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Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan claims Panjshir suicide attack

By Bill Roggio

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The al Qaeda-linked Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan claimed it executed last weekend's suicide assault on a Provincial Reconstruction Team base in the normally peaceful Afghan province of Panjshir.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, claimed credit for the Oct. 15 suicide attack that killed two Afghan civilians and wounded two security guard at the base. The attack consisted of a five-man team of heavily armed fighters. The attack began when one of the suicide bombers detonated a car packed with explosives at the front gate of the US-run Provincial Reconstruction Team base in the Rakha district.

Afghan and US forces repelled the attack, killing the remaining four fighters, although senior Afghan officials differed on whether the other members of the suicide team penetrated security at the base before they were killed. The International Security Assistance Force said the "complex attack" had "failed."

The attack in Panjshir is the first of its kind in the northern province since the US invaded Afghanistan in late 2001. The province is the birthplace of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the famed Northern Alliance commander who was assassinated in a suicide attack in Takhar province just

two days prior to the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. Under Massoud's leadership, the Panjshir Valley held out against both the Soviets and the Taliban.

The IMU recently published a statement on the Internet claiming the Panjshir attack, and released two photos of four of the suicide bombers. The IMU fighters are dressed in military camouflage uniforms and are sporting assault rifles, a machine gun, and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. The IMU said the fighters were Afghans from the northern province of Kunduz.

The Taliban had issued a press release for the suicide attack, and said it was executed by "martyrdom-seeking Mujahideen." In a statement released on Voice of Jihad, the Taliban's English-language propaganda website, the terror group identified the five suicide bombers and claimed they were from Panjshir province. The Taliban claimed that 43 US soldiers were killed in the strike, and described the attack as "one of the most successful and deadliest operations since the Operation Badar began, marking that the US-NATO invaders and their allies are no longer safe throughout the country."

Background on terrorist havens in the north

Earlier this year, ISAF identified several locations of safe havens and training camps in the north for the Taliban and the allied Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Both terror groups maintain a strong presence in the northern Afghan provinces of Badakhshan, Baghlan, Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Kunduz, Samangan, Sar-i-Pul, and Takhar, and have established suicide and military training camps in the north over the past several years. As the two groups expand their presence in the region, top leaders of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have integrated into the Taliban's shadow government in the northern provinces.

ISAF has identified the presence of suicide camps in Sar-i-Pul and Samangan provinces. On March 22, a special operations team captured an IMU commander who ran camps in Samangan. In addition, several other commanders who aid in suicide attacks have been targeted in the north.

ISAF and Afghan forces captured the IMU's senior leader in Afghanistan during a raid in Kunduz province in April. He served as "a key conduit between the senior IMU leadership in Pakistan and senior Taliban leadership in Afghanistan," and aided in suicide, IED, and other attacks by the IMU in the north. He was freed from a Pakistani jail in 2010 and immediately returned to lead forces in Afghanistan [see LWJ report, ISAF captures Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's top commander for Afghanistan].

The IMU has established camps in Kunduz province, a Taliban commander from Baghlan named Mustafa told the Asia Times earlier this year. The Taliban commander said that jihadis from Central Asia, including "Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Russia," make up a significant portion of the fighters in the Afghan north and that they are setting their sights on the neighboring country of Uzbekistan.

"I can tell you that there is an active connection between the Central Asian command and the Taliban in northern Afghanistan and they often join us, but how they connect, this is beyond my

level," Mustafa told Asia Times. "Our superior commanders are in touch with their counterparts in Central Asia and if somebody arrives in Afghanistan or goes to Central Asia from Afghanistan, it is arranged at a senior leadership level."

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Group, an IMU splinter faction, are also known to operate in the southeastern Afghan provinces of Khost, Paktia, Paktika, Ghazni, and Zabul. The two groups work with the al Qaeda-linked Haqqani Network [see LWJ report, ISAF detains senior Haqqani Network leader linked to the IMU].

Background on the IMU in Pakistan

The IMU's leadership cadre is based in Pakistan's Taliban-controlled tribal agency of North Waziristan, and operates primarily along the Afghan-Pakistani border and in northern Afghanistan. According to one estimate, more than 3,000 Uzbeks and other Central Asian fighters are sheltering in North Waziristan.

The US ramped up airstrikes against the terror groups in North Waziristan between September 2010 and January 2011. Many of the strikes targeted cells run by the Islamic Jihad Group, which were plotting to conduct Mumbai-styled terror assaults in Europe. A Sept. 8 strike killed an IJG commander known as Qureshi, who specialized in training Germans to conduct attacks in their home country.

In South Waziristan, the IMU's former leader, Tahir Yuldashev, was killed in a US Predator airstrike in September 2009. Yuldashev sat on al Qaeda's top council, the Shura Majlis. He has been replaced by Abu Usman Adil.

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan fighters often serve as bodyguards for top Pakistani Taliban and al Qaeda leaders. The IMU fights alongside the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and has stepped up attacks in Central Asian countries as well.