

IMU Gradually Developing Into Pan-Asian Movement

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Dushnabe, Tajikistan and Batken, Kyrgyzstan.

As the armies of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan brace for a third summer of fighting against the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), there are indications that the insurgency is broadening its appeal. Pressed by declining economic conditions and political repression, young men from across Central Asia are joining the ranks of the IMU. This trend suggests that the IMU is gradually developing into a pan-Central Asian movement.

A survey of conditions in and around the Ferghana Valley underscores the frustrations that heightens popular sympathy for the IMU. Fertile agricultural soil has deteriorated because of over-irrigation during the Soviet period. A lack of equipment further hampers efficient farming. Meanwhile, factories are shut and rusting away, and electricity is on for only four hours a day. International aid agencies estimate that the unemployment level approaches 80 percent in the Ferghana Valley and adjacent areas.

In villages around the Kyrgyz town of Batken, families bemoan the departure of their sons. In one village, nine young Kyrgyz have left to join IMU leader Juma Namangani, including four sons of a widow. More than a dozen young men have joined the IMU from Batken itself. "It's the same everywhere - the villages are empty of young men - either they have gone to Russia to look for work, or they join Namangani because at least he pays them," says a school teacher in Batken, who asked not to be identified.

The political response is heightening discontent, some observers say. Rather than addressing the some of the underlying causes of the insurgency, namely the poor state of the economy, regional leaders have cracked down on just about all forms of dissent. Repression is especially severe in Uzbekistan, where tens of thousands of Islamic believers have reportedly been jailed. [For background information see EurasiaNet's human rights archive].

Uzbek President Islam Karimov's reluctance to confront economic reality is starting to frustrate those around him, both near and far. A clear sign of dissatisfaction is the recent announcement by the International Monetary Fund that it will close its Tashkent office in mid April, due to Karimov's unwillingness to implement reforms. Meanwhile, in neighboring countries, officials are concerned that Uzbek policies are fanning unrest. "Karimov has created his own problem, and a bigger problem for the region - and Uzbeks are becoming radicalized," says Moheyuddin Kabir, a deputy leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) in Tajikistan.

Already, Uzbekistan's uncompromising stance towards the IMU is influencing attitudes in Tajikistan towards the militants. "Tajiks and others are joining the IMU extremists because the regimes don't change their attitudes towards such Islamic movements," says Sharif Himmatzade, another IRP leader in Dushanbe. "If there was a legal constitutional way in Uzbekistan for Namangani to play a political role, he would take part in politics, and there would be no need for such military actions."

Himmatzade was a military commander of the IRP, which fought a bloody civil war with the central government that ended in 1997. Some Tajik militants left over from the civil war, who were not integrated into either the Tajik army or the civil administration, as well as some from a younger generation, have joined the IMU's ranks.

There are reports that IMU military operations are already underway. In mid-March, local shepherds bumped into the guerillas in the mountains and alerted the Kyrgyz army, which has now set up a permanent military base at the foot of the Pamir Mountains, south of Batken. Local officials say 3,000 Kyrgyz troops have been dispatched into the mountains to flush out IMU guerrillas "We cannot exclude a major incursion this year by the IMU, although the Central Asian states are making big efforts to counter the well equipped and well trained IMU," says Ivor Petrov, head of the UN Peace-building Mission to Tajikistan. "The IMU will not repeat the tactics

of earlier years, they always do something new." Other Western diplomats in Dushanbe warn of the possibilities of urban terrorism, the kidnapping of foreigners and even an IMU incursion through Turkmenistan.

Central Asian states have spent the winter months beefing up military capabilities. This year Kazakhstan has doubled its military budget to US \$171 million, or 1 percent of GDP, and the army is raising mobile units for counter-insurgency.

Uzbekistan issued a military call up on March 23, and the Kyrgyz are conscripting nomad trackers to find the IMU guerrillas in the Pamirs. China, the US, Turkey, Israel and NATO have provided counter insurgency equipment and training. But all these fledgling armies suffer from low pay, lower morale and large scale desertions.

Regional leaders have expressed an intent to improve military coordination, but so far such cooperation has mostly been confined to rhetoric. Their disunity suits the IMU. "Namangani cannot afford to let the CA states enhance their cooperation, and his every move is calculated to create further differences between them," says the Western diplomat.

Uzbek policies appear to be complicating the ability of regional states to cooperate militarily. This winter, Tashkent cut gas supplies to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, seeking in part to compel a more spirited anti-insurgency effort by Dushanbe and Bishkek, as well as to secure concessions from Kyrgyz officials in a territorial dispute. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive]. In addition, Uzbekistan has now mined its borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, cutting off families, villages and trade. At least 30 people have been killed, and dozens more wounded in mine accidents along the border during the past six months. "The closure of the border has reduced the economy even further," adds an OSCE official in northern Tajikistan. In March, Uzbekistan expressed a desire to expel thousands of Tajik citizens, many of whom are ethnic Uzbeks, who fled to Uzbekistan during Tajikistan's civil war. The potential influx could overload Tajikistan's fragile economy. Fearing the economic impact, Dushanbe already is resisted admitting refugees from the ongoing Afghan conflict.

At the end of March in Afghanistan, anti-Taliban forces led by Ahmad Shah Masud launched an attack on Bamiyan, where the Taliban recently destroyed the two ancient statues of Buddha. Masud's aim, say his political aides in Dushanbe, is to destabilize the north and cut off Taliban supply routes to the south of the country. Through the winter many states have stepped up arms supplies to Masud through Tajikistan including India, Iran and Russia. The most serious threat to the Taliban could emerge in the west where the respected anti-Taliban commander Ismail Khan, who has been in exile in Iran, is expected to open a new front backed by Iran in April.

But the Taliban are also planning their offensive, which is likely to include encouraging the IMU to destabilize Central Asia. Namangani arrived in Tajikistan's Tavildera valley in November, but returned to Afghanistan at the end of January under enormous pressure from the Tajik government. Nevertheless, Namangani needs to show what he is capable of and help his Taliban hosts and nobody doubts that he will back in the early summer.