



The 2016 Insurgency in the North: Raising the Daesh flag (although not for long)

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The flag of the Islamic State (IS, or Daesh) has been flown twice in the last year in Takhar and Baghlan provinces by a group of ethnic Uzbek Afghans who had set up their own insurgent group, Jundullah, in 2009. It had enjoyed an uneasy alliance with the Taliban, but tried to use the turmoil of the Taliban's takeover of Kunduz in September 2015 to establish itself as an independent, Daesh-allied group. The Taliban moved swiftly to crush the dissidents. However, it is still engaged in lower-level, clandestine activity – recruiting and spreading propaganda. Given how magnified any Daesh flag raising becomes in media and local government reporting, AAN's Obaid Ali thought it useful to look into the origins of the Jundullah group, its shifting relationship with the Taliban and why it went over to Daesh.

It was mainly local Uzbek militants from the Jundullah group who, in September 2015, attempted to establish a base in the name of the Islamic State in north eastern



Afghanistan in the Eshkamesh district of Takhar, around 60 kilometres south of the provincial capital Taloqan. The group, which had been fighting as 'Jundullah' (Army of God) (1) in alliance with the Taleban, had gone over to Daesh. They flew the Islamic State group's flags over Koka Bulaq village, less than ten kilometres south of the district centre – but only for a few hours on 29 September 2015. The local Taleban immediately reacted to the challenge and, as they approached Koka Bulaq from Kandahari and Now Abad villages (both villages Pashtun and Taleban-controlled), the Daeshis retreated. Taleban commanders in north eastern Afghanistan, in October 2015, subsequently issued an order to kill or capture any Daesh fighters and supporters in Takhar, Kunduz and Baghlan provinces – a clear indication that they see anyone joining the ranks of the transnational Islamic State organisation as an enemy.

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) also responded, with a clearance operations against the insurgents in Eshkamesh in the last week of April 2016. The Daesh-affiliated, Uzbek fighters had long fled and it was the Taleban who found themselves pushed back from around the district centre to remote areas.

The emergence of Jundullah in the northeast

In order to understand how this group emerged and why it came to be allying itself with Daesh, one needs to look at the evolution of north eastern, Afghan, Uzbek, anti-government fighters in a context where the Taleban remains the strongest, anti-government group in the region, but the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) still has influence.

Jundullah is an indigenous, non-Pashtun, armed group in north eastern Afghanistan made up of radical Uzbeks and Tajiks, with some Arabs and Aimaq. It was initially formed by commanders who, in 2009, had split off (for unknown reasons) from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Since its establishment in 2009, Jundullah has fought alongside the Taleban against the Afghan government in several districts of the northeast. Jundullah had separate and independent fronts, with command structures separate from the Taleban, in Chahr Dara and Dasht-e Archi districts of Kunduz.

The IMU, itself, had started off as a militant group trying to overthrow the Islam Karimov government in Uzbekistan, then played a role in the Tajik civil war in the 1990s, before retreating to Afghanistan where it pledged allegiance to and became an ally of the Taleban regime (1996-2001). It also followed the defeated Taleban into exile in Pakistan (in its case to a new base in Waziristan) in 2001. (For previous AAN reporting on the presence of IMU in the Afghan north, see this [paper](#)).

In September 2014, the first reports emerged that the IMU under its now late leader Osman Ghazi (aka Odil Osman) had switched allegiance from the Taleban to Daesh (For an account of AAN's earlier reports on central Asian fighters in Afghanistan read [here](#) and [here](#)). In November 2014, Ghazi released a statement on the IMU's official website questioning Afghan Taleban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar's failure to address his followers and raising doubts as to whether he was still alive. In March 2015, Ghazi called IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi "the



caliph,” indicating he considered him his [leader](#). Other IMU groups followed suit; for example, one in Faryab province in March 2015 announced its [support](#) for IS. In November 2015, the then leader of the Taleban, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansur ordered his fighters to crush a group of Taleban dissidents in Zabul and their allies, the newly Daesh-allied, IMU. That Osman Ghazi was killed in or after the fighting has finally, officially, just been [announced](#). (For a detailed report on the IMU-Taleban split, see this AAN [dispatch](#).)

The IMU's break with the Taleban had a major impact on Jundullah. After this, the group started to criticize the Taleban's behaviour towards IMU fighters. Jundullah accused the Taleban of fighting against *muhajirin* (emigrants), ie the Uzbekistani members of the IMU, who had left their homes and come to sacrifice their lives to protect Islam. It also carried out several offensives against the ANSF independently of the dominant insurgent group. Although it did not formally break off its alliance with the Taleban, there were repercussions on the ground, in both Baghlan and Takhar.

Jundullah moves into Borka in Baghlan

Jundullah had already moved into Borka district, a predominantly Uzbek district located about 150 kilometres to the northeast of Pul-e Khumri, the provincial capital of Baghlan in 2014 and established a relatively strong footprint there. It has a remote, yet strategic location as it offers a swift and convenient route for insurgents to shift between Baghlan, the Khanabad and Aliabad districts of Kunduz to the northeast, and Eshkamesh in Takhar to the northwest.

According to local elders, the Baghlan group was established by a young, local, Uzbek, religious scholar called Qari Yaser Waseq. Local elders remembered that Jundullah's first military attack in the area took place in mid-2014 – against a security post in the Baytop area of Borka's district centre. In early 2015, Qari Yaser, along with ten fighters, was killed in an airstrike in Hesarak (not to confuse with the eponymous district in Nangrahar province), an area about 18 kilometres away from Borka district centre. After Qari Yaser's death, a young, local, religiously-educated Uzbek, Khairullah, took over the leadership of the group. Khairullah was a relative of Mullah Muhammad Ali, who had been a prominent Taleban commander in Baghlan during Taleban regime. Later, for reasons unknown to the local elders who spoke to AAN, Khairullah disappeared and another man, Qari Salahuddin, who had just arrived from Takhar, took over the Jundullah front in Baghlan.

Qari Salahuddin was an ethnic Uzbek originally from Borka district from a religious family—his father and grandfather had served as preachers in a mosque in Makhdom village in the Folul area of Borka. He himself was serving as the shadow *Taleban* district governor of neighbouring Eshkamesh at the time. The local Uzbek elders in Borka, who saw themselves as having been cornered into accepting Taleban leadership in the area, wanted to ensure the commander would at least be from their own ethnic group. According to a source close to the Taleban, the Uzbek elders had recommended Salahuddin to the Taleban, vowing to support him financially. Furthermore, the source told AAN, Qari Salahuddin, who already had a reputation for being affiliated with Jundullah, brought along 35 loyal fighters from his native Folul area of Borka,



which immediately boosted the numbers of Taleban in Eshkashem. The Taleban were happy with the arrangement, wanting to keep the Jundullah group within their fold.

The appointment of an Uzbek as the shadow district governor was also a strategic move by the Taleban, an attempt to secure the Uzbek community's support (for a more detailed background material on the Taleban's engagement with the Uzbek communities, see this AAN [paper](#)).

In August 2015, Jundullah's overall head for Kunduz province, Qari Bashir Madani, was killed in a United States airstrike in Chahr Dara district of Kunduz along with some of his most prominent commanders and many fighters (see an earlier AAN dispatch on this [here](#)). Their overall number after this is unclear, but the group's numbers are believed to have fallen to no more than 500.

The group was weakened and left even more subordinated to Taleban orders. In late September 2015 when Kunduz city was captured by the Taleban, the Taleban threatened to disarm the remaining Jundullah fighters in Kunduz if they ignored an order to obey them (see short report on Jundullah moving towards Eshkamesh [here](#) and [here](#)). Most Jundullah fighters chose, instead, to flee either to Eshkamesh, Qari Salahuddin's stronghold in Takhar, or to the neighbouring district of Borka in Baghlan.

By the end of 2014 and going into 2015, there were Jundullah fighters in both Borka and Eshkamesh, still fighting alongside the Taleban. After that, in late 2015 and early 2016, both districts experienced intensive fighting between the ANSF and the Taleban (read short reports [here](#) and [here](#)). By this time, Jundullah fighters in the area were hostile to the Taleban.

Why did Jundullah flee to Eshkamesh, as well as Borka?

Eshkamesh has a long history of instability with local commanders and criminals using it as an area to retreat to ever since the Najibullah government of the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, according to locals, the security in this remote district of Takhar started to deteriorate even further about six years ago when Taleban from outside the district, taking advantage of the perceived lack of rule of law, started to strategically engage Pashtun and other minority communities. The district also has a history of *non-Taleban* insurgency groups (IMU and Jundullah), which were to establish a footprint there in 2011. However, so far, those groups have hardly presented a threat to the Taleban in the region, as their number and capacity are far too limited.

Jamroz Khan, a tribal elder from the area, confirmed that since 2011 the Taleban and non-Pashtun insurgents started to become very active in their recruitment and on-the-ground presence. Over the past two years, he said, the Taleban and Jundullah have emerged in parallel in different areas of the district to an extent that most of the district has come under the control of one of other of the groups.

The emergence of Jundullah in Eshkamesh, which, like Borka, is predominantly Uzbek-



populated, was facilitated by the local communities always having had a strong connection with the IMU and with Jundullah groups in neighbouring Baghlan and Kunduz. (Read a short report on Jundullah fighters killed in Eshkamesh [here](#)). Aware of this dynamic, the Taleban had sought to capitalise on this connection by attempting to appoint Uzbek commanders supported by their communities in order consolidate their hold on the area.

However, in the case of Eshkamesh, this strategy backfired. Although Qari Salahuddin's Uzbek fighters and local Taleban fighters of various ethnic backgrounds initially manned the Taleban front in Eshkamesh together, during his time as the Taleban shadow governor, Salahuddin arranged for Jundullah fighters from Kunduz, who had no intention of supporting the Taleban, to move into Eshkamesh district and strengthen his personal position. According to local sources, in September 2015, before the Taleban attack on Kunduz, more than a hundred mainly Jundullah-affiliated fighters from Kunduz had arrived in Eshkamesh district.

The coming of the Jundullah fighters from Kunduz was said by elders to have been linked to the increasing efforts by Jundullah to slowly establish an independent and separate insurgency front led by non-Pashtuns in the area that would ultimately operate *in competition* with the Taleban. However, this kind of mobilisation and the formation of a movement, parallel to the Taleban, yet undetected by them, proved to be too big a project for Qari Salahuddin to pull off. It was difficult for the young shadow governor to handle such a large group of men. The newcomers not only had limited military experience, but also lacked awareness of the local power dynamics. The large influx of fighters soon presented challenges Salahuddin, especially as he and his supporters were being closely monitored by two prominent, local, Pashtun, Taleban commanders, Mullah Jano and Mullah Saifullah, also from Eshkamesh district. Both were wary of him and his supporters.

The influx of fighters also presented a challenge for the local (predominately Uzbek) elders as they were expected to provide accommodation and financial support to them. Furthermore, the elders became increasingly concerned about the direction the local insurgency started taking. After the arrival of the fighters from Kunduz, local elders explained, the "*Khelafat* [Caliphate] wave spread across the district," meaning that the more radical fighters were not only promoting Jundullah, but, in fact, were also sympathisers of Daesh, or the *Khelafat* idea now mainly associated with Daesh.

Jundullah goes over to Daesh

On 29 September 2015 (although independent of the attack on Kunduz and not endorsed by the Taleban leadership of the northeast), Qari Salahuddin's fighters, mainly those allied to Jundullah, but also some of the other local Taleban under his command (he was still the official *Taleban* shadow district governor), launched an attack on Eshkamesh district centre. The clashes lasted for several hours and eventually most parts of the district centre came under the insurgents' control. While the local district police chief, Abdul Rahman, confirmed the presence of Jundullah fighters during these attacks, (in addition to local Taleban), he denied the fighters had taken over the district, saying, "The enemy was pushed back and they failed to overrun the



district centre.” However, locals told AAN that Afghan government security forces had only managed to defend the district governor’s office and the district police chief’s compound, but lost control of the other parts of the district centre.

Qari Salahuddin claimed to have conducted these operations for the Taleban. However, speaking to AAN, Jamroz Khan, a tribal elder from the area, said that it was after this attack that Qari Salahuddin’s fighters (mainly those newly arrived from Kunduz and his own men from Borka) raised the Daesh flag in Koka Bulaq village of Eshkamesh. Jundullah had gone over to the Islamic State. They had chosen Koka Bulaq due to a large presence of Jundullah fighters there. A source close to the Taleban told AAN that, because the Taleban were engaged in controlling the Kunduz city at the time, the Jundullah fighters seized the opportunity to make their own mark under the Daesh flag. Although the flag was not up for even half a day, this incident caused a new confrontation between Jundullah and the Taleban, this time in Takhar.

The Taleban respond

Sources report that, within hours, Mullah Jano, the head of the Taleban’s judicial commission for Eshkamesh, had replaced Qari Salahuddin as Eshkamesh district governor with the Pashtun commander, Mullah Saifullah, who had until then served as the district head of the military commission. Mullah Saifullah immediately issued a decree to kill or capture the former shadow governor and his men, who were also presumed to have switched sides to Daesh. The Taleban, the source said, also dispatched reinforcements from other parts of Takhar to Eshkamesh to confront the Daesh-affiliated fighters in the area. In the meantime, local Uzbek elders also reacted. They warned Qari Salahuddin that if he continued to confront the Taleban, the chances for his survival would be slim. The elders also approached the local Taleban leadership and promised them not to shelter Qari Salahuddin’s group any longer and to expel any Jundullah fighters from their villages.

Despite an initial threat to kill Qari Salahuddin, the Taleban also needed to act cautiously, as they did not want to target an Uzbek shadow district governor who had gained the elders’ backing and who had allowed the Taleban to be able to ‘claim’ this district. In fact, if the Taleban had killed Qari Salahuddin, ethnic tensions (already simmering below the surface) would undoubtedly have intensified and possibly escalated. It would have further damaged, if not destroyed, the Taleban’s relationship with the Uzbek community locally. This relationship was important for the Taleban, as it was their main anchor in the district.

Elders from Pashtun and Uzbek communities interviewed stated that they had been willing to tolerate the Taleban (and in fact any insurgency presence) in their area, but only as long as they did not target people from their communities. Influential local Uzbek elders in Eshkamesh were in particular protective of their own communities – for them, the collaboration with the Taleban had been one coping mechanism to ensure that their Uzbek communities would not be sidelined. Without an Uzbek commander in charge of the insurgency in Eshkamesh, the elders also saw their status threatened. Cognisant of this sentiment, the Taleban also did not want to have an open confrontation over this issue. They would prefer to handle the challenge at a local



level, said local elders.

Escape to Borka

Expelled from Eshkamesh, Qari Salahuddin fled to his home district of Borka. The presence of a number of religiously educated, radical youth who were sympathetic to Jundullah gave him the opportunity to recruit and expand his front's local influence there. Within one month of his arrival in Borka, Qari Salahuddin and his fighters, all non-Pashtun and all Daesh supporters, again raised the IS flag –this time in Sai-ye Hazaraha [Hazara valley], an area around 25 km east of Borka district centre. This Daesh flag was also not up for long either.

Similar to the scenario in Eshkamesh, the local Taleban reacted swiftly and the Pashtun shadow district governor of Borka, Mullah Wakil, called on Uzbek elders to disarm the 'radical youths', who seemed to be promoting Daesh in Baghlan. The shadow governor also warned that he would capture or kill any Jundullah fighters (who were seen as primarily acting as supporters of Daesh) if they ignored the Taleban's order to stand down. As a result of the intervention of local Uzbek elders, Qari Salahuddin and his fighters were also forced out of their home district, as they were seen to have motivated the local youth to come over to Daesh. Without any other possible safe haven in the northeast and with Taleban looking for them, in December 2015, Qari Salahuddin and his fighters went to Nangrahar province in order to join the Daesh front there. This province in the east of the country is the only remaining Daesh stronghold in Afghanistan (see [here](#)). (AAN will be reporting more fully on Daesh in Nangrahar in the future.)

According to a local source close to Jundullah in the north, at least five of the group's fighters have since been killed in Nangrahar during the on-going confrontations between the IS and the Taleban there. By around 10 May 2016, some of the Jundullah/Daesh fighters were back in Burka. There, they remained in hiding, trying to mobilise fighters but refraining from taking up arms openly again. By late May, there were only reports of sporadic fighting between government forces and Taleban from Eshkamesh and Burka districts (read [here](#))

How much support does Daesh have in the northeast?

Looking at these events, the threat of Daesh in the northeast – through Jundullah affiliating itself to IS – is neither widespread, nor immediate. The 'flag raisings' were limited to a few areas of two districts and did not last long. The pro-Daesh fighters were chased from district to district, not unlike what happened in Farah in early 2015 (see [here](#)), and finally had to retreat to Daesh's only remaining stronghold in the country, in Nangrahar. The Daesh sympathisers in the north eastern region were unable to expand not only because of strong local Taleban resistance – they did not want to tolerate the slightest insurgent action independent of them, but also the intervention of local Uzbek elders once they saw their relationship with the (stronger) Taleban strained due to the pro-Daesh activities in their midst. As a result, local Uzbek communities do not seem willing to host local Daesh groups.

There are still some Daesh sympathisers and supporters for in the northeast. They appear to be



from among the religiously educated, radicalised youth and to be working underground. Currently, they seem to be limiting their activities mostly to translating Daesh statements and video messages into Dari (the common language, locally, so also attracts non-Uzbek speakers) and circulating them on social media. In May 2016, for example they released a video of the alleged killings of supporters of Haji Zaher's militia in Nangrahar by local Daesh fighters. Some local sources told AAN that a small number of radical young people from Baghlan and Kunduz provinces – mainly from Uzbeks and Tajiks – were fighting for Daesh in Nangrahar, but that there is no visible Daesh front in the northeast anymore.

It is difficult to determine the exact number of Daesh supporters in the northeast region or of north eastern fighters from the old Jundullah group in Nangrahar. In social media, however, there have been reports of casualties among them. In March 2016, a list with the names of nine men from Qala-ye Zal district of Kunduz alone who had been killed in Nangrahar were published on a Facebook account (the Facebook page named them as Mujahedin-e Qala-ye Zal, seen by AAN, but later deleted).

Far from the flag raising signalling a success for Daesh, the switch of allegiance by a local group of Uzbek fighters in the Baghlan-Takhar-Kunduz triangle actually represented another failed attempt to establish the Islamic State in Afghanistan. It showed again that IS mainly attracts splinter groups of insurgent groups, and that attempts to establish it mainly represent a re-arrangement of existing forces rather than a new, additional phenomenon. It also showed that IS-affiliated groups will immediately be confronted by the 'owners of the insurgency space,' the Taleban, who remain, by far, the dominant, anti-government grouping in Afghanistan.

Edited by Lenny Linke, Thomas Ruttig and Kate Clark

(1) There are a number of militant groups that call themselves Jundullah (Army of God) in the world, including in Pakistan and Iranian Balochistan. But the shared name does not suggest any organisational links. Like Hezbollah (Party of God, in Lebanon but also as a small registered party in Afghanistan), it is an obvious name for Muslim militants. In northeast Afghanistan, even when Jundullah and the Taleban working together, they largely retained basic separate command structure. Locals in Baghlan, Kunduz and Takhar where both groups operate can differentiate exactly which fighter is primarily affiliated to which group, calling them either *Jundullahi*, or *Emarati*.

(2) These fighters had been given an ultimatum by the Taleban to leave Kunduz; for details and background, see previous AAN reporting [here](#).



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