

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## **Mali: Election Maintains Status Quo Amid Rising Jihadist Threat**

*Brian Perkins*

Mali's presidential election was preceded by outbreaks of violence and terrorist attacks before concluding with a contentious run-off election on August 12 after the first round of voting on July 29 failed to produce a clear winner ([Malijet](#), August 8). In a showdown identical to that of the election in 2013, incumbent President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita beat out former Finance Minister Soumaila Cisse, securing a second, five-year term as president.

Mali, along with neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso, is facing a rising threat of jihadist attacks from several terrorist organizations, most notably al-Qaeda linked Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)—both of which control significant territory in Mali but regularly operate inside Niger and Burkina Faso. The result of the election and preceding violence is not a clear step forward or backward in the fight against the spread of militancy across the greater Sahel region. Rather, it is a reflection of widespread political disillusionment in Mali and an

indication of what the future likely holds—a continuation of disjointed local security policies and increasingly war-weary international partners.

The lead up to the election was marred by allegations of voter irregularities and violence as upwards of 871 polling stations were closed due to attacks and general insecurity. The embattled Mopti and Gao regions, where a large percentage of the terrorist attacks occurred, were particularly affected ([AllAfrica](#), August 7). Two of the most noteworthy attacks leading to the election include: the JNIM-claimed car bombing in Gao on July 1 that injured eight French troops participating in Operation Barkhane, and a suicide bombing on June 29 in the town of Sevare in the Mopti Region against the headquarters of the Sahel G5. The Sahel G5 is a joint security force comprised of military personnel from Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mauritania that is tasked with counterterrorism operations along their respective borders ([Malijet](#), July 2). The attack, which JNIM also later claimed via Mauritanian media outlet al-Akhbar, was more symbolic of JNIM's persistence and capabilities than it was successful. The attack left three soldiers dead and ultimately led to a reshuffling of the G5's leadership from Malian General Didier Dacko to Mauritania's General Hanena Ould Sidi ([Malijet](#), July 19). Member parties

hope the reshuffle will help spur momentum and lead to greater buy-in from Mauritania. In comparison to the other member states, Mauritania is less affected by JNIM and ISGS attacks and has contributed fewer resources.

While the G5 managed to reshuffle its leadership, voters in Mali elected to move forward with the status quo despite the generally poor perception of Keita, who was sworn in on September 4, just one day before the United States officially added JNIM to its list of designated terrorist organizations ([Africa News](#), September 5; [U.S. Department of State](#), September 5). While the result of the election does not inspire great optimism, it could still be a better outcome than if the untested Soumailia Cisse won the election.

The country has not made significant strides forward in terms of economic issues, corruption, or security. Widespread accusations of extrajudicial killings by Malian security forces have worsened communal violence in the northern and central regions and hindered counterterrorism operations against JNIM and ISGS. Signatories to the 2015 peace deal with Tuareg-led rebel groups—yet to be fully implemented—have played an active role in facilitating the activities of various jihadist groups. Despite all of this and Keita's overall lackluster performance, he at least brings with him somewhat of a sense of predictability in his relationships and political dealings, which is beneficial for a country that needs to continue fostering strong relationships with its counterterrorism partners and donors. As France seeks to reduce the number of troops participating in Operation Burkane and the United States is reportedly considering pulling U.S. counterterrorism forces in neighboring Niger as it shifts focus to Russia and China, Mali's need for stable leadership is particularly strong ([New York Times](#), September 2).

## **Indonesia: Anti-terror Law Risks Creating Jihadist Incubators and Driving Recruitment**

*Brian Perkins*

This past May, three families conducted a spate of attacks that left 12 dead, not including the attackers, in Surabaya, Sidoarjo, and Pekanbaru, Indonesia ([Jakarta Post](#), May 14; [Jakarta Post](#), May 16). Since then, Indonesia's police and counterterrorism unit, Densus 88, have killed dozens of suspected terrorists and arrested upwards of 400 more. The frequency of terrorism-related arrests has only increased since the government passed a new anti-terror law in May that went into force on June 22, with more than 350 suspected terrorists arrested between June 22 and September 4 ([Jakarta Post](#), May 25; [CNN Indonesia](#), September 4).

The law broadly expands police and military powers, allowing authorities to preemptively arrest individuals with "suspected" ties to terrorist organizations and granting them authority to detain suspects for longer without officially charging them. The South Jakarta District Court also officially banned the Islamic State-linked Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), the country's most active terrorist organization ([Jakarta Post](#), July 25). Anyone "determined" to be a member or who has played a role in recruitment can be imprisoned for two to seven years while prominent members and leaders face sentences of three to 12 years. Considering that authorities have issued statements indicating that if they look hard enough they can find terrorist links, this is a worrisome development. Previously, authorities could not arrest or prosecute individuals for belonging to, or having connections with, a terrorist group. Instead, they could only arrest those involved in attacks or plots.

Indonesian prisons are already chronically overcrowded and understaffed, with terrorists currently housed primarily at Police Mobile Brigade headquarters in Depok, where a deadly prison riot linked to JAD occurred in May, and at district prisons ([Tempo](#), May 9). Prison officials attempt to house terrorists away from other inmates, but crowding has inevitably resulted in them housing terrorists with other prisoners. The government has already stated they are quickly running out of room to accommodate the influx of inmates charged with terrorism. In fact, on August 7, the National Police confirmed they are building a maximum security prison to house terrorists in Cikeas, West Java. Construction is

reportedly beginning in early September and is intended for completion by the end of 2018 ([Jakarta Globe](#), August 8).

The new legislation and subsequent influx of inmates raises the threat of further radicalization while imprisoned. The amended anti-terror law and the creation of a designated terrorist prison will likely result in less-threatening, low level "terrorists" being imprisoned alongside those returning from fighting with the Islamic State in Syria and individuals materially involved in attacks in Indonesia. While imprisoning terrorists in one facility prevents the radicalization of ordinary criminals, the government will need to address the fact that an entire prison will be filled with both already hardened terrorists and inmates who are clearly susceptible to becoming more radicalized than when they entered. Inmates sentenced for menial connections to JAD and other groups will finish shorter sentences and rejoin society further exposed to radical Islam and with heightened animosity toward the government.

New legislation to tackle the rising terrorist threat is a positive step, but the law's breadth and implementation thus far are adding additional stress on the country's already overburdened prisons. The new law threatens to turn these prisons into jihadist incubators, a threat made more apparent by the prison riot in Depok. The arrests of individuals even loosely tied to JAD, meanwhile, are likely to spark retaliatory attacks and drive recruitment in less moderate mosques and within the communities most affected. In fact, a pro-IS hacking group published threats on social media on August 13 directed at the government stating "you have oppressed our brothers, jailed, killed and tortured our brothers" and " we will find you and we will kill you. Expect us" ([Channel News Asia](#), Aug 23). Locals have also noted that "resentment and support is building as the parents, shopkeepers, and teachers are being violently hauled off and held while Densus search for evidence to support the claim of terrorism" and that "discussion at mosques are more heated, shifting toward a dangerous territory." [1] While the fact that the attacks in May were carried out by families might be an anomaly, widespread arrests, some of which could be baseless, do raise the specter of entire familial groups becoming increasingly alienated and ultimately radicalized; and of mosques straying further toward radical teachings.

[1] Author's interview with an Indonesian researcher based in West Java on August 25, 2018.

## Notes

# Tajikistan's Islamist Shadow

James Pothecary

## Introduction

A sedan struck seven foreign cyclists riding through Tajikistan's Danghara district on July 29. Despite initial confused reports that it was nothing more than a car accident, grainy footage quickly emerged of the vehicle's driver deliberately swerving to hit the bikers. A group of men then "exited the car and stabbed the cyclists with knives," according to the United States Embassy in Dushanbe. Within minutes, four cyclists—two American, one Dutch and one Swiss—were dead, with several more injured.

The Tajikistani government mobilized rapidly and decisively. After identifying the likely location of the suspects based on the car's license plate, a major law enforcement operation began. The exact circumstances are unclear, but four of the suspects were shot dead during the arrest and several others taken into custody. This was announced in a statement from the Tajikistan Interior Ministry, which included pictures of both the deceased and the detained.

## Responsibility

Almost immediately, the government blamed the shattered political opposition, the Islamic National Renaissance Party (INRP) for the attack. The event was seized on as a chance to legitimize their suppression of the group. Citing a confession allegedly extracted from one of the detained men, authorities have sought to suppress any journalistic investigation into the incident that might lead to a different conclusion—that the attack was, in fact, linked to the Islamic State (IS) ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#), August 2).

The evidence seems to favor this hypothesis. IS, having already claimed responsibility for the attack, released a video showing five young, Russian-speaking men pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([Jihadology](#), July 31). These individuals appear to match the photos of the suspects published by Tajikistan's own interior ministry, although a formal identification has not been made. Furthermore, the modus operandi of the attack is a clear fulfillment of the command issued in the very first issue of IS' online magazine *Rumiyah* in September 2016:

*Stab them, shoot them, poison them, and run them down with your vehicles' ([Jihadology](#), September 2016).*

This phrase has been heeded by the global jihadist community. Militants launching attacks in France, Sweden and the United Kingdom, among others, have similarly used vehicles as a weapon. Difficult to detect and deadly effective, it should be of no surprise that this trend has spread to the Central Asian steppes.

## Typicality

An attack against tourists is extremely atypical in Central Asia, where political violence of this kind is almost unheard of. However, Central Asian—particularly Uzbek and Tajik—fighters have earned themselves a fearsome reputation in the jihadist communities of Afghanistan and the Levant. Groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, formed from the chaos of a disintegrating Soviet Union, have acted as incubators for cadres of highly trained fighters. These jihadists have continued to fight in Pakistan's Waziristan, in support of the Afghan Taliban, and against the Syrian government. Analysts believe that Central Asian fighters represent one of the largest contingents of IS fighters in Iraq and Syria.

The conditions in Tajikistan are ripe for jihadism to flourish. The lack of economic opportunities makes the prestige and salary associated with jihadist fighters increasingly attractive to swathes of the local population. Meanwhile, the government has continually attempted to place Islam—the dominant national religion—under its control. Imams are regulated through state-controlled councils and watched carefully by intelligence officers. Expressions of Islamic piety, such as wearing the hijab or other forms of Islamic clothing, can lead to harassment and arrest.

These policies have backfired and are partially responsible for the growth of Tajikistani jihadism. The high-profile example of Gulmurod Khalimov, a former special forces police commander, who defected to IS in 2015 – disillusioned with Dushanbe's policies towards Islam – shows the link between state suppression of religion and radicalization ([Asia-Plus](#), June 1, 2015). The government's insistence on blaming the INRP, which is ideologically Islamist, is indicative of Dushanbe's intentions to further expand its control over Tajikistani religious institutions. This has, and will, further drive radicalization.

It is too early to say whether this incident is an aberration or the opening salvo of a jihadist campaign in Tajikistan. The attack against the cyclists, while unusual, showed only limited capability by this alleged cell, which has been subsequently neutralized by the Tajikistani security forces. The wording of the IS communiqué that followed, claiming that the men had responded to the "call" to action, suggests that the cell had little logistical or operational support from IS trainers and experts.

## Implications

The most immediate consequence of the attack will be a further crackdown on the Tajikistani political opposition. The government's decision to blame the INRP is clearly politically motivated and will be used to legitimize the further suppression of activists or political figures opposed to the highly authoritarian and long-standing President Emomali Rahmon. Given the near-certainty that it was IS' pernicious ideology that led to the events of July 29, of far more importance would be an analysis of the implications that a wave of returning fighters would have on Tajikistan.

A return has never looked more likely. Military operations in Iraq and Syria have destroyed IS' proto-state. Without urban areas in the Levant, fighters have retreated to the Hamrin Mountains to regroup ([Iraqi News](#), December 27, 2017). In North Africa, the group's branches in Libya and Egypt have struggled to expand their territorial holdings. Initial forays into Afghanistan have proven more successful, although IS faces an array of hostile factions, ranging from the Taliban to the U.S. Air Force. With a pre-established foothold in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province, conditions in Tajikistan are ripe for exploitation and, due to porous regional borders, the situation looks bright for returning Tajik fighters.

The Tajikistani state is impoverished and will likely be hard-pressed to deal with such a scenario. Intelligence, law enforcement and military forces are poorly trained, undermanned and under-equipped. The 1300-kilometer-plus border is highly insecure and regularly crossed by smugglers, militants and other hostile actors. The Afghan government has extremely limited control in the northern province of Badakhshan, separated from Tajikistan only by the Panj River—a potential corridor for militant returnees. Russia, the major power in the region, is certainly taking the threat seriously. A recent joint military exercise between Russian troops stationed at the

federation's Tajikistan base and local military forces concentrated on defending the border regions from a concerted assault by Taliban loyalists ([Press TV](#), July 17).

Already, the attack has likely derailed Dushanbe's plan to boost its coffers by developing its tourism industry, concentrating on the steady stream of hikers, mountaineers and cyclists that choose to visit the steppes. Until the incident, tourism in Tajikistan was booming. Between January and July this year, Tajikistan saw around 900,000 visitors, compared to around 430,000 throughout the entirety of 2017 ([Eurasianet](#), August 3). The French Foreign Ministry has already advised its citizens to "postpone" planned visits to the country pending the conclusion of the government investigation.

It remains to be seen whether the attack was a singular event or the first skirmish of many. What is clear though is that IS has claimed its first victims in Central Asia, on that long and lonely biking trail through the Pamir Mountains.

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# Pakistan's Elections: Mainstreaming Terrorists, Radicalizing Society

*Sudha Ramachandran*

Pakistan's recent national and provincial assemblies' elections saw a significant number of candidates from religious extremist and terrorist outfits campaign. None of them won seats to Pakistan's National Assembly and only two managed to win seats to the Sindh provincial assembly. On the surface, the elections were a setback for Pakistan's extremists and terrorists. A closer look at the election campaign and voting trends, however, indicate that there is reason for concern as extremists may have emerged stronger from the July 25 elections.

## Extremists in the Electoral Arena

Religious extremists and terrorists have contested and campaigned in Pakistan's previous elections, but what set their participation in the recent elections apart was the unprecedented scale on which it happened. Of the roughly 12,000 candidates running for seats in national and provincial assemblies, over 1,500 were from extremist and terror groups ([Gandhara](#), July 24). Among these groups were the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), a proscribed Sunni extremist group. Formerly known as the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, ASWJ broke away from the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in 1996. It has a bloody record, having carried out hundreds of attacks on Shiite scholars, mosques and religious processions. The ASWJ fielded over 150 candidates in the recent elections, several of whom contested under the name of the Pakistan Rah-e-Haq party or as independents ([Al Jazeera](#), July 15).

Another extremist outfit in the fray was the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). The TLP is the electoral front of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY). It is an organization of radical Barelvis formed in August 2015 to campaign for the release of Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer. The TLP fielded 571 candidates for the national and provincial assemblies ([Daily Times](#), July 4).

The most controversial organization in the electoral arena was the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)/Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD). The group has carried out scores of terror attacks

in India, including the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai in which 166 people, including six Americans, were killed. The LeT and JuD have been designated as terrorist groups by the United Nations, the United States and India (Pakistan has only banned the LeT, not the JuD arguing that it is engaged in charity work). In August 2017, the LeT/JuD set up a political wing, the Milli Muslim League (MML), which was listed as a terrorist organization earlier this year by the United States ([Dawn](#), April 3). With the Election Commission of Pakistan refusing to register the MML as a party, the LeT/JuD fielded its candidates on the platform of the Allah-u-Akbar Tahreek. Among its candidates for the National Assembly elections were the son and son-in-law of Hafiz Saeed, the mastermind of the 2008 Mumbai attacks who carries a bounty of USD 10 million on his head, as well as Muhammad Sheikh Yaqoob, a member of LeT's central advisory committee, who is on the U.S.-designated terror list ([Times of India](#), June 22).

## Rise of TLP

With the exception of the TLP, extremist outfits did not win seats in the recent elections—nor were they expected to. This has been interpreted as voter rejection of extremist groups ([Hindustan Times](#), July 28). "Even mainstream Islamist parties do not do well in Pakistani elections, although they are otherwise popular in terms of their rhetoric and in raw street power," Madiha Afzal, author of *Pakistan under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State* told *The Diplomat*. "So parties that were further right or on the fringe, and certainly those with extremist links were expected to do worse," she said. [1]

There is, however, reason for concern as a closer reading of the results and voting trends reveal a troubling picture. For one, the recent elections mark the entry of two extremist candidates into the Sindh Assembly. Leadership of Islamist groupings in Pakistan that were hitherto in the hands of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, a relatively moderate alliance of Islamist parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami, has shifted to the far more radical TLP. The TLP's political and electoral rise over a short span of a year has been spectacular. On the streets, its sit-ins paralyzed Pakistan's cities and even forced the resignation of Pakistan's Law Minister, Zahid Hamid. In the election arena, its performance has been impressive. The TLP's first attempt at electoral politics was in the Lahore by-election of September 2017, where it won 7,100 votes compared to the winner who secured 61,000. The group's perfor-

mance was significant as it stood third, pushing the Pakistan People's Party to fourth place. The TLP improved on that performance in the recent elections, winning a total of two million votes across Pakistan, although it failed to win seats to the National Assembly. It stood third again in Lahore, and elsewhere in the Punjab province, it proved to be the spoiler between the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz. Importantly, two TLP members-turned-legislators will now sit in the Sindh Assembly ([Rising Kashmir](#), August 13).

### **Moderating Terrorists?**

The large number of extremist candidates in recent elections owe much to the Pakistan military's implementation of a plan to mainstream terrorist groups by nudging them to contest elections. Apparently, in 2016, the military proposed this plan to the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who turned it down. His removal from power in 2017 cleared the way for the plan's implementation. Two weeks after Sharif's exit, the formation of MML was announced ([The News](#), September 17, 2017).

More recently, in June, the National Counter-Terrorism Authority lifted the ban on the ASWJ, clearing the way for its participation in the election. Its leader Mohammad Ahmed Ludhianvi was removed from the Fourth Schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act by Pakistan's caretaker government. Ludhianvi's assets were unfrozen and restrictions on his movement removed ([Express Tribune](#), June 27).

Mainstreaming militants is aimed at getting them to moderate their views and methods by taking up ballot box politics instead of violent means. It has worked well in some situations, as in Nepal, for instance, where the Maoists gave up armed struggle, moderated their demands, contested elections and joined the political mainstream. This didn't happen in Pakistan. None of the candidates, extremist organizations, or their leaders moderated their views or renounced violence ([Dawn](#), July 23). In fact, the TLP leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi threatened to "wipe Holland off the face of the earth," should it allow a cartoon drawing competition of the Prophet Mohammed. ASWJ chief Ludhianvi warned that not a single Shiite would remain alive in Pakistan if he came to power ([Samaa TV](#), July 4; [Daily Times](#), July 30).

### **Mainstreaming Terrorism**

Liberal Pakistanis have strongly denounced the strategy of mainstreaming terrorists. "Allowing extremists to enter the electoral arena is a mistake," Afzal said, pointing out that "even if they don't do well electorally, allowing their rhetoric in the political mainstream validates them and thus will only further radicalize Pakistan." [2]

Pakistani analysts are arguing that bringing known terrorists like Saeed into the mainstream is not going to deradicalize them or make them more political or moderate. Rather, they warn this will radicalize society, ([Indian Express](#), October 7, 2017).

The military's strategy of mainstreaming terrorists distinguishes between what it describes as "good terrorists" and "bad terrorists." Bad terrorists, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, which target the Pakistani state and have declared war on the military establishment, are not part of the military's mainstreaming strategy. The mainstreaming strategy applies only to the good terrorists, i.e., the Pakistan military's protégés and favored proxies such as the LeT/JuD, which serve as tools of its policy towards India. Mainstreaming organizations such as the LeT/JuD appears aimed at reducing international pressure on Pakistan by projecting them as political players.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan's attempt at mainstreaming extremist and terrorist outfits by permitting them to contest elections is deeply flawed. None of these groups were required to renounce violence or moderate their views as a condition to contest elections. Their hateful rhetoric received much publicity at rallies. Although these outfits did not win seats in the National Assembly, they emerged as winners from the elections, having acquired a new respectability and legality. Rather than moderating them and bringing them into the political mainstream, Pakistan is in danger of normalizing extremism.

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### **Notes**

[1] Author interview with Madiha Afzal, non-resident fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of Pakistan

under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State, Washington D.C., August 17.

[2] Ibid.

# The Turkistan Islamic Party in Double-Exile: Geographic and Organizational Divisions in Uighur Jihadism

*Jacob Zenn*

## Introduction

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) was one of the world's more obscure jihadist groups until it emerged as a key player in the Syrian civil war in 2013. When the then Afghanistan-and-Pakistan-based TIP first began releasing videos in 2008—the year the TIP and corresponding media group, Islom Awazi (Voice of Islam) was created—it appeared to be more of a propaganda group with a militant wing than a militant group with a propaganda wing ([Terrorism Monitor, March 17, 2011](#)). Its videos indicated it only had an underwhelming several dozen fighters across that border region.

Despite initial ambiguity about the TIP, its videos since 2008 have always made it clear the group has an ideological affinity for al-Qaeda and loyalty to the Taliban. The U.S. capture of Uighurs in Afghanistan as early as 2001 and 2002 also revealed several dozen Uighur militants were initially placed under the leadership of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Afghanistan. The IMU was fighting under the leadership of the Taliban. [1] A review of the TIP's origin suggests its first members were among those Uighurs who fled China during crackdowns on Uighur nationalism in Xinjiang in the 1990s. They found safe haven in one of the only countries that would accept them—Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. There they became jihadists, if they were not already when they were previously in Xinjiang. Despite the TIP's origins in Afghanistan and stated loyalty to the Taliban, the group's involvement in the Syrian civil war has led some individual TIP members to shift their loyalty instead to the Islamic State or become involved with non-al-Qaeda militants.

The TIP has evolved and expanded significantly from its primary base in Afghanistan and Pakistan to its current role fighting in Syria. The group has also found itself in new positions both in relation to the Syrian and global jihadist milieus, and the primarily Turkey-based exiled

Uighur Islamist milieu. As a result of this, the TIP has become more divided both organizationally and geographically between its branches in Syria and Afghanistan than it ever has been, with a significant contingent of TIP fighters likely to align with the Turkish-backed militants in Syria. In a worst case scenario for the TIP, these fighters are more likely to retreat to Turkey than back to Afghanistan and Pakistan if the Syrian army—with Russian support—retakes Idlib (and possibly Afrin as well). Many of the TIP's current members, therefore, will likely remain in exile (in Turkey or Syria) from their original exile (in Afghanistan).

### The TIP's Confusing Career in China

On the surface, the TIP's evolution from a fledgling propaganda-focused militant group in Afghanistan and Pakistan to a key player in the Syria conflict is difficult to assess due to inconsistencies between some of its earlier claims and the actual attacks it proved it carried out. For example, the TIP claimed two bus bombings in Kunming, Yunnan Province and another bombing in Shanghai just ahead of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 ([Telegraph, August 4, 2008](#)). Although Beijing acknowledged a TIP commander ordered attacks on the Olympics, it still pinned those specific attacks on a lone actor, non-Uighur citizen who later in 2008 apparently tried to bomb a popular restaurant in Shanghai. Observers in China believed the government's claims to be more credible than the TIP's claims. The TIP likely was uninvolved in those attacks ([Shanghaiist.com, December 29, 2008](#)).

There was also a major stabbing in Kashgar, Xinjiang two weeks before the Beijing Olympics that killed 14 border policemen, but the TIP did not claim the attack ([Telegraph, August 4, 2008](#)). The timing of that attack would nonetheless suggest the attackers intended to disrupt the Olympics and gain attention for their cause. It remains unclear who carried out the attack in Kashgar, but the tactic of stabbing, the targeting of Chinese security forces, the timing before the Olympics and the location of the Xinjiang border suggests it was probably Uighur Islamic or nationalist militants. When China convicted two Uighurs in the attack, the media did not report any international or TIP angle to their operation ([China Daily, April 10, 2009](#)).

The TIP also claimed several other attacks in China after 2008, including a sample listed below:

- A truck hit-and-run on pedestrians and a mass stabbing attack in Kashgar on Ramadan Eve in 2011 that killed more than 10 people
- A low-sophistication suicide car-bombing in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in October 2013 that killed several foreigners
- A mass stabbing at the Kunming Train Station in March 2014 that killed 29 people
- An apparent double-suicide bombing (or suitcase bombing) at Urumqi Train Station in April 2014
- Car-bombings and explosions at an Urumqi market street in May 2014 that killed dozens ([Terrorism Monitor, May 24, 2015](#))

However, only the 2011 hit-and-run attack in Kashgar was credibly proven to be organized by the TIP in Afghanistan. One of the attackers was featured training in a TIP video in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region ([jihadology.net, October 15, 2011](#)). The other attacks, such as the 2011 car-ramming and mass stabbing attack in Kashgar, may have involved TIP-trained-or-inspired militants or militants inspired by jihadism more generally, but their provenance was unclear. In some cases, the attackers seem to have been disgruntled about grievances such as not receiving approval to build a mosque or being able to travel abroad to countries such as Turkey ([Telegraph, March 5, 2014](#); [sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com, November 7, 2013](#)). China nevertheless attributed those attacks to what it called the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – the broader term it uses for Uighur jihadist groups including the TIP itself.

Although the TIP still claimed some terrorist attacks in China after 2013, attacks have since become increasingly rare, with the last major attack in China occurring in March 2014. In fact, China reported the country was “free of terror attacks” for the first time in 2017 ([China Daily, March 14](#)). The TIP has become increasingly prominent in Syria since 2013 but almost a non-factor in China itself. The group announced in its feature publication Islamic Turkistan in 2013 that it was moving fighters to Syria to defend the Syrian Muslims, with the implication that Muslims should also defend the Uighurs in Xinjiang ([Islamic Turkistan #13, August 17, 2013](#)). The group's profile in China and even Afghanistan and Pakistan has decisively waned since then, while in Syria it has risen.

### Jihadist Divisions in Syria

While the TIP's earlier operations in Afghanistan and China were often unclear, by 2014 Uighurs were regularly seen in TIP videos from jihadist groups in Syria. TIP's Islom Awazi media wing began to release videos with a new style of branding that was of a higher quality than the group ever had in Afghanistan. The videos proved its fighters had not only arrived in Syria but were also fighting alongside the al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, in northwestern Syria and taking part in key battles in Syria in Idlib and Homs. The TIP that was once obscure in Afghanistan and Pakistan quickly became one of the vital members of the jihadist coalitions in Syria that included Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor groups. The TIP's upgraded media branding, new stylish uniforms and its new Arabic-speaking commander in Syria, Abu Rida al-Turkistani (possibly descended from Uighurs but raised in Saudi Arabia), who died in 2014, all suggested the TIP was receiving new sponsorship in Syria.

Despite the TIP's initial battlefield successes in Syria, it has since begun to suffer from factionalization for the first time in its history. In fact, until 2018 the TIP had a "Syria branch" and an "Afghanistan branch" that were complementary, with both maintaining loyalty to the Taliban. Now, however, the divisions within the Syria jihadist milieu may be affecting the TIP. Some fighters appear to be aligning more with Huras al-Din, which is a successor to Jabhat al-Nusra and has a pro-al-Qaeda and global jihadist outlook (@MzmjerSH, July 13). Other fighters, however, appear more aligned with Turkish objectives in Syria and have supported Operation Euphrates Shield and may align more with Turkish-backed militants than Huras al-Din. The leadership of the TIP in Syria maintains its loyalty to the Taliban, but it may be having trouble determining whether the Islamic coalition aligned with Turkey or the jihadists in Huras al-Din are true to the Taliban's "policy and methodology" (@MzmjerSH, July 13). The TIP leadership wants to stay out of the infighting between factions in Syria, but given the splits within the jihadist groups there, the TIP has apparently not been able to avoid factionalization itself.

There were likely two main reasons why the TIP was unable to withstand factionalization in Syria. First, al-Qaeda's "shaykhs and ideologues" began to influence the group and reportedly even paid fighters to stay with Huras al-Din even though other TIP fighters rejected being "bribed." Second, some TIP fighters served as intermediaries for Jund al-Aqsa fighters during a period when several dozen of them fled infighting in northwest

Syria to join Islamic State in Raqqa in eastern Syria in 2017. These TIP fighters, therefore, became more exposed to Jund al-Aqsa's pro-Islamic State ideology. The Islamic State's Wilayah Al-Furat saw an opportunity to capitalize on their increased exposure and, in February 2017, dedicated an entire video to calling for more Uighurs to join the group in Syria ([Jihadology, February 27, 2017](#)). As a result, pro-Huras al-Din and Islamic State-leaning fighters in the TIP today (not including those who actually did defect to the Islamic State and thus are no longer in the TIP) would not be willing to join a coalition of militants supported by "apostate" Turkey. Nevertheless, some TIP members have sought to join the Turkey-backed militant coalition and have maintained relative moderation compared to those members of the TIP who seek to remain with Huras al-Din and the former members who defected to the Islamic State.

The TIP's overall leader, Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, who reemerged in 2016 after having been reported killed in a drone strike several years earlier (and faked his death for security reasons), is apparently dissatisfied with the group's factionalization ([Jihadology, May 28, 2016](#); [Dawn, May 1, 2010](#)). He reportedly stated that the new divide in the TIP in Syria is "satisfying" to China (@saleelalmajd1, July 9—link broken). He is, however, not in Syria but in Afghanistan-Pakistan with the TIP's general leadership. Therefore, his ability to reign in the Syria-based TIP factions is minimal (@saleelalmajd1, July 9).

The Taliban has also tried to deal with the TIP's factionalization. Two Uighur commanders who fought alongside the Taliban for years were deployed from Afghanistan to Syria in February 2018. Neither of them were well-known beforehand, at least compared to other more public TIP leaders seen in its videos, such as Abdul Haq al-Turkistani. One of the commanders, Abu Umar al-Turkistani, was appointed by the Taliban to be the general leader of the TIP in Syria, while the other commander, Abu Muhammad al-Turkistani, was appointed to be TIP's military commander in Syria. Abu Umar al-Turkistani had reportedly trained "thousands" of Uighurs in Afghanistan over the course of the last 10 years and was an "expert in heavy and light weaponry in war zones." Abu Muhammad al-Turkistani was reportedly an expert in "tactical maneuvers and operations." According to the Taliban, any faction in Syria and TIP members must abide by the decisions of these two leaders concerning alliances. It is, however, unclear where these two leaders

stand with regard to Huras al-Din and the Islamist militant coalition aligned with Turkey in Idlib, Syria.

### **Non-jihadist Influences on the TIP**

If the TIP is the jihadist wing of what China would refer to as ETIM, then the Istanbul-based and Uighur-led East Turkistan Education and Solidarity Association (ETESA) is the Islamist wing of ETIM. Although it is unclear when ETESA was founded, it first attracted China's attention at the start of the Syrian war in 2012, when China accused it of helping ETIM members travel to Syria ([Global Times, October 19, 2012](#)). One theory about its origins is that it was comprised of members of the Turkey-based East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO), which in 2003 under War on Terror pressures in Turkey decided to "achieve independence by peaceful means" and remain in Turkey. At the same time, the group acknowledged that "inevitably" a separate "military wing" would form ([rfa.org, January 29, 2003](#)). That military wing became the TIP whether or not the ETLO, or what became ETESA, had a hand in its formation.

It is also likely the TIP and ETESA overlap not only overtly in some of their similar anti-China messaging. The ETSA also filters some Uighurs to Turkey from China, or Afghanistan, and into Syria. ETESA, however, is staunchly pro-Turkey and thus also pro-President Erdogan and pro-Operation Euphrates Shield. In March 2018, for example, ETESA led a "Loyalty March" of several hundred Uighurs to Hatay Province, which borders Syria, to express support for Turkey's military operations in Afrin. ETESA members cooked Uighur plov for Turkish soldiers and met with the AK Party head in Hatay. It was at this event that a video was posted on Twitter of a Uighur dressed in a Turkish military uniform declaring war against President Xi Jinping and the Communist Party of China, warning Chinese civilians to leave "East Turkistan" ([Al-Masdar, March 18](#)).

Only two months before that event, in January 2018, ETESA led another group of 500 Uighurs in a march to a military base near Zeytinburnu, the main Uighur neighborhood in Istanbul. There, the group submitted their applications to join the Turkish military operations in Afrin to the head of the military base. At the event, the head of ETESA, Hayatullah Oghuzgan, said "the enemies of Turkey are the enemies of people from East Turkistan" and that the Uighurs "stand with the Turkish

military in Afrin to clean up terrorists" who want to "divide Turkey" ([tv2.istiqlal.net, January 22](#)).

ETESA's alignment with Turkey could, therefore, prove to be decisive for TIP fighters' own calculations about their alliances in Syria. According to jihadist sources, there are an estimated 10,000 or more Uighurs in Syria, including TIP fighters and their family members. There are some doctrinal reasons for some of those TIP fighters to side with the Turkey-aligned militants in Syria if they find Huras al-Din to be too extreme. However, if the jihadists and militants of all factions are defeated in Idlib like they were in Aleppo, then the TIP fighters and their families will likely need to depend on ETESA and the Turkish government to find refuge in Turkey. As a result, certain as some TIP fighters may be that God will grant them victory in Syria, they may also be considering a Plan B—retreating to Turkey. This means the TIP fighters may be more likely to side with the Turkey-aligned and ETESA-supported militants in Idlib than Huras al-Din or other al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist groups that Turkey no longer backs. This, in the short-term, may boost the militant coalition in Idlib, but also increase China's support to the Syrian army's efforts against that coalition and add some extra friction to China-Turkey relations at a time when the U.S-Turkey relationship is also experiencing friction.

TIP fighters now face a test between their loyalty to al-Qaeda and its allied groups in Syria; practical concerns about the welfare of themselves and their families (especially if considering a battlefield loss in Idlib); and meeting the expectations of their overall leader, Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, and the Taliban in Afghanistan (that is, if they can still readily communicate among counter-terrorism pressures in Syria and Afghanistan). The TIP as an organization and its fighters as individuals will, therefore, have to balance loyalty, ideology and practical concerns as they chart their next steps. The case of the TIP may also serve as a bellwether for how other jihadist groups, including Central Asian groups, will maneuver between the various scenarios in the next stage of the Syrian war.

[1] See, for example, "Citizens of China" at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/guantanamo/country/china>.

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