

The Anatomy of a Militant Radical Islamic Website: The Islamic Jihad Union's Information Operations

By
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Article Synopsis and Editor's Note: This article analyzes the information operations and public relations strategy of the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), a coalition of Islamic militants from Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states, who are closely related to Al-Qaida. The analysis is based on thorough monitoring and examination of statements, videos and updates that the group posts to its Turkish-language website. It explores their target audience and their themes and messages with a view to identify how the group recruits, gain supports and perpetuates its militant radical Islamic ideologies through comprehensive public relations campaigns. The article also aims to provide insight into the IJU's future motivations. Since analysis of radical websites is an important part of IOII about radical Islamic threats, this article is a important contribution to this issue of *IO Sphere*.

Introduction

The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) is a coalition of Islamic militants from Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states closely related to Al-Qaida and the Taliban (Figure 1). The group conducts a comprehensive information operations campaign on its Turkish language website sehadetzamani.com ("time for martyrdom"), where it uses an ideologically powerful recruitment appeal to attract militants, gain support, and perpetuate its ideology (Figure 2). Close monitoring and examination of statements, videos and updates that the group posts to the site reveal the group's strategy, its target audience and its themes and messages; while revealing its goals, targets and future motivations.

The IJU is believed to have evolved from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an Uzbek-dominated terrorist group linked to Al-Qaida. The group was an obscure organization before it surfaced in 2004, when it claimed responsibility for bombings in the Uzbek cities of Tashkent and Bukhara which killed 47 people in March and April 2004. The group's largest attacks or attempted attacks were the July 2004 bombing of the US and Israeli embassies in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and its September 2007 foiled plot to bomb the US Air Force base in Ramstein, Germany, along with the US and Uzbek consulates in Germany. Their statements claiming responsibility for the attacks are an important part of their information operations.

Although the IJU started out with a goal of establishing an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, in recent years, it has expanded its objective to establishing an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. It calls for Muslim unity, attracting Pakistani, ethnic Turkish, Chechen, Arab, and other recruits outside the immediate Central Asian region. The group has also been referred to as a



Figure 1. Islamic Jihad Union Banner
Source: sehadetzamani.com



Figure 2. Islamic Jihad Union Website
Source: sehadetzamani.com

"Turkish Al-Qaida," for two reasons: first, the IJU's website, sehadetzamani.com, is in Turkish and promotes militant 'jihadi' ideologies and its affiliation with Al-Qaida; second, despite its Uzbek background, the content of the group's website has a strong Turkish element in its international support and recruitment networks. Based on information on its website, the group is currently active in Afghanistan and cooperates with the Taliban, conducting small-scale operations against US and NATO forces.

The IJU's Information Operations

It is unclear when the group adopted sehadetzamani.com as its mouthpiece (Figure 2). The website advocates militant jihad through its articles, and hosts an array of violent videos from militant radical Islamic media organizations affiliated with Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of the videos also make their way into YouTube, the popular video-sharing site. The site's colorful, technically-advanced home page is obviously a militant radical Islamic page, indicating that the group is targeting those who already espouse such ideologies; not trying to persuade or convert anyone into joining the "jihad."²

The IJU produces a wide range of sophisticated public relations materials, including a series of statements about the group's small-scale actions in Afghanistan. It features videos showing the organization's training camp, members preparing for suicide attacks, and farewell interviews with suicide bombers. Significantly, most of this content is published or recorded in Turkish. The group has even produced its own Turkish hymn, which it uses as the opening song for their videos (with the repeating refrain "We are the mujahedeen of the Islamic Jihad Union").

Themes and Messages

The group's comprehensive information operations strategy includes carefully thought-out themes and messages to reach and influence their target audience. There are several overarching themes the site uses to legitimize attacks on US and NATO forces.

- "Infidels and Apostate Forces": The group refers to US forces as the "Invader Infidel American Forces," and to NATO forces as the "Infidel Allied Forces." Similarly, the Afghan Army is referred to as the "Apostate ANA (Afghan National Army)." More recently, the group has become vocal about Pakistan as well, referring to it as the "US Puppet or Apostate Pakistan." The group denotes to itself as the "Islamic Emirate." These themes are used very frequently and consistently.

- "Muslim Victimization and Civilian Killings": The videos

posted on the site typically document scenes of alleged Muslim victimization, and pictures of alleged prisoners of war in US detention facilities. On March 18, 2011, the home page feature was, “The US Continues its Massacres,” claiming that US forces had attacked and killed 40 civilians and wounded 20. The words capitalized below are taken directly from the statement:³

A press release by the Islamic Jihad Union reported that, on March 17, 2011, the Invader Infidel Spy planes had conducted an attack on Muslims and killed 3 mujahedeen and 14 Muslim brothers. A new statement made today [March 18, 2011] says that the Invader Infidel American Spy Planes conducted another attack at the Digor Region later that same day; and that this attack was solely aimed at the CIVILIAN POPULATION. As a result of this attack, 40 Muslims from the CIVILIAN POPULATION have been killed, and 20 have been wounded. As such, it is noted that the Invader Infidel American Troops are continuing their CIVILIAN MASSACRES. ... The whole world should know that the Invader Infidel AMERICA and its puppet Apostate PAKISTAN, are conducting CIVILIAN MASSACRES in the North Waziristan Tribal Areas.

The same theme was in a posting on March 9, 2011, entitled, “Invader Infidels are KILLING CIVILIANS.”⁴ The “Muslim victimization” theme was present in older statements as well. Their statement claiming responsibility for the March and April 2004 attacks in Uzbekistan, claimed that Muslims were being “tortured and imprisoned as a way to terrorize and degrade them.”⁵ Videos on the site carry such titles as “Scenes from Abu Ghraib” and “What Democracies Have Done to Mujahedeen.” The site also exploits statements and pictures about Guantanamo, which it keeps current and accessible.

• The concept of “Martyrdom”: A natural extension of the “Muslim victimization” theme is the message that those who attack “infidel” US or NATO forces are “heroic martyrs.” Attacks are often described as revenge or retaliation. The message is that Muslims have an “individual obligation” to defend other Muslims who are under attack. As such, those who fulfill this obligation become “martyrs.” The site publishes profiles of those who have conducted suicide attacks as having fulfilled the most noble role. These articles extol the bomber’s



Figure 3. Islamic Jihad Union Fighter
Source: sehadetzamani.com

“martyrdom” and hold them up as role models. This appears to be a tool aimed at foreign recruitment and to send the message that this is the greatest thing that a Muslim can do for “Allah.”

- “Jihad is Enjoyable and Appealing”: This is targeted at potential recruits. The videos, statements and interviews send the message that there is an atmosphere of brotherhood, camaraderie and strength in the jihadi training camps (Figure 3).
- “The Mujahedeen are Winning”: Videos showcase supposed victories and carry such titles as “Scenes of Azeri Mujahedeen Brothers” and “Show from an Iraqi Mujahedeen Brother,” claiming they are conducting bombings on US or NATO bases in Afghanistan. The site posts almost daily statements on their

actions in various regions of Afghanistan, citing the number of “infidels” that they killed that day. On January 4, 2011, a posting claimed that, “The Apostates are disappearing One by One,” discussing how a Pakistani governor was shot to death.⁶ On July 26, 2010, they released a long list of action, each one detailing the number of troops killed from a NATO country. They also released a picture of a US soldier as one of the victims.⁷ Such lists are published periodically with the title, “Islamic Emirate Operations Report,” with the IJU logo attached to them.

- “Muslim Unity”: This message uses Islam as a unifying factor to attract radical Islamists from different countries. A home-page link includes an interview with a Turkish suicide bomber from Germany who attacked a NATO compound in Afghanistan in March 2008.⁸ Titled “Our Interview with our Brother Ebu Yasir El Turki from the Islamic Jihad Union Mujahedeen,” it includes a segment where the interviewer asks the suicide bomber what message he would like to send to Muslims in Turkey. His answer is, “Hopefully you will continue to support us both financially and through prayer....There is no nationalism in Islam....Don’t get confused with ideologies like democracy, secularism, and others and let’s not let them confuse our beliefs.”⁹



Young Child Indoctrinated with Jihad Training
Source: Google Images

• “Pakistan is a US Puppet”: Recently improved collaboration between the United States and Pakistan has led to the group becoming vocal about the Pakistani army. They have started referring to it as the “Apostate Pakistani Army,” or the “Puppet Pakistani Army,” implying that Pakistan is a powerless US “puppet,” that has turned its back on its Muslim identity. A March 10, 2011 posting titled, “Interview with Turkish Sniper Hamza Harbi,” promotes this message clearly. In response to a question as to why the Mujahedeen are treating the Pakistani army the same as the US army, Hamza Harbi says:

The Pakistani government and Pakistani Generals, who have been purchased by the US Army, are releasing their troops onto us. We don't want to fight the Pakistani army. But we react to their attacks against us. And this is exactly what America wants. We are aware of this and focus our attention on the Americans. But the Pakistani army, who have traded their religion for a small fee to the Americans, are attacking us like hungry dogs. We are merely defending ourselves against the Pakistani army, while counter-attacking the American army. We know that the Pakistani army's weaponry, equipment and salary are being supplied by America. But it is impossible for the Pakistani army to deal with the Mujahedeen. Even the world's superpower, the US hasn't been able to deal with the Mujahedeen.¹⁰

• “Generation Jihad”: One very ominous theme is “Generation Jihad,” which targets children and their parents. The IJU emphasizes through different methods. These include glorifying child suicide bombers, developing games idolizing those who detonate themselves amid “infidels,” developing cartoon images and portraying training camps for children, and publishing videos which target children to attack the US. The site also posts videos claiming to show the “next generation of mujahedeen in training to become “jihadists” or “martyrs,” ingraining the message of ‘individual obligation to fight against infidels’ from a very young age.¹¹

The training videos typically combine the recitation of Quranic verses with scenes of children in combat training. They portray militancy as a legitimate part of Islam and sends the message that madrassahs (Islamic schools) are good environments for Muslim children to learn how to put their combat skills into practice. The group aims to perpetuate their ideology through generations and across regions.

Claiming Responsibility for Attacks

In July 2004, the group claimed responsibility for almost simultaneous bombings against the US and Israeli embassies in Tashkent as well as the office of the Uzbek prosecutor-general, killing two and wounding several others. The IMU claimed responsibility for the attacks as protests against the Uzbek government’s support of the US and Israel, as well as support for Palestinian, Iraqi, and Afghan militants.¹² Following the attacks, the US State Department categorized the IJU, which is well known for its expertise in the use of explosives, as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” group.¹³

In a September 11, 2007 statement released on sehadetzamani.com, the group claimed responsibility for a foiled plot a week earlier in which German police had arrested two Germans and one Turkish citizen on suspicion of plotting to bomb the Frankfurt International Airport (Figure 4).¹⁴ However, the IJU stated that, contrary to press reports, the targets of the operation were the US Air Force base in Ramstein, Germany, and the US and Uzbek consulates in Germany. The IJU also warned of future actions against American and Uzbek interests, and called for the removal of the German Air Force base in Termez,



Figure 4. Islamic Jihad Union Press Release Video
Source: sehadetzamani.com

Uzbekistan.¹⁵ The 2007 foiled plot in Germany represented the organization’s first attempt to target a European country, and signaled its intentions to expand its target list to include Europeans.¹⁶

The statement confirmed that the action was linked to the IJU and that the suspects were part of the group’s German cell. It was unusual for a terrorist group to claim responsibility for a failed attack.¹⁷ One possible reason for this may have been to raise their standing among other militant radical Islamic groups. The group desired to be credited for a plot labeled by the media as being “Germany’s bloodiest act of terrorism.” The quantity of explosives found was more than that used in the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London attacks.¹⁸ By issuing the statement on September 11, the group was signaling their ideological affiliation with Al-Qaida.



Figure 5. Alleged Islamic Jihad Union Suicide Bomber
Source: sehadetzamani.com

On March 6, 2008, the group issued a statement claiming responsibility for an attack that took place on March 3, 2008. A suicide bombing in Afghanistan destroyed a guard post and wounded several NATO soldiers. The statement claimed that it was conducted with the help of the Taliban, and praised a Turkish suicide bomber for carrying out the attack (Figure 5). This statement represents a typical IJU statement and includes all of the aforementioned themes and messages:

On 3 March 2008, our Mujahid of the ISLAMIC JIHAD UNION has successfully carried out an operation against a military camp hosting Invader Infidels and Allied Forces in the Sabari Nation Valley in Afghanistan's Paktika Region. This Heroic Mujahid, with God's help, has attacked the Invader Infidel Army's Camp with a car loaded with 4.5 Tons of Explosives. According to witnesses and the Taliban

Mujahedeen, with whom we organized the operation, the Invader Infidel's Camp was completely destroyed. Following our operation, 5 helicopters continuously carried bodies out of the rubble. The number of soldiers who died in the camp was kept secret. According to witnesses and Mujahedeen, the bodies of at least 60 American soldiers and 70 Collaborator Afghan soldiers were carried. This operation was in retaliation to our recently Martyred Mujahid Sheikh Ebu Leys El Libi and other Martyred Mujahedeen. This operation was carried out by bold Cüneyt Çiftçi (Saad Ebu Furkan), who came from Germany but of Turkish origin, who traded his luxurious life for Heaven....In the coming days, we will release scenes from this operation and a video recording of our brother's last words to the Ummah [Islamic nation].¹⁹

Target Audience

The group appears to be conducting an intense public relations campaign through the Turkish language site, particularly aimed at recruiting ethnic Turks from Central Asia and/or Turkey, and possibly even the ethnic-Turkish Uyghur population in China. Ethnic Turks represent a potential target audience due to strong linguistic, ethnic and geographic affinity to Uzbekistan and Central Asian states, from which the IJU originated.

The organization uses propaganda to reach the Turkish diaspora abroad, particularly the large Turkish population in Germany. The postings and the video dialogues are in Turkish, but some members speak with a heavy German accent or in broken Turkish, suggesting that they are second-generation Turkish immigrants from Germany. One interview is recorded in both German and Turkish.²⁰

It is important to note that their target audience appears to

be those who are already attracted to militancy; i.e., the propaganda “preaches to the converted.” They do not appear to be trying to recruit random visitors to their site. On the contrary, they seem to appeal to both experienced militants who have fought elsewhere, or inexperienced militants who already believe in the cause and have the network and contacts who can enable them to actually join the group or provide financial support. Active, explicit recruitment is rare on the site.

The group is also appealing to Islamic youth, and possibly the parents of those children, through its “generation jihad” theme, which makes the children’s training camps look like an educational facility where children can go to learn about the Qur’an and gain valuable training.

Conclusion

Although the Islamic Jihad Union has not publicly stated its philosophy, history, or objectives, an interview with the alleged leader of the group, Ebu Yahya Muhammed Fatih, featured on Sehadetzamani.com provides some insight into its goals.²¹ The interview reveals that the group was formed in 2002 in opposition to the regime of Uzbek president Islam Karimov, but later expanded its goals to “uniting all oppressed Muslims under the banner of Islam and conducting ‘jihad’.”

Several facts can be deduced from their information operations. First, statements on the site indicate that they are opposed to the governments of the US, Israel, Germany, and Uzbekistan, and object in particular to US and Uzbek military and political policies which they claim “oppress Islam and Muslims.”²²

Second, the group has shifted its focus from the Uzbek regime to a more general message of “jihad,” and “Muslim unity,” to cast itself as part of the global jihad and attract more foreign



IJU Militants Detained in North West Pakistan

Source: Google Images

recruits. This appears to have been an effective strategy. While the IJU's initial members were mostly Uzbek, the nationalities of those involved in the thwarted plot in 2007 suggest that it has expanded its recruits beyond Uzbeks to include Turks, and the Turkish diaspora in Germany.²³

Third, the group is attempting to ensure that their war will continue to be fought by successive generations, through its themes and messages which are likely attractive to uneducated youth with no real life prospects and their parents.

Fourth, the IJU has been cooperating with the Taliban in Afghanistan; and has links with Al-Qaida, at least ideological, if not operational and financial. The group's operations focus on US and NATO forces in Afghanistan; the Afghan National Army and more recently, the Pakistani Army. The group adapts its targets according to changing political and military circumstances, possibly to deter other forces from collaborating with the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. This is reflected in their messages.

Fifth, each time the IJU has announced forthcoming actions, they follow up with bombings or foiled attacks, demonstrating some competence as a functioning terror network.²⁴ In April 2007, the group announced that it would step up actions abroad, leading German officials to issue a warning and increase security around its embassies. Five months later, the group attempted to attack US and Uzbek targets in Germany. Their threats are credible, and this points to the need to closely monitor the site.

Finally, their themes and messages reveal vulnerabilities that can be exploited. Each of their themes can be countered with messages such as the Islamic injunction against suicide, or highlighting negative experiences of surviving suicide bombers. A thorough examination of their messages reveal the kinds of information operations that the US and the DoD can conduct to neutralize or at least minimize the effect of the IJU's messages. This would undermine their credibility as well as other militant radical Islamic groups who use the same messages in their public relations campaigns. ●

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