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Jamaat Ansarullah (JA)

Profile and Post-Taliban Afghanistan Threats

Anahita Dodikhudo

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About the Author

Anahita Dodikhudo is a journalist specializing in international security, peace, and cultural issues. She has previously worked with Iran International TV and Afghanistan International TV, focusing on current affairs in Central Asia, with particular emphasis on Tajikistan. Anahita studied International Relations at the Russian-Tajik (Slavonic) University in Dushanbe and earned her MA in Politics and Security in Central Asia from the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, she studied Urban Planning and Public Affairs as a Humphrey Fellow at the University of Minnesota, USA. She served as an Assistant to the British Ambassador in Tajikistan, concentrating on bilateral relations and diplomatic engagements. Anahita also contributed to humanitarian development with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Dushanbe. Her impactful work in rescuing over 100 vulnerable people from Afghanistan in 2021 earned her the “Citizen of the Year” award from a Coalition of Women Journalists in Tajikistan.

Introduction

Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, is becoming a hub for numerous jihadi extremist groups. The Taliban's de facto governance has increased the prominence of the Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), a Tajik jihadi group. Operating under the JA umbrella is a newly established subgroup, known as Tehrik-e Taliban Tajikistan (TTT) consisting of 140 Tajik militants from Tajikistan and Afghanistan. This group was established in June 2022.

Whether these two groups collaborate now or have changed their names to create more confusion, one thing is clear. These Tajik jihadists are well-trained militants who threaten stability and security in Tajikistan and the broader Central Asian region. The rising prominence of JA/TTT militants also poses serious security challenges for China and Russia. Their primary goal is to overthrow the secular government and establish an Islamic regime in Tajikistan. Moreover, the Taliban Afghanistan is using JA and TTT as leverage against the government of Tajikistan.

Through propaganda on social media, especially YouTube, JA prepares the ground for a violent change of power in Tajikistan by winning the hearts and minds of people inside the country. Inspired by the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, their propaganda envisions Islam triumphing over democracy. They denounce Tajikistan's new law banning the Hijab as a "war against Islam," with their ideological leader vowing to defend Islam by any means necessary. In 2021, they altered the Iranian patriotic song "Ey Irān" to fit their religious narrative, exemplifying their use of cultural symbols for ideological purposes. For instance, the original lyrics, "Oh enemy, if you are of stone, I am of iron," were retained, but the line "May my life be sacrificed for the pure soil of my motherland" was replaced with "I sacrifice my life for the words of my Prophet. Our Islam is the best religion. The Prophet is the best human being."¹

Methods

This paper is based on qualitative methods, including first-hand materials, online peer-reviewed articles, UN reports, news, and discussions with experts who have covered this topic for many years. First-hand materials include JA's YouTube and Telegram channels. Their propaganda teams have started actively posting their videos since the end of 2020 on how to defeat the government of Tajikistan, along with lessons on Islam. Their old website, Irshod, is blocked, and now they are active on YouTube under the channel name Risolat. Despite this change, they continued their activities by promoting jihadi messages to Tajik citizens, especially the Tajik migrant community in Russia. All their archived statements and propaganda are in Farsi/Tajik language on their old blocked website, Irshod.²

Profile

JA has strong links with al-Qaida and the Taliban. The founder of the group, Amriddin Tabarov (known as Domullo Amriddin), refused to accept the Peace Agreement in Tajikistan in 1997. Originally from the Rasht Valley in the eastern part of Tajikistan, he established JA in Afghanistan during the first Taliban rule in Afghanistan, funded by Al-Qaeda in 2000. He was killed in Afghanistan in 2015. Most of the group's first members were close relatives of Tabarov and Tajiks from other jihadi militant groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The group committed



Only available photo of Amriddin Tabarov, source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

its first suicide attack in Khujand, Tajikistan in 2010, killing 2 police officers and wounding 30 other people. Another attack resulted in the deaths of 25 Tajik officers in the Kamarob Gorge in the Rasht Valley in 2010.

The current leader is Asliddin Khairiddinovich Davlatov (aka Mawlawi Ibrahim), also known as Motasim Billah³. The information about this person is very scarce. He freely travels in northern Afghanistan and holds meetings with various other jihadi groups and the Taliban to discuss joint plans for their activities. He is involved in drug trafficking and mining extraction in Badakhshan, Afghanistan.

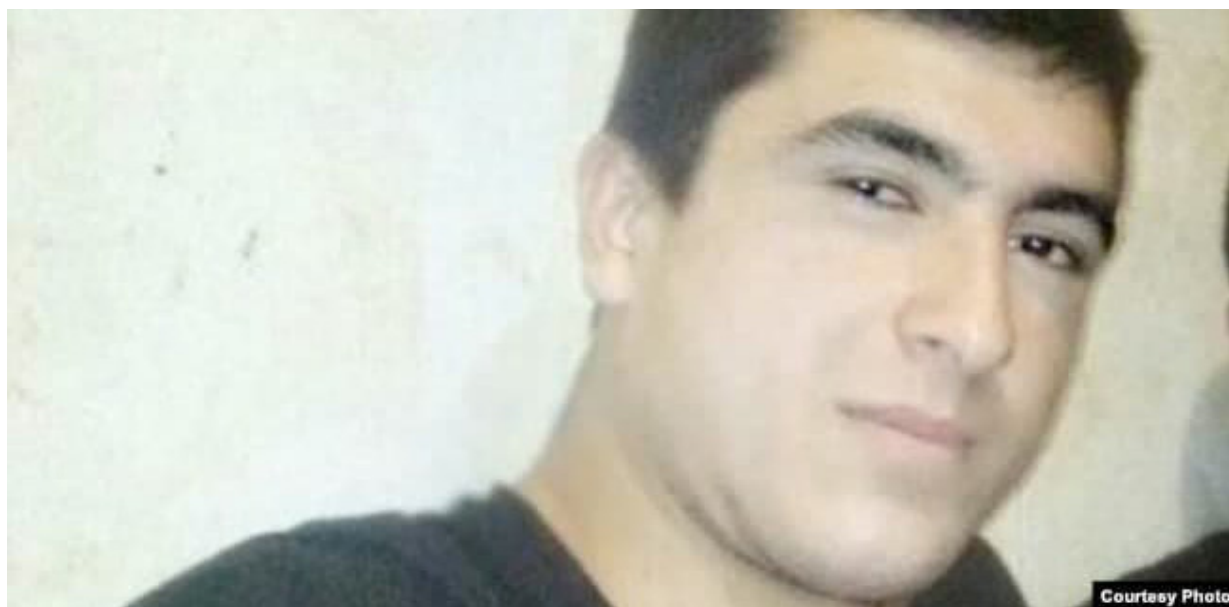


Photo of Mohammad Sharifov (Mehdi Arsalon), source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Second to Mawlawi Ibrahim, Mehdi Arsalon, whose real name is Mohammad Sharifov, reportedly disappeared from the Tajik-Afghanistan border in 2023. Originally from the Rasht Valley of Tajikistan, some have described him as 'a cruel person.' He was appointed as the leader of JA fighters in Badakhshan, specifically in Kuf Ab, Khwahan, Nusay, Maimay, and Shekay, the areas close to the Tajik border. It is now unknown whether Mehdi Arsalon is alive or dead. He gained notoriety after orchestrating a deadly attack in November 2020 on a police station in Maimay, Badakhshan, Afghanistan, during which over 20 officers of the previous Afghanistan government were killed.

The public face and ideological representative Mawlawi Asluddin appears on their YouTube channel, speaking with a heavy Farsi Dari accent, a dialect of the Persian language. In 2021, he revealed some details about his life, stating that he received training and studied religion in Tajikistan and Pakistan. He originates from Jamoati Khumdon, Dehai Obilyurd, Nurobod District, Rasht Valley, Tajikistan,

where he studied from 1998 to 2005. He then traveled to Peshawar, Pakistan, where he continued his studies from 2005 to 2013, focusing on Quranic studies in a madrassa. Afterward, he moved to Karachi, studying under the supervision of Sheikh Maulana Muhammad Anwar Badakhshani, an Islamic scholar. He spent one year at the Jamia Uloom-ul-Islamia, the Islamic University in Banoori Town, Karachi. The group's videos consistently advocate jihad through any means available to them. Most of his messages target Tajik citizens, both migrants and those within the country.



*Photo of Kholbekov Shakarbek (Abu Jaffar).
Screenshot from the YouTube channel IFSHO TV*

Other key representatives include Kholbekov Shakarbek (Abu Jaffar), a military commander; Sajid Tajiki, an operational commander; and a person known as Gaji Abdullo, a group financier.

Geography of operation

JA militants are concentrated near the Afghanistan-Tajik border. This fact underscores the group's ambition to cross the border and establish an Islamic state in Tajikistan. A diplomat of the previous government of Afghanistan, who is in exile, has confirmed that Badakhshan Province is becoming a foothold for JA militants. Moreover, Badakhshan is attractive due to its mining potential. Additionally, Kunduz and Takhar Provinces are their main areas of activity. One expert who spoke with me on condition of anonymity revealed that JA leaders reside in Kunduz, having obtained houses through Taliban representatives such as Juma Foteh. It is important to note that other jihadi groups are also active in these areas, complicating the tracking of movements of foreign fighters. Also, the same expert told me that Baharak, a town in Badakhshan of Afghanistan has become a hub for meetings of foreign fighters including JA members.

Ideology



Mawlawi Salmon, a JA militant, reacts to Emomali Rahmon's speech with religious leaders, which took place on July 4, 2013. The video was posted in September 2013.

JA's ideology is a Salafi-jihadism. Since the establishment of this group by Amriddin Tabarov, JA's ideology has been similar to that of Al-Qaida, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Taliban. While in Pakistan, Tabarov was influenced by the concept of takfir, which means announcing someone as an unbeliever (kafir) in the Muslim community. Later, his followers continue this idea by justifying violence against other Muslims, if they consider them not 'enough Muslims.' In videos from 2011, JA was calling infidels those Muslims who believe in democracy. They said: "Those who pray namaz, who follow fasting rules but support democracy are nonbelievers."⁴ And they are giving a divine meaning to their violence by saying "Allah is killing nonbelievers by our hands and, thus, blesses us." When analyzing their old videos on archived websites, one thing is clear: they reject both modernity and local customs extremely.

In a 2013 video, the group's preacher, Mawlawi Salmon, criticizes the celebration of the ancient Iranian/Tajik New Year holiday Navroz, calling it 'haram' (forbidden) in Islam. He states: "Even to congratulate a Muslim with this holiday is haram." Mawlawi Salmon considers a secular government unacceptable and believes that Islam can win only through the sword and preaching simultaneously.

JA is not hiding its calls for jihad in Central Asia by focusing first on Tajikistan.

Their first suicide operation in Khujand, Tajikistan in 2010 indicates their way of achieving their goals by spreading fear and terror. By analyzing the content on its website one can see a lot of information about jihad in Islam. Their preacher Mawlawi Asluddin is calling for a global jihad on their YouTube page by bringing an example of the 'Al-Aqsa Storm' on October 7th, 2023 by the Palestinian militant Islamist group, Hamas. He repeats that "all Muslims must defend Islam by any means" by showing the weapons.

Terrorist activities

According to the Tajik authorities, there were two unsuccessful attempts to cross the Tajik-Afghanistan border by JA in 2023. The first one happened on April 26, when two fighters of JA were killed.⁵ They crossed the border near the village Dashti Yazghulom, Vanj District of Badakhshan in Tajikistan. Reportedly, these two militants carried weapons.

The Tajik government reported the other one in September 2023. It stated that three militants of JA crossed the border on August 29-30 in Kevron, Darvoz District of Tajikistan.⁶ As a result, three were killed. They had a hidden cache with a lot of ammunition. The names of the JA militants were reported as Bobojonov Zarif Mahmudjonovich (aka Usmon) from Isfara, their leader, Bahodurov Farhod Basharovich (aka Abu Mus'ab) from Nurobod, and Qosimov Ahtam Sultonovich (aka Ubayda) from Kulob.

JA still has an impact on the other side of the river. Local media in Tajikistan have reported the detention of 35 people in May 2024 in Yazghulom, Vanj District of Badakhshan of Tajikistan.⁷ They were charged with being in contact with the terrorist group JA and some for hiding them in their houses. There has not yet been an official announcement regarding these cases. Yazghulom made headlines in 2022 too. Some people, including teenagers, were arrested on extremism charges.⁸ Yazghulom, Vanj District, close to Afghanistan, is a remote mountainous area with a low quality of life.

An overall assessment of its capacity

Reports estimate approximately 200 fighters of JA in Afghanistan. It is not known how many sleeping agents and sympathizers are inside Tajikistan. The jihadi groups operate very secretly, making it challenging to know the exact number of followers or active members. However, 200 active members are trained fighters who can recruit other young people both online and offline. If we analyze the group from its inception to its current condition, we can see that its members are becoming more confident. According to a UN report in 2023, the group members are estimated to be between 100 and 250 fighters, located in Badakhshan, Kunduz, and Takhar Provinces.⁹ Tajik sources believe the militants of JA between 200-300, with many of their members coming from Tajikistan¹⁰.

One of the experts, speaking on condition of anonymity, told me that it's difficult to determine the number of JA members in Afghanistan. Sometimes the group claims to have thousands of members to showcase their capabilities, but in reality, they include all their relatives and family members in these counts. This leads to a lot of confusion. We need to focus on identifying the exact figure of fighters, who are estimated to number between 200 people.

Al-Qaida and the Taliban are the main sponsors of JA.¹¹ The Taliban's control of revenues in Afghanistan is beneficial for JA. The UN has reported that Al-Qaida has combined traditional and technologically advanced methods of raising its financial resources. The traditional methods include kidnapping for ransom, robbery, and taxation. The technologically advanced methods involve fundraising via social media, crowdfunding, gaming platforms, and cryptocurrencies.

There is an indication that the Taliban are integrating JA fighters into their battalions. This means they receive payments and training as Taliban soldiers. In 2022, the media reported that the Taliban deployed Lashkar-e Mansoori, a unit of suicide bombers, in the Badakhshan and Takhar Provinces.¹² JA fighters were the main force in this battalion.

In terms of operations, there are obvious attempts by the militants to cross the Tajik-Afghanistan border. Two failed attempts in 2023 demonstrate their intentions

to test the border security capabilities of the Tajik side.

The group has also changed its propaganda tactics: now their representative speaks without hiding his face and shares his biography to establish his legitimacy by talking about Islam. However, his main message remains unchanged: to overthrow the secular government and establish Islamic rule in Tajikistan.

| Symbiotic relations with the Taliban



JA fighters looking at abandoned Soviet tanks and IFVs in Afghanistan.
Source: X page of war_noir. Posted on June 15, 2024

After a suicide bomb attack in Khujand in 2010 and their involvement in Kamarob Gorge operations, JA became somewhat silent. It was only in 2016 that reports surfaced about their founder and leader Amriddin Tabarov being killed in 2015 in Afghanistan. However, the name of the group resurfaced with an attack in Maymay

in 2020. From the beginning, JA fighters were fighting against the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and NATO coalitions shoulder to shoulder. JA militants proved their loyalty and capacity to the Taliban and Al-Qaida during their united fight against the former Republic of Afghanistan and NATO coalitions. After the fall of Kabul and the establishment of the Taliban governance, JA found a conducive environment to grow its network near the Tajik border. Now, with the Taliban in power, they have granted some territorial and border control in northern Afghanistan to this terrorist group. According to an expert who has traveled to Afghanistan and has many contacts there and prefers to remain anonymous, JA fighters are undergoing military training every day. Naturally, the Taliban denies any link with JA to ease their tense relations with Dushanbe.

NATO left a lot of weapons and ammunition in Afghanistan. UN has reported about "350,000 automatic weapons, 70,000 armored vehicles, 20 assault aircraft, 4 transport aircraft, and more than 100 helicopters."¹³ Ammunition is valued at \$8.5 billion. The main stockpiles are located in Kabul, Kunduz, Balkh, and Jalalabad. These weapons and training make JA strong and capable of attacking Tajikistan and destabilizing Central Asia.

Taliban try to control different Jihadi Salafi groups in Afghanistan but with little success. JA cannot boast the same level of support from the Taliban as Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) does. In contrast to JA, TTP has more manpower (between 6,000 and 6,500) and closer tribal and personal connections with the Taliban in Afghanistan. A UNSC report indicated that thousands of TTP fighters enjoy relatively free movement and have access to NATO weapons.¹⁴ Since the fall of Kabul in 2021, these opportunities have provided the TTP with the resources needed to frequently attack Pakistan. Nevertheless, JA enjoys full operational, logistical, and financial support from the Taliban. A recent report from the Swiss Institute for Global Affairs revealed that the Taliban agreed to mediate between Dushanbe and JA, but their mission failed.¹⁵ JA made unrealistic demands of the Tajik government: (a) declaration of an Islamic government; (b) removal of all Russian military personnel from Tajikistan; (c) release of all Ansarullah prisoners in Tajikistan; (d) establishment of religious schools (madrassas) in Tajikistan. Reportedly, under pressure from the Taliban, JA agreed to only one precondition for any talks: Russian military personnel must leave Tajikistan. Naturally, the talks have been at a deadlock since that point.



Taliban border guards are receiving their religious lessons in Nusai, Badakhshan, Afghanistan. May 2023. Credit: Franz J. Marty.

The Taliban and JA have created an alliance for mutual support. Locals in Badakhshan, Afghanistan have informed the media that JA is equipped with the latest technologies and that they work together with the Taliban.¹⁶ As one of the previously mentioned experts commented on the relationship between JA and the Taliban: “JA said to the Taliban: we were with you in your fight against the infidels; now it is your turn to help us establish an Islamic state in our homeland.”

Policy Recommendations

- It is important to remember that the Taliban is already building strong partnerships with China, Russia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. These collaborations provide a certain level of recognition, but in the long term, the Taliban understands that their governance needs broader international recognition as a legitimate country. However, the Taliban is desperate to be recognized internationally. The United States, Canada, and European countries should use this opportunity to increase pressure on the Taliban and demand that they cease all relations with Al-Qaida and other foreign jihadi organizations. Alternatively, they could ask the Taliban to demobilize and demilitarize foreign jihadists, hoping this approach will diminish the jihadists' regional ambitions to spread jihad to neighboring countries.

- The Taliban has proven that they are not an honest international partner. Therefore, there is a need to monitor their behavior in practice. Now, the Taliban feels a sense of 'victory' and may push its agenda more aggressively. Additionally, careful coordination and a clear vision among the US, Canada, and European countries will be crucial for the practical implementation of these policy recommendations.

- Countering ideological Salafi jihadism is not an easy task. Years of experience and significant expenditure have shown that ideological jihadism exploits many factors to attract people, especially young, disillusioned, and vulnerable individuals. While there is a possibility to mitigate ideological jihadism, eradicating it is entirely unlikely.

- It is clear that the Taliban and JA manipulate social media for their destructive purposes. A team of specialized individuals, like the community notes on X, should be established to refute their false claims. This would provide an alternative perspective on extremist content. Cooperation with tech companies such as Google and X is essential to halt the dissemination of content promoting violence, extremism, and jihadism.

- Another possible approach is to collaborate with local researchers in Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to develop qualified young researchers on violent extremism and jihadism. These researchers could work with international think tanks to publish their analyses in local languages. Although some Central Asian researchers publish in English and other foreign languages, there is a lack of well-known young researchers in the local languages of Central Asia. This type of collaboration can help build a strong foundation of local researchers in these languages.

- Tajikistan needs to enhance its current policy of combating violent extremism and jihadism, which is mostly based on military means. A holistic approach is required. Dushanbe should incorporate political and social strategies as well. It is known that jihadists are adept at exploiting local grievances and injustices to violence. Therefore, it is crucial to handle issues like the 'Hijabification' of the population carefully, as such measures can provide incentives for jihadists to promote their violent ideologies. JA is already exploiting this situation to attract new members and incite violence in Tajikistan.

Conclusion

The presence and activities of JA represent a slow-ticking bomb near the border with Tajikistan. The long-term threat posed by JA to Tajikistan and the region is real and serious. JA has experienced and well-trained jihadists. Even 200 fighters could be enough to destabilize the border region with Tajikistan. It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of their propaganda, but their persistent promotion of violent ideas suggests they might have some influence over Tajik migrant communities in Russia. Especially now, with the ban on hijab in Tajikistan, they could use this moment to lure more people into their ideology. Sources told me that JA leaders had a meeting with Hibatullah Akhunzada, the Taliban leader, in June 2024 and asked him to announce jihad against the Tajik government in response to this law. Akhunzada declined. In a recent video, Mawlawi Asluddin addressed the 'sisters' in Tajikistan. His message was simple: be patient.

There is also a significant question regarding whether JA militants will join IS-KP in the near future. If the Taliban pressures JA to relocate to different areas of Afghanistan or integrate into Afghan society, some JA fighters might see joining IS-KP as an option.

End notes

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² Archived version of the website

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⁸ Mirzonabii Kholiqzod, ‘Nidoi ‘Allahu Akbar’ Bud Yo Nabud? Haft Sokini Yazghulom Ba Zindon Mahkum Shudand’ [Was There a Call ‘Allahu Akbar’ or Not? Seven People from Yazghulom Sentenced to Prison], RFE/RL, January 4, 2022.

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¹² Farangis Najibullah and Mustafa Sarwar, “Taliban Says New Troops New Central Asian Borders Will Bring Stability. The Neighbors Are Not So Sure.” RFE/RL, accessed July 29, 2024.

¹³ Report No. S/2023/370 “Fourteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2665 (2022) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan” – was published on June 1, 2023.

¹⁴ Report No. S/2024/499 “Fifteenth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team established pursuant to resolution 1526 (2004), which was submitted to the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011), in accordance with paragraph (a) of the annex to resolution 2716 (2023), July 8, 2024.

¹⁵ Franz J. Marty. EXCLUSIVE: Uncertain Efforts to Broker Peace Between Tajikistani Jihadist Group in Afghanistan and Tajik Government. Swiss Institute for Global Affairs. February 21, 2024.

¹⁶ Mumin Ahmadi, «Amaliyoti Darvoz: «Ansorulloh» Khusa Yo Tahdid Ba Tojikiston?» [Operation in Darvaz: Is «Ansarullah» a Scarecrow or a Threat to Tajikistan?], RFE/RL, September 7, 2023.



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