



Central Asia: Next Stop for Syria's Foreign Jihadists?

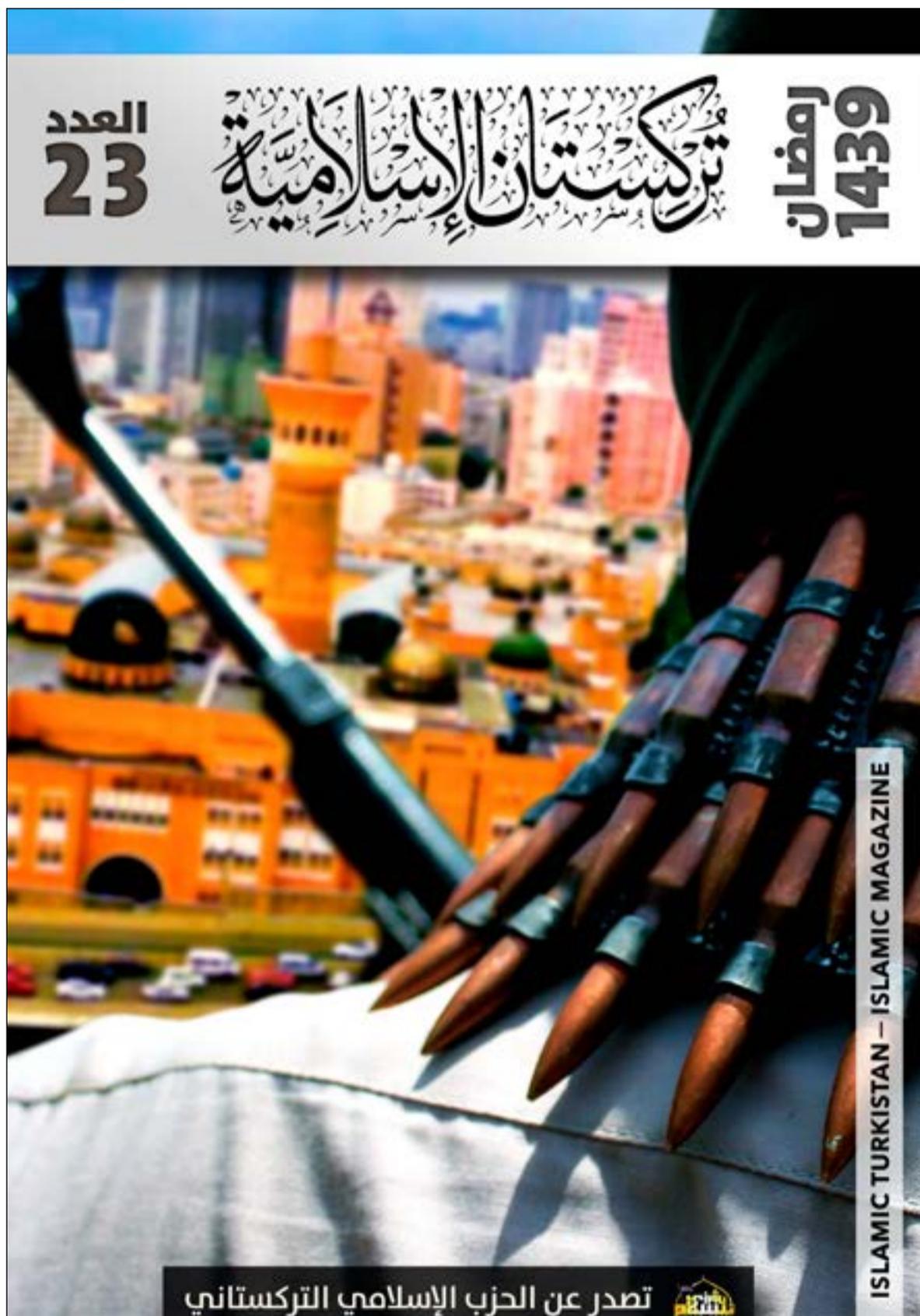
OE Watch Commentary: The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), a jihadist group made up primarily of ethnic Uyghurs, has emerged as one of the Syrian conflict's most resilient factions. With the majority of rebel groups having either collapsed, contracted, dissolved into other formations, or surrendered to government forces, the TIP has remained relatively strong and intact in its mountainous bases near the Turkish border. With the fulcrum of activity for global jihadists shifting away from Syria, though, TIP leadership may be torn between the divergent goals of consolidating gains in Syria or moving to more hospitable environments closer to their main targets in China's Xinjiang Province. The two accompanying excerpts, from prominent Arabic-language media sources, provide some context to this important question.

The first article, from Lebanon's *al-Akhbar*, relies on open source information and anonymous jihadist informants to argue that at least some Syria-based TIP members are shifting their focus toward Central Asia. The article mentions an influential Rohingya jihadist ideologue, the former spokesman for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, who recently called for TIP fighters "to include China in your targets... and support your brothers in Turkistan and elsewhere, and carry out commando attacks inside China..." The article also mentions a high-ranking al-Qaeda envoy from Afghanistan who recently visited TIP bases in Syria, purportedly to discuss the establishment of a "High Coordinating Council for Jihad against Buddhists." This entity's main role, according to the article, will be to "coordinate between the Turkistani, Uzbek and other Central Asian jihadists, with the aim of targeting Buddhists everywhere."

The second article, from the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, looks at how foreign jihadists have become "the biggest obstacle to resolving the dilemma in Idlib, Northern Syria." It points to efforts by various parties, including local rebels, to uproot the jihadists from the area. The plan, according to a local analyst cited in the article, is to "gradually" expel them from Syria." The article's author does not speculate on where they would be sent to, merely noting that "the same recruitment networks that were used to bring them into Syria have smuggling routes to get them out."

If the Syrian government and local rebels strike a truce deal in Idlib Province and its surroundings, foreign jihadists will face increasing pressure to move on, as their presence will complicate the success of any government-rebel reconciliation program. Foreign jihadists, particularly those from Central Asia, may well decide to retrace their steps out of Syria sooner rather than later. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“...include China in your targets... and support your brothers in Turkistan and elsewhere, and carry out commando attacks inside China...”



Cover from Turkistan Islamic Party's Electronic Magazine (latest issue).
Source: Jihadology Website (Aaron Y. Zelin and Jihadology.net), <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/turkistacc84n-al-islacc84micc84yyah-magazine-23.pdf>, <https://jihadology.net/about/legal-notice/>.



Continued: Central Asia: Next Stop for Syria's Foreign Jihadists?

Source: التركستاني يستعدّ نحو الجهاد ضد البوذيين؟
 “The TIP Prepares... for Jihad Against Buddhists?” *al-Akhbar*, 20 June 2018. <https://goo.gl/8qhgcB>

Source: المتطرفون الأجانب... عقدة الحل في الشمال السوري
 “Foreign Extremists... Obstacle to a Solution in Northern Syria,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 11 June 2018. <https://goo.gl/u74XMG>

Far from the spotlight, the Turkistan Jihadist Movement continues to rearrange its cards in preparation for playing a role beyond Syria... to divide the TIP into two main factions, the first of them ready to depart the Syrian scene in preparation for what comes next, the second committed to continuing the “Syrian mission” until its end...

Foreign fighters affiliated with al-Qaeda represent the biggest obstacle to resolving the dilemma in Idlib, Northern Syria. For this reason efforts are required to expel them from the region. These began about two months ago, and the number of foreigners has decreased, including fighters from the Turkistan Islamic Party, which is considered the largest and fiercest force according to analysts.

Recent changes have created disorder within the TIP and divisions... among those who call for the need to continue the “Syrian jihad” and encourage migration to Syria and those asserting the need to fight against “the near enemy” (meaning China)...

The presence of foreign fighters is on the agenda for resolving the situation in the north, where extremist fighters were pushed into by the Syrian regime and Russia, transported from areas in the north and center of Syria, as well as the Damascus surroundings, and their presence has become an “essential” issue amidst news of a solution to “gradually” expel them from Syria, given the difficulty of reaching truces with them given their links to al-Qaeda.

Some days ago, Abu Dhir Azzam entered the TIP jihad fray openly. The well-known jihadist issued an audio recording... [where] he called on them... to “include China in your targets... and support your brothers in Turkistan and elsewhere, and carry out commando attacks inside China...”

Experts following events in northern Syria say the extremists in Idlib are currently divided into two groups. The first is made up of Syrian Nusra Front members. Most of them have a “domestic agenda. There are also in Idlib Syrian leaders of al-Qaeda with a foreign agenda, and other foreign leaders who were targeted over the past 18 months in two big campaigns, the first in early 2017 with an airstrike that killed more than 150 fighters, and the other a few months ago. This in addition to the wave of assassinations that killed some of them....

...“TIP leaders in Syria in the past three months hosted a jihadist envoy coming from Afghanistan in two visits that were separated from one another by five weeks.” The envoy was a Pakistani national who... “held three meetings, two with leaders from the Nusra Front and the third with a group of field commanders from the TIP, a meeting which lasted around five hours,” according to the source...

According to al-Hajj, they “represent a basic obstacle to any truce and hence they must be expelled and neutralized in the ongoing operations in Idlib,” which aim to change the status of Nusra members and de-radicalize the group so their existence can appropriate for the next stage...

“TIP leaders in Idlib had not welcomed an envoy of this rank except for once, about three years ago.” The timing of this trip, according to the source, came less than two weeks after the rough contours were sketched for forming the “High Council for Jihad Against Buddhists” in Afghanistan. It is believed that this council will be called the “Islamic Movement for Jihad Against Buddhists.”

... the same recruitment networks that were used to bring them into Syria have smuggling routes to get them out, even if it is a “complex, slow and expensive operation”...

The source also pointed to the key role played by the known jihadist Abu Dhir Azzam, who is of the Rohingya ethnicity, in the formation of this council. Some years ago, he was the spokesman for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. He came to Syria in 2014 and joined ISIS, but he left the group and secretly fled in the second half of 2016, after which he renounced the group. The sources added that Abu Dhir “received direct assistance from Taliban commanders and leaders of al-Qaeda for forming this new council, which will aim to coordinate between Turkistani, Uzbek and other Asian jihadists, with the aim of laying out plans for jihad against Buddhists everywhere.”

Experts estimate the number of foreign fighters in Idlib commanded by al-Qaeda to be more than 2,000 fighters. The TIP fighters in Syria are estimated to number 1,200...



Image from Turkistan Islamic Party's Electronic Magazine (latest issue, p.30).

Source: Jihadology Website (Aaron Y. Zelin and Jihadology.net), <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/turkistacc84n-afislacc84micc84yyah-magazine-26.pdf>; <https://jihadology.net/about/legal-notice/>