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Kabul Suicide Attack: Growing IS Factor in Afghanistan

By Shahzeb Ali Rathore and Sara Mahmood

Synopsis

The suicide attack in Kabul by Islamic State's local franchise, Wilayat Khurasan, underscores the group's operational capability. The attack on the Hazara Shias also brings a sectarian dimension to the Afghan conflict.

Commentary

LAST SATURDAY, on 23 July 2016, the Afghan-Pakistan franchise of the so-called Islamic State (IS), Wilayat Khurasan, conducted a suicide attack in Kabul. Two IS fighters detonated their explosives during a peaceful demonstration by the minority Hazara Shias, killing 80 and injuring over 260 individuals. While this is the largest attack against the Hazara community by IS, it is not the first. In November 2015, members of the group beheaded seven Hazara Shias who had been kidnapped from the Zabul province.

Varied reports have highlighted the numerical strength of the IS branch operating primarily from the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. In March 2016, the Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan asserted that IS members and supporters in Afghanistan stood at about 10,000. United States estimates however claimed that Wilayat Khurasan (WK) has between 1,000 to 3,000 active fighters located in eastern Afghanistan. These fighters have conducted several attacks against the armed forces, police and civilians.

Taliban – IS Rivalry in Afghanistan

In recent months, a IS stronghold in the eastern Nangarhar province of the country has come under pressure from the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces

(ANDSF) and US air strikes. In September 2015, the Afghan National Army (ANA) launched Operation Shaheen-09 targeting IS, killing a number of IS leaders and commanders. A few months into the operation, President Ashraf Ghani announced that IS has been defeated in eastern Afghanistan, claiming that Afghan forces have killed over 200 fighters.

However, despite the strides made against IS fighters, the attack in Kabul is a reminder that military operations provide only temporary gains. It is clear that the IS-infiltrated province in Afghanistan has managed to recover to perpetrate one of the largest suicide bombings of 2016 in the country.

Over the past year, sporadic clashes between Taliban fighters and IS members have been reported specifically in the Nangarhar province. Moreover, ongoing defections from the Taliban to IS, specifically after the revelation of Mullah Umar's death in 2015, have occurred. The IS attack in Kabul seems to have pre-empted the Taliban's fighting season, with the Spring Offensive currently underway.

The magnitude of the attack by WK is much greater than the last suicide bombing in Kabul claimed by the Taliban. Consequently, the Taliban are bound to intensify their retaliatory assaults against WK to reclaim their space.

Hazara tribes have been targeted by the Taliban during the 1990s; the nature of the conflict with the Hazaras was largely ethnic and political rather than religious. The Taliban remain focused on US and local government targets in their ongoing offensive. However, as IS considers Shias as *Rafidah* (rejectionists) and *kafir* (unbelievers), it has the potential of transforming a traditionally ethnic and political conflict into a Sunni-Shia one.

Middle East Connection

WK's push for a sectarian conflict in Afghanistan cannot be divorced from the Syrian conflict. As such, considering IS' *takfiri* ideology and its penchant for targeting Shias, more attacks of such nature are likely. This will prove to be quite detrimental for peace prospects in a country that is traditionally fraught with divisions along ethnic lines and tribal affiliations.

Moreover, according to Human Rights Watch, Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has recruited thousands of Hazara Shias from Afghanistan to fight for the Zainebiyoun Brigade in Syria. Aside from other Shia militias, the Zainebiyoun Brigade in particular defends the sacred shrines of Shia Muslims, which includes the Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque – the tomb of Prophet Muhammad's granddaughter.

In this regard, the attack in Kabul could be a consequence of Afghan Hazara support to the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. Moreover, Iran hosts three million Afghan refugees, of whom Hazara Shias constitute a substantial proportion. To incentivise the fight against IS and other opposition forces, financial remuneration, legal residence and annual pilgrimages for the families have been offered by Iran. As such, the inclusion of Afghans in the fight has brought sectarian war to Afghanistan.

Similarly, the Middle East connection has been felt in neighbouring Pakistan as well.

The country is home to the second largest Shia population outside of Iran, with strong divides along sectarian lines and rampant violence against Shias. In December 2015, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), a sectarian militant group, conducted a suicide bombing in the Kurram Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The attack was conducted in the Shia majority town of Parachinar, which killed 24. Shortly after the incident, LeJ stated that the attack was in retaliation for the Shias' support of Iran and the Assad regime in Syria. Thus, as Pakistani groups such as LeJ act on the basis of Syrian conflict dynamics, this could represent an emerging trend in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

Regional Implications

South Asian countries have denied the presence of IS across their territories. Pakistan has refused to accept the presence of IS, even though multiple networks and individuals linked to the entity emerged in the country. In addition, Bangladesh has also repudiated IS existence in the country, even after the bloody Dhaka café siege in July 2016.

As such, despite Ghani's claims, it is evident that IS in Afghanistan is still operationally active and will be a force to reckon with. Recent reports have indicated that the group has relocated to the eastern Kunar and Nuristan provinces, while it is gaining influence in parts of Ghazni and Zabul as well.

It is unlikely that peace in Afghanistan can be restored simply through successful negotiations with the Taliban. The IS branch in Afghanistan is a formidable force that has shown that it possesses operational strength comparable to the dominant insurgent group in the country. While the international community deems Taliban as the biggest risk to peace in Afghanistan, it should be noted that IS is another threat to stability.

In addition, continued attacks at the behest of IS targeting the discriminated Hazara Shias could become a growing source of recruitment for Iran's Shia militias. This not only fuels and aggravates the growing sectarian divide in Iraq and Syria, but also within Afghanistan itself.

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