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## Unclaimed Terrorism: Afghanistan's 'Grey' Attacks

*By Abdul Basit*

### SYNOPSIS

*Despite the Afghan government's attribution, the Taliban's denial of the Kabul maternity hospital attack indicates the group's efforts to distance itself from indiscriminate violence against civilians fearing negative political outcomes ahead of the expected peace talks.*

### COMMENTARY

TERRORISM IS communicative violence that draws attention to perpetrating groups' ideological narratives. Beyond the terrorist outfits' use of the violence to kill or maim, there is their need to highlight their political grievances and demands through intimidation. Yet, the empirical data indicates that majority of the terrorist attacks go unclaimed; only [one in seven attacks](#) is claimed by the terrorist groups. Attacks are claimed if the expected political [outcomes are positive](#) and vice versa.

In May, two high-profile attacks in Afghanistan targeting a maternity hospital in Kabul and a [mosque in central Parwan](#) province went unclaimed. Though the Afghan government [blamed the Taliban](#), the group has [denied responsibility](#). Contrary to the Afghan government's allegations, the US blamed the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) for the attack.

### Why Some Attacks Remain Claimed

The terrorist groups are less likely to claim attacks which target the civilians ahead of major political developments such as ceasefire agreements or peace negotiations. Indiscriminate violence against civilians carries more political risks as compared to selective violence against military targets.

Currently, the Taliban are engaged in the campaign of winning the hearts and minds in Afghanistan as part of their political propaganda against the Afghan government. Alongside discrediting the government, the insurgent group is mindful of avoiding civilian casualties.

Since 2006, barring its fighters from harming civilians has been at the heart of different *Laheya* ([codes of conduct](#)) issued by the Taliban leadership. In 2011 and 2013, the Taliban respectively formed a committee and a commission to mitigate the harm to civilians brought about by group's operations.

In 2017, both these entities were merged into the commission for [the Prevention of Civilian Casualties and Inquiry of Complaints \(PCCIC\)](#).

### **Principal-Agent Problem**

Organisationally, the anonymous claims constitute the principal-agent problem where some level of disconnect exists between the top leaders of terrorist groups and their subordinates. Despite its organisational coherence and exemplary discipline as a formidable fighting force, the Taliban movement is fraught with internal divisions. The February deal with the US in Qatar has further deepened these divisions.

For instance, ahead of the intra-Afghan peace process, the demotion and replacement of hardline military commander [Sadar Ibrahim](#) with Mullah Yaqoob, the son of Taliban's founding leader Mullah Omar, as the head of group's military wing exposes the militant movement's internal cracks.

Similarly, the Taliban's [political office in Qatar seems divided](#) between the supporters of moderate Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and hardliner Maulvi Muhammad Abbas Stenakzai. Likewise, the movement also appears [divided over the question of severing links with Al-Qaeda](#), as demanded in the February deal with the US.

The Taliban leadership exercises only nominal control over the day-to-day operations of the rank-and-file. The field commanders and allied networks enjoy tremendous operational autonomy. Some of them are the beneficiaries of Afghanistan's lucrative narcotics trade, illicit mining industry and timber trade, among others.

### **Internal Sabotage?**

Since the expansion of Taliban's territorial control, the annual revenue stream of the group has increased from US\$300 million per annum to US\$[1.5 billion](#) per annum. In each district under the group's control, drug traffickers pay tax to each local Taliban commander (\$6 per kilogram of heroin). A political settlement between Kabul and the Taliban would potentially deprive these commanders of a steady income stream.

Given the above-mentioned divisions, it is quite possible that the hardline Taliban factions might have carried out the attacks to derail the peace process. The hardline Taliban factions not only dispute negotiations with Washington and Kabul but they are also opposed to power-sharing plans. They believe the Taliban are winning militarily and should unilaterally form the Shariah government in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, the Taliban have officially distanced the group from these attacks for two possible reasons. First, in line with the February agreement with the US, the Taliban pledged not to attack main cities and provincial capitals in Afghanistan.

Second, claiming these attacks not only constituted violation of the deal but it would have potentially jeopardised the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as per the agreed timeline.

### **Political Settlement Way to Go**

Alternatively, ISKP, the ideological archfoe of the Taliban, might have carried out these attacks to derail the peace process. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the US Special Representative for Afghanistan [Zalmay Khalilzad](#) have blamed ISKP for the attack.

ISKP is a byproduct of chaos and anarchy; continued violence in Afghanistan would allow the terror group to maintain a footprint in the country. The US-Taliban deal and any form of intra-Afghan political settlement would be detrimental to ISKP's presence in the country.

The terror group is the common enemy of the US, Taliban and the Afghan government. By opposing peace negotiation, ISKP is projecting itself as the only defiant group with the hope of luring dissident Taliban and Al-Qaeda members opposed to the agreement.

Also, it is quite possible that Afghanistan's urban networks of violence, which in the past have worked in cahoots with the Taliban-allied Haqqani Network (HQN), might be [facilitating these attacks by cooperating with ISK now](#). On its own ISKP lacks the wherewithal of launching complex attacks in Kabul.

A recent UN report has hinted at the possibility of [tactical cooperation between ISK and HQN](#). The report maintains that this pattern of violence which discredits the government on account of its failure to protect the civilians in Kabul, the capital, provides Taliban with deniability and ISKP with relevance.

The longer the uncertainty looms over the peace process, the unclaimed terrorist attacks are likely to continue. An early initiation of the peace process and political settlement are necessary to stem the maddening violence in Afghanistan.

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*Abdul Basit is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

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