



## **KABUL ATTACK: TOWARDS AN ENDLESS QUAGMIRE?**

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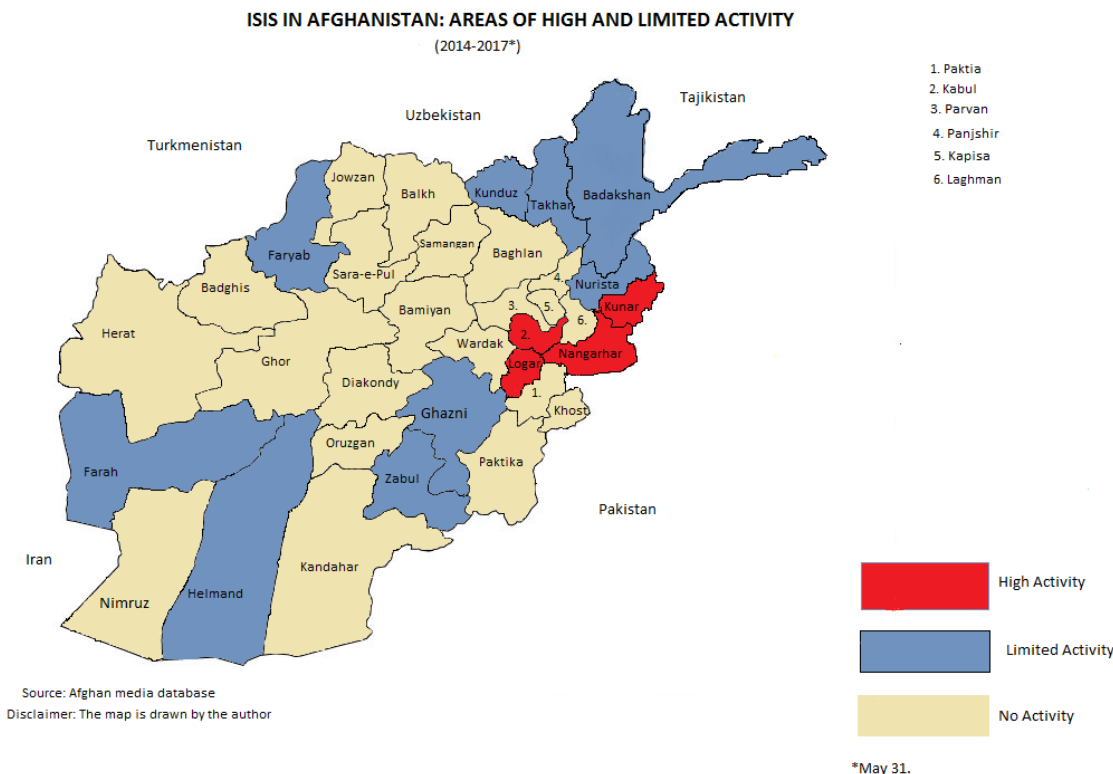
The war-racked country was jolted again on May 31, 2017, when unidentified militants killed at least 90 people and injured more than 460 others in a car bomb blast in Wazir Akbar Khan area, close to the fortified entrance of the German Embassy in the diplomatic enclave of Kabul. No outfit has claimed responsibility for the attack, thus far. However, Afghanistan's Intelligence Agency, National Directorate of Security (NDS), on June 1, 2017, accused the Haqqani Network and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Agency for the attack in Kabul. The NDS pointing out its early findings that showed the role of Haqqani Network with assistance from the ISI, said in a statement, "These terrorists once again proved they don't represent any religion and they only carry out such coward attacks to please their Pakistani masters which is against all Islamic and human rights principals."

Since there has been no claim from any terrorist organisation operating in Afghanistan, the space for conjecture is ample with fingers pointing at Taliban, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/ also known as Daesh and Wilayat Khorasan) and Haqqani- ISI collusion. All three outfits have carried out large-scale terrorist attacks in the capital city of Kabul in the past. However, the Taliban categorically denied involvement in the May 31 suicide attack in Kabul. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement, "This blast has nothing to do with the Mujahidin's...The Islamic Emirate condemns those blasts carried out against civilians and in which civilians suffer casualties without a clear target."

Though there is no clear claim of responsibility for the deadly attack, the role of ISIS – that has carried out major terrorist attacks in Kabul with high civilian casualties - cannot be ruled out. Since 2014 – when the first signs of IS appeared - IS activity has increased significantly in the Province with consolidation of its position and capabilities in the eastern part of the country. The last two major bomb blasts in Kabul were also claimed by the IS. The first province to come under ISIS military control was Nangarhar, followed by the neighbouring Provinces of Kabul, Logar and Kunar. The map below shows the military activity of ISIS through the country with areas marked

in three main categories – high activity zone, limited activity zone and no activity areas. The high activity zone can be understood as areas experiencing increasing military offensives, whereas the limited activity zone is primarily the control zone that indicates physical presence of the outfit engaged in low intensity attacks, targeting opposing forces.

### ISIS CONFLICT MAP



According to the map indicating the presence and areas of activity of ISIS, out of the 34 Provinces in Afghanistan at least four are experiencing high level of violent ISIS activity. Of these, Nangarhar is the worst affected with majority of ISIS activity occurring in the Province. Starting in April 2015, ISIS launched attacks in southern and western Districts of Nangarhar, including Achin, Jalalabad, Sherzad, Deh Baka, Chaparhar and Surkod Districts. However, the first attacks conducted by ISIS were against the Taliban forces present in south western part of the province. The turf war between IS and the Taliban that was limited to Nangarhar Province gradually spread into other areas, resulting in increasing incidents of violence. The turf war was followed by terrorist attacks targeting the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), international targets, civilians, including the sectarian minority in the country, particularly in Kabul.

Some of the prominent attacks on each of its targets in Kabul include:

In its first ever attack in Kabul, ISIS on July 23, 2016, killed at least 80 people, mostly civilians and injured 231 others in a double suicide attack targeting Hazara Shias who were sitting on a protest demonstration in Kabul. The protestors were demanding that the Afghan Government change its

decision to reroute the 500-kilovolt TUTAP (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan) power line, which was originally set to pass through the Bamiyan Province, home to the Hazara community, but was now passing through Salang in Parwan Province for economic and technical reasons. This attack on Shias indicated the spread of ISIS influence, beyond its traditional areas of control in Nangarhar.<sup>2</sup>

Later, on February 7, 2017, at least 22 civilians were killed while more than 41 were injured in a suicide attack outside the Supreme Court complex in Kabul. The attack was claimed by IS on February 8, 2017, in a post on *Twitter*.<sup>3</sup>

In an attack on the military, on March 8, 2017, Daesh militants, disguised as doctors, carried out an attack on Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan facility, a military hospital in Kabul, killing 38 people and injuring dozen others.<sup>4</sup>

On May 3, 2017, ISIS militants attacked an armoured NATO convoy in Kabul killing at least eight people and injuring 25 others, including three coalition soldiers. Though the target of the attack was the international military forces, the majority of casualties occurred in civilian category.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the latest, May 31 attack, has also claimed mostly civilian lives. The blast was the latest in a long line of attacks in the Afghan capital. This shows the vulnerability of the civilians in the 15-year long war in afflicting the country. The multiplicity and lethality of terrorist attacks in Kabul and across the country has led to high civilian casualties in the last two years, hitting a record high in 2016.

The table below shows civilian casualties from 2009 when **United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan** (UNAMA) began to systematically document civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

#### Civilian Casualties

Year	Killed	Injured	Total
2009	2412	3557	5969
2010	2794	4368	7162
2011	3133	4709	7842
2012	2769	4821	7590
2013	2969	5669	8638
2014	3710	6825	10535
2015	3565	7469	11034
2016	3498	7920	11418

Source: UNAMA

\*Data till April 2017

According to the half-yearly report on the *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Afghanistan* for 2016, prepared by the Human Rights Unit of UNAMA, which covers the period from January 1 to December 31, at least 11,418 civilians suffered casualties (3,498 deaths and 7,920 injured) - an overall increase of 3 percent from 2015. This increase in civilian casualties was visible in the early and mid period of 2016. Indeed, the first six months in 2016, from January to June,

recorded 5,166 civilian casualties – 1,601 deaths and 3,565 injuries. It is the highest number of such casualties recorded during the first six months of a year since 2009, when UNAMA began to systematically document civilian casualties in the country.

Of these casualties, the UN attributed at least 4,953 deaths and injuries to the Taliban. In fact, there was a 10-fold increase in casualties owing to attacks by IS, which primarily targets members of the Shia community. IS has inflicted heavy civilian casualties. Of the total number of casualties, at least 899 civilian casualties (209 deaths and 690 injured) were attributed to IS, which has been struggling to create a stronghold in the complex terrain of tribal and militant landscape. ISIS has faced severe backlash from Afghan and international security forces stationed in country, in addition to United States (US) airstrikes.

Significantly, in a dramatic escalation of US military operation and in an attempt to erode IS's capabilities in Afghanistan, the US on April 13, 2017, dropped the most powerful conventional bomb in the American arsenal, weighing 2,000 pounds - GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast, popularly referred as "Mother of All Bombs" - on a complex of tunnels and bunkers used by ISIS militants in Achin District of Nangarhar Province, killing at least 92 militants. Soon after the bombing, the US and Afghan forces conducted clearing operations and airstrikes in the area. While assessing the damage, the District Governor of Achin, Ismail Shinwari, said that security forces had recovered 92 bodies, none of them civilians.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Internal and external military pressure is repelling IS's attempts to expand in Afghanistan beyond the eastern Provinces. According to the most recent estimates from the US military in Afghanistan, a total of 600 to 800 fighters are reported to be operating in Afghanistan. This is in contrast to its initial strength at 3,000 in the summer of 2015. As ISIS continually suffers losses, it struggles to stay relevant by conducting suicide attacks in mosques, bazaars, military hospitals and diplomatic enclaves.

With a ten-fold increase in civilian casualties in the previous year and the increasing number of incidents of violence, the current year – 2017 - raises serious security concerns among both the Afghans and international community. The US Secretary of Defence, James Mattis during a visit to Kabul on April 24, 2017, had warned of "another tough year"<sup>7</sup> for both international troops and local forces in Afghanistan. As local ISIS fighters suffer setbacks, the concerns of the international community is regarding the inflow of foreign militants from Central Asian Arab and neighbouring countries, which would further complicate the situation on ground, boost the morale of the outfit and increase its influence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, creating an endless quagmire. It is equally important to note that the final annihilation of IS-Khorasan is nowhere close to the end of this year.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Kabul blast: Taliban denies involvement, condemns attack on civilians, *Firstpost*, June 2, 2017, <http://www.firstpost.com/india/kabul-blast-taliban-denies-involvement-condemns-attack-on-civilians-3502305.html>, accessed on June 2, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Devastating blasts rip through Hazara protest in Kabul, *Al Jazeera*, July 23, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2016/07/devastating-blasts-rip-hazara-protest-kabul-160723131756517.html>, accessed on June 2, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Islamic State claims responsibility for Afghan Supreme Court attack in Kabul, *Hindustan Times*, February 8, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-for-afghan-supreme-court-attack-in-kabul/story-cNaDawgusgtEXkhTNScDBK.html>, accessed on June 6, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Michael Safi, Isis militants disguised as doctors kill 38 in Kabul hospital attack, *The Guardian*, March 8, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/08/gunmen-dressed-as-doctors-attack-military-hospital-in-kabul>, accessed on June 2, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Deadly ISIS-Claimed Blast Targets NATO Convoy in Kabul, *Asharq al-Awsat*, May 3, 2017, <https://english.aawsat.com/asharq-al-awsat-english/world-news/deadly-blast-targets-nato-convoy-kabul>, accessed on June 2, 2016

<sup>6</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen, US 'mother of all bombs' killed 92 Isis militants, say Afghan officials, *The Guardian*, April 15, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/15/us-mother-of-all-bombs-moab-afghanistan-donald-trump-death-toll>, accessed on June 2, 2017

<sup>7</sup> Susan Jones, Defense Secretary Mattis: '2017's Going to Be Another Tough Year' in Afghanistan, *CNS News*, April 24, 2017, <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/susan-jones/defense-secretary-mattis-2017s-going-be-another-tough-year-afghanistan>, accessed on June 2, 2016