

Islamic State's Terror in Afghanistan: The Latest Killing of Hazara in Perspective

By Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf, Jul 25, 2016

Afghanistan suffers from a sharply deteriorating security situation. This is mainly due to the massive return of the Taliban and the expanding activities of Islamic State (IS) and other Jihadist groups which led to a tremendous increase in terrorist attacks leading to an extraordinarily high level of civilian casualties. On July 23, Kabul was once again rocked by a major terrorist attack. Afghanistan capital city experienced a **twin explosion** which hit a large, demonstration of tens of thousands of the Hazara minority, **killing at least 80 people** and wounding hundreds of others. **IS claimed responsibility** for the suicide attack which was carried out by two of its fighters.

This attack marks the first major IS attack in Kabul. In order to shed light on causes and consequences, the terror strike must be seen in the context of several factors:

Firstly, there is the proximity of time to the decision of US President Barack Obama to **draw down troops 'only' to 8,400 by the end of his administration**. This is much more than envisaged in the initial plan to maintain a force level of 5,500 soldiers in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the combat troops were entrusted again with an offensive mandate with the clear mission to fight terrorism and to support the Afghan government. After the official withdrawal of most of the international combat troops from Afghanistan in 2014, this is, without a doubt, a new dimension in the latest US military strategy in the country. Primarily, this has to be seen as Washington's reaction of the territorial gains of the Taliban as well as the rise of Islamic State and Al Qaeda activities in the country. In operational terms, transferring more power to the top commander (currently General John Nicholson) means that the US troops in Afghanistan will be entrusted with more flexibility helping to maximize use of available capacities, reacting faster towards potential upcoming and ongoing threats. However, the decision of maintaining not only troops but even more than expected and entrusted with a robust mandate to fight Islamist terror groups must be identified as a 'motivation' for Taliban, Al Qaeda and especially Islamic State to intensify their activities.

Secondly, ISIS has a **history of attacking Hazara** – not only in Syria and Iraq but in Afghanistan too (like the **beheading of 7 Hazara in the Zabul province**)- and it is obvious that the terror group wants to enforce the already entrenched sectarianism between the

minority of the Hazara Shiites and the Sunni majority in the country. Sectarian violence, or mainly the **Shi'a-Sunni divide**, is already a serious challenge facing the government in Kabul. Differences between these two sects of Islam can be traced back to the succession issue after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD. In the Af-Pak region, this cleavage mainly surfaced in the early 1980s when mostly Sunni Islamic radical groups received funding from the USA and Saudi Arabia to fight the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Concurrently, the Shi'a Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran promoted Shi'a radicalism in the region, resulting in the formation of numerous organization to safeguard Shia's interests. Iranian support for Shi'a elements in Pakistan, and the mostly Sunni Afghan jihad against the 'Red Army', encouraged Sunni extremism, supported by an emerging anti-Iranian block in the Muslim world. International proponents of this proxy war provided political, financial, and ideological support to their respective factions. Latter phenomenon led to a further increase of Sunni as well as Shia militant groups in order to conduct subversive activities such as targeted killings, mosque bombings and suicide attacks against the rival community. One Pakistan-based Sunni terror group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, carried out **an attack against Hazara's in December 2011**, killing more than 55 people in Kabul during the Shi'ite festival of Ashura. This was the deadliest action against Shias until last Saturday. Attempts by the Afghan government to counter sectarianism have mostly proven ineffective, partly because sectarian groups have themselves been used for political purposes (especially during by the administration of former Afghan President Hamid Karzai) and also because socio-economic factors such as high unemployment and the unequal distribution of wealth continue to contribute to frustration and intolerance within the Hazara community. The latter one is gaining importance since the IS are achieving two goals: On one side the attack will create further rifts between the different religious communities, on the other side it produces tensions between Hazara with the central government.

Thirdly, despite the Iran nuclear deal framework, general mistrust between Tehran and Washington will remain, this will also include suspicions regarding ongoing Iran's role and activities in Afghan domestic politics. There are concerns, that the newly attack on the Hazara community might provoke a reaction from Tehran. Basically one must state, that Iran is increasingly gaining importance in the whole region. Some analysts even argue that Shia Iran is the real beneficiary of the US/NATO military engagements in Afghanistan since it was weakening -at least temporarily- the Sunni Afghan Taliban, a major regional adversary which were seen as threats to **Iran's political and socio-cultural existence**. Due to the disastrous

post-invasion periods in Afghanistan producing a tremendous power vacuum paving the way for Iran to extend its activities and influence in Afghanistan. As such, the growing Sunni terrorism and especially the advent of the IS in Afghanistan might be used by Tehran to actively safeguard its interests in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the resurgence of the Taliban and the extent of IS influence is reawakening Tehran's threat perception of an encirclement of Iran by a potential '**Sunni wall**' (Iraq-Pakistan-Afghanistan). In consequence, one should rather expect a stronger role of Iran in Afghanistan's domestic affairs.

Fourthly, the two blasts among peaceful demonstrators is an apparent attempt to undermine Afghanistan's civil society, to enforce social and economic inequality in order to produce frustration among disadvantaged communities. As such, terror incident must be also seen as an attack on people attempts to exercise their fundamental political rights and subsequently a strike against Afghanistan's process of democratic transition. The Hazara, the third-largest minority with estimated 9 percent of the population in Afghanistan, were protesting against the change of the route of the so-called **the TUTAP transnational electricity project**. The latter one is an initiative by the Asian Development Bank involving five countries: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the initial plan of the route incorporates the Bamiyan province, where most of the Hazara settlements are located. In consequence, the changes in the project implementation are increasingly perceived as the continuation of the suppression of the Hazara's. The people are disenchanted about **the democratic and economic performance** of the country. Those in control of Afghanistan since October 2001, namely the US-backed Kabul elite, have failed to establish an **inclusive, legitimate and accountable political system**. Instead the country's democratic transition and state-building process were featured by the return of autocratic, decentralised warlord rule, high level of tolerance for impunity regarding war crimes, pervasive corruption, torture and other human rights' violations as well as the exclusion or marginalization of certain, disadvantaged communities.¹ Especially the corrupt and nepotistic governments of former **President Hamid Karzai truncated and violated any notions and fundamental principles of 'liberal democracy'**. Additionally, the remarkable uncertainty and heightened risk of tensions over the **election period in 2014** convinced many refugees not to return to Afghanistan and were an incentive for people inside the country to leave .

Fifthly, the latest terror attack must be contextualized within the tensed Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. More concrete, Kabul is blaming its eastern neighbor **for providing safe havens to terrorists** operating in Afghanistan. This follows the rationale of observers stating that most acts of terrorism in Afghanistan carry the Pakistani paw print. Therefore, it does not come by surprise that Afghan President **Ashraf Ghani states** that “having state-to-state ties with the neighboring country a "bigger challenge" for his government than combating terror groups such as al-Qaeda and Taliban”.

Sixthly, as a **predominantly Sunni terror group**, IS is, like the Taliban, opposed to Shiites and does not recognize them as Muslims. Nevertheless, the Taliban immediately rejected any involvement in the terror attack and stand aloof from IS. This is once again emphasizing the growing power struggle between both Jihadi groups in Afghanistan. In this context, besides its resurgence, one must be aware that since the death of the Taliban’s spiritual leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, the militant movement experienced changes in leadership, internal power struggles, and severe rifts. In other words, the Taliban movement was or still is in a deep identity crisis. Being disenchanted about the future course, goals and strategies, it seems obviously that several Taliban fighters were defecting to IS - in search of a new, strong leadership and a clear ideological orientation, they are getting increasingly attracted by IS. Consequently, conducting major, successful terror attacks might help to win over more Taliban fighter and other Jihadists. Here, IS will introduce a new quality of brutality and violence which is until today largely unknown in Afghanistan. In order to be able to ‘keep up’ with the aggressive forward policy of IS, local terrorist groups might be forced to escalate their activities. In result, the situation will once more turn from ‘bad to worse’ finding its expression in more terror attacks, consequent counter-terror campaigns and a continuation of the exodus of Afghans towards Europe.

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