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SADF COMMENT

## In the shadow of Syria: Contextualising Islamic State attacks against Shias in Afghanistan

On November 21, Kabul witnessed [once again a major terrorist incident](#) against a place of worship of a religious minority in the country. A suicide bomber attacked the Baqir-ul-uloom mosque from the inside by [blowing himself up among the other worshippers](#) belonging to the religious Shia community. The [Shias constitute](#) an estimated 15 per cent of Afghanistan's population of about 30 million. The timing was strategically chosen since the Shias were celebrating the end of the important Arbaeen period, [a 40-day mourning period](#) to commemorate the death of Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and a Shia martyr. This occasion is one of the most important events in the Shia religious calendar. Like in [several other attacks](#) against Shia's in Afghanistan this year, the Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility for the recent incident in which more than [30 people got killed and over 80 people](#) were injured. This on-going series of anti-Shia attacks by the Taliban is rising several questions: What is the rationale of the IS to attack the Shia community in Afghanistan? What is the role of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours in the increasing level of terrorist attacks in the country? Against this backdrop, how is the

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government in Kabul as well as the international community reacting to the increasing attacks against Afghanistan's religious minorities?

In order to contextualise the latest IS attacks against the Shias in Afghanistan, one must take into account several geographical- and actor-orientated conflict constellations, as well as domestic and international dimensions.

Firstly, there is the IS-Taliban confrontation. During the last years - especially in the post 2001 '[Kunduz offensive](#)' by the Taliban - one could observe a tremendous strengthening of the military capacities of the Taliban forces. In this context, one phenomenon is remarkable. Even if the Taliban were [not able to hold Kunduz for a long time](#), the 2015 battle over this city, which is the sixth greatest urban centre in Afghanistan, has a [highly symbolic nature](#). At the very core of the symbolism of Kunduz lies the semblance of a tectonic shift in the Taliban's self-conception *and* especially self-portrayal: from a mainly exclusive movement towards an inclusive one. In other words, the Taliban is undertaking attempts to broaden its ethnic-cultural recruiting base. It seems that the Taliban is trying to learn a lesson from the past and attempt to broaden its social structure and base by softening its stand towards Afghanistan's non-Pashtun population and non-Afghan migrants. As such, the 'battle over Kunduz' symbolises a change in the overall political strategy and subsequently the recruitment patterns of the Taliban: from a mainly Pashtun-focused composition of its ranks and files towards a more 'multi-ethnic force' in order to improve their chances of maintaining rule over seizures of territory, especially in the north of Afghanistan which has been the stronghold of anti-Taliban forces. This could determine a remarkable departure from the repressive policies against minorities during the [Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime in Afghanistan \(1996-2001\)](#), in which Shia had no opportunity to worship in public at all.

Moreover, IS is most likely identifying the country's Shia as a target for two reasons: on one hand, from a radicalized Sunni Jihadist perspective, Shias are a priori identified as a hostile religious community since they "[are conspiring to destroy Islam and to resuscitate Persian imperial rule over the Middle East and ultimately the world](#)". On the other side, IS

seems to be convinced that certain sections of Shias might function as a potential recruiting base of the rival Taliban movement.

Secondly, the latest attack must be seen in the context of the current attempts of the [National Unity Government \(NUG\)](#) to negotiate with minorities -especially Shia- aiming at improving their political and economic situation, at least on paper. Shia communities, especially the Hazaras, where [organizing large scale protests against](#) the NUG demanding more political participation and representation as well as a greater share in the economic development of the country. As such, the IS attack on the Shia can be seen as undermining the efforts to strengthen national unity and civil society activities in general as well as, aimed at avoiding greater participation of minorities in Afghanistan's political-administrative structure and social, economic life in particular.

In this context, the IS attack was also an attempt to weaken the current NUG government (which suffers already from internal fractures and rifts) by portraying them as unable to ensure a safe environment for the various religious (non-Sunni) minorities. Consequently, much [critic was raised](#) that the government is not doing enough to protect the Shia community against IS and other Jihadist groups.

Thirdly, the IS attacks against the Shia could also be seen as a strategy to get Iran to be more involved in Afghanistan. Tehran has a traditional long record of [interfering massively in the domestic affairs](#) of its neighbouring states, f. ex. by supporting pro-Shia militant insurgency and terror groups (like encouraging and paying [Hezbollah forces, Afghan and Iraqi mercenaries](#) to [in support of Bashar al-Assad regime](#) in Syria). Iran could use the latest attack against Shias in Afghanistan as a justification to be more active in Afghanistan. This would lead without doubt to a further weakening of the government in Kabul and to more destabilisation in the country. Furthermore, the IS attacks is also a clear warning for the Shia community not to cooperate with the Taliban nor with the NUG; instead they should keep a low profile in Afghanistan. Moreover, Iran's involvement is gaining significance, since [it is massively recruiting](#) fighters among Afghanistan's Shias to [take part in the war in](#)

[Syria](#). Deploying around 20,000 fighters from Afghanistan, Iran's 'Foreign Legion', depends heavily on Afghan's Shia fighters. Some sources are claiming that around [20,000 Afghan Shias](#) are permanently fighting in Syria. As such there are several common interests between Sunni IS and Shia Tehran beyond the old Sunni-Shia divide. Both are combating the pro-democratic forces in Syria by all means, as such they are not interested in an uplift of the social, economic and political conditions of the Shia community in Afghanistan. Nor any peace and reconciliation processes between the Taliban and NUG is in the interest of Iran or IS. In this context it is worth mentioning that IS in Pakistan is following similar strategies. Instead of targeting directly state government institutions, they are focusing primarily on traditional religious sites and places known to be strongholds of criticism and resistance against the central civilian and military authorities. Furthermore, there is evidence that IS fighters from Syria are infiltrating Afghanistan via Pakistan and that recent major terror assaults against international institutions are planned in Pakistan, like the [bomb attack on the German consulate](#) in Mazar-i-Sharif.

Being aware of these intermingling domestic and international factors, one must ask how the government in Kabul and the international community are willing to handle the situation of the IS threat and the role of Afghanistan's neighbours, foremost Pakistan and Iran, in orchestrating the terrorist scenarios in the region. Here, one must clearly differentiate between the Afghan government and the international community. Kabul is very much aware about the IS threat and its connections with Pakistan but given its limited resources and multiple challenges, the Afghan security forces have not much capabilities to fight IS alone. The US decision, to entrust their on-going military mission in Afghanistan with a [more robust \(offensive\) mandate](#) has proved already to be an effective measure. Furthermore, the earlier statement of President-elect Trump to have a stronger focus on Pakistan when it comes to counter terrorism affecting the whole region would be without a doubt a step in the right direction. By having said this, the international community must finally realise how is the situation and be willing to deal with the consequences and also with the root causes of the terrorism in the AfPak region and beyond. More concretely, it

must deal with the challenge of state-sponsored terrorism (this includes diplomatic support), and especially with Iran and Pakistan. Consequently, there must be a clear condemnation of support for cross-border terrorism by states. The international community should hold accountable the States, which are still identifying terrorism as an instrument of their foreign policy.