

Topic of the week for discussion: 28th July to 3rd Aug 2016

Topic: Twin Blasts in Kabul

Topic Introduction

Twin blasts in Kabul, in which at least **80 people died** and over **260 were injured**, is a clear escalation of the **Afghan conflict by the Islamic State**. Over the past two years, the 'IS' has built some presence in eastern Afghanistan, operating largely from the chaotic **Nangarhar** province. But by carrying out **one of the worst mass attacks in Kabul in 15 years**, it has flaunted its growing footprint. It has sent a message that it is now a force to reckon with in Afghanistan. In turn, the attack once again exposes the chinks in the country's security armour. **Despite support from U.S. troops** and its superior air cover, **the Afghan military hasn't been able** to do much to prevent **Taliban attacks** in recent months. Now, with the 'IS' also joining the fray, the security situation could become much worse. For the IS, Afghanistan is a potential area of expansion. It is under increasing pressure **in Iraq and Syria** in the wake of sustained attacks by, variously, the U.S., Kurdish groups and the Iraqi and Syrian national armies. Over the past year **it has lost territory and thousands of fighters**, forcing the leadership to look for other countries, especially Libya and Afghanistan. Groups such as the IS are most comfortable amidst chaos. The IS has exploited the post-war chaos in Iraq and the civil war uncertainty in Syria. Afghanistan falls into the same category. The civil war has substantially weakened post-Taliban state-building in Afghanistan, leaving several regions, particularly the mountainous areas along the Pakistan border, beyond the control of the government. Unsurprisingly, it is in one such district that the IS has found a foothold.

The Kabul attack also fits into the **IS's sectarian narrative**. The targets of the blasts were the **Hazaras**, the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, **which is mainly Shia**. In both Iraq and Syria the **IS has exploited the Shia-Sunni rivalry** to win the support of Sunnis, particularly disaffected youth from the community. By directly attacking the Hazaras, the 'IS' is clearly trying to whip up sectarian passions. This is a dangerous game that even the Taliban has largely stayed away from in Afghanistan. Though the **Hazaras were persecuted under the Taliban in the 1990s**, the Afghan civil war did not turn sectarian like the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The 'IS' is trying to change this equation, because only then can it hope to spread its Sunni fundamentalist ideology to the Afghans.

President **Ashraf Ghani's** claim four months ago to have wiped out Islamic State in Afghanistan was shattered when the militant group struck the capital, Kabul, the **country's deadliest attack in 15 years of war**. The Islamic State's ability to carry out deadly attacks complicates prospects for peace in Afghanistan, where Afghan and U.S. forces and their allies have fought Taliban insurgents since 2001. In a rare move, the Taliban joined the government in condemning the attack by ISIS, a group it considers mostly "**well-known robbers and kidnappers**" with no connection to Afghanistan. The protesters, who were mostly Shiite Muslims in **Sunni-majority** Afghanistan, were rallying against government plans to divert a planned regional power line away from the Hazara-dominated province of Bamiyan. Islamic State claimed the assault as a "**martyrdom attack**" on Shiites.

Troop Withdrawal

The carnage is the single deadliest assault in the country since 2001, **the year the U.S. invasion unleashed the Taliban insurgency**, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission of Afghanistan. It marks the first time Islamic State has struck the Afghan capital since gaining a foothold in the country in **2014**, and has stoked fears the extremists are gathering strength. The attack was condemned around the world, including by both the White House and Russian **President Vladimir Putin**, who said his country stood ready to help Afghanistan fight terrorism. **President Barack Obama**, who once promised to pull out all U.S. combat troops from Afghanistan within 16 months of taking office, last October, said he would slow the withdrawal from the country, leaving about **8,400 military personnel** at the end of this year. Last month Obama expanded the U.S. mission to allow troops to deploy alongside their Afghan counterparts in the fight against the Taliban and other insurgent groups in an acknowledgment that nation-building efforts and peace negotiations have foundered. **A four-nation peace process led by Pakistan this year failed** to make any headway after the Taliban refused to join negotiations. The 15-year conflict has cost the U.S. almost **\$700 billion** and killed more than **2,200 American troops**.

Taliban Clashes

The Taliban condemned attacks, calling them an attempt by Islamic State to ignite civil war. The two groups have clashed **as they compete for territory in the east**, leaving scores dead. Islamic State, which includes **disaffected Taliban fighters from Pakistan and Afghanistan**, now ranks behind the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the country, with as many as **3,000 fighters**, according to a U.S. Congressional Research Service report.

The question is how the Afghan government and the international coalition will respond to these twin challenges. If they indeed let the IS gain ground, as happened with the Taliban in the 1990s, the consequences will be far more disastrous.

Read further:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-24/kabul-attack-islamic-state-claims-suicide-bombing/7655470>

<http://www.newindianexpress.com/photos/world/After-the-deadly-Afghanistan-twin-attack-by-IS/2016/07/24/article3544238.ece>

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/suicide-bombings-kabul-demonstration-kill-injure-over-300-n615391>

<http://indianexpress.com/article/world/world-news/afghanistan-twin-attacks-kill-25-jeopardises-peace-talks-with-taliban/>