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Afghanistan braces for violence as Islamic State makes presence felt

Suicide bombing in Jalalabad first major attack by militants aligned with Isis, while further violence is expected as winter ends

Sune Engel Rasmussen

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Afghan policemen inspect a suicide bombing site in Jalalabad where at least 33 people were killed on Saturday.

Afghanistan is bracing for an upsurge in violence as spring begins with a new maverick force emerging: militants associating themselves with Islamic State.

Isis claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in the eastern city of Jalalabad on Saturday, which appears to be the first major attack in Afghanistan by insurgents aligning themselves with the group which has been wreaking havoc across Syria and Iraq.

Ahmad Zia Abdulzai, spokesman for the provincial governor, said a suicide bomber on a motorcycle detonated a vest rigged with explosives in front of the state-run New Kabul Bank, which has been the target of attacks in the past, killing at least 33 people and injuring more than 100.

In a statement, a group calling itself the Province of Khorasan – Islamic State’s name for the region it strives to conquer – named the suicide bomber as Abu Mohammad Khorasani. On social media, Isis supporters shared a photo of the purported suicide bomber, masked and flanked by a Kalashnikov rifle.

The Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, seemingly taking his cue from media reports, named Isis as the perpetrators. Ghani made his comments to local journalists on a trip to the northern province of Badakhshan, where he went to mourn victims of other recent violence.

The surfacing of an Isis-aligned splinter group has caused anxiety among Afghans, though officials disagree about the level of the threat.

During his recent trip to Washington DC, where he also lobbied the US for continued military and financial support, Ghani called Isis “a terrible threat”.

However, former spy chief Amrullah Saleh said in an interview with Radio Free Afghanistan that Isis, known as Daesh throughout the Arab world, would not be able to spread roots in Afghanistan, “because whatever Daesh has been doing in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban have been doing the same in Afghanistan for the past 20 years”.

Borhan Osman, an analyst with Afghanistan Analysts Network who has tracked the emergence of Isis in Afghanistan, said the group might benefit from frictions within the Taliban.

“[Isis] has not built a solid, actual political presence in Afghanistan so far,” Osman said, “but if the Taliban quasi-monopoly is broken, that will help [it] to build networks and their brand.”

With or without Isis, this year’s fighting season threatens to be the most deadly since the US-led invasion in 2001.

At least 23 Afghan soldiers were killed last week when Taliban militants overran their military posts in Jurm district. The Taliban answered Ghani’s promises to “defend our soil” with defiance.

“If they try to do an operation, we are ready to defend ourselves,” Zabiullah Mujahed, a spokesman for the group told the Guardian.

Even a supposedly safe haven like the northern city of Mazar-I Sharif has suffered a rare bout of violence. On 9 April, four gunmen stormed the provincial prosecutor’s office in the city, taking hostages and leaving at least 10 people dead.

Casualties have risen drastically since foreign troops began drawing down from a peak of nearly 150,000 troops in 2011.

With more than 10,000 civilian casualties, last year was the bloodiest on record for ordinary Afghans. In a new report, the UN documents an 8% increase in civilian casualties from ground engagements in the first three months of 2015, compared to the same period last year.

The research shows that, as foreign troops have largely receded from the battlefield and limited aerial support to the Afghan security forces, fighting has drawn closer to residential areas. As a result, the proportion of women and children among casualties is at an all-time high.

“The continuing use of suicide attacks in densely populated areas, that are certain to kill and maim large numbers of Afghan civilians, may amount to a war crime,” Nicholas Haysom, the UN’s head of mission in Afghanistan, said in a statement on Saturday.

The Taliban traditionally launches an offensive in the spring, when snow recedes from the mountains. As they advance, the fighting uproots thousands of civilians.

“People are being displaced in much higher numbers than last year,” said Pia Jensen, programme manager for emergency response with People in Need, an NGO. “Militants come down and attempt to recruit people. They grab young guys and force families to feed them, or to give one of their sons to the fight.”

She said residents are being pressured by an influx of militants from Pakistan, where a long-standing military campaign in North Waziristan has pushed over 300,000 people across the border. More than 50,000 undocumented Afghans have also left Pakistan since December after harassment from authorities, according to the International Organisation for Migration. There are likely a substantial number of potential insurgents among the displaced, said Jensen.