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Taliban Hotel Attack: Low Death Toll, High Psychological Value

By Scott Stewart
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At about 10 p.m. on June 28, a group of heavily armed militants attacked the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, Afghanistan. According to government and media reports, the attack team consisted of eight or nine militants who were reportedly wearing suicide vests in addition to carrying other weapons. At least three of the attackers detonated their vests during the drawn-out fight. Afghan security forces, assisted by International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), needed some eight hours to clear the hotel of attackers. One group of militants even worked their way up to the roof of the hotel, where they fired several rocket-propelled grenades.

The attack resulted in the deaths of 12 people, as well as all the militants. The Taliban had a different take on the attack, posting a series of statements on their website claiming responsibility and saying the assault was conducted by eight operatives who killed 90 people and that the real news of their success was being suppressed. (Initially, the Taliban claimed to have killed 200 in the attack but reduced the toll to 90 in later statements.)

NATO and ISAF spokesmen have noted their belief that, due to the location and use of suicide bombers in the attack, the Haqqani network was involved in the operation. On the evening of June 29, a NATO airstrike killed Ismail Jan, a senior Haqqani leader in Afghanistan who NATO claims was involved in planning the hotel attack.

When viewed in the context of other recent attacks in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan, the attack on the Intercontinental Hotel was not all that spectacular. It certainly did not kill the 90 people the Taliban claim, although it does have a number of interesting security implications.

Past Attacks

Militants in Afghanistan have conducted several armed-assault style attacks in Kabul in recent years. In April 2011, a group of militants dressed in Afghan army uniforms stormed the Ministry of Defense in Kabul and killed two people in what the Taliban later claimed was an assassination attempt aimed at the visiting French defense minister.

On Jan. 18, 2010, the day that the Afghan Cabinet was sworn in, 11 militants conducted a wave of armed assaults against a variety of high-profile targets in Kabul that included the presidential palace, the Central Bank and the Defense and Justice ministries. The most prolonged fighting occurred at the newly opened Grand Afghan Shopping Center. The shopping center was heavily damaged by a fire apparently initiated by the detonation of a suicide device. In spite of the large number of militants participating in this attack, it resulted only in seven deaths.

In February 2009, eight militants attacked the Justice Ministry, the Department of Prison Affairs and the Education Ministry. The attack killed 21 people and took place the day before former U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke was scheduled to arrive in Kabul.

The Taliban have also targeted hotels in Kabul. In January 2008, the Serena Hotel was attacked by four militants who used an explosive device to breach the front security perimeter and then stormed the hotel. One of the attackers detonated his suicide vest in the lobby and another roamed through the hotel shooting guests. The attack, which resulted in six deaths, occurred while the Norwegian foreign minister was staying there.

In October 2009, three militants attacked a guest house being used by U.N. personnel in Kabul. The attack resulted in the deaths of five U.N. staff members and three Afghans. The Taliban took credit for this attack, which targeted U.N. election workers in an attempt to disrupt the November 2009 Afghan election.

Sending a Message

When STRATFOR began looking at these Kabul attacks from a tactical viewpoint, we were initially surprised by the relatively low death toll considering the number of militant operatives employed. None of the Taliban's armed assaults in Kabul have produced the high casualty count of the November 2009 Mumbai attacks. However, over time it became quite apparent that the objective of these armed assaults in Kabul was not only to cause carnage. If so, the Taliban would have discontinued conducting such attacks due to the relatively low return on investment they were providing. Instead, the Taliban have shown that they like to use such attacks at strategic times to make sure the threat they pose is not forgotten.

Consider the context of the attacks described above. They all happened in relation to other events that were occurring at the time over which the Taliban wished to voice their displeasure. The attack on the Intercontinental Hotel occurred during a conference to discuss the transfer of security authority from the ISAF to the Afghan government — an event the Taliban certainly wanted to comment on, and did.

These multi-man armed attacks in Kabul were true acts of terrorism — attacks conducted for their symbolic propaganda value — and not acts conducted to be tactically significant from a military standpoint. When taken together, these less than spectacular individual attacks were conducted with enough frequency to cultivate a perception of instability and lack of security in the Afghan capital — an important goal for the Taliban.

In their official statement claiming responsibility, the Taliban said the Intercontinental Hotel attack was intended to disrupt the handover conference. They also claimed their primary goal was to target U.S. and NATO spies and agents who would be staying at the hotel, but that was obviously a red herring since very few Western government employees stay at that hotel, though some do attend meetings there.

This attack also illustrated some other facts about the Taliban movement: First, the Taliban do not appear to have any shortage of men. Despite almost 10 year of war, they have the resources to burn through eight suicide operatives on a mission that did not appear to be strategically significant. Second, they do not appear to be suffering from morale problems. They are able to readily recruit militants willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause. And they are able to make outlandish propaganda claims — that they killed 90 people in the hotel attack, for example — to a target audience that will take their statements at face value.

This brings us to our final point, a discussion of the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel itself.

The ‘Intercontinental’

Kabul’s Intercontinental Hotel, known widely as the “Intercon,” opened for business in 1969. At that time it was the Afghanistan’s first international luxury hotel and was a part of the international chain of hotels with the same name, now known as the InterContinental Hotels Group. Following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the hotel ceased to be part of the InterContinental Hotels brand, but the hotel’s local ownership continued to use the Intercontinental name.

This is not an uncommon situation, particularly in countries like Afghanistan where it is hard for large corporate hotel groups to enforce their trademarks. One potential downside of this type of arrangement is that it can give an international traveler a false sense of security. Generally, the large hotel chains are very serious about security, and if a chain does not own a specific hotel property, the local owner of the property who wants to use the chain’s name will be forced to adhere to the chain’s stringent security standards. Therefore, anyone seeing the Intercontinental Hotel name would assume that the Intercon in Kabul would adhere to the global chain’s security standards. In this case, they would be wrong.

Most U.S. and Western visitors to Kabul stay at the Serena Hotel rather than the Intercon because the Serena has better security. The Intercon tends to get more local traffic, which belies the Taliban's claim that the primary reason they attacked the Intercon was to kill U.S. and NATO spies. We have heard rumors that the operation may have been intended to target a specific VIP who was supposed to be visiting the property but have not been able to confirm this. If a VIP was indeed the target, the operation failed to kill him or her.

The false assumption that the Kabul Intercon would adhere to the stringent security standards of the InterContinental Hotels Group illustrates the importance of properly preparing for a trip by thoroughly researching your destination before traveling. This week, STRATFOR began publishing a series of reports on travel security that are designed to assist travelers during the busy summer travel season in the Northern Hemisphere. For a detailed examination of the terrorist threat to hotels and hotel security, please read our detailed special report on the topic, which can be found [here](#).

As U.S. and other international forces begin withdrawing from Afghanistan, we can expect the Taliban and their allies to continue conducting high-profile attacks in the heart of Kabul that coincide with significant events. Such attacks will be a fact of life in the city for the foreseeable future, and people traveling to and from or living in Kabul should pay close attention to events that could trigger Taliban attacks and plan their activities and make personal security arrangements accordingly.

Even the Taliban cannot attack without conducting preoperational surveillance, which highlights the utility of surveillance detection and counterintelligence to uncover Taliban agents who have penetrated facilities in order to turn them into targets.