

Blast at Afghan Mosque Kills Dozens as Shiites Are Targeted Again

It was the second week in a row that attackers had struck a Shiite place of worship during Friday Prayer.

By Taimoor Shah and Thomas Gibbons-Neff

Oct. 15, 2021

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — Multiple Islamic State suicide bombers at a mosque in southern Afghanistan killed dozens of people and wounded dozens more during Friday Prayer, the second such attack on a Shiite place of worship on successive Fridays in the country.

The attack, which witnesses said involved multiple explosions, took place in Kandahar city — considered the heart of the re-established Taliban government. The Islamic State Khorasan, also known as ISIS-K, claimed responsibility hours later, saying the attack was carried out by two suicide bombers. The terrorist organization had said it was behind a similar strike last week on a Shiite mosque in Kunduz Province, in the north, that left more than 40 people dead.

Hafiz Saidullah, a Taliban official in charge of the culture and information department in Kandahar, said that the latest attack killed 47 people and injured at least 68.

Witnesses described a bloody scene at the mosque, after multiple blasts erupted inside the building.

“We have no idea if it was a suicide bomber or an I.E.D. — but it was powerful; human flesh and blood were seen all around the mosque,” said a worshiper, Mohammad Ali, referring to an improvised explosive device.

Mr. Ali said the Taliban arrived shortly after the blast and cordoned off the area. Outside Mirwais Regional Hospital, where victims were taken, people were lining up to donate blood.

Such an attack in a Taliban stronghold poses the risk of undermining the Taliban government’s commitment to provide security to Afghan citizens after the Western-backed government collapsed in August.



Injured victims at a hospital in Kandahar on Friday. EPA, via Shutterstock

That pledge has become increasingly difficult to uphold as Taliban fighters are now responsible for securing major urban centers like Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second-largest city, and Kabul, the capital. And it remains unclear if the Taliban will extend that promise of security to Afghanistan’s Shiite minority, whom the Sunni militant movement regards as apostates.

“People are very worried,” said Abdul Wahed Pazhwak, whose shop is just a few hundred feet from the targeted mosque. “It was the first time in Kandahar that they went inside the mosque. The chatter among us is to what to do, should we migrate? Should we stay or leave?”

Zabihullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesman, condemned the attack on Friday via Twitter. The government was “ordering the security forces to arrest the perpetrators of such incidents soon and bring them to Shariah law,” he said, while expressing sympathy to the families of the victims.

Updates on Afghanistan Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

ISIS-K is a Sunni extremist group that has long had a presence in Afghanistan’s east but has rarely attacked in the south. The terrorist group has largely targeted Shiite Muslims in the country, focusing heavily on the Hazara ethnic minority, which is predominantly Shiite. Most of Afghanistan is Sunni, and ethnic Pashtuns — who make up most of the Taliban’s ranks — are a plurality.

The Shiite mosque attacked Friday was a house of worship for Afghans of multiple ethnicities, including Hazaras.

ISIS-K had claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing at the international airport in Kabul on Aug. 26 that killed about 170 civilians and 13 U.S. troops. It also staged an attack this month outside a mosque in Kabul, which killed several people during a memorial service for the mother of Mr. Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman.

This latest attack was a significant display of the terrorist organization’s newly established reach as it begins a reinvigorated campaign of violence against the people of Afghanistan and, in some cases, the new Taliban government.

ISIS-K has carried out guerrilla-style attacks and bombings throughout the country in recent weeks. In Afghanistan’s east, where the Islamic State maintained a presence even after being nearly wiped out in 2019 in a coordinated operation between the United States, Afghan government forces and Taliban fighters, the terrorist group has taken responsibility for several attacks that the group said were targeting Taliban military units.



Taliban at the scene in Kandahar on Friday. Stringer/EPA, via Shutterstock

The ability of the new government to keep the ISIS-K threat at bay is one of the conditions of international recognition and the delivery of crucial aid money that could prevent Afghanistan’s economy from completely collapsing.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Suhail Shaheen, a Taliban spokesman, told The Associated Press last week that the new government could contain the threat of the Islamic State and other terrorist groups and would not accept assistance from the United States. The spokesman's comments came ahead of talks in Doha, Qatar, between U.S. officials and Taliban representatives held last weekend, the first meeting since the U.S. withdrawal of American forces in August.

"The Taliban must show their commitment to not allow Afghan soil to be used by ISIS-K or any other terrorist group that threatens the security of the United States or its allies, and certainly not innocent Afghans," the U.S. State Department said in a statement to The Times.

"Vanquishing ISIS-K is certainly in our shared interest and we will continue to seek ways to work with the Taliban on this effort," the statement added.

For the Shiite minority, and many Hazaras in the country, the insurgent group's return to power and the Islamic State's resurgence have ushered in yet another era of uncertainty and dread.

Earlier this month, Amnesty International said that the Taliban unlawfully killed 13 Hazaras, including a 17-year-old girl, amplifying fears for ethnic and religious minorities amid reports that the Taliban are also evicting Hazaras from their homes. The Taliban have challenged these reports in the media as inaccurate.

During the Taliban's first reign in the 1990s, Hazaras were targeted and thousands were killed, only for that to continue and metastasize after the U.S. invasion in 2001 and the growth of ISIS-K in 2015. Hazaras were especially critical of the Western-backed government in Afghanistan in recent years, as its security forces did little to protect them from frequent attacks.

Taimoor Shah reported from Kandahar, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff from Kabul. Lara Jakes contributed reporting from Washington, and Wali Arian from Istanbul.