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***Dozens killed following twin
explosions in Kabul***

Afghanistan – 27 August 2021

SITUATION SUMMARY

On 26 August 2021, two explosions detonated near Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, deliberately targeting civilians and security personnel involved in the ongoing withdrawal of internationals and at-risk Afghan nationals out of Afghanistan.

The first bomb blast occurred at approximately 17:50 local time near the Abbey Gate at Hamid Karzai International Airport. This was shortly followed by the second blast at Barron Gate near the Barron Hotel – a staging post for the evacuation of American citizens.

Hundreds of Afghan civilians were injured during the attack, and at least 85 people were killed, including 72 Afghans and 13 serving members of the United States military. Taliban officials have also claimed that at least 28 Taliban fighters were killed in the explosions. The exact death toll is likely to continue rising and surpass 100 in the coming days.

The incident occurred within hours of a warning issued by the United States Embassy indicating that a terror attack targetting the evacuation effort was imminent.

The Islamist extremist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISKP) claimed responsibility for the blasts. They were quickly condemned by heads of state and governments across the world.

United States President Joe Biden vowed to "hunt down" the ISKP leadership in the aftermath of the attack. Declaring that the United States would develop operational plans to strike ISKP "assets, leadership and facilities" across Afghanistan.

The Taliban spokesperson, Zabiullah Majuhid, denounced the attack and re-committed the Taliban towards finding and eradicating ISKP's presence in Kabul. Both groups have been engaged in a protracted conflict against one another since ISKP's emergence as an actor-of-note in Afghanistan in 2015.

Further terror-related attacks organised by ISKP and other terror organisations operating within Afghanistan remain a possibility as the withdrawal deadline of 31 August grows closer.

SOLACE GLOBAL COMMENT

Islamic State attacks on Hamid Karzai International Airport were widely anticipated by intelligence agencies and analysts across Western governments. The dangerous and vulnerable security environment inside of Kabul, as well as thousands of Afghan nationals and foreign citizens attempting to evacuate via a singular location, presents a significant opportunity for terror organisations to carry out complex mass-casualty attacks.

Data tracking of ISKP's activity in Afghanistan had demonstrated a sharp decrease in the organisation's operations from 14 August, a day prior to the fall of Kabul at the hands of the Taliban. This short-lived hiatus was likely prompted by a strategic desire to witness the outcome of the Taliban's advance on Kabul.

Open conflict between the Taliban and ISKP has been routine in the past. The Islamic State's attack on 26 August was likely motivated by a desire to both inflict damage against NATO forces whilst also undermining the credibility of the Taliban who are attempting to seek recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

The blast also demonstrated the precarious situation that Afghanistan is now in. The relationship between the Taliban and ISKP is complex. Despite being adversaries, the Taliban offshoot of the Haqqani Network (HQN), a designated terrorist organisation whose leader has been appointed as the Taliban's chief of security in Kabul, has links to ISKP. The two groups have even collaborated in the past.

Despite these past links, the ISKP have major differences with the Taliban. Indeed, the groups presence in the country has resulted in cooperation between the United States and the Taliban previously. Taliban operations against ISKP even received air support from the US during former President Donald Trump's administration.

As such, the group present one of the poignant threats to the Taliban as they look to consolidate power and go from the insurgents to the government in the country. There now remains the possibility that the Taliban will have to face their own Islamist insurgency.

SOLACE GLOBAL ADVICE

- No travel to Afghanistan for any reason is advised at this time.
 - If currently in the country, contact your relevant embassy for support. Be aware that the assistance that they can provide is now extremely limited.
 - All internationals should leave Afghanistan by any safe means necessary when possible. Liaise with your relevant diplomatic mission for flight information, airport access details and any additional information.
 - Those in country should look to stand fast in a secure location until departure is possible.
 - Do not depart for the airport unless immediate access has been guaranteed, the situation remains volatile outside with further attacks a realistic possibility.
 - Be ready to depart with little or no notice. Keep mobile and other electronic devices charged with the ability to recharge whilst on the move.
- Ensure paperwork, including any visa and COVID-19 information, is in order.
 - Commercial flights are currently not operating from the airport, if you can depart by any other safe means, do so.
 - Travel by road is extremely dangerous, with a high risk of being stopped by Taliban checkpoints, IED and small arms attacks and banditry are likely throughout the country.
 - Monitor media and Solace Secure updates to keep apprised of the situation.
 - The situation for Afghan nationals is complex. The Taliban have stated that Afghans can now no longer leave, including the blocking of the airport to nationals.
 - It remains unlikely that Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport will continue to operate beyond this 31 August.



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