

## The suicide attack on Hazaras in Kabul: three projections

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### [Security and Terrorism](#)

Kabul: Although, one day after the suicide attack, the city seems to be back to normal, there can be no misunderstanding about the brutality of what just happened here. There is no silver lining to the tragedy of July 23 when suicide bombers wreaked havoc in Kabul on a peaceful demonstration of Afghanistan's Hazara ethnic minority. Almost one hundred people died and more than two hundred were wounded in the biggest suicide attack in Kabul since 2011. At the time of the attack, the protesters were demanding that Bamyan province be connected to a planned electricity transmission line. It was terrorism at its worst: a cowardly attack, striking fear into the political heart of a country where many people and organisations are working firmly towards putting an end to poverty, instability and at least 38 years of conflict.



To try to make some sense of this horrific act of terrorism, three projections may be made, using the lenses of 1) Islamic State, 2) national unity and 3) peace talks. *Firstly*, Islamic State has claimed responsibility and nobody seems to deny this link. If the suicide attack was indeed carried out or inspired by Islamic State, it would mean that either their operational capacity or ideological influence has now for the first time reached into urban areas and into the political heart of Afghanistan. So far, the presence of Islamic State had mainly been confined to the rural areas of the eastern province of Nangarhar. It should come as no surprise that they are able to strike in Kabul. This big city is difficult to control. Every day there are thousands of cars crossing the city's borders and the so-called *Ring of Steel*, a series of 25 police checkpoints in the centre of Kabul. The explosive devices could even have been produced within the city. Any necessary parts that are not available here can easily be smuggled in. To that extent, it does not say much about the capabilities of Islamic State.

So is this the definite rise of Islamic State in Afghanistan? For the moment, it does not seem so, and most Afghans I speak to tell me that Islamic State will never be accepted in the country. But the attack does seem to be a firm response by the terrorist organisation to the Afghan government's ongoing military operations against Islamic State in eastern Afghanistan, launched only last week. Interestingly, when President Ghani launched this 'decisive battle', he was stressing the fact that Islamic State (Afghans use the term 'Daesh') was an external phenomenon, without roots and, supposedly, also without popular backing in Afghanistan.

*Secondly*, regardless of whether the suicide attack was specifically targeting the Hazaras as a Shia minority group or more a retaliation for the ongoing offensive of the Afghan military forces against Islamic State, national unity – almost a contradiction in terms in Afghanistan –

is another important lens. At first glance, the Hazara protests are about good governance and the provision of basic services. But they are also part of a broader (historical) context in which Hazaras have not only suffered discrimination but also oppression and ethnic massacres, most recently under the Taliban regime (1996-2001). As such, the demonstrations were partly motivated by perceptions of systematic bias against the Hazaras.

While the protests in themselves thus once again highlighted the disunity and inequality in present-day Afghanistan, the suicide attack could paradoxically help to at least build some national solidarity with the Hazaras. It is unclear at this point to what extent other ethnic groups will rally behind the victims, but it is clear that many Afghan people supported the Hazaras' right to demonstrate and are appalled by this brutal attack. However, in Afghanistan's highly sensitive political environment, held together by the delicate National Unity Government which struggles on many fronts to keep at least a minimum level of stability, the momentum could tip either way. It could produce even more distrust between ethnic groups or it could actually help to increase inter-ethnic understanding. The national day of mourning that President Ghani decreed could be a step in the right direction.

That brings me to the *third* lens: the peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban that is currently stalled in Afghanistan. As opposed to Islamic State, the Taliban is clearly not an external but a homegrown phenomenon. Interestingly, the Taliban quickly denied any responsibility for this suicide attack, even before Islamic State claimed it. That means that there may just be this small window of opportunity to use this tragedy as a starting point to put the peace process with the Taliban – fierce opponents of Islamic State in Afghanistan – back on track. In some parts of the country, the Taliban has had the upper hand in the fighting with the Afghan security forces for quite some time. But, on the other hand, the killing of 45 Taliban commanders in the past four months may also have weakened the movement considerably. The presence of Islamic State in Afghanistan does not convert the Taliban and the Afghan security forces into brothers in arms fighting a common enemy. But if it can somehow function as a catalyst for peace talks, there may be some hope after all.