

Jalalabad gauntlet: on the growth of IS in Afghanistan

The [suicide attack in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad](#), which left at least 19 people dead, mostly from the minority Sikh and Hindu communities, is yet another warning from the Islamic State to the war-torn country's dilapidated political and security apparatus. The victims were travelling in a bus to meet President Ashraf Ghani when the bomber struck. That the attack claimed the life of the only Sikh candidate running for elections this year speaks volumes of the plight of minorities in a country once celebrated for its diversity. Over the past few months, the Afghan government has been trying to reach out to the Taliban to begin a peace process. Mr. Ghani first offered the militants pardon in return for giving up weapons, which the group rejected. In the run-up to Id last month, he announced a unilateral ceasefire, which drew a truce, though shorter, from the Taliban. But at a time when the number of Taliban-led attacks has come down, the IS, which controls some areas in the Nangarhar province, in which Jalalabad is located, has stepped up assaults. Last month it had threatened to attack schools in response to U.S. and Afghan military operations in Nangarhar. A day before the Jalalabad attack, a boys' school in Khogyani district of the province was attacked. Militants beheaded three workers and set fire to the school building.

The IS set up its Afghan affiliate as a South Asian outpost when its so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria came under strain. Afghanistan is relatively easier terrain for the IS to recruit fighters from and occupy turf. When the government and the Taliban were fighting each other, the IS built a network in Nangarhar and started targeting minorities. Most of its previous attacks were aimed at the Shia minority. Now, by attacking Sikhs and Hindus, the IS has re-emphasised its worldview and renewed its threat to any attempt to make peace in Afghanistan. Over the past two years, both Afghan and U.S. forces have targeted operations against the IS. Last year the U.S. even used the Mother of All Bombs — the most powerful conventional bomb in its arsenal — against the IS in Nangarhar. But despite these claims the IS remains lethal and capable of striking citizens, as the latest attack suggests. The Afghan government, overstretched in the endless civil war, faces two fronts now. On the one side, it faces the Taliban which controls almost half of Afghan territory; and on the other, the IS's rising profile is further weakening the already fragile social equation in the country. The war against the Taliban has slipped into a stalemate, and the government's strategy is to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. Meanwhile, if the IS is allowed to grow, Afghanistan's descent into total chaos will only be a matter of time.

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