

WAR WITHOUT END? ON THE ATTACK ON KABUL

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developing countries on India's interests

The [attack on a religious gathering](#) in Kabul that [killed 55 people](#), including several scholars and clerics, is another signal of Afghanistan's descent into chaos. The clerics had gathered to mark the birth anniversary of Prophet Mohammed when the suicide bomber blew himself up. The Taliban denied responsibility and blamed the attack on "seditious circles", alluding to the Islamic State. Given the manner of the attack, it could well be responsible. In June, the IS had claimed an attack on another gathering of clerics. In Afghanistan the group has carried out a series of attacks on Shia religious gatherings and mosques. Hardline Sunnis consider venerating the Prophet's birthday sacrilegious, making the clerical gathering a target for extremists such as the IS. But beyond the specific reasons behind the attack, the fact that a major religious gathering in the Afghan capital can be so easily assaulted by terrorists is worrying. Despite repeated promises by the government, the security situation has deteriorated, and markedly. Afghan forces face a war on two fronts. One is with the Taliban, which is mostly attacking government offices and soldiers. The other is with the IS, which is targeting civilians, minorities and clerics. It is almost certain, after 17 years of war, that the government cannot stabilise the country using force.

This stalemate has prompted the Afghan government and its international backers to look for ways other than war to find a solution to the conflict. The U.S. has already appointed a special envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad. He has held talks with Taliban representatives in Doha. Russia has also stepped into the peace process by hosting an international conference in Moscow, in which both Taliban and Afghan representatives participated. These attempts are actually exploring the possibility of a peace deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government to end the insurgency. It is not going to be easy. The Taliban insists on international troops being withdrawn from Afghanistan as a precondition and wants changes in the Afghan Constitution. The government wants the Taliban to accept the Constitution, while the Americans say a troops pullout is not a matter of discussion with the Taliban. Still, the Taliban has made it clear that it is ready for talks, which is in itself a change given the group's approach towards the conflict. It had, for the first time, agreed to a brief ceasefire with government forces around Id earlier this year. The reason is that the Taliban realises that it cannot win the war, at least not as long as the U.S. supports the government. It is also facing heat from the IS. The question is whether the government can seize the moment, strengthen its own counter-insurgency measures and negotiate from a position of strength, with backing from international actors. It's indeed a tall ask.

Recent attacks suggest that Maoists are focussing on greater militarisation

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