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of Afghanistan's
Balkh Province
Killed in Blast**

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Taliban Governor of Afghanistan's Balkh Province Killed in Blast

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/9/taliban-governor-of-afghanistan-province-killed-in-suicide-attack>

The Taliban governor of Afghanistan's Balkh province has been killed inside his office in a suicide attack that was later claimed by the ISIL armed group. The killing of Mohammad Dawood Muzammil, the provincial governor, on Thursday marked one of the highest-level attacks since the Taliban stormed back to power in 2021. A second person also died in the attack, police said.

"Two people, including Mohammad Dawood Muzammil, the governor of Balkh, have been killed in an explosion this morning," police spokesman Asif Waziri said on Thursday. Waziri said the blast happened on the second floor of his office in the provincial capital of Mazar-i-Sharif. "It was a suicide attack. We don't have information as to how the suicide bomber reached the office of the governor," he said, adding that two people were also wounded. The ISIL armed group claimed responsibility for the attack late on Thursday, the group's Amaq agency reported.

The killing of Muzammil, known for his resistance to the ISIL (ISIS) in the area, came a day after he met top government officials visiting from capital Kabul.

Comments

Background

The killing of Mohammad Dawood Muzammil by the ISKP has given the group notoriety at a time when scholars assumed it to have limited impact on Taliban's new security mechanisms employed throughout the region. After being pushed out eastern Afghanistan and daily arrests of the group's sympathisers, the targeted killing of a sitting governor of the Balkh province, highlights their capability of executing high profile Taliban members in various cities of the entire region with greater lethality and a high degree of technical sophistication. For those watching Taliban exercising control in the region closely, Governor Muzammil was not just another political appointee tasked to enforce Taliban's farman in the Balkh Province, with its provincial capital, Mazar-e Sharif, the fourth largest city by population.[1]

[1] Arabiya, Al. 2023. "Taliban Governor of Afghanistan's Balkh Province Killed in Blast at His Office," 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2023/03/09/Taliban-governor-of-Afghanistan-s-Balkh-province-killed-in-blast-at-his-office>.

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The slain governor was tasked to lead the fight against Islamic State militants in his previous appointment as the governor of the eastern province of Nangarhar, and was moved to Balkh last year. From political ambitions to territorial expectations, the rivalry between Taliban and the ISKP has taken a form of an unending ideological conflict reinforced by resourced based confrontation with dynamics involving state actors including the Pakistan's Inter State Intelligence. The recent losses endured by the Taliban reinforced by disgruntled Tajik fighters who continues to be viewed with suspicion of ISKP sympathisers, have greatly affected the organizational structure, recruitment, and operations' policy, forcing many to seek revenge against systematic insults hurled at them by their brother fighters.

Inexperienced security providers vs rural-based insurgency

As the Taliban continues to struggle within their role of state security providers, battling its ideological adversary in eastern Afghanistan, and parts of north-west and south-west, (where they once enjoyed mass public support), point towards a heightened level of insecurity in the regions. Fighting in the hinterlands has never been a challenge for the Taliban (who raised insurgency against the West from rural regions), and were largely successful in retaining a strong hold by integrating influenced based operations in its tactics which prevented erstwhile US-led ISAF forces to retain territorial control. Operating as a light mobile force (seven to ten fighters supported by Toyota Hilux with a mounted Soviet DShKM heavy machine gun), the group retained their tactics even after coming to power. Experienced in long range night patrol, the Taliban provincial commanders did not forfeit the same tactics (or employed new ones) even during the night. Stretched thin, lurking in either the day or in the night proved counterproductive to secure urban city centres, which resulted in the casualty of governor Muzammil, whose attacker had successfully penetrated Taliban's interior and outer security without hassle.

By targeting the governor of Balkh, the ISKP has not only identified vulnerabilities in Taliban's security mechanism/apparatus but by shifting its operations from rural/hinterlands to urban cities of the north, the disgruntled Tajik have been granted an opportunity to seek revenge against its former group and reclaim their honour. To a Badakhshan based scholar, the ISKP since December 2022, has launched near-daily attacks near daily attacks on Taliban in the provinces of Sar-e-Pol, Balkh, Baghlan, for instance, forcing Taliban fighters to flood the city with men and materials after every attack.

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Although, the group which captured bases and guarded compounds from the erstwhile regime, conducted some maintenance of check posts and increased manned presence with mobile roadblocks in multiple new locations. With high ranking members being the daily target for the group, a Mazar based scholar pointed to a memo released by Interior Minister which tasked provincial police chiefs to conduct strict checking of incoming transport such as rickshaws, motorbikes, which are known vehicles used by IS-KP fighters. Will such tactics play a significant role in curbing ISKP menace? It may temporarily halt high ranking members from being daily casualties in an ideological war, but it solely will not make significant impact, any more than disgruntled members of the group, willing to make a sacrifice for vengeance.



Source: Al Jazeera

International response to counter ISKP

The only viable/ratified source of information on US engagement against the ISKP is attributed to a drone strike conducted in late August 2021. At a policy level, US has not implemented a long-term strategy against the ISKP, at least according to the former State Department officials who spoke to the author on the condition of anonymity.[2] According to one scholar, the once robust intelligence and reconnaissance (ISR) network between the US and its allies have become inactive. In the context of existing policy (against the ISKP), the only available statement is that of the CENTCOM commander, Gen. Frank McKenzie, who during a press briefing remarked on Washington providing limited support to the Taliban in its efforts to counter the ISKP. [3]

[2] US Department of Defence. 2022. "CENTCOM Commander Gen. Frank McKenzie Holds a Press Briefing, March 18, 2022." Transcript, March 18, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2971495/centcom-commander-gen-frank-mckenzie-holds-a-press-briefing-march-18-2022/>.

[3] In conversation with a former US State Department Official

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Regional economies (members of the SCO) do not have a concrete policy dedicated for the ISKP or a draft framework for a unified response against the ISKP, which continues to gather influence in their regions. The ISKP attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (emanating from Northern Afghanistan) did receive global condemnation but Tashkent and Dushanbe remained tight lipped for weeks.[4] According to a Tajik scholar, the government declined to even comment (for weeks), downplaying the threats posed by the ISKP, on one account. [5] The attacks, which should have rattled Tashkent and Dushanbe, their tight-lipped response gave indirect legitimacy to the group, which now have Central Asia in their cross hairs.

Moscow, on numerous occasions have reiterated a possible flow of ISKP fighters from the northern Afghanistan into Central Asian countries cloaked as refugees, sparking a debate continuous engagement with the Taliban. According to one scholar, Tehran continues to engage in frequent discussions with the Taliban to prevent ISKP fighters from entering their borders.[6]

The imminent threat of the ISKP could possibly force regional economies to legitimise Taliban in exchange for stringent security measures, in an effort to dismantle ISKP circles of influence. How does Taliban manage to prevent disgruntled battle-hardened members with the group's frequent diplomatic engagement with the international community to defect? Perhaps the answer lies in the ISKP's growing multi-ethnic pool of fighters. The enemy of my enemy: Hypothesising India's outreach to contain ISKP influence in the region.

For several years ISKP has been looking to recruit Indians with one scholar estimating dozens or more as active members.[7] As research institutions look for a connect between the ISKP and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), shagirds inside Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) continue to receive sabotage & irregular warfare training by the ISI[8]. There is no doubt of spill over effects from ISKP's operational capabilities in Afghanistan, seeping into J&K, if not already.

It is in the interest of both Taliban and New Delhi to prevent ISKP from creating regional instability in Afghanistan for two simple reasons:

[4] Webber, Lucas, and Bruce Pannier. 2023. "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's Enduring Influence on IS-Khurasan." The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), March 3, 2023. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/03/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistans-enduring-influence-on-is-khurasan/#>.

[5] In conversation with a Tajik based scholar

[6] In conversation with a Tehran based scholar

[7] In conversation with a Delhi based security analyst

[8] In conversation with a former member of the erstwhile Afghan NDS

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a) A strengthened ISKP will result in a serious blow to the legitimacy of Taliban's rule, its expectations of engaging with international partners in an effort to gather legitimacy as a people's choice, whereas for New Delhi, it is not a matter of choice but to prevent any incursion of militants/radical factions trained on Afghan soil and supported by the ISI, propping up in J&K. This would also mean a significant blow to the current motivation of the ISKP factions and preventing any other islamists militant faction using Afghan soil for terror acts against India. With ISKP and Taliban engaged in an ideological war, factions affiliated to Al-Qaeda may see this as breathing grounds ripe for recruitment, even at the cost of undermining Taliban's influence.

b) With limited alternatives for New Delhi, the author does not wish to make a wild argument by propping up the notion of boots on the ground. Instead, a multilateral alliance against the ISKP seems achievable. With New Delhi currently the chair of G20 and with a technical team in Kabul, it has the means and resources to bring regional stakeholders such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, & Russia for a regional alliance, with US and other Western allies in support of a New Delhi-led initiative.

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