Beat: News

The forever war in Afghanistan is nowhere near its end.

Analysis by Praveen Swami

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ARAC Int Contributor Praveen Swami - The forever war in Afghanistan is nowhere near its end. Now IS indulging in ethnic warfare. Islamic State is seeking to overthrow the Taliban—quietly helped along by the discontent in its own ranks, economic crisis, and disputes over the spoils of power.

The stories tell of the Raqs-e Murda, the macabre dance of freshly-decapitated bodies when boiling oil was poured over them: In 1993, the power struggle between Afghanistan's factions degenerated into savage ethnic warfare, major mujahideen groups uniting against the Hazara underclass in Kabul. There were men, it is said, killed by having nails hammered into their heads; others burned alive inside shipping containers. In the Hazara-dominated neighbourhood of Afshar, hundreds were massacred.

For months now, unremitting Islamic State violence against the mainly-Shia Hazara community has led many to wonder if a new genocide lies ahead. Just in past days, Hazara schoolchildren have been bombed, and a mosque targeted in Mazhar-i Sharif—this on the back of multiple killings in Dasht-e Barchi, the community's Kabul bastion.

There have also been attacks on other groups the Islamic State and other Islamist groups consider heretics: Friday's bombing of a Kunduz mosque linked to Sunni folk-Islam, is part of a wider pattern of strikes against religious and ethnic minorities.

Heresey is the pretext, though, not the target. The Islamic State is using the deep wellspring of ethnic-religious hatred in Afghanistan to gain legitimacy. The end it seeks is the overthrow the Islamic Emirate—a project that is gaining momentum because of the grinding economic crisis in Afghanistan, frustration among rank-and-file Islamist fighters that victory has brought no material rewards, and divisions within the Taliban.

The Islamic State's birth and rebirths.

From early 2015, pamphlets began to be posted on the walls of Hazara neighbourhoods in Kabul, denouncing the Shia as infidels. Later that year, in March, the jihadist group staged its first attack, a bombing outside a Shia mosque which claimed one life. These attacks became almost routine: there were bombings in Zabul, Balkh and Ghazni, in some cases killing women and children. In 2016, a religious procession was bombed, along with a mosque and a mainly Hazara political protest.

The first Afghan volunteers to fight in Syria had left around 2012, drawn from the ranks of the Taliban and its Pakistani counterpart, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP. TTP leader Hafiz Saeed Khan, for example, despatched over 100 volunteers to fight with al-Qaeda's affiliate in the country, al-Nusra. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's de-facto second-in-command, Serajuddin Haqqani, also sent several hundred volunteers.

Late in 2014, Afghan intelligence began reporting that the Islamic State itself had set up training camps in Kunar, and despatched small units of fighters into other regions such as Farah and Nangarhar. The attacks on Hazaras spiked in 2018, with a series of lethal attacks on Hazara-linked institutions in Kabul, among others a wrestling club and a tuition centre.

Following this, though, the Islamic State campaign fell off—the consequence, scholar Afsandyar Mir has noted, of "sustained targeting from three sides: the United States military, the former Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban."

Then, as the Afghan republic began to collapse, Islamic State violence surged. In May 2021, 85 people were killed in an attack on the Syed-ul-Shuhada high school. In August, a suicide attack on the airport—carried out by a one-time Noida engineering student held for plotting attacks in India, but later freed by the Taliban—killed more than 70 people. In October, up to 80 worshippers at the Gozar-e

Syedabad mosque in Kunduz were blown up in a suicide attack. A week later, two suicide-attackers blew themselves up at Kandahar's Bibi Fatima mosque, killing more than 40.

Last year, United Nations special representative Deborah Lyon noted that the Islamic State now seemed "to be present in nearly all provinces, and increasingly active." Islamic State attacks, she noted, more than tripled last year—a sudden and unexplained increase in capability.

The politics of the Islamic State's growth.

Like so much else, the reasons for the Islamic State's resurrection have something to do with politics. The Taliban's military triumph was led by the so-called Eastern Taliban of Serajuddin Haqqani, which enjoys decades-old relationships with the TTP, as well as both al-Qaeda and elements of the Islamic State. Anas Haqqani, a brother of Sirajuddin Haqqani, and his paternal uncle, Khalil-ur-Rehman Haqqani, played a key role in bringing about the collapse of the Afghan republic last year.

The new Islamic Emirate government, though, was dominated by figures who held office before 9/11—mainly from southern Afghanistan. Taliban defence minister Abdul Qayyum Zakir, from Helmand, served in First Emirate. So did interior minister Ibrahim Sadr, finance minister Gul Akha Ishakzai, and several others.

Founded in the early 1970s—with the backing of Pakistan's Intelligence Service Intelligence Directorate—the warlord Sirajuddin Haqqani's network helped lay the foundation of the jihadist movement in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's north-west, scholars Don Rassler and Vahid Brown have recorded. Their status derived from their control of the seminary at Akora Khattak, a hub for Arab and other transnational jihadists.

In spite of the Haqqanis' jihadist credentials, scholar Thomas Ruttig has noted, they were given no great influence in the First Emirate. Their influence centred in the provinces of Paktika, Paktia and Khost, the Haqqanis were kept out by the Kandaharis around Taliban patriarch Mullah Muhammad Umar. The eastern tribes, moreover, generally belonged to neither of the two great Pashtun tribal confederations, the Durrani and the Ghilzai.

Yelena Bieberman and Jared Schwartz have written that the tensions between the two groups date back to at least 2016, when the Taliban emir Hibatullah Akhundzada divided operational control of Taliban forces between the Haqqanis and Muhammad Yukub, the son of slain First Emirate patriarch Mullah Muhammad Umar. This denied the Haqqanis control of a military of which they were the principal part. Eastern Taliban, scholar Antonio Giustozzi presciently warned last year, would quietly back the Islamic State if their demands for power were not met.

The Islamic State also has the support of a large cohort of prospectless young jihadists, who have learned that while the fall of Kabul has given Taliban greybeards office and status, it's brought the rank-and-file nothing. For this cohort, the Islamic State offers the prospect of perpetual war—and, thus, perpetual livelihoods.

The history of hate in Afghanistan.

This much is clear: killing Hazaras is not an invention of the Islamic State. "Hazaras, where will you hide," asked Taliban commander Mullah Abdul Niazi, the Governor of the province of Balkh, as Hazaras were slaughtered at Mazar-e Sharif, in 1998. "If you jump in the air, we will grasp your legs, if you enter the earth, we will grasp your ears. Hazaras are not Muslims. You can kill them. It is not a sin." Taliban commanders have evicted Hazara from grazing lands, seized their homes, and taken hundreds hostage.

Emir Abd-al-Rahman Khan, the founder of the modern Afghan State, brutally stamped out Hazara rebellions in the nineteenth century, resettling ethnic-Pashtun on their lands, and enslaving tens of thousands.

Islamic State leaders have, from the outset, sought to capitalise on ethnic-religious divisions to consolidate their authority. In a February 2014 letter, Ahmad Fadeel al-Khalayleh, the Afghan-trained al-Qaeda jihadist who laid the foundations for the Islamic State in Iraq, described Shia as "the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom."

Polemic like this has a constituency. The Hazaras made educational and employment gains after 9/11, sparking resentment among the rural Pashtun élite. There are old disputes over lands and irrigation; the liberal urban milieu of Kabul, and the relatively high status of Hazara women, evokes fear and hatred from Taliban supporters.

Exactly how the power struggle behind the anti-Hazara campaign might play out remains unclear. Ferocious efforts by the Taliban to hack at the roots of the Islamic State have led to massive killings in the eastern Nangarhar region. The Islamic State, Oved Lobel has written, has given back as good as it's getting, executing Islamic Emirate bureaucrats and officials.

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