



Factors behind the Jalalabad prison raid by the Islamic State Khorasan Province

Saurav Sarkar
Research Associate, CAPS

Keywords: Islamic State Khorasan Province, Jalalabad prison,

The city of Jalalabad, the capital of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province, was rocked by the sounds of gunfire and explosions on Sunday evening, 2nd August. While violence in Afghanistan is not uncommon, people were looking forward to a quiet weekend after the Eid-al-Adha celebrations the previous day with the Afghan government and the Taliban having declared a three-day ceasefire.¹ Therefore, the attack on the Jalalabad prison complex housing around 1,793 prisoners came as a complete surprise and led to a prolonged gunfight that lasted well into Monday afternoon. Over the more than 20 hours long attack 30 people - including 11 policemen, five prisoners and 14 civilians - were killed.² The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) had claimed responsibility for the attack.³ Around 300 prisoners are believed to have escaped, many of them linked to ISKP and the Taliban.⁴

This attack came at a critical time in Afghanistan with the ongoing prisoner exchanges between the Afghan government and the Taliban,

and ISKP's status at a low among jihadists in Afghanistan due to a string of recent losses and leadership arrests.⁵ ISKP has the potential to utilize the present political situation to its advantage by waging such high-profile attacks in an attempt to recruit and boost morale amongst its members. Until recently for quite some time ISKP attacks were limited largely to soft targets such as civilians and this attack on a hard target in a major urban center could signify a renewed offensive intent for the group.

ISKP inspired by tactics used in Iraq and Syria?

According to a United Nations (UN) report in July ISKP leadership ranks have been supplemented by foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) from Iraq and Syria such as Abu Said Mohammed al-Khorasani, Sheikh Abdul Tahrir, Abu Qutaibah and Abu Hajar al-Iraqi.⁶ The Islamic State (IS) in its early formative days in Iraq had conducted a series of prison breaks freeing multiple Islamists in what came to be known as the "Breaking the Walls"

campaign.⁷ The Jalalabad prison attack points towards the same tactics utilized by IS in Iraq and Syria being repeated in Afghanistan directed by Syrian or Iraqi jihadists. Multiple FTFs were involved in the attack (only three of the attackers out of 11 were Afghans).⁸

A post-attack statement by an ISKP spokesperson on IS-linked social media channels said that the attackers were divided into four teams.⁹ The raid began with the detonation of a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) at the gate and a three man squad firing machine guns and rockets from a nearby building. This was followed by five *inghimasi* (suicide) fighters entering the prison complex by breaching the walls from another section of the perimeter (taking advantage of the distraction at the gate cause by the SVBIED). And in what seems like a diversionary tactic, a two man “support unit” fired mortars from long range towards the Jalalabad air base that houses NATO forces. The ISKP spokesperson compared the attack to the Abu Ghraib prison break in Iraq, a precursor incident to the formation of IS in 2014.¹⁰

Interestingly, Ansar-ul-Khilafah in Hind (a South Asian IS-linked entity) in the July edition of its *Voice of Hind* (VoH) magazine mentioned jihadists currently imprisoned and said that their release was a top priority for IS.¹¹ It also mentioned that IS had previously carried out *inghimasi* operations to free their members from prisons in Syria and elsewhere. *Inghimasiuns* are

suicide attackers who carry small arms and explosive belts. *Inghimasiuns* fundamentally operate as ‘shock troops’, aiming to soften the defenses of their targets for follow up attacks.¹² Given that three of the attackers involved in the prison raid were Indian (including the suicide bomber)¹³ along with one from Pakistan the references to prison breaks and *inghimasi* operations in VoH seem to be significant.

The attackers were well-armed and equipped, including having more than 150 mortar rounds and multiple suicide vests, pointing towards careful preparation. The tactics used by IS in Iraq and Syria appear to have been deployed effectively by ISKP as not only did the attackers free hundreds of prisoners but were also able to pin down Afghan forces for almost 20 hours. All eleven attackers were confirmed killed by security forces. While this is not the first time that such a prison break has happened in Afghanistan, the Taliban had done so previously multiple times¹⁴, but this is the first time that ISKP was able to mount such a complex attack.

ISKP’s endeavor to establish itself and assert itself

The Jalalabad prison raid does not just represent a major escalation of ISKP attacks but also a major security failure in the sense that a large number of heavily armed attackers were able to infiltrate and execute an attack of this scale on a target that was not only fortified but also within a major city. The current ISKP leader known by

name of Dr. Shabab al-Muhajir (as per IS sources) or Sheikh Matiullah Kamahwal (according to UN reporting)¹⁵ could be trying to boost his profile and motivate existing members by carrying out such high-profile and complex attacks. In a recently released statement, he reassured imprisoned ISKP members that the group would not “sit idle” while they remain jailed.¹⁶ ISKP seems to have bet a lot on this attack given the detailed description of the attack that followed on IS media.

Most ISKP losses have occurred in Nangarhar¹⁷ and Jalalabad has been in ISKP crosshairs¹⁸ due to its proximity to Kabul and remote ISKP logistical bases in the east along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions. The attackers could have taken advantage of the sense of security brought about by the Eid celebrations and ceasefire to mount their attack.

This attack could also improve its standing against the Taliban by giving the impression that it remains capable of freeing its members independently and inflict casualties on Afghan security forces while the Taliban has to negotiate with ‘foreign’ and ‘secular’ forces to get their members are released from prison. This could further complicate the peace process as the Taliban could blame the Afghan government for failing to protect its prisoners and in turn portray the government as corrupt and incompetent. Already both the Afghan government and the Taliban have accused each other of being behind the attack as has been the case during the last

few attacks attributed to/claimed by ISKP.¹⁹ This attack and recent deadly attacks in Kabul shows that despite losses of territory and fighters ISKP remains a major security threat if not a strategic one.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ BBC News, “Islamic State group claims deadly attack on Afghanistan prison”, 3 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53633450>, accessed on 6 August 2020.

² Fahim Abed, “Afghan War Casualty Report: August 2020”, *New York Times Magazine*, 6 August 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/magazine/afghan-war-casualty-report-august-2020.html>, accessed on 8 August 2020.

³ SITE Intelligence Group, “Seizing on Importance of Jalalabad Prison Raid, Is' 'Amaq News Agency Presents Infographic on Operation”, 3 August 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/seizing-on-importance-of-jalalabad-prison-raid-is-amaq-news-agency-presents-infographic-on-operation.html>, accessed on 6 August 2020.

⁴ N. 1.

⁵ United Nations Security Council, Twenty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, 23 July 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/717>, accessed on 6 August 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Business Insider, “Trump's abrupt withdrawal from Syria may allow ISIS to come back with a vengeance - using the group's time-tested strategy”, 11 October 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.in/international/news/trump-abrupt-withdrawal-from-syria-may-allow-isis-to-come-back-with-a-vengeance-using-the-groups-time-tested-strategy/articleshow/71538888.cms>, accessed on 6 August 2020.

⁸ Official Speech from the Media Office of Khurasan Wilayah, Black Flags Media Center, Telegram, 3 August 2020

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Voice of Hind Issue 6 (Dhul-Hijjah 1441), Al-Qitaal media, Telegram, July 2020

¹² Cameron Colquhoun, "Inghimasi – The Secret ISIS Tactic Designed for the Digital Age", Bellingcat, 1 December 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/12/01/in-ghimasi-secret-isis-tactic-designed-digital-age/>, accessed on 5 August 2020.

¹³ *The Hindu*, "Kerala doctor may have been among Afghan jail attackers", 4 August 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala-doctor-may-have-been-among-afghan-jail-attackers/article32271298.ece>, accessed on 6 August 2020.

¹⁴ *BBC News*, Afghan Taliban storm Ghazni prison, freeing hundreds, 14 September 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34241882>, accessed on 6 August 2020.

¹⁵ N. 5.

¹⁶ N. 1.

¹⁷ Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines, Taking Aim: Islamic State Khorasan's Leadership Losses, September 2019, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, <https://ctc.usma.edu/taking-aim-islamic-state-khorasans-leadership-losses/>, accessed on 5 August 2020.

¹⁸ *The Guardian*, "Islamic State attacks show group is intent on killing Afghan peace hopes", 1 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/01/afghan-istan-us-look-taliban-for-help-isis-attacks-rise>, accessed on 6 August 2020.

¹⁹ Ali Latifi and Mohsin Mohmand, "Jalalabad Jailbreak Highlights Resurgence of 'Eliminated' ISIS", Foreign Policy, 7 August 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/07/jalalabad-jailbreak-highlights-resurgence-of-eliminated-isis/>, accessed on 8 August 2020.