

TROUBLE AHEAD IN AFGHANISTAN'S EAST?

Insurgents in the eastern province of Nangarhar recently perpetrated one of the most vicious attacks against Afghan civilians in recent memory. On February 19, a team of suicide bombers and gunmen stormed the offices of Kabul Bank in Jalalabad, targeting Afghan soldiers and policemen who had lined up to collect their monthly salaries. At least thirty-eight Army, Police, and civilians were killed while more than seventy others were wounded in the attack, which lasted several hours. According to Afghan intelligence officials and the Taliban media spokesman, the Haqqani Network was responsible for organizing and executing the raid. This recent attack in Nangarhar suggests that the Haqqani Network is evolving, expanding both in geographic reach and in their desire to inflict civilian casualties. As the network has evolved, so has its relationship with other insurgent and terrorist organizations. These factors will contribute to what may be a bloody spring fighting season for coalition forces in eastern Afghanistan.

The Haqqani Network's Nangarhar suicide attack demonstrates a shift to striking targets in areas where the network has not previously operated. Prior to the February attack, Haqqani operations were largely limited to southeastern Afghanistan, mainly Khost, Paktika, and Paktia provinces, and occasionally Kabul. This expansion is, in part, the result of increased pressure on Haqqani operations by special operations forces in its traditional strongholds. It is also an attempt to gain influence in new terrain which will, in turn, strengthen the reputation and standing of the network. The Haqqani Network may already be able to successfully execute spectacular attacks beyond their southeastern stronghold and even beyond Nangarhar; the network is rumored to have a presence in neighboring Laghman and Kapisa provinces surrounding Kabul.

The Haqqani Network's increased violence and geographic reach has generated widespread popular backlash. Just days after the assault, Afghanistan's independently-owned Tolo TV broadcast surveillance footage from the bank's security cameras, documenting the gruesome assault which was the first time such a brutal attack has been captured on video.

The population's reaction to the devastating Nangarhar attack has caused a rift between the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) and the Haqqani Network, highlighting the former's desire to distance themselves from practices that alienate the population. The QST initially claimed responsibility for the attack but, in

reaction to widespread outrage created by the footage, Taliban leadership and other senior commanders instead publicly laid the blame on the Haqqani Network. The Haqqanis have made no effort to deny their involvement.

The QST's concern about alienating the population is not new. In recent years, QST senior leadership has issued code of conduct rule books outlining the need to win the support of the population at the expense of Afghan and international forces. The Haqqani Network has not shared this concern, and has become more extreme in their tactics and operational objectives. Perhaps most importantly, they have also strengthened their bonds with foreign extremists.

For example, while the gap between the Haqqanis and the QST continues to widen, the Haqqani Network has sought to solidify relationships with other militant Islamist organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Historically a Punjabi-focused terrorist organization, LeT maintains close ties to the Haqqani Network and has participated in Haqqani-led operations against Indian targets inside Afghanistan over the past several years. There is widespread speculation that LeT was involved in the February Nangarhar attack. Reports from the scene describe the attackers as being directed via telephone. Preliminary indications suggest these calls were made from Pakistan, where the attackers received training during the four months it took to plan the attack. In addition, the coordination and execution of the attack bore resemblance to the LeT-sponsored Mumbai attacks of November 2008, and LeT is known to conduct operations throughout Nangarhar and other eastern provinces. The Haqqani Network's ability to link organizations like LeT and others with attacks inside Afghanistan reinforces the notion that the network intends to propagate violence beyond its prior sphere of influence.

As the Haqqani Network moves closer to national and transnational terrorist groups such as LeT and al-Qaeda, and extends its territorial influence into new areas of eastern Afghanistan, coalition and Afghan forces should prepare for an active spring fighting season. Confronting this threat will require a renewed focus on eastern Afghanistan—likely the next key battleground in the fight to secure Afghanistan.

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