

Afghanistan: Isis claims responsibility for Kabul fatal bomb attack on Hazara protesters

Sunday 24 July 2016, by [ENGEL RASMUSSEN Sune](#) (Date first published: 23 July 2016).

At least 80 dead and more than 230 wounded after attack on demonstration by minority group, which makes up 9% of population.

At least 80 people have been killed and hundreds injured after two suicide bombers struck a peaceful protest in Kabul by a Shia minority group.

Responsibility for the attack, which appears to have targeted a demonstration by the Hazara minority, was claimed by Islamic State via the group's news agency, Amaq. If true, it would mark the first attack by Isis in Kabul, and its largest ever in Afghanistan.

According to a spokesman for the Afghan interior ministry, 231 people were wounded, though this figure could rise.

The attack, the deadliest in Kabul since 2001, has raised fears of an intensification in sectarian conflict. Since Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s the country has largely been spared the sectarian violence that plagues neighbouring Pakistan, as well as Iraq and Syria, where Isis has deliberately tried to stoke ethnic tensions.

Hazaras have historically suffered discrimination and persecution. The protesters were marching against government plans for a major power project to bypass Bamiyan, a predominantly Hazara province in the central highlands. Following similar protests in May, Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, established a commission to look into the issue but government attempts to find a compromise failed. On 19 June, a contract was signed to build a smaller electricity line through Bamiyan, which did not placate Hazara activists.

In the hours after the attack, details of casualties were unclear, but some security forces seemed to have been among the killed. As people were frantically calling friends present at the protests, calls went out on social media for blood donations to the city's poorly resourced hospitals. "I was standing by the side of the crowd, behind an ice cream truck," said one protester, Aman Turkmani. When the blast happened, "first the ice cream cart exploded, then he exploded. The sound of the explosion was very strong," he said.

Hours after the attack on Saturday, Amaq said Isis had sent two fighters with suicide belts to detonate among "a Shia gathering". If confirmed, the attack would be the group's first against civilians in the Afghan capital. Kabul has become increasingly unnerved, particularly after another massive attack in April, which also killed 64 people. That attack was the deadliest in the capital since 2011.

Isis has so far been concentrated in a few districts in Afghanistan's eastern provinces, where they have battled for turf with the Taliban. Their fighting force of 2,000-3,000 fighters is relatively small, but Saturday's attack is likely to stoke fears that Isis is gaining strength in the country. Most

Afghans consider Isis to be an alien, extremist group, that is far more radical than the Taliban.

Ghani said in a statement: "Opportunist terrorists went among the protesters and set off explosions that killed and wounded a number of our countrymen, including security and defence personnel." Leading Hazara representatives in the government had refused to endorse the protesters, accusing them of fuelling ethnic tension. Instead, the demonstration was led by grassroots activists and Karim Khalili, the country's former vice-president.

According to a western official, the head of Afghanistan's intelligence service had earlier this week tried to persuade the protesters to cancel the event. The government deployed minimal security personnel to protect protesters, focusing instead on keeping them away from the city centre. At a previous demonstration, in late 2015, protesters who attempted to scale the wall of the presidential palace were shot at.

On Saturday, to keep the demonstration away from the palace, authorities blocked central roads, forcing protesters to gather at Deh Mazang Square, about two miles from the palace. To Hazaras, the power project is about more than electricity. A Shia minority making up an estimated 9% of the Afghan population, Hazaras have historically felt discriminated by the government and persecuted by insurgents.

The worst recent attack on Shias was in 2011 when twin blasts in Kabul and Mazar-i Sharif killed as many as 80 worshipers, most of them Hazaras who had gathered to commemorate the holy Shia day of Ashura. Hazaras have also been targeted in highway kidnappings, some of which have ended in killings of hostages. In 2015, seven relatives were kidnapped and beheaded by Islamists in Zabul province, sparking protests outside the presidential palace in demand for better protection of Hazaras.

Many Afghan migrants and refugees who travel to Europe are Hazaras who argue for asylum on grounds of persecution. Bamiyan and Kabul, where Saturday's attack took place, are two out of three provinces, which the UK government deem safe enough to deport Afghans to.

Sune Engel Rasmussen

P.S.

* The Guardian. Saturday 23 July 2016 16.01 BST Last modified on Saturday 23 July 2016 23.45 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/23/hazara-minority-targeted-by-suicide-bombs-at-kabul-protest>