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AFGHANISTAN: Dozens killed in suicide bombing at Kunduz mosque

ISIL affiliate claims responsibility for the blast at Shia mosque in Kunduz that has killed dozens.

Aljazeera (08.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3v4V9lf> - Dozens of people have been killed in a suicide bombing at a Shia mosque in Afghanistan's northeastern city of Kunduz during Friday prayers, the country's worst attack since the Taliban took over control in August.

The Islamic State in Khorasan Province, ISKP (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility for the attack through its Telegram channels on Friday.

In a statement released on Telegram, the group said an ISIS-K suicide bomber "detonated an explosive vest amid a crowd" of Shia worshippers who had gathered inside the mosque.

Video footage showed bodies surrounded by debris inside the Gozar-e-Sayed Abad Mosque that is used by people from the minority Shia Muslim community.

There have been conflicting reports about the number of casualties. The United Nations mission to Afghanistan said in a tweet the blast killed and wounded more than 100 people.

Dost Mohammad Obaida, the deputy police chief for Kunduz province, also said at least 100 people were killed or wounded in the attack, adding that the "majority of them have been killed".

"I assure our Shia brothers that the Taliban are prepared to ensure their safety," Obaida said, adding that an investigation was under way.

Meanwhile, the state-run Bakhtar News Agency said at least 46 people were killed, while more than 140 were wounded inside the mosque in the Khan Abad area of Kunduz city.

A deputy director for the province's health department said there were "around 50 dead and at least 50 wounded", the DPA news agency reported.

Suicide attack

Al Jazeera's Hashem Ahelbarra reporting from the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif said people in Kunduz have described "horrifying" scenes.

"They were struggling to deal with the human remains scattered throughout the back yard of the mosque," Ahelbarra said.

"They expect the death toll to further climb in further hours because they say many people who were injured are in critical condition."

The blast blew out windows, charred the ceiling and scattered debris and twisted metal across the floor. Rescuers carried one body out on a stretcher and another in a blanket. Blood stains covered the front steps.

In its claim of responsibility, the region's ISIL affiliate identified the bomber as a Uighur Muslim, saying the attack targeted both Shias and the Taliban for their purported willingness to expel Uighurs to meet demands from China.

The statement was carried by the ISIL-linked Aamaq news agency.

The worshippers targeted in Friday's attack were Hazaras, who have long suffered from double discrimination as an ethnic minority and as followers of Shia Islam in a majority Sunni country.

Groups affiliated to the ISIL (ISIS) group have a long history of attacking Afghanistan's Shia Muslims.

There have been several attacks, including [one at a mosque](#) in Kabul, in recent weeks, some of which have been claimed by ISIS-K.

Ahelbarra said this explains why the Taliban has in the past few days "launched a major crackdown and said they arrested many ISIL operatives in Kabul and in Jalalabad".

"This [attack] is going to put more pressure on the Taliban; people will now be angry. When the Taliban took power in August, they prided themselves on providing a safe environment for the Afghan people. Now, this isn't the case any more because you're seeing the pattern of those attacks.

"[Friday's attack by ISIS-K] could be a clear indication that they are sending a message to the international community that they are far from defeated, that they are willing to further expand their footprint across Afghanistan and we are likely to see major confrontation in the future between [ISIS-K] and the Taliban," Ahelbarra said.

AFGHANISTAN: UN Chief Condemns 'Horrific' Attack At Kunduz Mosque

By UN News

Eurasia Review (09.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3mM7aZe> - At least 100 worshippers have been killed or injured after a suicide bomber targeted a Shia mosque, in the northern Afghan city of Kunduz, according to news reports, during Friday prayers. The UN chief condemned the "horrific" attack "in the strongest terms", noting that it represents the third assault on a religious institution, in less than a week.

"Attacks that deliberately target civilians exercising the right to freely practice their religion are violations of fundamental human rights and international humanitarian law", said Secretary-General António Guterres, in a statement released by his Spokesperson. "The perpetrators must be brought to justice."

The Secretary-General expresses his condolences to the bereaved families and wishes those injured, a speedy recovery.

IKSP claim attack

According to news reports, the attack was claimed by the local Islamic State terrorist group affiliate, known as Islamic State Khorasan Province (IKSP).

IKSP has previously targeted the Shia Muslim community in Sunni-majority Afghanistan, and is an extremist Islamist faction opposed to the de facto rulers of the country, the Taliban, who seized power in mid-August.

Militants from IKSP, carried out the deadly attack at Kabul airport last month, which killed 13 United States military personnel, and 169 Afghan civilians.

'Disturbing pattern'

The UN Mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA, tweeted that it was deeply concerned over the recent spate of attacks, which apart from the bombing of Sayyidabad mosque on Friday, included an incident claimed by IKSP on Sunday near a mosque in Kabul, and Wednesday's attack on a school in Khost, which is so far, unclaimed.

"Today's incident is part of a disturbing pattern of violence", said UNAMA.

In a tweet, the UN human rights office, OHCHR, said that the bombings and targeting of houses of worship, "highlights the vulnerability of ordinary Afghans, especially religious minorities. Our hearts are with the victims and we hope for justice."

KAZAKHSTAN: Kazakh efforts to repatriate ISIL fighters should be replicated

Countries should follow Kazakhstan's successful model and bring ISIL-linked fighters and their families home.

By Talgat Kaliyev

Aljazeera (07.07.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3AFaNGn> - It feels like a long time ago that we fought the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS). The world has moved on to other problems since the military defeat of this terrorist group in March 2019. Yet the challenges associated with ISIL are far from over. As well as the continuing

global threat of terrorism, one of the key issues is what to do with detained ISIL soldiers, their families, and those that joined the group at the height of its power.

For one reason or another, roughly 40,000 people travelled to the areas controlled by the group from 81 countries. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) captured thousands of foreign fighters and their families. In January this year, SDF said it held around 2,000 foreign fighters and 13,000 foreign women and children who are family members of ISIL-linked fighters.

The question now is what to do with these individuals. While many countries, including those in the West, have hesitated to repatriate their citizens, Kazakhstan has taken a very different approach. Our country carried out operations "Zhusan" and "Rusafa", as part of which around 700 of our citizens have been brought home, including 520 children. The others are mostly women. Twenty-five men who were brought back have been prosecuted as ISIL fighters. Our effort is based on humanitarian grounds. Many women and children were stranded without access to basic needs, including food, shelter, clean water, health and education. They were exposed to sexual abuse, exploitation and potential recruitment by terrorist groups.

Bringing back individuals who were once part of ISIL can certainly carry security risks. Nevertheless, many of the women were deceived by ISIL propaganda, then held against their will. Some were simply naive. Crucially, the children had no choice in this matter, and it is therefore morally and politically right to give them another chance. It is for this reason that the first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, made the decision to repatriate our citizens from Syria and Iraq. This policy has continued under the current President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

Repatriating our citizens has only been half the battle. It has been just as important to ensure their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Our state-run rehabilitation programme has been designed to offer mental health care, family support, housing, education and job opportunities. Children of ISIL fighters have been given Kazakh birth certificates and Kazakh names, while women have been issued clean passports and documents to reduce social stigmatisation and facilitate their integration into society. Accommodation was initially provided in specially created adaptation centres. They included round-the-clock support from social workers, psychologists, teachers, theologians and medical workers. Most of the children spoke Arabic, so we involved Arabic language specialists to establish contact. To help the children integrate into society, individual learning programmes were developed with the involvement of teachers, who provided classes in mathematics, languages, and other subjects.

This stage of rehabilitation lasted for a month, after which the families were transferred to the place of residence of their relatives and friends. An important part of the rehabilitation programme was devoted to restoring family ties. The initial rehabilitation stage enabled children to start school with other pupils, while younger kids joined preschool education centres and kindergartens. The families have also been offered stationery, clothing and food supplies, while they get back on their feet. Overall, more than 300 specialists have been involved across the country. As well as giving families and children a second chance, we believe that this policy will contribute to preventing radicalisation and violent extremism in Kazakhstan, as many families publicly spoke about the horrors they witnessed in Syria under ISIL rule. Our hope is that this will deter others from wanting to join terrorist organisations.

We have certainly faced challenges along the way. Some children have struggled to readjust. Some relatives and friends of individuals who joined ISIL decided to cut all ties

with them, hampering reintegration efforts. Nevertheless, we believe that the decision to repatriate our citizens has been vindicated and we are proud of the work that has been carried out, including with the support of UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the United States and other partners. The US State Department, for example, has been highly appreciative of Kazakhstan's repatriation efforts, and plays an important role in assisting Kazakh authorities with delivering effective rehabilitation.

Unfortunately, many families from other countries are still left stranded in Syria and Iraq. The authorities in these countries do not have enough resources to keep ISIL prisoners and their families in captivity indefinitely, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. Other countries should therefore study Kazakhstan's experience and consider repatriating their citizens as well.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

TAJIKISTAN: To prevent violent extremism in Tajikistan, promote religious freedom

Washington should promote and directly incorporate religious freedom training as a requirement for Tajikistan to receive aid.

By Tony Perkins and Nury Turkel

The Diplomat (11.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3xWkWfN> -Tajikistan is located in a dangerous neighborhood, sharing a long border with Afghanistan that is a growing concern amid the imminent U.S. withdrawal. While the United States engages with Tajikistan on such security issues, the government of Tajikistan continues to operate under the fallacy that security requires strict control of religion, justifying gross violations of religious freedom and facilitating a deeply counterproductive strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism.

Given these circumstances, U.S. assistance to Tajikistan should come with conditions, and should not ignore or condone domestic policies that generate the kinds of grievances that contribute to radicalization. Instead, the U.S. should promote and directly incorporate religious freedom training as a requirement to receive aid. [Research](#) has [found](#) such training to be an effective antidote to violent extremism, and international bodies like the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe \(OSCE\)](#) and the [United Nations](#) have recommended it as best practice.

President Emomali Rahmon, who last year won a fraudulent [reelection](#) with a staggering 91 percent of the vote, promotes a monolithic, state-controlled version of Islam that punishes non-conformity. The government has closed more than 2,000 mosques since 2017, converting many into cafes, movie theaters, or factories — even as it ironically prepares to open the [largest mosque](#) in Central Asia, able to accommodate more than 150,000 worshippers. Such large central mosques are staffed by imams appointed and paid by the state. The government dictates or approves the content of sermons, often with the inclusion of explicit praise for the Rahmon regime.

The intended message is clear: The only acceptable form of Islam is official, highly centralized, and nationalistic.

Tajikistan's extremism laws are also vague and expansive, enabling the government to criminalize most speech or behavior it opposes. Security forces round up young men with [beards](#) and forcibly shave them, while women who wear [hijabs](#) are publicly shamed or even denied basic services like medicine and education. The government has also [targeted](#) political opponents, critical journalists and media outlets, and even naïve social media users who "[like](#)" content deemed to be extremist. These individuals are funneled into a decrepit and overcrowded prison system, cramming violent Islamists together with many who are falsely imprisoned.

The Rahmon regime regularly identifies political opposition with extremism and terrorism. This calculus, which sets a monolithic state-approved religion against an exaggerated host of frightening radicals, has been counterproductive. [Studies](#) show that increased religious freedom actually diminishes the relative influence of radical groups by exposing individuals to a [variety of messages](#) and perspectives. Violent Islamist fighters, for example, consistently demonstrate low levels of knowledge about actual Islamic thought and doctrine.

Indeed, a significant percentage of respondents in recent studies on radicalization in Tajikistan [claim](#) that religious illiteracy makes individuals more vulnerable to extremist recruiting. The country's overcrowded prisons have become a major [vector](#) for the spread of violent extremism, as many imprisoned on bogus or frivolous extremism charges are subjected to inhumane conditions alongside actual violent extremists. Those conditioned to perceive all religious non-conformity as opposition, or even rebellion, are more likely to become radical.

Consider the case of Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, the commander of an elite police unit in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who in May 2015 released a video [swearing allegiance](#) to the Islamic State. As a highly trained officer with intimate knowledge of Tajikistan's security infrastructure, Khalimov's [defection](#) was a devastating blow to the country and a boon to terrorists. By 2016, the Islamic State allegedly appointed him [minister of war](#). Khalimov claimed to have been radicalized through observing and participating in the [government's campaign against Islam](#). He equated these anti-Islamic policies with "democracy" and called on Tajikistani citizens to combat it by joining the Islamic State. By leading Khalimov to conflate "democracy" with anti-religious authoritarianism, the government's policies contributed to a dynamic in which opposition was more readily equated with violent extremism.

In contrast to these failed approaches, effective U.S. government engagement with Tajikistan should emphasize the importance of religious freedom to achieving sustainable security. For example, [USAID](#) opened its first full development mission in Tajikistan in October 2020. This program should include support for religious freedom as part of its educational outreach. The State Department should also include religious freedom training for Tajikistani officials as part of U.S. security assistance, laying out the benefits of religious freedom in countering violent extremism. Such programs would be far more effective in meeting the challenges that actual violent groups like the Islamic State pose, by promoting the social benefits of religious tolerance and pluralism while ending the self-defeating cycle of grievances that current Tajikistani policy generates.

Photo : Depositphotos

BOSNIA police arrest woman for financing Islamic fighters

AP News (12.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2STNNIG> - Bosnian police have arrested a woman on suspicion of financially supporting her husband and other Bosnians who joined Islamic fighters in Syria and Iraq, authorities said Wednesday.

Sena Hamzabegovic was arrested upon her arrival to Bosnia at the airport in the central town of Tuzla on Tuesday, Bosnia's security agency said in a statement.

The prosecutor's office said they will seek detention for Hamzabegovic, who holds dual Bosnian and Swiss citizenship. The 61-year-old woman faces charges of "financing terror activities."

Hamzabegovic allegedly sent money and other means of support from 2013 to her husband, who held a prominent position in the Islamic fighters' group structures. The unidentified man remains at large.

The prosecutor's statement said security agencies in Bosnia have worked in cooperation with foreign colleagues on Hamzabegovic's case over a longer period of time. No other details were immediately available.

Hundreds of Bosnians in the past have joined Islamic fighters in Syria and Iraq. Many have been jailed upon returning and dozens still remain in camps in Syria.

DENMARK: "Translation Law" vs. Religious Liberty

Protestants and Roman Catholics are protesting a new law that would compel all religious bodies to translate into Danish and publish in advance their sermons.

By PierLuigi Zoccatelli

Bitter Winter (30.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3pC5wcE> - Here we are again. Concerns about Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism lead to introduce legislation that reduces the religious liberty of all religions. The mother of all such laws is the **Russian statute against "religious extremism,"** introduced as a weapon to combat Islamic radical groups, and in fact used to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses and other peaceful communities whose proselyting activities disturb the majority Russian Orthodox Church. The new French law on the defense of the Republican principles was also presented as necessary to combat Islamic "separatism" and extremism, but ended up creating problems for all religions.

Now, the same process is at work in Denmark. **A new law**, which had broad support in the Parliament and the public opinion, would request all religions to have their sermons

published and put at the disposal of the authorities. If they are in languages other than Danish, they should be translated.

It may seem a good idea to allow the police to check the sermons delivered, often in Arabic, by some firebrand Islamic imams, but as usual the law cannot target one religion only, least it meets with intractable Constitutional problems. The result is that the same provisions will apply to all religions.

A first problem is that in Greenland and the Faroe Islands, which are part of the Kingdom of Denmark, most religious services are in the local languages rather than in Danish. Yet, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen **has indicated** that she "cannot guarantee" exceptions for the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

More generally, there are in Denmark German-speaking minorities, which have used German as language for their religious services for eight centuries, and immigrant religious communities, which would be placed under a heavy economic burden if all sermons should be translated. And religious groups also have the unpleasant feeling that they are "**placed under general suspicion by this law,**" in the words of the General Secretary of the Nordic Catholic Bishops Conference, Sister Anna Mirijam Kaschne.

Evangelicals are also complaining that it would be the poorer congregations that would face the more serious problems. The Council of Churches of Denmark called the law "discriminatory and ill-considered." And Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, President of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe, **in a statement published by the Vatican**, said that the law "could impede the fundamental right to freedom of religion." Once again, media hype and emotion caused by the presence of radical Islam is leading to ill-advised legislation restricting the freedom of all religions.

UN expert warns counter-terror policies led to 'further stigmatisation' of Muslims

UN Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed said Islamophobia has reached 'epidemic proportions' across the world

UN expert Ahmed Shaheed said Muslim women face the triple threat of discrimination due to their gender, ethnicity, and religion (AFP)

By Areeb Ullah

Middle East Eye (05.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3rIFPsg> - A United Nations expert has warned that counter-terrorism policies adopted by countries after terrorist attacks done in the name of opposing radical Islam have led to the further stigmatisation of Muslims.

Ahmed Shaheed, UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, told the Human Rights Council on Thursday that more needed to be done to tackle Islamophobia, which he said had reached "epidemic proportions" across the world.

"Islamophobia builds imaginary constructs around Muslims that are used to justify state-sponsored discrimination, hostility and violence against Muslims, with stark consequences for the enjoyment of human rights including freedom of religion or belief," said Shaheed.

"In such climates of exclusion, fear and distrust, Muslims report that they often feel stigma, shame and a sense that they are 'suspect communities' that are being forced to bear collective responsibility for the actions of a small minority."

His report at the UN Human Rights Council highlighted how Muslims, when a minority in a given country, are frequently targeted based on visible characteristics such as their name, skin colour, clothing and religious attire, notably headscarves.

He also warned that Muslim women face threefold discrimination based on their gender, religion and ethnicity.

The report emphasised that critiques of Islam should never be conflated with Islamophobia, adding that international human rights law protects individuals, not religions.

"I strongly encourage states to take all necessary measures to combat direct and indirect forms of discrimination against Muslims and prohibit any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to violence," the UN expert said

Last month, UN Special Rapporteur Fionnuala Ni Aolain released a report stating that many Muslim communities worldwide are being "hyper-regulated" due to counter-terrorism policies.

She voiced concern over the "construction" of the Muslim family within counter-terrorism policy in certain countries and how the "Muslim home" is viewed as a site of risk, resulting in blame, pathology and state hyperregulation".

She added that in some instances, the "good mother" within a Muslim household "is one who partners with the security state in preventing and countering violent extremism programmes, even as such programmes may stigmatise, marginalise and make her a frontline target within her own political context."

SRI LANKA to ban burqa, shut more than 1,000 Islamic schools

Minister for public security says decision has been taken on 'national security' grounds; activists decry announcement.

ALJAZEERA (13.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3vpMzxd> - Sri Lanka's government says it will ban the wearing of the burqa, a full-body veil that covers the face as well, and close more than 1,000 Islamic schools, the latest actions affecting the country's minority Muslim population.

Separately, the government on Saturday announced using a controversial anti-terror law to deal with religious "extremism" and gave itself sweeping powers to detain suspects for up to two years for "deradicalisation".

Minister for Public Security Sarath Weerasekera told a news conference he had signed a paper on Friday for cabinet approval to ban the burqa – an outer garment that covers the entire body and the face and is worn by some Muslim women – on "national security" grounds.

"In our early days, Muslim women and girls never wore the burqa," he said. "It is a sign of religious extremism that came about recently. We are definitely going to ban it."

The minister said he signed documents outlawing the burqa, but they need to be approved by the cabinet of ministers and Parliament where the government has a two-thirds majority to see its bills through.

Weerasekera also said the government plans to ban more than 1,000 Islamic schools that he said were flouting national education policy.

"Nobody can open a school and teach whatever you want to the children," he said. The government's moves on burqas and schools follow an order last year mandating the cremation of COVID-19 victims – against the wishes of Muslims, who bury their dead.

This ban was lifted earlier this year after criticism from the United States and international rights groups.

Shreen Saroor, a Sri Lankan peace and women's rights activist, said the moves come "at a time when the Muslim community has been constantly targeted".

"It's part of the Islamophobic reaction in Sri Lanka," Saroor told Al Jazeera from the capital, Colombo.

"The compulsory cremation policy was revised, and now we hear so many other measures to some form of punishing the Muslim community," she added, noting that Muslims in the country were not consulted in advance.

Citing the fact that the wearing of the mask has been made compulsory in the country during the coronavirus pandemic, Saroor said the burqa "looks [like] a very political revenge move".

The wearing of the burqa in the majority-Buddhist nation was temporarily banned in 2019 after the Easter Sunday bombing of churches and hotels by armed fighters that killed more than 250 people.

The move drew a mixed response, with activists saying it "violated Muslim women's right to practise their religion freely".

Prevention of Terrorism Act

Meanwhile, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was elected president in 2019, after promising a crackdown on “extremism” promulgated regulations allowing the detention of anyone suspected of causing “acts of violence or religious, racial or communal disharmony or feelings of ill will or hostility between different communities”.

The rules, effective on Friday, have been set up under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which local and international rights groups have repeatedly asked Colombo to repeal.

“Anybody can be arrested for saying anything,” said Saroor, calling PTA “very problematic”.

Sri Lanka’s previous government, which was defeated by Rajapaksa at the 2019 elections, had pledged to repeal the PTA after admitting it seriously undermined individual freedoms, but failed to do so.

Muslims make up about 9 percent of the 22 million people in Sri Lanka, where Sinhalese Buddhists account for some 75 percent of the population.

A former defence secretary, Rajapaksa is immensely popular among the Sinhala Buddhist majority, who credit him with ending the island nation’s 26-year civil war in 2009.

Critics, however, say during the war he crushed the dissident Tamil Tigers with little regard for human rights, allowed abductions and gave consent to extrajudicial killings. He has rejected all the allegations.

Photo : Danish Siddiqui/Reuters