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“No Safe Place”

Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Afghanistan



“No Safe Place”

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Map



Summary

There is no safe place in Kabul—you don't know where the next attack will be.

—Mohammad A., shopkeeper who survived an insurgent attack in Kabul, November 13, 2017

Since early 2016, insurgent groups in Afghanistan have sharply escalated their attacks in Kabul and other major urban areas that have left thousands of civilians dead and injured. Suicide attacks, including car and truck bombings, caused at least one-third of these casualties. Hundreds of civilians going about ordinary activities—walking down the street, working in a shop, preparing food at home, or worshipping in a mosque—have experienced sudden and terrifying violence.

The families of those who perish endure tremendous pain and suffering, and often the loss of a breadwinner. Those who survive are frequently left with lasting and debilitating physical and psychological wounds. Many face enduring problems getting health care, counseling, and other assistance.

This report—based largely on Human Rights Watch interviews in late 2017 and early 2018 in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Herat—details a number of the deadly attacks by the Taliban and other insurgent groups in Afghanistan since late 2016, highlighting the continuing impact on affected families and communities. The report concludes with recommendations to insurgent groups and to government authorities responsible for providing support to victims.

In the past two years, the Taliban have intensified their attacks in large urban areas, ostensibly targeting Afghan government and foreign military facilities but using means that cause massive, indiscriminate casualties. These attacks have killed hundreds of civilians. In January 2018, the Taliban claimed responsibility for two large-scale attacks in Kabul that killed at least 125 civilians.

Attacks claimed by groups affiliated with the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), an affiliate of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), have targeted civilian facilities, including

many Shia mosques and a cultural center. The sectarian nature of these attacks marks an ominous development in Afghanistan's armed conflict.

A May 31, 2017 truck bombing in Kabul was the largest single attack in the city during any period of the war, killing possibly 150 or more and injuring hundreds. The sheer size of the bomb and the location of the explosion—a busy traffic intersection in central Kabul—dramatically eroded the confidence of many Afghans in their security, a fear compounded by subsequent attacks. No group claimed responsibility for that attack.

According to statistics compiled by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 2017 recorded the highest number of civilian casualties from suicide attacks and so-called complex attacks in a single year since the mission began documenting them in 2009.

Enduring Harm to Families and Communities

The cost to civilians from these attacks is far greater than the numbers of those killed or injured. In interviews with Human Rights Watch, relatives of individuals killed in insurgent attacks described the cascading negative consequences for victims' families: the psychological trauma for relatives who witnessed the violence, some of whom had to search hospitals and morgues for the mutilated remains of their relatives; the devastating financial impact for families that have lost a breadwinner; the social consequences, especially for women who are suddenly widowed, becoming dependent on other members of their husband's family for support and limited in where they can live and work; and the impact on children who have had to leave school, either because the family can no longer afford the cost or because the child must work in order to supplement the family's income. Each death has a ripple effect on the family network, with spouses, children, parents, and other relatives suffering losses in support, emotional and social security, and income.

For those injured, there are also lasting harms that are not measured by the numbers. Many have ongoing physical health needs and may not be able to afford more expensive treatment beyond what most hospitals in Afghanistan can provide. Many medicines are costly and often out of reach for poorer Afghans. Those with severe physical injuries or acquired disabilities may lose mobility and the ability to work and contribute to the

household or go to school. There are limited support services for people with disabilities in Afghanistan, who then become dependent on other family members.

Many of those Human Rights Watch interviewed described serious emotional and psychological trauma as a result of witnessing and surviving such attacks. The last 40 years of protracted conflict, social unrest, and limited mental health services have had a devastating impact on the mental well-being of many Afghans. The escalation in insurgent attacks in the past two years, bringing increased insecurity, uncertainty, violence, and economic hardship, has exacerbated trauma and psychological distress.

Although no statistics are available, Human Rights Watch research suggests a large proportion of those killed and injured have been the very poor. For example, the victims of the January 27, 2018 ambulance bomb in Kabul included street children, peddlers, and kiosk vendors. Those interviewed for this report who were injured in attacks included two mosque custodians, a wedding hall guard, a tailor, a baker, and a taxi driver. All of them described the severe financial hardship they endured after surviving the attack.

Government Support to Victims

Although the Afghan government offers some financial assistance to those injured and to the families of those killed in insurgent attacks, many of those we interviewed said they had received no government assistance despite promises that such aid was forthcoming. Others said that the process for obtaining assistance was prohibitively onerous, or was tainted by corruption, with some receiving assistance and others not.

As attacks have escalated, the growing needs of those affected have overwhelmed nongovernmental services. Nearly everyone with whom we spoke complained that no officials had come to ask them about their situation, or to inquire about their immediate needs and long-term medical recovery. Whatever animosity they felt toward those who had carried out the attack, they also described feeling abandoned by the government and the international community. Every person we interviewed described living with fear that other loved ones would die or be injured in the next catastrophic attack. The uncertainty of never knowing when or where the next attack would be increases anxiety and exacerbates psychological distress.

Key Recommendations

The Taliban claim they do not target civilians or carry out indiscriminate attacks, but actually protect civilians as an Islamic and Afghan obligation. As detailed in this report, however, their attacks in urban areas have taken a horrific toll on families and communities, and the harm continues to mount long after the attacks. The attacks are tearing at the families and lives that the Taliban have pledged to protect.

Both the Taliban and other insurgent groups should end attacks that fail to discriminate properly between civilians and combatants, as well as attacks that can be expected to cause disproportionate harm to civilians. They should cease all intentional attacks on civilians and civilian objects—including schools, hospitals, places of worship, and homes not in use for military purposes—as well as perfidious attacks, in which the attacker feigns protected civilian status to carry out an attack, such as using an ambulance to conceal bombs. Insurgent commanders who order or are otherwise responsible for serious laws of war violations should be held to account.

Governments have the responsibility under international law to protect the lives of all those under their jurisdiction and to bring those who commit criminal offenses to justice. Although governments have no obligation to provide redress to victims of insurgent armed attacks, there is a growing consensus, including at the United Nations, on the importance of assistance. The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted by the General Assembly in 2006 and reviewed every two years, recognizes the importance of supporting and showing solidarity with victims of terrorism. While there is no recognized international instrument outlining countries' specific obligations toward terrorism victims, there has been growing recognition that countries should develop national assistance systems that promote the needs of victims and their families and facilitate the normalization of their lives.

In light of this, the Afghan government should seek to formalize through regulation or legislation the current ad hoc system, or create a new program for providing assistance to civilian victims of the conflict, including those injured or those that have lost a family member from insurgent attacks.

The government should launch a campaign to inform the general public about the procedure for obtaining financial assistance or other support. Support should be equitably

distributed, and complaints of corruption and discrimination should be promptly investigated. The government should also develop and implement measures to provide psychosocial support to survivors of attacks, whether by insurgents or government and allied forces. Afghanistan's international donors should support programs to provide financial and other assistance, including psychosocial services, to civilian victims of attacks by all parties to the conflict.

Methodology

Between November 2017 and February 2018, Human Rights Watch interviewed people affected by insurgent attacks in the cities of Kabul, Jalalabad, and Herat. We spoke with 45 people (32 men and 13 women) who had been injured or whose family members had been killed or injured in attacks by Taliban forces or armed groups claiming allegiance to the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), an affiliate of the Islamic State. We also interviewed representatives of United Nations agencies and humanitarian organizations, journalists, and Afghan government officials about such attacks. Security considerations precluded us from seeking interviews with the insurgent groups.

All interviews were conducted individually. Researchers explained the purpose of the interviews and received interviewees' consent to describe their experiences in this report and, in some cases, to film the interview. No interview subject was paid or promised a payment, service, or personal benefit in exchange for their interview. Some pseudonyms have been used in the report to conceal the identity of interview subjects.

Human Rights Watch was not able to assess claims by insurgent groups taking responsibility for specific attacks. In some cases, Human Rights Watch researchers were able to visit the sites of recent attacks, including the Imam Zaman Mosque in Kabul, the Jawadiya Mosque in Herat, and the Sedarat Square checkpoint in central Kabul.

The incidents documented in this report represent only a small fraction of insurgent attacks that have caused civilian injuries and loss of life since 2016. A partial list of major attacks since July 2016 is available in the appendix. We have not attempted to address the even larger number of smaller unlawful attacks perpetrated during this period.

I. A Rising Civilian Toll

Fighting between Afghan government and insurgent forces has intensified since 2016, causing increasingly higher numbers of civilian casualties. While urban suicide attacks have been part of the Taliban's operations since the mid-2000s, 2017 saw a dramatic increase in the number and size of such attacks, in tandem with increased military operations by Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and United States forces in provinces where the Taliban have made significant territorial gains.

Principally in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, Afghan government and US forces have also battled the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Afghan branch of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). Since January 2016, ISKP has been responsible for suicide attacks in Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad, and Lashkar Gah provinces that have killed and wounded at least 2,000 civilians. Most of these attacks have targeted Afghanistan's Shia religious community.

Analyst Borhan Osman has suggested that the insurgents are committing attacks in urban areas for strategic reasons: "By turning Kabul into a battlefield, insurgents gain wider attention, shake public confidence in the government, while showing their continued ability to strike hard."¹

According to statistics compiled by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 2017 recorded the highest number of civilian casualties from suicide attacks and so-called complex attacks in a single year since the mission began documenting them in 2009.² The Taliban were responsible for 42 percent of all attacks that killed and injured civilians in 2017, and groups affiliated with ISKP were responsible for 10 percent. Attacks that could not be definitively attributed to one group, or which were carried out by other insurgent groups, accounted for 13 percent. UNAMA found that 22 percent of civilian casualties in 2017 resulted from suicide and complex attacks intentionally directed at

¹ Borhan Osman, "The Cost of Escalating Violence in Afghanistan," *International Crisis Group*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/cost-escalating-violence-afghanistan> (accessed April 23, 2018).

² UNAMA, "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Report 2017," February 2018, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2017_final_6_march.pdf (accessed April 2, 2018), pp. 1-2. A "complex attack" is one in which an attacker uses two or more modes of attack against a single target.

civilians or civilian objects, and 16 percent of all civilian casualties resulted from such attacks in Kabul.³

Legal Standards

The armed conflict in Afghanistan is considered a non-international armed conflict under international humanitarian law, or the laws of war. The laws of war apply to all parties to the armed conflict, whether national armed forces or non-state armed groups. The laws of war prohibit deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian objects, attacks that cannot discriminate between civilians and combatants, and attacks that cause disproportionate civilian harm.⁴

Individuals who commit serious violations of the laws of war intentionally or recklessly are responsible for war crimes. Commanders who knew or should have known about violations but failed to stop them or punish those responsible may be liable as a matter of command responsibility.⁵

Many of the attacks included in this report were described as “suicide attacks,” which typically involve individuals driving vehicles packed with explosives or small groups of insurgents armed with assault weapons, hand grenades, improvised bombs, and other light weapons who intend to fight to the death. While the laws of war do not prohibit suicide attacks, the majority of such attacks are perfidious, a war crime in which the attacker feigns civilian or other protected status in order to carry out an attack.⁶

Emergence of ISKP

Groups that claim allegiance to ISIS first emerged in Afghanistan after 2010, although it was not until January 2015 that ISIS announced its expansion into “Khorasan province,” a term encompassing parts of Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan.⁷ However, there is little evidence of any working relationship between ISKP’s leadership and that of ISIS in

³ Ibid.

⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pt. I.

⁵ Ibid., pt. VI.

⁶ Ibid., rule 65.

⁷ Markham Nolan with Gilad Shiloach, “ISIS Statement Urges Attacks, Announces Khorasan State,” *Vocativ*, January 26, 2015, <http://www.vocativ.com/world/isis-2/isis-khorasan> (accessed April 2, 2018).

Syria and Iraq. According to Borhan Osman, those behind the Khorasan armed group have largely been “Pakistani militants who had long been settled in the southeastern districts of Nangarhar.... Before choosing to join ISKP, these militants operated under different brands, mainly under the umbrella of the ever-loosening Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP).”⁸

Most of these militants, who operate under diverse affiliations, appeared in Nangarhar after 2010, when pressure from Pakistan’s military operations in North and South Waziristan and in the Swat Valley in 2009 compelled many to relocate across the Afghan border into Nangarhar.⁹ In Nangarhar, deteriorating security and infighting among local militant groups had created a vacuum they could easily exploit.¹⁰ Rivalries among powerful Nangarhari families and government elites over land grabbing and access to contracts and customs revenue sparked wider conflict and militancy.¹¹ Afghan government officials, particularly the National Directorate of Security (NDS), Afghanistan’s intelligence agency, also courted some of the new arrivals as “a bulwark against the Afghan Taliban.”¹² In 2009, the US provided military support to some tribal communities to stand against the Taliban

⁸ Borhan Osman, “The Islamic State in ‘Khorasan’: How It Began and Where It Stands Now in Nangarhar,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 27, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-islamic-state-in-khorasan-how-it-began-and-where-it-stands-now-in-nangarhar> (accessed April 2, 2018). The International Crisis Group writes: “Pakistani Taliban groups are loosely aligned under the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Taliban Movement of Pakistan, TTP), formed in December 2007 by senior leaders of some 40 militant groups. Led by South Waziristan-based Baitullah Mehsud until his death on 5 August 2009 in a US drone attack, and now by his former deputy Hakimullah Mehsud, the TTP is loosely allied to Punjab-based jihadi outfits, including the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and the Jaish-e-Mohammed, the military’s jihadi proxies in Kashmir.” International Crisis Group, *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA*, October 2009, <https://d2071andvipowj.cloudfront.net/178-pakistan-countering-militancy-in-fata.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2018), p. 5.

⁹ Pakistan’s 2009-2010 military operation in Waziristan involved aerial bombardment, massive civilian displacement, extrajudicial executions, mass arrests, house demolitions, and arbitrary detentions. The insurgents controlling the area had been engaged in conflict with the Pakistan military and were implicated in assassinations, bomb attacks, and other abuses against local civilians. More than 150,000 people fled to other areas of Pakistan and some to Afghanistan. The Pakistan army declared the area a closed military zone for the duration of the operation, barring journalists and human rights monitors from entering. See “Pakistan: Get Aid to Civilians Caught in Fighting,” Human Rights Watch news release, October 28, 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/10/28/pakistan-get-aid-civilians-caught-fighting>.

¹⁰ David Mansfield, “The Devil Is in the Details: Nangarhar’s Continued Decline into Insurgency, Violence and Widespread Drug Production,” *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, February 2016, <https://areu.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/1602E-The-Devil-is-in-the-Details-Nangarhar-continued-decline-into-insurgency.pdf> (accessed April 23, 2018).

¹¹ Borhan Osman, “Descent into Chaos: Why Did Nangarhar Turn into an IS Hub?” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, September 27, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/descent-into-chaos-why-did-nangarhar-turn-into-an-is-hub> (accessed April 2, 2018).

¹² According to Osman, “They described this state of affairs as a small-scale tit-for-tat reaction to Pakistan’s broader and longer-ranging, institutionalised support to the Afghan Taleban in their fight against the Afghan government.” Osman, “The Islamic State in ‘Khorasan,’” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*.

in exchange for money, weapons, and development projects in their district.¹³ The plan, known as the Shinwari Pact, backfired, as it fueled conflict among different tribal groups and further destabilized the region.¹⁴

ISKP has also attracted some support from Central Asian militants, particularly the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU's loyalties to ISKP reportedly have wavered, and as of 2018, the total Central Asian contingent constituted less than one-third of ISKP's fighting force.¹⁵ Unlike the Taliban, ISKP does not have purely nationalist ambitions, and criticizes the Taliban on those grounds.¹⁶ Instead, it seeks to establish a caliphate encompassing swaths of Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

As ISKP established itself, its members engaged in intimidation and brutal attacks against the local civilian population, forcing schools and health clinics to close, threatening journalists, and killing those they accused of supporting the government or criticizing ISKP. ISKP proved adept at courting media attention, and in mid-2015 acted on its new claim to power in Nangarhar province by blowing up 10 alleged Taliban supporters, videotaping the murders, and then using social media to ensure the video had wide circulation.¹⁷ From its inception, ISKP has carried out sectarian attacks, targeting the Shia religious community. Such attacks appear to have become the group's main form of action. ISKP militants in Nangarhar have often clashed with the Afghan Taliban over control of

¹³ Allegedly in partnership with governor Gul Agha Sherzai, the Sepai tribal elites started to exploit their elevated position with the government and US military in order to extort local resources, specifically casting their eyes on large pieces of land. The encroachment led to open conflict, ultimately drawing in US airpower in October 2013. See Osman, "Descent into Chaos," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*; Fabrizio Foschini, "How Outside Interference Politicised the Achin Land Conflict," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, October 30, 2011, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/how-outside-interference-politicised-the-achin-land-conflict> (accessed April 2, 2018).

¹⁴ Kate Clark and Borhan Osman, "More Militias? Part 2: The Proposed Afghan Territorial Army in the Fight against ISKP," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/more-militias-part-2-the-proposed-afghan-territorial-army-in-the-fight-against-iskp> (accessed December 10, 2017).

¹⁵ Bill Roggio, "Former IMU Cleric Denounces Islamic State," *Long War Journal*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/former-imu-cleric-denounces-islamic-state.php> (accessed December 10, 2017); Borhan Osman, "Another ISKP Leader 'Dead': Where Is the Group Headed after Losing So Many Amirs?" *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, July 23, 2017, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/another-iskp-leader-dead-where-is-the-group-headed-after-losing-so-many-amirs> (accessed April 2, 2018).

¹⁶ Borhan Osman, "ISKP's Battle for Minds: What Are Its Main Messages and Whom Do They Attract?" *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/iskps-battle-for-minds-what-are-their-main-messages-and-who-do-they-attract> (accessed April 2, 2018).

¹⁷ UNAMA, "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Report 2015," February 2016, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc_annual_report_2015_final_14_feb_2016.pdf (accessed April 2, 2018), p. 56.

districts. Although ISKP has not established itself effectively outside Nangarhar, an ISKP cell in Kabul is believed to be responsible for most of the recent attacks on Shias.¹⁸

Support for Victims of Insurgent Attacks

The Afghan government has a policy of providing financial assistance to those injured in attacks by insurgents and to family members of those killed. After an attack takes place, the police district in that jurisdiction is required to register all injuries and deaths. The Office of the Chief Executive is responsible for calling a meeting of officials from the relevant ministries along with the Attorney General's Office, the President's Administrative Office, and the NDS to discuss the security implications and determine a compensation plan. Payment for those injured is set at 50,000 afghanis (US\$720), and for families of those killed at 100,000 afghanis (\$1,440).

Human Rights Watch's research indicates, however, that the system for determining eligibility for such assistance and delivering payments is onerous for those who have tried to access it. Many victims of insurgent attacks and their family members do not know what assistance is available to them or what is required to claim it. People we interviewed described difficulties collecting the necessary documentation, often making multiple trips to the hospital or clinic where they were treated and to the Ministry of Public Health only to learn that their names were not on the list of those eligible for assistance, or that the list had not been approved. The belief that the system is biased, either because of corruption or discrimination, was also widespread among those we interviewed.

In a 2013 report, the Center for Civilians in Conflict evaluated Afghan government initiatives to assist civilians harmed by both government forces and insurgents. The report concluded that while commendable, the programs suffered from serious flaws, with the result that "most civilian interviewees did not receive any assistance from the Afghan government. Some ... individuals filed claims and did not receive any response. Many others gave up on their pursuit of monetary help, owing to the time-consuming and confusing application process. Others did not apply due to concerns of retaliation from the

¹⁸ Borhan Osman, "With an Active Cell in Kabul, ISKP Tries to Bring Sectarianism to the Afghan War," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, October 19, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/with-an-active-cell-in-kabul-iskp-tries-to-bring-sectarianism-to-the-afghan-war> (accessed April 2, 2018).

Taliban or because they were unaware of these assistance mechanisms.”¹⁹ The report noted that the process of applying for assistance had “generated frustration and anger among applicants, while discouraging others from even applying for assistance.” It urged the government to reform the process, to institute a public awareness campaign about its assistance program, and to make the process more “accessible, transparent, and gender sensitive.”²⁰ Human Rights Watch’s research indicates that in the five years since the report was published, the flaws remain and still need to be addressed.

From April 2015 through February 2018, the Afghan Civilian Assistance Program (ACAP) operated as a donor-funded service to identify survivors of attacks, whether by insurgents or government and allied forces, and inform them about available services.²¹ The organization also maintained a hotline to provide victims and families with information on services.

A number of people Human Rights Watch interviewed mentioned receiving a package of basic food supplies from ACAP. The organization also provided counseling and physical rehabilitation services, although available reports do not indicate how many had requested and received this support. In its October 2017 newsletter, ACAP said that because the number of civilian casualties increased significantly in 2017, it had been forced to scale down its assistance packages to help only those it determined to be the most at risk. Due to limited resources, the group was unable to offer psychosocial counseling and physical rehabilitation after October 2017.²²

Afghanistan ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), as well as its Optional Protocol, in 2012, and subsequently developed a national strategy for disability and rehabilitation. The Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled is the lead government agency responsible for policy on support for persons with disabilities. However, throughout the country, the government lacks the facilities, trained personnel, and technical expertise to effectively deliver services to those with disabilities.

¹⁹ Center for Civilians in Conflict, “Caring for Their Own: A Stronger Afghan Response to Civilian Harm,” January 2013, p. 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

²¹ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded the ACAP program through the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) program, in coordination with the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD). The ACAP program ended in February 2018. A successor USAID program, Conflict Mitigation Assistance for Civilians (COMAC), became operational as of April 2018.

²² ACAP, “Monthly Status Update—October 2017,” https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/acap_iii_monthly_update_october_2017_final.pdf (accessed April 23, 2018).

There are critical gaps in the availability and quality of psychosocial support and mental health services in Kabul and other cities, while in rural areas they are virtually nonexistent. Afghanistan lacks trained personnel in all areas—psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, psychologists, and social workers. The stigma associated socially with psychosocial disabilities (mental health conditions) is also a significant barrier for people seeking support.²³

Under international law, the government is obligated to provide redress to victims of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed by its own forces or groups acting under its orders.²⁴ There is no international legal requirement for governments to compensate or assist victims of attacks by opposition armed groups. However, the UN General Assembly’s Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy of 2006, which has been reaffirmed every two years since, emphasizes the “dehumanization” of victims of terrorist attacks and asks UN member states to consider adopting “systems of assistance that would promote the needs of victims of terrorism and their families and facilitate the normalization of their lives.”²⁵

²³ A 2014 study found that Afghanistan had “only one tertiary health facility (Kabul Mental Health Hospital), approximately three trained psychiatrists and ten psychologists ‘covering’ a population of more than 30 million people.” Samuel Hall, “Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul—Part One: Mental Health Matters,” 2016, <http://samuelhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/UDY-Chapter-1-Mental-Health.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2018). A 2011 World Bank report estimated that “half of the Afghan population aged 15 years or older [was] affected by at least one of these mental disorders: depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.” Ghulam Dastagir Sayed, “Mental Health in Afghanistan: Burden, Challenges and the Way Forward,” World Bank, August 2011, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/HEALTHNUTRITIONANDPOPULATION/Resources/281627-1095698140167/MHinAfghanistan.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2018).

²⁴ ICRC, *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, rules 150 and 151; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, art. 3.

²⁵ UN General Assembly, “United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy,” A/Res/60/288, September 20, 2006, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/60/288 (accessed April 23, 2018). Studies on the effects of terrorist attacks show that the victims of these crimes often feel dehumanized and forgotten. See Laura Dolci, *A Victimless Crime? A Narrative on Victims of Terrorism to Build a Case for Support* (Oisterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2018).

II. Attacks on Civilians Claimed by the Taliban

In 2017, the Taliban were responsible for 42 percent of all civilian casualties and 65 percent of all deaths and injuries caused by insurgent groups, according to UNAMA. The 4,385 civilian casualties (1,574 deaths and 2,811 injuries) attributed to the Taliban in 2017 were 12 percent fewer than those in 2016.²⁶ The Taliban claimed responsibility for one of the most deadly recent attacks, the January 27, 2018 ambulance bombing that killed more than 103 people, mostly civilians, at a Kabul intersection.

On some occasions, the Taliban have sought to justify attacks against civilians by claiming that anyone working for the government of Afghanistan, including civil servants, is a valid military target. This argument flouts international humanitarian law, or the laws of war, which prohibits attacks targeting civilians unless directly involved in hostilities at the time. Such pronouncements demonstrate criminal intent by Taliban leaders to commit war crimes and instigate war crimes by subordinate personnel.

Ambulance Bomb in Kabul, January 27, 2018

On January 27, 2018, an ambulance rigged with explosives killed at least 103 people in Kabul, most of them civilians, and injured over 200. At about 12:50 p.m., the ambulance drove toward the checkpoints at Sedarat Square in central Kabul, the location of the former Ministry of Interior building. The street where the checkpoints are located is blocked to most vehicular traffic but, because of its proximity to Jamhuriat Hospital, is frequently used by ambulances. The ambulance drove through the first checkpoint at the entrance to the street, where it was allowed it to pass. It was reportedly stopped while attempting to gain entrance at the second checkpoint. A spokesperson for the Kabul police told the *New York Times* that after police stopped the vehicle, the driver attempted to continue driving forward from the left lane, but was again stopped, at which point the bomb detonated.²⁷

²⁶ According to UNAMA, “Civilian casualties from suicide and complex attacks claimed by Taliban decreased by 22 per cent compared to 2016, while those resulting from such attacks claimed by Daesh/ISIL-KP increased by 18 per cent compared to 2016.” The report noted that the numbers could be higher, given underreporting from inaccessible and insecure areas. UNAMA, “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Report 2017,” p. 29.; UNAMA, “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Report 2016,” February 2017, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_annual_report_2016_final280317.pdf (accessed April 2, 2018), p. 7.

²⁷ Mujib Mashal and Javid Sukhanyar, “‘It’s a Massacre’: Blast in Kabul Deepens Toll of a Long War,” *New York Times*, January 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/world/asia/afghanistan-kabul-attack.html> (accessed March 10, 2018).



People flee after an ambulance rigged with explosives detonated in central Kabul, killing 103, January 27, 2018. © 2018 Andrew Quilty

The Taliban, in a departure from their normal practice, quickly claimed responsibility for the attack. In a January 28 statement issued in response to media reports of civilian casualties, the Taliban claimed that the target “was the enemy, and the true brunt was also borne by the workers of this Ministry [of Interior],” and that “it is illogical to claim that civilians or a bazaar would be present.”²⁸ As noted above, the Taliban do not consider the ministry’s administrative staff to be civilians—a position contrary to international law.

The street where the bomb detonated is open to civilian pedestrian traffic, including but not limited to government workers. Witnesses described most of those killed and wounded as civilians. According to the Kabul daily *Etilaat Roz*, three cobblers and two street children who were seen on the street before the blast were not found afterward and are believed to have been killed.²⁹ The article described damage to shops and other normally civilian

²⁸ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “Clarification of Islamic Emirate Statement concerning Attack on Ministry of Interior,” <https://alemarah-english.com/?p=25114> (accessed March 1, 2018).

²⁹ *Etilaat Roz*, “One Day after the Bloody Explosion in Kabul, the Bodies of Five People Have Not Been Found” (“از پس روز یک” “است نشده یافت نفری پنج بدن کابل، در خونین انفجار”), <http://etilaatroz.com/56587> (accessed April 23, 2018).



Smoke rises from damage on an adjacent street after the ambulance bomb in central Kabul, January 27, 2018. © 2018 Andrew Quilty

structures in the vicinity of the blast, including Jamhuriat Hospital, where security cameras recorded the moment of the explosion.³⁰ A journalist who was on adjacent Chicken Street when the blast happened told Human Rights Watch that many of the victims were civilians who had been walking or working near the intersection, including street vendors selling fruits and juice.

Beyond the attack being unlawfully indiscriminate, the use of an ambulance, or a vehicle painted to be taken for an ambulance, as military subterfuge is prohibited under the laws of war. Use of medical insignia to feign protected status in order to carry out an attack constitutes perfidy, which is a war crime.³¹

Human Rights Watch interviewed Roya (pseudonym), who had been on her way to the Ministry of Interior with her sister and a friend at the time of the attack. The three women had arrived at the ministry at about 12:40 p.m. for Roya to apply for an open position in

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ ICRC, *Customary International Humanitarian Law*, rules 29, 61, and 65.

data entry at the ministry. The guards told her she would need to wait until the doors opened at 1 p.m. The women then stepped into a photocopy shop near the second checkpoint to pass the time. When the blast occurred, Roya was thrown to the floor. She told Human Rights Watch:

I didn't know what had happened. I thought I had gone blind because there was blood running down my face into my eyes and I couldn't see. My friend grabbed hold of me to pull me out of the shop, but I was crying that I had to find my sister. It was dark in the shop and dust was in the air. The bodies of two men were lying near the door. I found my sister under a pile of rubble—only her hand was sticking out. My friend and I freed her and she was able to walk so we managed to get out of the shop. The street was full of bodies. One man who was very badly injured pleaded with us not to step over him. I have not been able to go back to that place.³²

When a Human Rights Watch researcher visited the site of the explosion nearly three weeks later, shops and other buildings closest to the blast were badly burned and showed structural damage. Shops further along the street were open despite broken windows and other damage. Ali (pseudonym), a waiter at a café, said:

I saw many people killed that day. Our café was shaken and glass flew everywhere. My coworker was injured and has not yet returned to work. My hand was injured, but I have to work so I came back. For the few days after the attack, almost nobody came to this street. But people have to work, even though we are afraid.³³

Attack on Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel, January 20, 2018

The attack on the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul began at about 9 p.m. on January 20, 2018, when six gunmen armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles and grenades entered the hotel through the kitchen. Most of the rooms were occupied, with at least 100 guests of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology staying there for a conference.

³² Human Rights Watch interview with Roya (pseudonym), February 14, 2018.

³³ Human Rights Watch interview with Ali (pseudonym), February 14, 2018.



A man tries to escape from a balcony during the attack at Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel, January 21, 2018.

© 2018 Omar Sobhani/Reuters

The attackers killed 21 civilians, including 14 expatriates, and wounded an additional 11 Afghans. The attack did not end until the afternoon of January 21.

The attack showed extensive pre-planning. Two of the attackers had reportedly been working as servers in the hotel restaurant for days before the attack, and had apparently placed weapons inside the hotel as part of the preparations. The attackers also seemed to have prior knowledge of the layout and guests, and sought out hotel rooms with expatriates. Survivors, some of whom hid on balconies of rooms where guests had already been killed, reported hearing gunmen enter rooms and shoot the occupants.³⁴ At about 11 a.m. on January 21, the Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

³⁴ Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar, "After Kabul Hotel Attack, Security Plan Queried as Death Toll Rises," *New York Times*, January 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/22/world/asia/kabul-hotel-attack.html> (accessed April 23, 2018).

Among the dead was Ahmad Farzan, a 34-year-old religious scholar and member of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, as well as two Venezuelan and seven Ukrainian pilots and crew members of the Afghan commercial airline Kam Air.

Fahim Hakim, a former commissioner with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, was in the hotel having dinner with his family when the attack began. He told Australia's Special Broadcasting Service:

One of the shooters was saying, "All of these people are foreigners," and shot indiscriminately and then turned toward us. All the guests were screaming and trying to hide somewhere. I was in front of them. One guy was very agitated and I said, "We are Afghans, we are not foreigners, we are a family here. Don't shoot at my family members, if you want you can shoot at me."³⁵

The gunman shot him and one of his sons, injuring them both. Then the power went out and the attackers fled to another area of the hotel.

Abdul Haq Omeri, a journalist, had been visiting friends in the hotel when the attack began. He told the *New York Times*:

I went from one balcony to the next. I did not jump down. I joined other people, and reached the balcony of a room that had been already attacked and its occupant killed. We switched off our phones and stayed quiet.... At one point, a woman screamed for help on the third floor, but then we heard gunfire and the woman stopped.³⁶

Attack on a Mining Ministry Shuttle Bus in Kabul, July 24, 2017

On July 24, 2017, the Taliban carried out a suicide attack against a minibus carrying employees of the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, killing at least 38 civilians and injuring

³⁵ Abdullah Alikhil, "Afghan Man Shot to Save Three Australian Women in a Taliban Attack in Kabul," Special Broadcasting Service, February 20, 2018, <https://www.sbs.com.au/yourlanguage/pashto/en/article/2018/02/10/afghan-man-shot-save-three-australian-women-taliban-attack-kabul> (accessed April 23, 2018).

³⁶ Mashal and Sukhanyar, "After Kabul Hotel Attack, Security Plan Queried as Death Toll Rises," *New York Times*.



An Afghan shopkeeper inspects his shop after the suicide attack in Kabul on July 24, 2017. © 2017 Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

dozens. In a statement taking responsibility for the attack, the Taliban claimed to have targeted a bus carrying personnel working for the National Directorate of Security, the government intelligence agency.

M. Ahmadi, a property dealer whose shop was at the site of the explosion, said:

I was in my shop.... I heard a very loud sound and I did not know what happened.... I was not hearing well, and somebody pushed me and said, “Get out!” The staff shuttle bus for the Ministry of Mines that had been bombed had crashed into my shop. I walked out with bare feet and the broken glass cut into my feet. My shop was on fire. There were fires on both sides of the street.³⁷

Out on the street a car stopped in front of him and the driver told him to get in:

³⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with M. Ahmadi, November 20, 2017.

He took me to Mawla Hospital and he called my family to let them know. Then my sons brought me to Emergency Hospital. I do not remember how long I was there. My head, my belly, and my arm were injured—there are still shell fragments in my arm.... During the night I scream in my sleep. The doctors told me I need to see a psychiatrist. But I cannot because of the money.³⁸

The consequences for Ahmadi went far beyond the initial injuries:

My family asks me not to go to work, but what can I do? This shop is mine, and I had to borrow a lot of money to repair it. I am the only breadwinner in the family. Due to our financial problems, my children can't go to school now. Why doesn't the government give some money to help the injured people in this area? Aren't we from this land, from this country?³⁹

M. Daud, a guard at a wedding hall near the site of the attack, was injured in the explosion:

I was standing on duty in front of Sabeqa Street when the explosion took place. Particles from the explosion hit both my legs and also my arm. If the wall hadn't been here, I would have been killed.⁴⁰

His family found out about him via Facebook and television:

When I was discharged from the hospital, I went home for almost 20 days. My family said, "Don't go back to Kabul." But I told them, "I can't work here, I have to go."... Now, as the weather is getting cold, I feel a lot of pain in my right leg, especially in the morning. Doctors told me not work for a year, but

³⁸ Ibid. Afghanistan has extremely limited psychosocial services at government hospitals. A few private facilities may offer these services for a fee. The costs of medication in Afghanistan represent a hurdle to those seeking support. A few nongovernmental organizations have begun limited programs to offer counseling, but information about these programs is not widely available. Human Rights Watch interview with social worker, Kabul, February 14, 2018.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with M. Ahmadi, November 20, 2017.

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with M. Daud, November 6, 2017.

if I do not work, how can I survive and support my family? Every night I feel fear.... I still feel the sound of the explosion in my ears.⁴¹

Sardar A., a baker, was also injured in the attack:

I was sitting in the front part of my bakery near the window and selling bread. During the explosion my head, my right side of the body, and my legs were injured.... My family tells me not to go to the bakery, but I have to because there is no other work I could do—I am the owner of this bakery. Now I am very afraid. Even when I hear the sound from the tire of a bike getting punctured, I am scared.⁴²

Milad D. said that his father had a calligraphy shop that was a five-minute walk from their home:

I had just woken up when the explosion happened. It has become so routine, you just check your phone to see where it is.... We kept calling my father's number, and finally a doctor at Isteqlal Hospital answered and told us my father was injured and we should come.... When we arrived, a nurse told us he was dead and that we should identify the body. My uncle collapsed, and I went to where they kept the bodies.

You know the target for the attack was a shuttle bus? That vehicle was completely burned and the [passengers] were burned too. My father was among those bodies in the morgue.... For a month after that I was not in a normal state psychologically—I could hardly sleep for three hours. I know the loss of my father can't be compensated, but we are so afraid to lose anyone else. When I leave the house, my mother really worries. My brother tells me not to go out unless it's really necessary.⁴³

Mohammad A. owned a motorbike repair shop near the site of the explosion:

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Human Rights Watch interview with Sardar A., November 11, 2017.

⁴³ Human Rights Watch interview with Milad D., November 13, 2017.

I came to my shop 10 to 20 minutes early. Just as I opened the door of my shop, the explosion happened behind me. I fell and saw that some of my intestines were protruding from my body, so I held my hands over my belly and found someone to take me to Isteqlal Hospital.⁴⁴

He and his family have not recovered from the blast:

It was really hard for my family as I am the only breadwinner. I still have shrapnel in my back. My stomach had 30 sutures and I still feel pain. I can't do heavy work at my shop, so I had to hire an assistant. You know now that there is no safe place in Kabul—you don't know where the next attack will be.⁴⁵

Attack on District Six Police Station in Kabul, March 1, 2017

At about 12:30 p.m. on March 1, 2017, the Taliban attacked the police station in District Six in Kabul. A suicide bomber detonated a car bomb behind the precinct office, after which gunmen attacked the station with small arms fire. At about the same time, the Taliban also attacked an NDS training facility in another area of Kabul. Eleven civilians were killed and more than 50 injured in the two attacks.⁴⁶

Najla (pseudonym), who lives near the police station, said:

I was at home preparing lunch for my family when suddenly it seemed an earthquake struck, and a cloud of dust and debris swept over the house. The blast destroyed all the windows and many of the doors, and many of my family members were injured. I was five months pregnant at the time, and I fell to the ground in great pain. Within an hour, I started bleeding. My husband came home and took me to Cure Hospital. I remained there for two months until the doctors decided to deliver my baby surgically. The worst

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Mohammad A., November 13, 2017.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mirwais Harooni, "Taliban Claim Attacks in Afghan Capital, At Least 15 Dead," Reuters, March 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast/taliban-claim-attacks-in-afghan-capital-at-least-15-dead-idUSKBN1683MR> (accessed December 10, 2017).



Smoke rises from the site of the car bomb attack on the police station in District Six, Kabul, March 1, 2017.
© 2017 Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

thing is that no one helps you in the government or anywhere else. My husband and his family had to cover all the medical expenses.⁴⁷

Safar M., a plumber, was fixing a hand pump at a house behind the police station when the explosion happened:

I heard a loud sound—everything went dark and I fell. Then I felt like my leg was on fire. A relative of mine heard me screaming and took me to Alemi Private Hospital in Dasht-e Barchi. My leg was hanging loose. They took me to the operating room and when I woke up I discovered they had amputated my leg below the knee.... I can't work anymore and I have financial

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Najla (pseudonym), December 6, 2017.

problems. Sometimes my wife's relatives come and help me a little. It is a very bad situation.⁴⁸

A doctor at the Gulkhan Health Clinic near the police station said that she and her colleagues were in the middle of a busy vaccination program when they decided to get a quick lunch in the area. Two of her colleagues and three other volunteers from the clinic died in the explosion:

I was injured. I was bleeding a lot but I had to stay there for 40 minutes because fighting was still going on inside the police station. Then some colleagues and a local resident took me on his back to the nearest private clinic. From there I went to Emergency Hospital where they removed the shrapnel from my leg.... I am still lame and I hope to go to India for more treatment.⁴⁹

Another colleague of mine who is the *chowkidar* [guard] named Ibrahim was injured as well. He had already lost his left eye, but in this explosion his right eye was injured too, and now he can't see very well. He is still working but he can't stay as chowkidar at night, so his son will do it then. His son has stopped going to school because he needs to work to support his family.⁵⁰

Doctor M. said that he was busy in the neighborhood vaccinating residents when the explosion happened. Immediately afterward he received a call from his father, asking him if he was all right and telling him to search for his cousin Khalid who was in the area at the time. He also called his clinic and learned that his colleagues had been killed:

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Safar M., November 16, 2017.

⁴⁹ According to a report by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), "The Afghan government lacks funds to operate and sustain its health care facilities; hospitals are unable to provide adequate care; health care facilities lack qualified staff; and corruption throughout the system remains a concern. Because of these challenges, many Afghans seek health care services abroad." SIGAR, "Afghanistan's Health Care Sector: USAID's Use of Unreliable Data Presents Challenges in Assessing Program Performance and the Extent of Progress," January 2017, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-17-22-AR.pdf> (accessed April 2, 2018), p. ii. While urban hospitals provide basic care, and the hospital operated by the Italian nongovernmental organization Emergency is equipped to handle urgent trauma cases in Kabul, Afghans who need advanced medical treatment and who can afford the travel costs and fees seek treatment outside Afghanistan; India is a frequent destination. Those who can obtain visas go to Europe or elsewhere. See "Afghans Turn to India's Hospitals for Treatment," *Deutsche Welle*, November 29, 2013, <http://www.dw.com/en/afghans-turn-to-indias-hospitals-for-treatment/a-17260216> (accessed April 23, 2018).

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with doctor (name withheld), Gulkhan Health Clinic, November 26, 2017.

In the clinic I saw the dead bodies of my colleagues. I could only see the face of one—I could not stand to see the others. I was so upset I could only say, “Ena lellah wa ena elaihe rajeroon.” This means, “We are from God and we return to him.” Then I went home because my entire family was looking for my cousin Khalid and his colleague. Finally, our friends from the department of forensic medicine called and said, “There are two or three new dead bodies brought here. Please come and check to see if they are from your family.”

My uncle went and saw there were three bodies. One was my cousin Khalid. Another one was Hussain, brother-in-law of my other cousin, and the third one was Qadeer, our neighbor. I hope God does not cause such misfortune to anybody else. All of us still feel so distraught. My uncle always says, “I wish I had lost everything, but that my son Khalid would be alive.”⁵¹

Haji Mohammad lives and owns a shop near the police station in District Six:

It was 12:30 in the afternoon when the explosion took place. My house has two stories and all the windows were broken. I got pieces of glass in my head.... My brother had a stroke due to the explosion. He is still disabled. He has problems with one of his hands, a leg, and also his tongue.... I am helping his family. His son is small. Now, when my children hear the sound of an explosion, they are very afraid such incidents would be repeated again.⁵²

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Doctor M. (full name withheld), Gulkhan Health Clinic, November 26, 2017.

⁵² Human Rights Watch interview with Haji Mohammad, November 6, 2017.

III. Attacks on Civilians Claimed by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province

Attack on Imam Zaman Mosque in Kabul, October 20, 2017

On October 20, 2017, armed men carried out coordinated attacks on the Imam Zaman Mosque, a Shia mosque in west Kabul, killing 65 people and injuring 45 more. Initially, a suicide bomber threw two grenades into the female section of the mosque, killing six women and injuring four. He then blew himself up among male worshippers gathered for evening prayers. Additional attackers, reportedly wearing police uniforms, then entered the mosque and fired on worshippers. Gun battles continued for several hours. An armed group proclaiming allegiance to ISKP claimed responsibility.⁵³



A man carries copies of the Quran inside the Imam Zaman Mosque in Kabul a day after the suicide attack during Friday evening prayers, October 21, 2017. © 2017 Wakil Koshar/AFP/Getty Images

⁵³ Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar, “Twin Mosque Attacks Kill Scores in One of Afghanistan’s Deadliest Weeks,” *New York Times*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/world/asia/afghanistan-kabul-attack-mosque.html> (accessed December 10, 2017).

Sugra Hussein told Human Rights Watch that her husband, Abdul Hussein, had decided to go early to the mosque that evening to find a good place:

A half-hour later we heard the explosion. We rushed to the mosque, but they had taken the wounded and dead to the hospitals. We searched for him from one hospital to another but could not find him. Then someone from Ali Abad Hospital who had taken the SIM card from his smashed phone called us saying he was wounded. We went there. He was in surgery but the doctors told us he would survive. I went home as my son would stay with him through the night. But my son came very early in the morning. I asked him, “Why did you leave your father alone?” He told me, “My father is *shaheed shood*, martyred.”... We have lost the head of our family.... We are helpless. My children can’t go to school now, I can’t afford their fees.⁵⁴

Her son Mahdi added:

When we saw my father his face had been burned and both hands shattered.... When he regained consciousness he told me, “Son, I am fine, go home.”... But as the effect of the anesthesia wore off he began complaining about the pain.... I knew he was dying in front of me but I couldn’t do anything. His pain was growing and I was just watching—I couldn’t do anything, nor could the doctors.... It’s very hard when your father is alive during the day and dead by night. It is not just our pain, it is the pain of the nation.⁵⁵

Ali Reza, a resident of the neighborhood where the mosque is located, said that the *iqama*, the second call to prayer before the prayer begins, had just begun when the explosion happened:

There was a huge fire in front of me. I fell down and two or three times I tried to get up but could not. I saw a lot of people killed and injured. Men and women were running and looking for their loved ones.... My father came to

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Sugra Hussein, February 14, 2018.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Mahdi, February 14, 2018.

the mosque and took me out. Fragments had hit my right leg, left arm, and there were a lot of wounds on my body due to pieces of broken glass.... I had surgery to remove the fragments but I think there is still a piece in my leg. I still feel pain in my leg and arm.⁵⁶

Mahram Ali described seeking treatment for his father:

As soon as I heard the sound of the explosion, I went to the mosque. My father's left side was injured. I took him to Sayid-ul Shahada Private Hospital that is close by. They could not do anything, so my brother-in-law took him to Isteqlal Hospital. I returned to the mosque to help others. But my brother-in-law called me to tell me that as soon as my father arrived at the hospital, he died. I was distraught. That was a very bad night. My children still ask, "Where is our grandfather?" I tell them he has gone on a journey. They say, "Why didn't he take us?"⁵⁷

Mohammad T. and his wife, Huma (pseudonym), lived in the mosque compound where he worked as the caretaker. The explosion took place during evening prayers, when Huma was in the women's section of the mosque. She said:

When the explosion happened, I went to the men's section. My brother had been killed, and I could not find my son. I thought he had been killed and his body torn to pieces.... I did not know what to do. Then a woman came to me and said, "Let's go to the hospital. Your son is injured, but he is alive."... But now since the attack, my son gets irritated and angry easily. He has bad dreams. He went to stay in our village in Ghor province because he is afraid to stay here. But we want him to come back and continue going to school.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Ali Reza, November 30, 2017.

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Mahram Ali, November 30, 2017.

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Huma (pseudonym), November 30, 2017.



A man surveys the destruction a day after the suicide bomb attack at the Jawadiya Mosque in Herat, August 2, 2017. © 2017 Jalil Rezayee/EPA

Attack on Jawadiya Mosque in Herat, August 1, 2017

Herat has endured less violence than Kabul, and as of 2018, ISKP did not have a well-developed cell in Herat. But the group has carried out some attacks in Herat, notably the August 1, 2017 bombing of the Jawadiya Mosque that killed at least 31 people and injured 65. ISKP claimed responsibility.⁵⁹ One witness told Human Rights Watch that the scene was “like the judgment day—it was so chaotic. Bodies were lying on top of each other. It was so bad that even imagining such a scene could traumatize you.... May no one experience that horrific night we went through.”⁶⁰

Mariam, a 25-year-old woman with three children ages 1, 5, and 7, lost her husband, Mohammad Asif, in the attack. She told Human Rights Watch she now has no means of support and had been relying on help from other survivors and her husband’s relatives to feed her family.⁶¹ Her friend Sima, who was injured in the attack, said:

⁵⁹ UNAMA, “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Report 2017,” p. 37.

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Rezaee Ahmad, December 8, 2017.

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Mariam, December 8, 2017.

We had just started the Friday prayer and were standing. Suddenly I heard a loud sound. The people in the front said to leave as quickly as possible. Then there was another explosion. A door fell hard against my shoulder. I had to walk out on the broken glass—I was taking glass out of my feet for many days after. No one should see such a day! I was treated at the hospital and went home, but I am not well. My husband has been ill for some time, so I must work, but I cannot now. I need psychological help.⁶²

Jalil A. said the assailants entered the mosque and started methodically shooting at people:

They were masked and leaned their backs on the walls and had big guns, I think AK-47s [assault rifles]. They were shooting straight, not left and right, hitting the first row, the second row, and the third row. As the worshippers bent for genuflection, they started shooting.... The lights were off and everyone was on the ground. [When it ended] I crawled over dead bodies.... Later, I got up without noticing that I was wounded.... My hands and my face and chest had received shrapnel. I am a tailor, mostly working by my hands. But my wounded hand has not yet fully recovered. I cannot lift things and cannot apply pressure.... The governor granted 25,000 afghanis [US\$360] to the wounded people, but I didn't receive any.⁶³

Attack on Al-Zahra Mosque in Kabul, June 15, 2017

On June 15, 2017, several gunmen attacked the Shia Al-Zahra Mosque in the Dasht-e Barchi neighborhood of western Kabul. A suicide bomber detonated his explosives in a kitchen outside the main prayer hall, after a guard prevented him from entering the main hall.⁶⁴ At

⁶² Human Rights Watch interview with Sima, December 8, 2017.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch interview with Jalil A., December 8, 2017.

⁶⁴ Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Suicide Bomber Strikes at Shia Mosque in Western Kabul," *Guardian*, June 15, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/suicide-bomber-shia-mosque-kabul-afghanistan> (accessed December 10, 2017).



A policeman stands on a bloodstained street following the suicide attack at the Al-Zahra Mosque in Kabul, June 16, 2017. © 2017 Omar Sobhani/Reuters

least six people were killed and more than ten wounded. ISKP claimed responsibility.⁶⁵ Mohammad Musa, whose father, businessman Haji Ramazan Hussainzada, was killed in the explosion, said:

My brother was with my father. Upon finishing their prayers, they heard gunfire outside the mosque. They could see three attackers shooting into the mosque. Two of them were in front of the mosque. Then the third came behind the mosque near the kitchen, when he faced my father and brother. The attacker blindly shot everybody. Abdullah, who was the tea maker, was killed. My father was hit by a bullet to the chest near the shoulder. Then the attacker blew himself up.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ “Four Killed in Attack on Mosque in Kabul,” Reuters, June 15, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast/four-killed-in-attack-on-mosque-in-kabul-idUSKBN1962GN?il=0> (accessed December 10, 2017).

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Mohammad Musa, November 20, 2017.

Haji Ramazan Hussainzada died on the way to the hospital. Mohammad Musa's brother eventually received treatment abroad and survived.

Attack on Baqir-ul Ulum Mosque in Kabul, November 21, 2016

On November 21, 2016, a suicide bomber detonated explosives inside a Shia mosque in the Dar-ul Aman neighborhood of Kabul, killing at least 32 people and wounding dozens. The worshippers had gathered to mark the Shia ceremony of Arbaeen, the end of the 40-day mourning of Ashura. ISKP claimed responsibility for the attack. Musa J., the caretaker and muezzin of the mosque, described being injured in the attack:

I was near the inside door of the mosque, and the explosion took place five or six meters away from me. I was thrown along with the door and the window into the yard. After a while, when I became conscious, I saw broken glass everywhere. I wanted to get up and move but I couldn't because my leg was injured. I recovered, but afterward my son who is 5 pleaded with his



The Baqir-ul Ulum Mosque in Kabul after a suicide attack, November 21, 2016.

© 2016 Rahmat Gul/AP Photo

mother, “Stay with me at school because if an explosion takes place, I’m scared and I can’t escape.... If there is an explosion, how can I find you?”⁶⁷

Attack on the Enlightenment Movement Protest, July 23, 2016

On July 23, 2016, a twin suicide bombing in Deh Mazang Square in central Kabul targeted protesters, predominantly Hazaras, who were demonstrating against a government decision to reroute a power project, bypassing a Hazara majority area of the country.⁶⁸ At least 85 people were killed and 413 injured.⁶⁹ ISKP claimed responsibility in a statement that included anti-Shia rhetoric linked to reports of Hazaras fighting for the Syrian government in Syria’s civil war.⁷⁰ The Taliban condemned the attack.⁷¹

The two bombers detonated their explosives, which were packed with ball bearings, among the hundreds of protesters. The first explosion at 2:34 p.m. took place between an improvised stage and a restaurant on the corner of the square. According to a UNAMA investigation report, “The wide blast radius and the projection of ball bearings explain why victims included demonstration participants as well as non-participants including women and children.”⁷² The second blast at 2:38 p.m. was more limited, as the attacker’s vest only partially detonated.⁷³

Sima, whose son Ahmad was killed in the attack, said:

We heard from Tolo TV that there had been an explosion among the protesters. We were very frightened and called his number, but it rang and he didn’t pick up. I went to Isteqlal Hospital where they had brought many

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Musa J., November 20, 2017.

⁶⁸ An initial assessment recommended the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TUTAP) project route through Bamyan province, a Hazara-majority province in the Central Highlands, but in 2016 the government rerouted it via Salang Pass. The “Jonbesh-e-Roshnayi” (“Enlightenment Movement”) was started in early May 2016 as a way to voice the concerns of the Hazara community.

⁶⁹ UNAMA, “Special Report: Attack on a Peaceful Demonstration in Kabul, 23 July 2016,” October 2016, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/23_july_suicide_attack_against_peaceful_demonstration_-_18_oct_2016.pdf (accessed December 10, 2017).

⁷⁰ Borhan Osman, “With an Active Cell in Kabul, ISKP Tries to Bring Sectarianism to the Afghan War,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*.

⁷¹ UNAMA, “Special Report: Attack on a Peaceful Demonstration in Kabul, 23 July 2016.”

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*



An Afghan protester cries out near the scene of the suicide attack that targeted a demonstration of mainly Shia Hazaras at Deh Mazang Square in Kabul, July 23, 2016. © 2016 Wakil Koshar/AFP/Getty Images

dead bodies and injured people. I asked his friends and they told me that Ahmad was wounded and was at another hospital. They said we should come in the morning. But then I learned that actually he had been killed.⁷⁴

Gulsom, Ahmad's wife, described the effect of Ahmad's death on their children:

When my daughter was born, I named her Parastish. It's a synonym for *hamd* [praise], the root of her father's name. Now Ahmad is gone, but Setayish is recalling him so often. Two days ago, her uncle came from Mazar-e Sharif and Setayish ran toward him, thinking that it was Ahmad. Sometimes she comes to me and asks, "Everyone's father is returning, why not mine?" I have told her that her father has gone to a very far place. A few days ago, it was her birthday and I asked her what she wished for. She looked at me and said, "Call my father and tell him to return."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Sima, December 20, 2017.

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Gulsom, December 20, 2017.

IV. Attacks for Which No Group Has Claimed Responsibility

Suicide Truck Bomb in Kabul, May 31, 2017

On May 31, 2017, a suicide bomber detonated a sewage tanker truck packed with explosives in central Kabul at about 8:25 a.m., during the morning rush hour. The explosion created a crater five meters wide and more than three meters deep near Zandaj Square. The truck had been stopped at a checkpoint outside the Green Zone, the fortified Kabul neighborhood where many foreign embassies and government buildings are located. It was the deadliest single attack in Kabul in any period of the war. UNAMA documented 583 civilian casualties from the explosion—92 killed and 491 injured. However, media sources estimated the number killed at closer to 150, since most of those who died close to the blast site may never be identified. The blast caused injuries and damage to buildings four kilometers away. No group claimed responsibility.



A member of the Afghan security forces stands at the site of a truck bomb attack in Kabul, May 31, 2017.

© 2017 Shah Marai/AFP/Getty Images



Screenshot of footage of the tanker truck about to turn right at the checkpoint in central Kabul, May 31, 2017. © 2017 TOLONews

Roshan Telecom’s main office was almost directly opposite the blast site. The building collapsed, and at least 30 Roshan employees were killed and more than 50 injured.⁷⁶ Shoaib (pseudonym) described what happened:

I went to the office as usual and it was a little early when I arrived. The cleaners were there, so I thought I would sit in the yard, but then they finished so I sat at my desk and read emails, when suddenly the ceiling of the office came down and the air conditioner hit the back of my head. The force blew me against the wall. The desk actually shielded me, so I was not badly injured except for my head, which had a 15-centimeter gash, and some pieces of glass hit my chest. For fifteen minutes I was not very conscious, but after that I heard noises from my colleagues.... A lot of them were injured and killed. Many people in the yard were also killed.⁷⁷

Shoaib discussed some of the difficulties he has faced since the blast:

⁷⁶ Zabiullah Jhanwal, “Roshan Telecoms Suffers Enormous Loss in Truck Bombing,” *TOLONews*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.tolonews.com/business/roshan-telecoms-suffers-enormous-loss-truck-bombing> (accessed April 2, 2018).

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Shoaib (pseudonym), December 1, 2017.

Afterward, at home, I was not able to sleep because I felt the shock of the incident again. I met with some psychologists and they told me to leave Kabul and go to a quiet place, but I cannot afford it. I would lose my job and could not support the family. Two weeks after the incident, the office called and said that the president's office is supposed to give us 50,000 afghanis [US\$720] if we had been injured. But my name was not on the list and neither was my colleague's. Unlike me, he had time to follow it up and get his money.⁷⁸

Another Roshan employee, Hashim (pseudonym), said:

I found myself under dust, furniture, and window glass. It was hard to breathe or stand.... I was injured from the head and bleeding.... My body, clothes, and even my shoes were full of blood, and I could hardly walk. Walking out of the office I saw a colleague's body, furniture, glass all around. I realized I was walking toward an inferno.... After I recovered, I came to know that six people from my department were killed and one colleague had lost his right arm. Later, I found out how massive that explosion was with only a wall between it and the place I was sitting.⁷⁹

Hashim said that the government's offer to help with cash proved "more painful" because even when he compiled all the required documents, he was unable to get any money:

Some of my colleagues received [a cash payment] and when I went to claim mine they said that I was required to bring the hospital confirmation. I took the hospital confirmation clearly stating that I was injured, but they again asked us to bring them the confirmation of Ministry of Health as well. I took the list of injured where I was listed, but they said the list was not yet confirmed, although I know some people had gotten money by then. It's clear to me that it is a waste of time to follow it up. I am trying to find a new

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Hashim (pseudonym), December 4, 2017.

opportunity and place to live in peace. I hate Kabul city now.... I think peace is something that my country will never experience.⁸⁰

Soroya (pseudonym) has seven children, and her husband, who was killed in the attack, was the only breadwinner:

My husband, Aman, was a driver for Roshan Telecom. He was not officially working there, but he recently had an informal contract with them. It was his second month with Roshan Telecom when he was killed.⁸¹

Since his death, the family has had to borrow money and rent rooms in the house for income and so that Soroya will not be on her own.

Razia spoke about the death of her brother Hussain:

He was supposed to get married soon. We were planning to have his engagement party after Eid.... Recently, he was working as an electrician at the Canadian Embassy.... On May 31, I was at work when I heard the explosion. Whenever an explosion happened, I used to call my brother, but this time nobody was answering my calls. My brother had been working the night shift and was supposed to return home by bicycle. I went to the site and saw broken glass everywhere. The road was full of blood and ashes.

At the hospital, they told me that no injured from the Canadian Embassy had been transferred there. Then I decided to look for him at the morgue. When they uncovered the corpses, I saw my brother and collapsed. We took him home. His shroud was full of blood. Now I must cover all the family expenses. Aside from this, I am harassed so often, because everyone knows that I am alone. Because of that incident, life is now bitter and dark.⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Soroya (pseudonym), December 1, 2017.

⁸² Human Rights Watch interview with Razia, December 15, 2017.

BBC journalist Ayoub Arwin was traveling by car with three other colleagues to their office in the Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood in the Green Zone, and passed through the checkpoint 15 seconds before the tanker truck. Their car was propelled forward by the force of the explosion. The driver was killed and Arwin suffered head injuries. His other colleagues sustained minor injuries. “We were only 15 seconds ahead of the truck,” he said. “If we had been any closer, I would not be here now. I was just lucky.”⁸³

Attack on the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, August 24, 2016

At about 7 p.m. on August 24, 2016, when fall semester evening classes at the American University in Kabul were just getting underway, a suicide bomber detonated a truck filled with explosives at the campus perimeter walls. The explosion also severely damaged a school for visually impaired students next door, killing a guard.⁸⁴

Gunmen then entered the campus through the gap, initiating a 10-hour siege during which eight students, two professors, three security guards, and three police officers were killed. More than 50 people were injured, almost all civilians. Afghan special forces, with the assistance of US and Norwegian troops, finally secured the campus at about 5 a.m. the next day.

Throughout the siege, trapped students sent messages to friends and relatives describing how the attackers had moved through the university buildings, targeting students and faculty who tried to barricade the doors.

⁸³ Human Rights Watch interview with Ayoub Arwin, December 8, 2017.

⁸⁴ Ahmad Shuja, “Attack in Afghanistan Shatters Its School for the Blind,” commentary, Human Rights Watch dispatch, September 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/01/attack-afghanistan-shatters-its-school-blind>.



Screenshot of Twitter posts from photojournalist Massoud Hossaini, who was trapped inside the American University of Afghanistan during the attack on August 24, 2016.

Human Rights Watch interviewed four students who were injured in the attack. Nargis, who was in her final year, said:

As soon as the explosion took place, our security staff turned off the lights so that the students could escape in darkness. I was on the first floor and when they threw hand grenades, all the glass broke and pieces of it injured my shoulder. My classmates and I hid under the desks, but our security people told us to escape. We ran and I fell down once under the feet of others. My leg and back were injured, and I got glass in my legs. At that time, I did not feel the pain as I was afraid. For days after the attack, I had psychological problems, and still its effects are with me. The loss of my classmates and my teacher, Professor Khpulwak, has had very bad impact on me. I had a class with him at 6:30 p.m., and then he was killed. I attended so many funerals for those who were killed.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Nargis, November 20, 2017.

A. helped direct students to escape routes across the campus until he was shot in the legs and back. He said:

Our professor had just given us a prayer break, so my classmate and I had just gone to pray when suddenly there was an explosion. Everyone was screaming, so I told them they need to wait to see if there is a second explosion, and to stay away from the window because of the glass.... Then I started directing people how to escape. We made our way behind the C Building and library to get to the emergency exit. Then I told people to run.

[My classmate and I] were last. My classmate was on his phone, trying to talk to his family. I told him not to, that they would see him. Just as I entered, I heard gunfire behind and instantly everything changed. He went down. Everything was spinning. I went down. I was lying on the ground injured, thinking, “I am about to die,” when I thought about my mother. She has lost her other sons already. I thought, “I cannot die, I cannot do that to her, I have to do my best to live.”... People were still passing me to get to the gate. One helped me stand, but I couldn’t so I told him to just let me down. Finally, some police reached me. I told them not to pull me [because it would cause further injuries], and they got a wheelchair and got me out.⁸⁶

A. required multiple surgeries over the next year.

Anil Qasemi was also injured in the attack, and only recovered enough from his injuries to return to his studies part-time in 2017. He described how he was thrown through a window two stories up when one of the attackers had tossed a grenade into the classroom. He said:

I thought I was going to die as I lay on the grass outside.... Somehow, with a severe shrapnel wound to my head and other injuries, I managed to heave my body to a safe place until help came.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with A. (full name withheld), December 5, 2017.

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Anil Qasemi, February 14, 2018.



A medic assists an injured man following the attack on the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, August 24, 2016. © 2016 Andrew Quilty

Sajjad Haidari was also injured in the attack. He said:

We had been in a math class for about 10 minutes when I heard the sound of gunfire, then a loud explosion. Everything was shaking, there was a lot of dust, and the window glass was broken. Some students shouted, “The university has been attacked. Get out!” Our class was on the second floor. We were just getting down to the first floor when we saw the attackers had entered the building. They fired toward us, and the guards shouted, “Go back to your classrooms!” All of us thought we would die.

In the classroom we climbed out the windows to the balcony. One of the attackers was looking down from the third floor. I had one leg out the window and on the balcony. I said to myself that if they enter the class, I will jump down, but it was very high. Then the attacker on the third floor fired at me and hit me in the left arm, and I fell to the floor. Meanwhile, the attacker on the second floor was shooting at people, so I stayed in a corner

and waited until he stopped firing. I thought he had run out of bullets so I ran. Then I heard shooting, bullets hit my backpack, and I fell down on my face. The attackers left. I hid by the corner of the wall so that the attacker on the roof would not see me. Then I escaped out an exit door that had been left open.⁸⁸

Sajjad Haidari's father added that the books in his son's backpack saved his life. He required seven operations, costing his family about US\$15,000.

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Sajjad Haidari, February 14, 2018.

Recommendations

To All Insurgent Forces

- In accordance with the laws of war, cease all intentional attacks on civilians and civilian objects. Armed forces can only target military objectives, enemy combatants, or civilians directly participating in hostilities. Civilian government officials are immune from attack, like other civilians. Civilian objects such as schools, hospitals, places of worship, and homes may not be attacked unless they are at that time being used for military purposes.
- Cease all attacks that do not or cannot discriminate between civilians and combatants, or are expected to cause disproportionate harm to civilians or civilian objects. Attacking forces must take all feasible steps to minimize harm to civilians.
- Cease perfidious attacks, in which the attacker feigns protected civilian status to carry out an attack, such as using an ambulance to conceal bombs.
- Appropriately punish commanders who order or are otherwise responsible for serious laws of war violations.

To the Government of Afghanistan

- Formalize through regulation or legislation the current ad hoc system or create a new program for providing assistance to civilian victims of insurgent attacks. Assistance should not be limited to the victims of major attacks or their families, but any insurgent attack. Launch a campaign to inform the general public about the procedure for obtaining financial assistance or other support. Ensure the equitable distribution of support, and promptly investigate complaints of corruption and discrimination in the process.
- Develop and implement measures to provide psychosocial support to survivors of attacks, whether by insurgents or government and allied forces. Such services should include counseling or other support for victims of trauma.

To the United Nations

- Provide technical assistance to Afghanistan, through the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, in drafting a comprehensive victims compensation policy.

To Afghanistan's International Donors

- Support programs that provide financial and other assistance to civilian victims of attacks by all warring parties. Focus on psychosocial services as part of a broader effort to improve mental health care for all communities in Afghanistan.

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Appendix: Partial List of Insurgent Attacks That Have Killed Civilians since July 2016

2018

April 22: Bombing at a voter registration center in Kabul, killed at least 61 and injured 115. ISKP claimed responsibility.

March 23: Bombing outside Ghazi Ayub Khan Stadium, Lashkar Gah, killed at least 14 and injured 40. No group claimed responsibility.

March 21: Suicide attack on a Nowruz celebration at a Shia shrine in Kart-e Sakhi, Kabul, killed 33 and injured 65. ISKP claimed responsibility.

January 27: Suicide ambulance bomb in central Kabul, killed 103 and injured 200. Taliban claimed responsibility.

January 24: Suicide attack and gun battle at the Save the Children office in Jalalabad, killed 6 and injured 27. ISKP claimed responsibility.

January 20: Suicide attack on the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, killed at least 21 and injured 11. Taliban claimed responsibility.

2017

December 28: Suicide attack inside the Shia Tabayan cultural center in Kabul, killed 42 and injured 77. ISKP claimed responsibility.

October 20: Suicide attack inside the Imam Zaman Shia Mosque in Dasht-e Barchi, Kabul, killed 69 and injured 60. ISKP claimed responsibility.

August 25: Suicide attack inside the Imam Zaman Shia Mosque in Khair Khana, Kabul, killed 35 and injured 65. ISKP claimed responsibility.

August 1: Suicide attack on the Jawadiya Mosque in Herat, killed at least 31 and injured 65. ISKP claimed responsibility.

July 24: Suicide car bomb attack on a Ministry of Mines and Petroleum employee shuttle bus in Kart-e Seh, Kabul, killed 35 and injured 57. Taliban claimed responsibility.

June 15: Suicide bombing at the Al-Zahra Mosque in Kabul, killed 6 and wounded more than 10. ISKP claimed responsibility.

June 3: Suicide attack on a funeral of the son of a prominent political figure outside Kabul, killed 20 and wounded 87. No group claimed responsibility.

May 31: Tanker truck bomb at Zanjaq Square, central Kabul, killed an estimated 150 and injured over 491. Deadliest attack in Kabul to date. No group claimed responsibility.

March 8: Gunmen attack on the Sardar Daud Khan Military Hospital in Kabul, killed at least 48 civilians and wounded 22. ISKP claimed responsibility.

January 10: Suicide attack outside the parliament administration building in Kabul, killed 34 and injured 75. Taliban claimed responsibility.

2016

November 21: Suicide bombing at the Shia Baqir-ul Ulum Mosque in western Kabul, killed 32 and injured more than 80. ISKP claimed responsibility.

August 24: Suicide attack by gunmen on the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, killed at least 12 and injured more than 50. No group claimed responsibility.

July 23: Twin suicide bombings in Deh Mazang Square, Kabul, during a protest by the Enlightenment Movement, killed at least 85 and injured 413. ISKP claimed responsibility.



“No Safe Place”

Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Afghanistan

Since early 2016, insurgent groups in Afghanistan including the Taliban and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) have sharply escalated their attacks in Kabul and other major urban areas. Thousands of civilians have been killed and injured, at least one-third from suicide attacks. An increase in both large-scale indiscriminate attacks and targeted attacks on civilian facilities has led to a steep rise in civilian casualties.

“No Safe Place” documents the devastating impact of the rising civilian toll on victims’ families, witnesses, and members of targeted communities. Based on interviews with 45 survivors and victims’ relatives, as well as government officials, journalists, and humanitarian agency staff, the report details the sweeping and long-term consequences of attacks, including psychological trauma and severe economic hardship. Injured victims often face loss of livelihood or education, with minimal government support for physical injuries or acquired disabilities. Survivors and families describe prohibitive barriers to accessing government assistance, including corruption, opaque regulations, and discriminatory decision-making. The jump in insurgent attacks has exacerbated insecurity and fear throughout minority and other targeted communities, compounded by critical gaps in mental health services.

Human Rights Watch calls on insurgent forces to cease all attacks that intentionally target civilians or cause indiscriminate or disproportionate harm. The Afghan government should formalize a program for providing civilian victims with adequate and equitable assistance, including financial, medical, and psychosocial support. Afghanistan’s international donors should support programs that promote the needs of victims and their families, and contribute toward a broader effort to improve mental health care nationwide.

(above) Medical workers transport an injured man on a stretcher to an ambulance near the site of a truck bomb attack in Kabul, May 31, 2017.

(front cover) Afghan security personnel and residents stand near the crater left by a truck bomb attack in Kabul, May 31, 2017.

Photos © 2017 Andrew Quilty