

SOLACE GLOBAL

LATEST

TRAVEL ADVISORY





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Taliban Spring Offensive 2018

KEY POINTS

- The Afghan Taliban announced the start of their 2018 Spring Offensive, named 'Al Khandaq'.
- US forces, and their supporters, are declared to be their primary targets.
- Locations in all 34 provinces have come under attack.
- The Afghanistan Taliban have claimed control of several northern provinces as a result of the offensive.



SITUATIONAL SUMMARY

Terrorism: On 25 April, the Afghan Taliban announced the beginning of their 2018 spring offensive, the 'Al Khandaq Jihadi operations'. The planning of the Al Khandaq Jihadi operations is organised by the Military Commission of the Islamic Emirate, which acts as a central headquarters for the Taliban's guerrilla operations. The Taliban's stated objective is to claim control or actively contest at least 58 percent of Afghanistan's 407 districts by the end of the fighting season. Similar spring offensives have been a key part of the Taliban's operations since being ousted from government in late 2001.

Taliban militants argue their fighting is justified to restore their version of strict Islamic law within Afghanistan. Afghanistan Members of Parliament (MP's) have criticised the offensive, claiming it is a war against the country of Afghanistan, and Islam as a whole. The Taliban also stated that their operations are focused on killing or capturing American troops and their supporters in response to United States' (US) present strategies in Afghanistan.

The first confirmed fatalities from the offensive occurred on 29 April, from a suicide bomber in Nad-e-Ali, within the southern



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Helmand province. Further attacks in the eastern Nangarhar province saw five killed and 15 wounded. Jalalabad has reported up to 12 people wounded during a suicide bombing and a further 14 soldiers were killed in Kunduz. Twenty security personnel were killed in Tashkan, Badakhshan province with three policemen believed to have been kidnapped. Although the attacks were targeting security forces and officials, many of those injured or killed were believed to be civilians, five of which were killed in the Hoodi area of the Goshta district. Since the initial wave of violence, attacks have continued at a heightened tempo. None of those attacks reported since the start of the offensive have resulted in foreign fatalities.

A number of schools and community centres have been closed across Afghanistan following warnings issued over possible attacks and threats to voter registration centres ahead of the October 2018 parliamentary elections.

Afghan president Ghani announced an offer of peace talks in February 2018 in a bid to deter the Taliban from hostilities. The Taliban dismissed the peace overtures due to the continued presence of American and allied troops in Afghanistan. The Afghan government have announced the launch of a counter offensive to evict militants from Taliban controlled areas, and a series of clearance operations have been launched by Afghan forces.

SOLACE GLOBAL COMMENT

The Spring offensive, typically the Taliban's major operation during each year's fighting season, has seen extreme levels of violence since 2001, although the public announcement and naming of the offensive is a propaganda exercise which began only in 2016. During the 2017 offensive the Taliban was able to steadily increase its influence on the control and governance of Afghanistan. The first publicly announced offensive (Operation Omari) in 2016, stated that the aim of the spring operation was to engage in large scale attacks on enemy positions across the country. The Taliban has increased pressure on provincial capitals and launched successful assaults on major military bases during previous offensives. The 2018 offensive saw attacks across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan within 24 hours from its announcement.

Despite previous attacks on civilian targets, including the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul on 21 January 2018 the Taliban have stated that they intend to use precautionary measures to avoid harm to civilian lives and property. History, however, indicates that collateral damage is likely to remain high; a recent attack on Romanian troops in Kandahar resulted in the deaths of 11 children, and eight Afghan civilians, whilst only wounding a handful of troops. These attacks are expected to continue across Afghanistan during the coming months.

In addition, Islamic State (IS) continue to operate across Afghanistan, most recently in Kabul, resulting in the deaths of ten journalists and 19 other civilians. Attacks from other insurgent groups, such as Islamic State, are often distinct from Taleban operations, however they are believed to provide each other with assistance where local priorities align.

Following the failure of peace talks between the president and the Taliban, the Afghan government and its allies announced they will respond to increased violence with a greater use of military power, particularly given the public pronouncements of President Trump, and his increasingly aggressive cabinet. Further violence and retaliatory attacks are highly likely.

The continuing offensive will lead to an increase in violence across the country. Travellers should anticipate further attacks during this time. As demonstrated, attacks may occur in any province. Police stations, military check points, and government related buildings are most likely to be targeted, however hotels and civilian infrastructure may also be attacked.

It is possible that travel into and within the country may be suspended in the wake of these attacks or threats. The violence also underlines the risk to parliamentary and district council elections scheduled for October 2018, attacks against voters and voting centres are highly likely during this time.



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SECURITY ADVICE

HIGH ARMED CONFLICT RISK



The consistent level of attacks from the Taliban and Islamic State and their ability to target various cities is a further reminder that Afghanistan remains highly vulnerable to insurgent attacks throughout the country. Travel to Afghanistan should only be undertaken in business-critical circumstances.

If caught in an insurgent or terror attack, travellers are advised to RUN – HIDE – TELL – FIGHT. RUN – If in a location where gunfire or explosions are heard, leave the area or building by any safe and available exit immediately. HIDE – If unable to run away, find suitable cover or barricade yourself in a room. Remember to silence your phone and turn vibrate off. TELL – Inform emergency services or alert someone who is able to do it for you. Once security forces arrive, comply with their instructions and do not make any sudden movements. FIGHT – As a last resort, if confronted with a gunman, it is recommended to fight back by using the element of surprise by shouting, screaming and running fast at the attacker. If sheltered with others, convince them to do the same and rush the attacker all at once. Ensure the person entering the shelter is an attacker and not law enforcement.

Solace Global would advise clients to employ a high level of personal security when visiting Afghanistan – an armed security detail and the use of armoured vehicles should be considered as the minimum-security standard for all travel throughout the country. For certain visitors, itineraries, or locations, this level of security may need to be heightened further. Travellers should also consider the use of a safehouse or other secured accommodation. A travel tracking app with an intelligence feed will permit employers to exercise additional duty of care and allow travellers to be kept aware of the relevant changes in the security situation.



Solace Global remains available to provide the full range of Travel Risk Management services to clients. Solace Global is also able to provide comprehensive crisis management, in-country journey management, tracking, response, and evacuation services. For further details please contact +44 (0)1202 795 801 or email sgr@solaceglobal.com