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The Daily Beast

Taliban Commanders Say Kabul Attacks Show New Strategy

By Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau

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Coordinated insurgent assaults were in the works for months, leaders say.

A senior Taliban commander in Kabul boasts to The Daily Beast that Sunday's strikes against military and diplomatic targets in the Afghan capital and three eastern provinces were just a preview of the fighting season to come. "These are coordinated attacks that went just as we planned," says Qari Talha, "This is only the start of what's in store this year and next for the Americans and [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai. We will show them our ability."

Talha says the mastermind of the operation was Hajji Lala, the insurgency's shadow governor of Kabul and its eastern-front military chief. The attacks, which used suicide bombers and gunmen, had been in the works for months, according to Talha, bore striking similarities to last September's rocket and small-arms assaults on the U.S. Embassy and NATO headquarters on Sunday. Once again the guerrillas took advantage of Kabul's recent growth, this time seizing not one but two high-rise construction sites and using them as platforms for the assault. The British and German embassies came under fire, as did the Afghan Parliament and Camp Eggers, a key Coalition base nearby. A separate assault took place in the eastern part of the capital, near military bases and the main prison.

One big difference, according to Talha and other Taliban sources, was that this time the Haqqani Network did not play a significant role in the operation. Talha says all the fighters in today's assaults were commanded by Lala, who is a specialist in logistics and communications. A fierce rivalry has clearly developed between the Taliban and its supposed eastern partner in insurgency, although the notorious militia's leaders, Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin, have in the past declared their loyalty to the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar. "We want to show other groups that we too can carry out attacks in Kabul," says one Taliban commander, who declines to be identified. Nevertheless, Talha says he's hopeful that the Taliban and the Haqqanis will learn to pool their resources in the future. "With this coordination we can double of number and size of attacks across Afghanistan," says Talha.

Perhaps the most disturbing surprise of Sunday's attacks was the seeming ease with which the Taliban were able to infiltrate fighters, suicide bombers, explosives, rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons into the capital and the main towns of the three surrounding provinces. The Kabul government's security forces now number more than 300,000, and uniformed Afghans seem to be on duty everywhere you go. Nevertheless, Talha brags, the bigger the Afghan police, army, and intelligence service grow, the less effective they become, "Kabul's intelligence and police are weaker than ever, allowing us to carry out these stunning episodes," he claims.

He's not alone in that assessment. A senior Kabul-government official in eastern Paktia province tells The Daily Beast he agrees. "I fear our intelligence and security forces are becoming less coordinated while the Taliban's coordination is getting better," says the official, who requests anonymity because of the sensitivity of his comments. He says much of the problem is that the intelligence service, the police, and the army are riven by ethnic rivalries and mistrust among Pashtuns and the Tajik and Uzbek minorities. "They do not coordinate with each other," the official says. "This provides a golden opportunity for the Taliban to infiltrate and penetrate wherever and when they wish."

"I fear our intelligence and security forces are becoming less coordinated, while the Taliban's coordination is getting better," says a senior gov't official.

The Paktia official says he was shocked today when three insurgents wearing suicide vests fought their way into a building opposite the police training base in the provincial capital, Gardez, and began firing at anything that moved. About the same time in Logar province, just south of Kabul, four suicide bombers stormed the Mining Ministry's office, while two other gunmen hit a building near the offices of the provincial governor and the intelligence service. In the eastern city of Jalalabad, gunmen wearing suicide vests reportedly fought their way into the Afghan National Army's regional headquarters.

Talha says Sunday's attacks were a reflection of the insurgents' new strategy for the coming spring and summer. "We want to engage smaller numbers of well-trained fighters to make attacks on significant government, American and NATO targets," he says. "We have no problem with manpower and the capability to mount and coordinate these complex attacks." The basic idea is to stage headline-grabbing assaults on military and government targets. He says today's

attackers were -- and are -- in contact with senior Taliban leaders based in the eastern Pakistan cities of Peshawar and Quetta.

Still, those attackers could not withstand the overwhelming numbers of the Kabul government's security forces and the Coalition's troops. Any survivors among the insurgents are expected to be captured or killed within the next few hours, and the government will resume its control over what had until today been peaceful and secure neighborhoods. American, Afghan and NATO officials undoubtedly will call the Taliban assault a failed offensive. But that assertion may be small comfort to most Afghans. Already nervous about the impending withdrawal of U.S. forces over the next two years, they will now be more doubtful than ever about the Afghan security forces' ability to protect them in the future.

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