

Who is ISIS-K, the group officials blame for the Kabul airport bombings?

by [Jack Jenkins](#) in the [September 22, 2021](#) issue



In this image taken from video, people attend to a wounded man near the site of a deadly explosion outside the airport in Kabul on August 26. (AP Photo)

A horrific terrorist attack at the Kabul airport on August 26 killed at least 12 US service members and more than 60 Afghans attempting to flee the country. US officials are attributing the attack to an ISIS affiliate.

The details of the attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport and a nearby hotel are still unfolding. But Gen. Kenneth McKenzie Jr. told reporters on the day of the attack that those responsible for the twin suicide bombings and subsequent barrage of gunfire were “assessed to have been ISIS fighters” and “ISIS gunmen.” Shortly thereafter, ISIS formally claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Earlier in the day, the Associated Press and other news agencies cited unnamed US government officials who said the attacks are believed to have been carried out by a violent group known as the Islamic State Khorasan, an Islamic State affiliate also

known as “ISIS-K.”

ISIS-K was reportedly created about six years ago by disaffected members of the Taliban’s Pakistani wing and is thought to be more radical than the Taliban, which took control of Afghanistan in mid-August. The group’s violent attacks—which include dozens this year alone—have often targeted Afghanistan’s Shi’ite Muslim minority, and its actions have triggered airstrikes and counterattacks from both US forces and the Taliban.

But according to the New York Times, thousands of fighters aligned with the Taliban, ISIS-K, and al-Qaeda have poured into Afghanistan in recent months, creating a complicated dynamic between the rival groups. ISIS-K reportedly criticized the Taliban for taking control of the country, suggesting their rule was insufficiently strict.

ISIS-K’s ranks are small—it reportedly boasts around 1,500 to 2,000 fighters—but it is under new leadership: Shahab al-Muhajir, an “ambitious” new leader who is seeking to “recruit disaffected Taliban and other militants,” took over the group in June 2020, according to a United Nations report from June 2021.

Officials have repeatedly expressed pointed concerns about the group, outlining fears of a potential attack on the Kabul airport or, more specifically, those fleeing there in hopes of escaping the country. President Joe Biden mentioned the group by name two days before the attack, saying in a speech: “Every day we’re on the ground is another day that we know ISIS-K is seeking to target the airport and attack both US and allied forces and innocent civilians.”

He was echoed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken the next day, when the US Embassy also warned Americans to stay away from the airport and urged those near the perimeter to “leave immediately.”

“It’s hard to overstate the complexity and the danger of this effort,” Blinken said. “We’re operating in a hostile environment in a city and country now controlled by the Taliban with the very real possibility of an ISIS attack.” —Religion News Service