Rise of IS in Afghanistan

What is the issue?

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- A recent suicide attack carried out by the ISIS in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad has killed 19 people (mostly religious minorities).
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- Islamic State's growing presence in the country can undo Kabul's peace moves with Taliban and other insurgents.
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What is the context of the recent blast?

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- **ISIS -** The IS set up its Afghan affiliate as a South Asian outpost when its so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria came under strain in 2016.
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- Afghanistan proved to be a relatively easier terrain for the IS to recruit fighters from and occupy turf due to its deserted and remote topography.
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- When the government and the Taliban were fighting each other, the IS built a network in eastern Afghanistan and started targeting minorities.
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- Most of its previous attacks were aimed at the Shia minority, the present one was targeted at Sikhs and Hindus.
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- **Attack -** Afghanistan has a small Sikh and Hindu population totalling to about 10,000, who live concentrated in cities like Kabul and Jalalabad.
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- A bus ferrying a group of Sikhs and Hindus, who were heading to meet the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, was attacked in Jalalabad by the IS.
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- The attack killed the only Sikh candidate running for upcoming elections, which speaks volumes on the current plight of minorities in Afghanistan.
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How is the overall political situation in Afghanistan?

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- **Backdrop -** The Afghani government has been trying to pilot a peace initiative with all the armed groups in the country in recent times.
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- Taliban, which is the strongest armed group, has been responding positively although it has refused to drop arms for now.
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- Significantly, in the run-up to Id last month, the government had announced a unilateral ceasefire, which drew a truce from the Taliban.
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- **Challenge -** The government's effort to reign in armed groups faces its most formidable challenge in the eastern provinces due to the rise of IS.
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- The IS, as per its worldwide stand of not engaging with any government has refused to respond to Afghan government's outreach.
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- Contrarily, it has been increasingly attacking schools and other targets, claiming it as a response to U.S. and Afghani military operations against it.
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How does the future look?

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- Afghanistan is struck up in an overstretched civil strife for about 4 decades now, right from the days of Soviet invasion in the 1980s.
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- The war with Taliban, which controls almost of half of the country's territory, has presently reached a stalemate and peace is being explored.
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- In this context, the rise of IS might disturb the present fragile truce and force the country back to total chaos.
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- While the U.S. and Afghani forces are stepping up the offensive in the eastern provinces, the lethal potency of IS only seems to be growing.
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Source: The Hindu

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