

## Targeted and Forgotten: The Hazara Shia Community's Struggle in Afghanistan

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The Hazara Shia community has endured widespread discrimination and systematic sectarian violence since the establishment of modern Afghanistan in 1747. A long history of persecution endured by the Hazara community and their status as a vulnerable ethnic group over centuries in Afghanistan is now part of Central Asia's folklore. The Hazaras have suffered from centuries of discrimination, violence, and systemic oppression, ranging from historical atrocities under the rule of Amir Abdul Rahman to targeted attacks by the Taliban and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province. This Issue Brief examines the extent of marginalization faced by the Hazara Shia community in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime.



## INTRODUCTION

As a multi-ethnic state, Afghanistan comprises various micro-societies divided along ethnicity, language, and religious practices.<sup>1</sup> The predominant perception, which holds to a large extent, is that ethnic differences are the primary cause of conflict in the country.<sup>2</sup> The Pashtuns, constituting around 40 percent of the population, have historically held ethnic dominance, exerting significant influence over the political and military landscape of the region. Consequently, this has resulted in the marginalization of numerous minority communities. Among these communities, the Hazara population stands out as one of the largest minority groups in Afghanistan, accounting for approximately 11 percent of the total population.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Hazara Shia community has endured widespread discrimination and systematic sectarian violence since the establishment of modern Afghanistan in 1747. Notably, according to the Central Intelligence Agency, the majority of the population in Afghanistan, ranging from 84.7 to 89.7 percent, follows Sunni Islam, while Shia Muslims comprise only 10 to 15 percent.<sup>4</sup> This Issue Brief examines the extent of marginalization faced by the Hazara Shia community in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime.

## WHO ARE THE HAZARAS?

Primarily inhabiting the central highlands of Afghanistan, known as Hazarajat, the Hazara people have long been a subject of debate regarding their origins.<sup>5</sup> Various theories have been put forth by scholars in this regard. One theory, proposed by French scholar and traveller Joseph Pierre Ferrier, suggests that Hazaras are the original inhabitants of Hazarajat, having resided there since Alexander the Great.<sup>6</sup> Another theory, supported by Western scholars, posits that the Hazara

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<sup>1</sup> Amin Saikal, "Afghanistan: The Status of the Shi'ite Hazara Minority," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 1, May 2012, pp. 80-87.

<sup>2</sup> Conrad Schetter, "Ethnicity and the Political Reconstruction in Afghanistan." *Center for Development Studies*, University of Bonn, Germany, 2003, pp. 1-13, Available at [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28376/1/Schetter\\_LSERO\\_version.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28376/1/Schetter_LSERO_version.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> "South Asia State of Minorities Report 2018," *The South Asia Collective*, pp. 277-284, [www.minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SASM-Report-2018\\_e-Book-revised.pdf](http://www.minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SASM-Report-2018_e-Book-revised.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Desautels-Stein, "Rites and Rights in Afghanistan: The Hazara and the 2004 Constitution." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2005, pp. 157-179.

<sup>6</sup> J.P. Ferrier, *Caravan journeys and wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Beloochistan; with historical notices of the countries lying between Russia and India*. Second edition, 1875. Accessible at <https://archive.org/details/caravanjourneysw00ferrich>

people are descendants of Mongol invaders. American sociologist Herbert F. Schurmann further proposed that Hazaras are a blend of different races, including Tajik-Mongols and Turks-Mongols.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of their origin, it is evident that the physical features of the Hazara population have played a significant role in shaping their collective identity. The distinct Hazara phenotype has made them easily distinguishable, making assimilation into the majority cultures of Afghanistan challenging.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the Hazara community have faced years of severe discrimination in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAZARA PERSECUTION

To grasp the nature of Hazara persecution in Afghanistan, it is crucial to consider the period of Amir Abdul Rahman's kingship. Abdul Rahman assumed power in 1880 with a vision to rebuild the Afghan state based on European statehood ideals. Pursuing this objective, he deemed it necessary to subdue the traditionally independent Hazara community. However, this endeavor soon turned violent, evolving into a war for Hazara independence. Rahman declared the Hazaras as "infidels unworthy of Afghan citizenship," accusing them of rebellion, heresy, and spreading anti-Shiite sentiments and hostility throughout the country.<sup>9</sup> The conflict escalated into a genocide, as both sides mobilized fighters based on ethnic and religious affiliations. By late 1893, the Hazaras were on the brink of total defeat. Abdul Rahman ordered the enslavement of all Hazara men and women while Pashtun tribal armies united against the Hazaras, resulting in mass killings, looting, displacement, and forced subjugation. The consequences of this war led by Amir Abdul Rahman continue to reverberate. Despite bringing the entire country under strict government control, Abdul Rahman is often cited as the reason for the deep ethnic divisions embedded within the Afghan state.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Dupaigne, "Afghan Genetic Mysteries." *Human Biology*, Vol. 83, No. 6, 2011, pp. 735-744.

<sup>8</sup> Justin Desautels-Stein, "Rites and Rights in Afghanistan: The Hazara and the 2004 Constitution." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2005, pp. 157-179.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas F. Gier, "The Genocide of the Hazaras: Descendants of Genghis Khan Fight for Survival in Afghanistan and Pakistan." *American Mongol Association*, 2014, pp. 1-8.

<sup>10</sup> Niamatullah Ibrahim, "Divide and rule: state penetration in Hazarajat (Afghanistan) from the monarchy to the Taliban." *Crisis States Research Centre*, 2009, pp. 1-23.

During the Soviet Union's rule in Afghanistan, the position of the Hazaras can be argued to have improved compared to the past. While no significant Hazara organization or military commander joined the factional infighting, many local Hazara commanders established contact with the government. By the time Soviet troops withdrew from the nation and the Mujahideen government was established, the Hazaras had gained more self-confidence and assertiveness in their dealings with the central government and other ethnic groups. They demanded a significant share of power positions in the central government, official recognition of Shiite jurisprudence in their regions, and proposed a federal system with different provincial capitals.<sup>11</sup> The Hazaras also participated in the civil war under Hizb-e Wahdat in the subsequent years.<sup>12</sup>

### **HAZARAS UNDER THE TALIBAN (1996-2001)**

The rise of the Taliban brought forth Pashtun nationalism alongside it. In the initial stages of their control, the Taliban government clashed with Hizb-e Wahdat on multiple occasions. Following one such clash, the Taliban retaliated by imposing economic sanctions on the Hazarajat region, resulting in skyrocketing food prices in local Hazara markets. The region and its residents were completely cut off from Kabul. In the subsequent years, the Taliban carried out a systematic campaign targeting Hazara civilians, which can be seen as another act of genocide against the community. Thousands of civilians were killed, and women endured rape or were subjected to sexual slavery by victorious Taliban fighters.<sup>13</sup> Towards the end of the Taliban regime in 2001, the militant group demolished the ancient Hazara statues of Buddha in the Bamyan region, directly attacking the Hazaras' historical existence, culture, and infrastructure. This ideological and military campaign by the Taliban against the Hazaras can be traced back to the genocide perpetrated by Amir Abdul Rahman. Thus, Pashtun nationalism and the deep Sunni-Shia divide in Afghanistan have subjected the Hazaras to over a century of discrimination and persecution.

### **POST-2001 STATUS OF THE HAZARAS**

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 prompted the deployment of US troops to Afghanistan, leading to the swift overthrow of the Taliban regime. This instilled a glimmer of hope among the Hazara

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Afghanistan: Information on Hezb-e Wahdat*, May 27, 2003. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3f5203a34.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Niamatullah Ibrahim, "Divide and rule: state penetration in Hazarajat (Afghanistan) from the monarchy to the Taliban." *Crisis States Research Centre*, 2009, pp. 1-23.

people, who believed that the newly established government, with the support of foreign allies, would protect their rights. In principle, the Hazaras' faith in the government is justified, as the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan recognizes their tribe and several others as integral parts of the country. The constitution explicitly states that every Afghan citizen, irrespective of ethnicity or tribal affiliation, is considered an Afghan. It includes the following statement: "The nation of Afghanistan shall comprise Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkman, Baluch, Pachaie, Nuristani, Aymaq, Arab, Qirghiz, Qizilbash, Gujur, Brahwui, and other tribes. The word Afghan shall apply to every citizen of Afghanistan."<sup>14</sup> However, in practice, the government failed to ensure the security of the Hazara people. Despite their adherence to democratic practices, the Hazara community remained a frequent target of the Taliban insurgency.

### TALIBAN AND THE HAZARAS: 2010-2020

Even after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Hazara population continued to face numerous hardships. The Taliban insurgency intensified with targeted attacks on areas predominantly inhabited by Hazaras.<sup>15</sup> Schools, mosques, and other public spaces became frequent targets. One notable attack occurred in 2018 when the Hazara-populated district of Jaghori and the district center of Malestan were targeted.<sup>16</sup> These violent attacks forced many families to flee their homes due to the severity of the assaults and the government's delayed response, resulting in nearly seven thousand internally displaced people (IDPs).<sup>17</sup>

Suicide attacks were another prevalent form of violence against Hazaras. The deadliest suicide attack occurred in 2016 when Hazaras peacefully gathered at Dehmazang Square to protest the government's decision to alter the trans-regional electricity power line route. This attack claimed over 80 lives and left several hundred injured.<sup>18</sup> Another attack targeted the Shia Mosque Imam-e Zamani in western Kabul in 2017, resulting in almost a hundred casualties. In 2018, a wrestling club in Qala-e Nazer, western Kabul, was targeted, executing twin suicide attacks that caused

<sup>14</sup> The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004).

<http://www.afghanembassy.com.pl/afg/images/pliki/TheConstitution.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Mohammad Hussain Hasrat, "Over A Century Of Persecution: Massive Human Rights Violation Against Hazaras In Afghanistan Concentrated On Attacks Occurred During The National Unity Government," February 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/SR/Call/mhhasrat.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Ali Yawar Adili, Martine van Bijlert, "Taliban Attacks on Khas Uruzgan, Jaghori and Malestan (I): A New and Violent Push into Hazara Areas." *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taliban-attacks-on-khas-uruzgan-jaghori-and-malestan-i-a-new-and-violent-push-into-hazara-areas/>

<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Hussain Hasrat, "Over A Century Of Persecution: Massive Human Rights Violation Against Hazaras In Afghanistan Concentrated On Attacks Occurred During The National Unity Government" February 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/SR/Call/mhhasrat.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

approximately 130 civilian deaths.<sup>19</sup> Suicide attacks against Hazaras persisted over the years, while the government failed to take adequate measures to ensure the community's security.

Kidnappings, road blockages, and human trafficking were crimes inflicted upon the Hazara population during the National Unity Government's reign and other administrations. Though not

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province views Hazaras as apostates and uses this justification to commit crimes against the community.

as frequent, abductions of Hazara civilians were reported in various provinces. For instance, in 2015, nearly thirty Hazara civilians were abducted in Zabul Province, with seven being beheaded.<sup>20</sup> Similar abductions occurred in other provinces, including Ghor Province and along the Ghazni-Gharabagh-

Jaghori route. The Taliban also employed roadblocks to target Hazara communities, effectively restricting or banning their movement. This strategy aimed to establish political and economic dominance over this minority group. As security deteriorated, human trafficking increased in Afghanistan, aided by the Taliban's military advances. Hazaras became targets within Afghanistan's major cities and neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan.<sup>21</sup>

### ISLAMIC STATE'S WRATH: 2015-2020

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), a branch of the jihadist group Islamic State (IS) primarily active in Central and Southern Asia, has targeted Hazaras and other religious minorities through a series of violent attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. These attacks have taken place in mosques, schools, and workplaces.<sup>22</sup> The ISKP views Hazaras as apostates and uses this justification to commit crimes against the community. For instance, in October 2020, a suicide bombing near the Kawsar-e Danish education center in West Kabul resulted in the deaths of 40 civilians, with around 79 Hazara children and young adults who were students at the center injured.<sup>23</sup> Another notable attack occurred in mid-2019 at the Dubai City wedding hall in western

<sup>19</sup> "Two journalists among 20 killed in wrestling club blasts in Kabul," *CNN*, September 6, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/06/asia/kabul-attack-wrestling-intl/index.html>

<sup>20</sup> "Hazara take protests to Kabul as Afghan sectarian fears rise", *Reuters*, November 10, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-afghanistan-taliban-idCAKCN0SZ19420151110>

<sup>21</sup> See, International Relations and Defence Committee: The UK and Afghanistan, Call for Evidence: *Written Submission by the Hazara Research Collective*, September 06, 2020.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/11165/html>

<sup>22</sup> "Afghanistan: ISIS Group Targets Religious Minorities." *Human Rights Watch*, September 6, 2022, [www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities](http://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities).

<sup>23</sup> Mehdi J Hakimi, "Relentless Atrocities: The Persecution of Hazara," *Michigan Journal of International Law*, Vol. 44, 2022, pp. 1-84.

Kabul, where 91 civilians died, and more than 140 people were injured.<sup>24</sup> In August 2017, ISKP fighters targeted the Hazara-populated Mirza Olang village in the Sayyad district of Sari Pul province, resulting in a three-day massacre that primarily affected families trying to escape their homes.<sup>25</sup> Children, women, and the elderly fell victim to this attack. These examples illustrate the brutalities endured by the Hazara community under the so-called democratic governments of Afghanistan.

## PRESENT STATUS OF HAZARAS IN AFGHANISTAN

With the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan, Hazaras continue to face direct threats and systematic discrimination. The community's vulnerability is exacerbated by the lack of media coverage shedding light on their plight and the atrocities they endure. While the Taliban's spokesperson for the Interior Ministry, Saeed Khotsy, affirmed the responsibility of the Taliban

The removal of over 100 Hazara judges from Afghanistan's judicial bodies, justified by the notion that "A Hazara cannot be a judge," further highlights the systematic discrimination faced by Hazaras on a large scale.

Emirate to protect all citizens, especially religious minorities, the Taliban government has yet to take tangible actions to secure the position of Hazaras in the nation. Notably, the Hazara people hold no significant positions in the Taliban-formed government. They are absent from the Taliban's interim cabinet, provincial and district governorships, mayoral roles, and police chief positions. The continued systemic discrimination in political representation leaves the community even

more insecure. Under international pressure, two Hazara men were given symbolic positions within the Taliban government. The removal of over 100 Hazara judges from Afghanistan's judicial bodies, justified by the notion that "A Hazara cannot be a judge," further highlights the systematic discrimination faced by Hazaras on a large scale.<sup>26</sup> Most physical attacks on Hazaras, including suicide bombings, abductions/kidnappings, and shootings, are often attributed to the ISKP.

<sup>24</sup> "Afghanistan: Bomb kills 63 at wedding in Kabul", *BBC News*, August 18, 2019.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49383803>.

<sup>25</sup> "UNAMA Human Rights Special Report: Attacks on Mirza Olang, 3-5 August 2017," *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan*, August 2017.

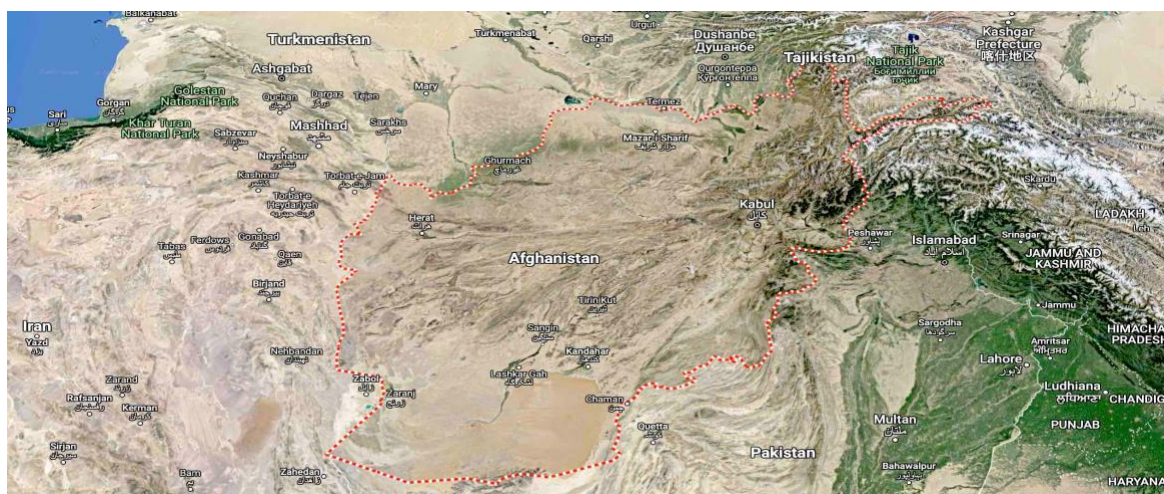
<https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/english.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Farkhondeh Akbari, "The Risks Facing Hazaras in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan," *The George Washington University*, March 2022, [www.extremism.gwu.edu/risks-facing-hazaras-taliban-ruled-afghanistan](http://www.extremism.gwu.edu/risks-facing-hazaras-taliban-ruled-afghanistan).

## CONCLUSION

A long history of persecution endured by the Hazara community and their status as a vulnerable ethnic group over centuries in Afghanistan is now part of Central Asia's folklore. The Hazaras have suffered from centuries of discrimination, violence, and systemic oppression, ranging from historical atrocities under the rule of Amir Abdul Rahman to targeted attacks by the Taliban and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province. Despite the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Hazaras continue to face threats, discrimination, and human rights abuses. With the recent return of the Taliban to power again in August 2021, the Hazaras face a significant challenge as their access to free media has been curtailed, making it difficult to gauge the extent of discrimination they currently face. The animosity between the Taliban and the Hazara community is well known. Pashtun dominance, sectarian divisions, and the rise of extremist groups have contributed to the marginalization and victimization of the Hazaras. The targeting of their religious sites, educational institutions, and public spaces underscores the deliberate efforts to suppress and oppress this minority group.

The international community has recognized the plight of the Hazaras and exerted pressure on the previous Afghan government and insurgent groups to ensure the safety and security of this vulnerable community. However, much more must be done to address the underlying issues of discrimination and sectarian violence and provide lasting solutions for the Hazara population. While the Taliban regime struggles with myriad problems and international recognition is awaited, the international community should bargain and exert more pressure on the Taliban to ensure the security and protection of the marginalized Hazara people.





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*The views expressed in this article are personal.*

Picture: Source: [REUTERS/Jorge Silva/Hazara Cemetery in Kabul, Afghanistan October 20, 2021.](#)

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