

Persecution of the Hazaras of Afghanistan

From Abdur Rahman Khan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

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The violent persecution of the Hazaras has been a constant theme in Afghanistan's history, mainly perpetrated by Pashtun rulers, a reality borne out since the history of the rule of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901) to the present day. Abdur Rahman Khan enforced the concept of Pashtunism upon the Afghans and, in particular, on the non-Pashtuns. Pashtunism entailed the superiority of the Pashtuns over other ethnic groups. Prominent scholars of Afghanistan have also described the idea of racial supremacy as a gift from God¹ and as the basis for building a strong nation-state.²

The persecution of the Hazaras has been implemented, first, in accordance with the concept of Pashtunism as imposed

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1 M. H. Kakar, *Afghanistan: A Study in International Political Development: 1880-1896*, Panjab Educational Press, Lahore, 1971, Appendix XII and XIII; Curzon of Kedleston, *Tales of Travel*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1923, pp. 69-72.

2 J. C. Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, Pall Mall Press, London, 1967, pp. 65-68.

by successive rulers, regardless of the regime system in place and its ideology. A second decisive factor has been religion, with the Hazara Shias³ being deemed ‘infidels’ by the Sunni Pashtun majority. While small communities of Sunni Hazaras inhabit the provinces of Badghis, Parwan and Panjshir,⁴ even these subsets are usually associated with the Shia faith by other Sunni groups.

Further, Hazara leaders have done little to secure the implementation of policies in favour of their co-ethnic people. Therefore, discrimination and acts of cruelty against the Hazaras have not been a prerogative of the two Taliban regimes, but rather a continuation or evolution of previous governments’ policies.

Modern Afghanistan (from 1747 to the present day) has been characterised by the dominance of the Pashtun ethnic group, which represents about 42 per cent, and the Sunni religious groups, constituting at least 85 per cent, of the population. This has often escalated into violent persecution of such minorities and their political and social marginalisation, which has had a dramatic impact on national cohesion. The Hazaras, estimated to make up around 15 per cent of the population,⁵ have been the most targeted section of Afghan society mainly because of

3 While a minority of Shia Hazaras are Ismaili Shias, the vast majority are Imami Shias. K.B. Harpviken, “The Hazaras of Afghanistan: The Thorny Path towards Political Unity, 1978-1992,” in T. Atabaki and J. O’ Kane eds., *Post-Soviet Central Asia*, Tauris, London, 1998, pp. 177-203.

4 N. Ibrahim, “The state, identity politics and ethnic boundaries in Afghanistan: The case of Sunni Hazaras,” *Nation and Nationalism*, Volume 29, Number 2, 2023, pp. 669-685.

5 This figure may not be accurate since the last national census was held in 1979. Scholars disagree on the actual figure, since such percentages range from 8% to 20%. The Pashtuns have no interest in holding a new census, which can result in a different ethnic make-up of the country. If the Hazaras were more numerous than current estimates, this would have repercussions for the Pashtun claim to power and the role of Hazaras in Afghanistan.

their adherence to the Shia confession of Islam.⁶ In recent years, the rise to power of the Taliban, coupled with the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's South Asian affiliate, the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), which has repeatedly targeted the Hazaras, has worsened an already precarious situation.

Finally, according to the Rome Statute of 2003 of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague⁷, the persecutions of the Hazaras constitute crimes against humanity under Article 7(1) (h), which states that persecution is “the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights... by reason of the identity of the group” stemming from “political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender or other grounds” and must be “committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack.” Moreover, based on the ICC's definition

...the crime of genocide is characterised by the specific intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group by killing its members or by other means: causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about

6 In addition to the Hazaras, the Shias of Afghanistan include Sayeds, Qizilbash and Farsiwan. The Hazaras are the biggest Shia group. Within the Hazaras, Twelver Shias represent the majority. They believe in twelve divinely appointed Imams after the Prophet Muhammad. Minority Shia groups include the Ismailis, who believe that Ismail, the son of the sixth Imam should have succeeded him as the seventh Imam. A.Y. Adili, “The Politics of Survival in the Face of Exclusion: Hazaras and Shia Actors under the Taliban”, *Afghanistan Analyst Network*, February 2023, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/the-politics-of-survival-in-the-face-of-exclusion-hazara-and-shia-actors-under-the-taleban/>.

7 See Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, July 17, 1998, 2187, U.N.T.S. 90. Afghanistan is a signatory of the Statute.

its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.⁸

These definitions clearly indicate that that genocide and crimes against humanity have been perpetrated against the Hazaras by different rulers in Afghanistan, at least since 1880.

The Hazaras' homeland is the so-called Hazarajat in Central Afghanistan, which includes the provinces of Daikundi and Bamyan, and several districts in the neighbouring provinces of Ghazni, Wardak, Parwan, Sar-e Pul, Samangan and Ghor. Hazaras also inhabit other areas of the country, such as Ghazni, Balkh, and Kunduz provinces, as well as the Dast-e-Barchi neighbourhood in Kabul. Their origin is debated by scholars, who have come up with different theories. A school of thought is represented by those who think that Hazaras have inhabited Afghanistan for thousands of years; while the second traces their origins back to the Mongols and Turkic invasions. Recently, Sayed Askar Mousavi concluded that the Hazaras are among the oldest inhabitants of Afghanistan and the region, and that they are a mixture of race and ethnic groups, and as such their language and tribal structure have been influenced by their various ancestors, such as Turkic and Mongols.⁹

The fact that the Hazaras' origins have been such a feature of academic debate highlights their history of exclusion from Afghan society. However, the debate over their origins should not be the central focus of academic research, but rather, as

8 International Criminal Court, "The Crimes", *How the Court works*, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/about/how-the-court-works#:~:text=First%2C%20the%20crime%20of%20genocide,conditions%20of%20life%20calculated%20to>.

9 S.A. Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: an historical, cultural, economic and political study*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1997, p. 43.

this paper demonstrates, their historical quest for social and economic justice and equal representation in the political sphere of Afghanistan.

1880 TO 1901: ABDUR RAHMAN KHAN AND HAZARA PERSECUTION AS A STATE POLICY

In 19th century Afghanistan, Hazara society mainly consisted of a feudal aristocracy and below them, farmers, herders, and artisans. The relationship between the former and the latter was based on properties as well as animals and water. Within this community, the nobility, which often identified with the leadership of the tribes, was known by titles such as khan (landlord), mir (chief of a region or tribe) and sultan (King). Hazara chiefs maintained a certain degree of autonomy thanks also to the establishment of personal militias.¹⁰ This dramatically changed with the advent of Abdur Rahman Khan to the power when Afghanistan came into existence as a geographical entity (1880-1901).¹¹ He came to power following the end of the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880). In 1878, Britain had invaded Afghanistan from India for the second time, not least because they feared the expansion of the Russian Empire into Afghanistan. The British attempt to install a friendly government in Kabul had failed and as such they tried to take control of Afghanistan. Instead, a period of greater instability ensued, and this resulted in the disintegration of the country in areas governed by local

10 N. Emadi, "The Hazaras and their role in the process of political transformation in Afghanistan", *Central Asian Survey*, Volume 16, Issue 3, 1997, pp. 365-366.

11 N. Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras and the Afghan State*, Hurst & Company, London, 2017, pp. 53-86. In 1747, however, Ahmad Shah Durrani had established Afghanistan as a modern country. At his death in 1772, the Durrani Empire included Punjab, Kashmir, Sindh and Balochistan. However, Abdur Rahman, was the first ruler who implemented the persecution of the Hazaras as a state policy. N. Ibrahimi, 2017, op. ct., pp. 25-28.

powerbrokers.¹² In fact, the British's authority was confined to major cities such as Kandahar and Kabul, as admitted by the Viceroy of India, Lord Lytton: "The range of our effective administration went no further, so that the country at large was without a government."¹³ Influential religious leaders used to incite people to conduct *jihad* (holy war) and that brought about rebellions against the British authority.

Abdur Rahman was the first ruler who succeeded in creating a strong central government in Kabul. However, to implement his strategy, he often resorted to violence against the population and particularly the Hazaras, which was coupled with the spreading of an anti-Hazara sentiment and propaganda throughout the country.¹⁴

Abdur Rahman's authoritarian rule led to internal rebellions by different ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, such as the Ghilzai and the Shinwari. In his autobiography, Abdur Rahman describes his own war on the Afghan people as a "just conflict between the civilised and generous state on one side and the uncivilised, primitive, and ignorant tribes on the other."¹⁵ Abdul Rahman justified the war against the Hazaras in these terms: "the Hazaras had raided and plundered the neighbouring

12 B. Omrani, "The Iron Amir", *History Today*, June 2014, pp. 48-53, <https://web-p-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=4866d1df-63d9-40c7-84b5-ff2d2b17656b%40redis>.

13 Ibid.

14 In fact, his politics were a mere continuation of the previous ruler's and his grandfather, Amir Dost Mohammad Khan, who had started the persecution against the religious minority in 1834. Dost Muhammad declared himself Amir ul Mumeneen (Commander of the Faithful) and waged *jihad* on the Sikhs of Punjab. What happened during Dost Mohammad's periods (1826-39 and 1843-1863) was the shifting character of violence, which started to be directed domestically, to impose his authority over all the provinces and districts of Afghanistan. N. Ibrahim, op. cit., pp. 62-63.

15 Sultan Mohamed Khan, ed. *The Life of Abdur Rahman Khan, The Amir of Afghanistan*, John Murray, London, 1900, p. 249.

subjects (of the Afghan confederacy) for about three hundred years past, and none of the kings had the power to make them absolutely peaceful.”¹⁶ Abdur Rahman waged a Sunni *jihad* against the Hazaras because he considered them to be infidels and also forced ordinary Afghans to brand them as such. The Amir then implemented a regime of terror to pacify the tribes. Families and clans who dared to oppose his authoritarian rule were killed or enslaved, while their properties were seized, and their villages and crops destroyed.¹⁷

Acts of brutality, such as the rape of Hazara women, were a typical *modus operandi* during the reign of Abdur Rahman, which the Taliban and ISK would also carry out in more recent times. Other kinds of cruelty included the creation of piles of bodies and pyramids of skulls to intimidate the population as well as the massive displacement of Hazaras to break down their unity and cohesiveness. Abdur Rahman, like the Taliban more than a century later, emphasised the importance of a centralised legal system, which would administer justice according to the principles of *Sharia*, and not to the tribal *jirga* system which had been the dominant justice system for centuries. This system also institutionalised the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and deepened the gap between Pashtuns and Hazaras. In fact, Sunni Hanafi tribunals were established in Shia dominated areas.¹⁸

The Hanafi System would constitute the legal basis of the two Taliban regimes (1996-2001 and 2021 to present), which

16 Ibid.

17 The confiscation of Hazara properties would become a state-sanctioned policy in the following decades. As a result, there is no province in Afghanistan without Pashtuns. Even historical Hazara strongholds such as Bamyan are inhabited by Pashtun tribes. Ben Acheson, *The Pashtun Tribes in Afghanistan: Wolves Among Men*, Pen and Sword Military, 2023, p. 141.

18 A. Tarzi, “Islam, Shari’a, and State Building under Abd al-Rahamn Khan”, in Nile Green ed., *Afghanistan’s Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2016, pp. 129-144.

in the Hazaras' view is prone to discrimination and persecution of non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan, as the Hazaras adhere to the Ja'fari school of jurisprudence. The impact of Abdur Rahman's personal justice system had a profound effect on the prison population, which increased from 1,500 in 1880 to 20,000 in 1896. Because of these draconian rules, prisons became overcrowded, and inmates were held in inhuman conditions. Food was purposely rationed and about 60 to 80 per cent of the prisoners died during custody, while thousands were executed to free-up space.¹⁹ Hazaras were the most targeted group also in terms of jailed people, and they would continue to be targeted and imprisoned in nefarious facilities such a Pol-e-Charkhi to the present day.²⁰

To fill his growing army, Abdur Rahman started an enforced conscription campaign which allowed him to bring the number of soldiers on active duty from 60,000 in 1880 to 100,000 in 1900.²¹ As written by Abdur Rahman in his 1900's autobiography, the main purpose of raising such a powerful and lethal force was to win the support of non-Hazaras and exacerbate tensions between Pashtuns and Hazaras to his own benefit.²²

The king promoted his personal version of Political Islam (he thought that the king of Afghanistan derived the right to rule from God and as such the Afghans had to recognise his divine authority). When coercion and religious legitimation were not effective, he caused and exploited ethnic tensions for his own benefit.²³

19 B. Omrani, *op.cit.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 M.H. Kakar, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

22 Sultan Mohamed Khan, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

23 The authoritarian rule was implemented with British financial support, which also aimed at softening his stance on the Durand Line, which would be finalised in 1893.

The concept of *jihad* would become more relevant starting from the 1980s and would be used to gather Muslims from around the world to fight against the Soviet and Western infidels in Afghanistan and the wider region. Nevertheless, earlier, between 1880 to 1901, *jihad* and central authoritarian rule were mere instruments to sow discord between tribes, while the extensive use of force and brutality led to rebellion against the state. The relevance of *jihad* is exemplified by the 1889 book, “*Taqvim al-Din*”, written by Afghan religious scholars (ulema) which stated, “The Beneficent God has made *Jihad* so firm and strong as an obligation of all believers that he who denies it becomes an infidel”.²⁴ Such a seminal book has influenced the political and military strategies of successive governments, especially in recent decades.

The Hazaras had lost some of their fertile territories and were now confined to the so-called Hazarajat area.²⁵ Its impervious and mountainous territory as well as its deep and inaccessible valleys have historically contributed to its isolation and the divisions between the different Hazara tribes and families. Moreover, these factors have also contributed to the exclusion of the Hazaras from the most important social, political, and economic developments, which have taken place in the rest of the country.²⁶

Abdur Rahman was able to unify the country, but the price paid by ordinary Afghans, and the Hazaras was too high. He

24 M. Abu Bakr, A. R. Dihlavi and M. Azim Khan, *Taqvim Al-Din*, Printing Press of the Royal House, Kabul, 1889, pp. 6-7.

25 Despite such repressive policies, this region included the vast mountainous territory between Kabul to the east, Qalat and Ghazni to the south and southwest, Herat to the west, and Afghan Turkestan to the north. Moreover, the most important roads to and from Kabul crossed the Hazarajat region. N. Ibrahim, op cit., p. 65.

26 R. L. Canfield, “New Trends among the Hazaras: From The Amity of Wolves to The Practice of Brotherhood”, *Iranian Studies*, Volume 37, Number 2, 2004, pp. 241-262.

boasted about killing 100,000 civilians, and that alone is a proof of genocide committed against the Hazaras. More than 50 per cent of the male Hazara population [reportedly] died as a direct or indirect result of the conflicts. Sexual violence, rape, and forced marriages were committed in a widespread manner, with thousands of women under duress married to Pashtuns in a deliberate effort to destroy social and religious hierarchies of Hazara community.²⁷ However, his impact was not noted in the economic and educational sectors.

The peak of violence against the Hazaras took place during the 1891-1893 war when the forces of Abdur Rahman managed to coalesce most of the Pashtun tribes under his army. This was likely the beginning of the Hazaras' enslavement and persecution, which has continued throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Moreover, Abdur Rahman's enslavement of the Hazaras, forced thousands of them to flee their homeland and seek refuge mainly in Iran and Pakistan.²⁸ The use of extreme force and cruelty resulted in a collective rebellion against the state, unifying different Hazara tribes, which constituted an unprecedented event since they had been known for their internal feuds and lack of a common strategy. However, internal divisions persisted and were exploited by Abdur Rahman. In particular, the sellout Hazara leaders, who were offered opportunities to play minor roles in the state machinery,

27 "...more than fifty percent of the male Hazara population [reportedly] died as a direct or indirect result of the conflicts." Sexual violence, rape, and forced marriages were committed in a widespread manner, with "[t]housands of women... forcibly married to Pashtuns in a deliberate attempt to destroy Hazara social and religious hierarchies." J. L. Lee, *Afghanistan: A History From 1260 to the Present*, Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 2018, p. 399.

28 Forced migration of Hazaras to neighbouring countries, mainly to Iran, would be a recurrence in the Hazaras' history throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

contributed to the isolation of the ordinary Hazaras, who lived as slaves²⁹ until the end of the Third Anglo-Afghan War and the subsequent independence of Afghanistan in 1919, declared by King Amanullah (1919-1929).

1901 TO 1973: A CONTINUATION OF DISCRIMINATORY POLICIES

The centralised state Abdur Rahman left behind became the model, successive kings and rulers tried to maintain. Repressive policies against and social-political isolation of the Hazaras continued, albeit these rarely constituted state policy until the emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s.

Amanullah Khan, Abdur Rahman's son, penned a new constitution in 1923, which abolished slavery and introduced a body of laws to modernise the country. The Hazaras strongly supported his government and policies even when Amanullah was ousted by a pro-British ruler, Habibullah, in 1929. The latter's rule was short-lived (just 9 months) since General Mohammad Nadir Shah ousted and executed him, declaring himself to be the new king.³⁰ The enlightened rule of Amanullah abruptly came to an end, since the new king reintroduced anti-Hazara policies and embarked on a 'Pashtunisation' campaign meant to cancel the Hazaras' identity by introducing Pashtu culture, tradition, and language in the Hazarajat region. In particular, Nadir Shah encouraged the Pashtun Kuchi nomads to relocate to the Hazaras' homeland to counterbalance the power and influence of the majority Hazara residents. This

29 People arrested were charged with 'treason against the state and the Hazara peoples. Around 8000 women and girls were forced to work in factories in Kabul, while other were given to soldiers as sex slaves. Most of the men were executed in Kabul. This is another indication of a clear strategy to commit genocide and gendered difference in persecuting men and women. F. M. Mughul, *Sirajut Tawarikh*, Matba'a e Horofi, Kabul, 1912, Vol. 2, pp. 944-945 and 975.

30 H. Emadi, op. cit.

policy had been first implemented by Abdur Rahman Khan in the 1890s, by granting the Kuchis control over summer pastures and markets in the Hazarajat region.³¹

The draconian measures implemented by Nadir Shah were also directed at Hazara intellectuals. This constituted a fatal blow to the Hazaras' self-confidence and trust in their leadership, whose activities in the wider region had constituted a source of inspiration for ordinary people. The brutality and discriminatory policies of the king caused a young Hazara intellectual, Abdul Khaliq, to kill Nadir Shah in November 1933. Zahir Shah was appointed as the next king, and he personally ordered the torture and execution of Khaliq.

Zahir Shah, who ruled Afghanistan from 1933 to 1973, is considered among the most moderate and enlightened rulers of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, he continued the 'Pashtunisation' campaign and resorted to the extreme use of force and torture against political opponents and innocent civilians.³² As cited in Hafizullah Ehmadi (1997), the 'Pashtunisation' campaign could be compared to the Nazification campaign of Hitler in the period leading up to World War II, which was aimed at the creation of an Aryan race. In this regard, the Zahir administration went so far as to publish fictitious literature to sustain their argument that Pashtuns were a superior race and culture.³³ Moreover, Hazaras who had settled down in areas inhabited by tolerant communities of other groups, ended up in

31 K. Ferdinand, "Nomad Expansion and Commerce in Afghanistan", *Folk*, Volume 4 1962, pp. 123-159.

32 Ibid.

33 This policy is exemplified by books such as *Putra Khazana* (The Hidden Treasure), which was written in 1960 by a pro-government Pashtun nationalist historian, Abdul Hay Habibi. The book is a collection of Pashtun heroes' gestures and literary works in the one hundred years that followed the death of Prophet Muhammad, as well as a demonstration of Pashtun influence on the Hazara people throughout history.

Hazara elders marrying non-Hazaras women and in doing so, depriving their heirs of their identity. This has had an impact on today's Afghanistan, in which Hazaras of mixed descent try to hide their identity for their own safety, or ignore their Hazara lineage altogether.

In the mid-1930s, Zahir Shah also started a cultural revolution by declaring Pashto as the official language of government and educational institutions.³⁴ He went as far as to embark on a 40-year attempt to rewrite the history of Afghanistan, based on the concept of Pashtunism and the greater body of thought and values entrenched in Pashto literature.³⁵

To minimise the political and social influence of the Hazaras, Zahir Shah implemented an unprecedented administrative reform which divided the Hazarajat region into five provinces; Bamiyan, Ghazni, Ghor, Uruzgan and Wardak, which to this date are inhabited by the Hazaras. The law was also aimed to decrease the amount of international support destined to the Hazarajat and reduce the number of Hazaras seats within the *Wolesi Jirga* (or House of the People of the Afghan Parliament).

To make matters worse for ordinary Hazaras, their own tribal chiefs and politicians used their influence and authority to make Hazara farmers' lives miserable through the imposition of an agricultural and economic system that resulted in increased poverty, and social isolation. The occurrence of natural disasters, such as drought, would then result in starvation and mass death among Hazaras in rural areas.

34 Elisabeth Leake, "Constitutions and Modernity in Post-Colonial Afghanistan: Ethnolinguistic Nationalism and the Making of an Afghan Nation-State", *Law and History Review*, Volume 41, 2023, pp. 295-315.

35 M.M.S. Farhang, *Afghanistan dar Panj Qarn-e Akhir*, Volume 3, 1992, Isma'iliyan Publisher, Qom. pp. 329-330.

1973 TO 2001: INTERNAL DIVISIONS, ATTEMPTS AT POLITICAL UNITY AND PERSECUTION

In 1973, Zahir Shah was ousted by his cousin, Mohammad Daoud, ushering in six years of political instability, which eventually led to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. In 1978, the communist party of Afghanistan, the so-called People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) formed the government that would rule Afghanistan until 1992, with the financial and military support of the Soviet Union. The 1978-1992 period was characterised by profound political changes, both at the national level and within Hazara society. The weakness of the government in Kabul forced the Hazaras to take action to protect themselves. In 1979, they established the *Shura-e-Inqilab-Ittifaq-e-Islami* (Council of the Islamic Revolutionary Alliance) in which Hazara religious leaders (Sayyeds, Sheikhs and Mirs) played a major role.³⁶ The *Shura* was effective in providing security in 1980 and 1981. But later, as the Soviets focused their military operations outside the Hazarajat region, the threat proved to be exaggerated and, therefore, the demands in terms of taxes and conscription were not justified. This eventually eroded popular support and created splits within the *Shura-e-Inqilab-Ittifaq-e-Islami*. Differences among the religious figures became more frequent, which led to the emergence of the more radical elements and eventually the outbreak of a civil war in Hazarajat in 1982, which would last till 1984. The conflict led to the ascendance of the *sheikhs*, the Shia trained clergy,³⁷ who were seen as trustworthy religious figures, as opposed to the untrained *sayyeds*. The fact that the *jihad* against the Soviets was mainly fought outside Hazarajat

36 In neighbouring Iran, the Islamic Revolution was being implemented and that boosted their credibility.

37 These elements were emboldened and inspired by the Iranian Revolution and had studied in Najaf, Iran, under Ayatollah Khomeini.

and the growing divisions among Shia leaders were decisive factors in the outbreak of the war, which eventually resulted in thousands of victims. Once again, the vested interests of sub-groups prevailed over those of the Hazara nation.

In February 1989, concomitant to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan hosted a convention of the Afghan Sunni parties to decide the future of Afghanistan. Shias were left out and no role was granted to the Hazaras in the future interim government. The negotiations led to the creation of a government led by a representative of the PDPA, Mohammad Najibullah. This situation convinced the Hazara political and tribal leaders that it was time to create a single party, representing the totality of the Hazara nation. Such a political coalition was established in 1989, under the name of *Hezb-e-Wahdat-e-Islami Afghanistan* (Party of Islamic Unity of Afghanistan).³⁸ On 28 April 1992, after 3 years of political tensions between the different political parties, the PDPA executive collapsed, paving the way for further instability and the Taliban's rise to power. In the period between 1989 and 1992, about 1 million people were killed and many more fled the country, heading mainly towards Pakistan and Iran.³⁹ Most of the Hazaras sought refuge in Iran, where they would be safe from persecution by Pashtuns.

The groups responsible for the political instability of the period immediately after the Soviet withdrawal, were unable and unwilling to reach a consensus on the form of government and the future of Afghanistan and this, despite the diplomatic efforts of Iran and Pakistan,⁴⁰ would result in a bloody civil war. The war would cause thousands of civilian deaths and would

38 N. Ibrahimi, op. cit., pp. 181-187.

39 N. A. Khalidi, "Afghanistan: Demographic consequences of war, 1978-1987", *Central Asian Survey*, Volume 10, Number 3, 1991, pp. 101-126.

40 Since the 1970s, the two countries had been hosting Islamists in opposition to the communist regime in Afghanistan.

be instrumental in the emergence of the Taliban movement in Kandahar in 1994.

Despite the creations of a unified political party, the Hazaras remained weak and they were being targeted by the Hizb-e-Wahdat's (HeW's) political and ethnic rivals. In this regard, the most nefarious event was the so-called February 1993 Afshar Massacre by *mujahedeen* groups in the Afshar area of West Kabul, during the fighting to take over the capital, between rival *mujahedeen* factions. Officially, hundreds of Hazaras were killed by Pashtun groups and even by Tajik units under the command of Ahmad Shah Massoud and President Burhanuddin Rabbani. However, the role played by rogue Hazara elements or traitors in the massacre should not be ruled out. In 1995, Hazara contingents that had sought refuge in the Hazarajat region were able to defeat Massoud's troops when they later launched an offensive on the Hazara homeland.⁴¹

Supported financially and militarily by state (mainly Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) and non-state actors, the Taliban conquered the south of Afghanistan and entered Kabul in September 1996. However, they met with a stronger than expected opposition in the northern provinces where they suffered several setbacks, also at the hands of local Hazaras.⁴² The reverses suffered by the Taliban in their quest to conquer the northern provinces would trigger brutal measures, such as economic blockades and mass-killings of Hazaras, in the following months and years.⁴³

41 F. Adelhkah, "War and State (Re)Construction in Afghanistan: Conflicts of Tradition or Conflicts of Development?", in I. Bono and B. Hibou eds., *Development As a Battlefield*, Brill Nijhoff, Leiden, 2017, pp. 137-162.

42 I. Singh, "Exploring issues of violence within the recent context of the Hazarajat, Afghanistan", *Central Asian Survey*, Volume 20, Number 2, 2001, pp. 195-227.

43 Human Rights Watch "Afghanistan: The Massacre in Mazar-I Sharif", Volume 10, Number 7 (c), 1998, p. 5.

On August 8, 1998, the Taliban carried out an even bloodier mass-killing of Hazaras at Mazar-e-Sharif. In a mission to terrorise the population, the Taliban killed between 2,000 and 8,000 civilians, and raped and abducted hundreds of women and children. The regime created mass graves to hide the corpses to prevent reporters from spreading the news of their genocide. Still, information coming from within Afghanistan would reveal the extent of their violence to the world and the fact that such policy was part and parcel of the overarching Taliban strategy.⁴⁴

Following the killing of the prominent Hazara leader Abdul Ali Mazari in 1995, HeW split into two parties: one, headed by Karim Khalili from Wardak province, who joined the Northern Alliance of Ahmad Shah Massoud; and the other by Mohamed Akbari, originally from Bamyan province, allied with the Taliban as well as Iran. The splinter factions fought against each other until the fall of Hazarajat into Taliban's hands in 1998. Akbari and his inner circle were appointed as rulers of this region, while Khalili and his troops continued to fight against the Taliban until May 1999, when they were defeated in a battle to conquer Bamyan. However, such a setback did not prevent Khalili from attempting to conquer Bamyan's Yakawlang district in 2001. This last offensive also resulted in a Taliban victory and widespread bloodshed, destruction, and displacement of thousands of Hazaras and Tajiks.⁴⁵ Once

44 The Taliban didn't stop at Mazar-e-Sharif. One year later, in May 1999, after capturing the province of Bamyan, they killed and abducted hundreds of Hazaras. This was accompanied by the destruction of Hazara properties and land, and the burning of 200 homes. They eventually forced survivors to relocate to other areas or countries, a pattern already seen in previous periods. Human Rights Watch, "Massacres of Hazaras in Afghanistan", *Human Rights Watch*, February 19, 2001, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2001/02/01/massacres-hazaras-afghanistan>.

45 F. Adelhah, op. cit., pp. 137-162.

again, the efforts and bravery of Hazaras fighting against an oppressive regime were thwarted by the Hazaras' internal divisions and lack of a common strategy. This also contradicted the HeW's political manifesto, which emphasised the need for unity and for a single political strategy for the Hazaras.

During their first regime, the Taliban, reintroduced a policy of enforced displacement, which had first been implemented by Abdur Rahman. After forcing Hazaras to relocate to other provinces or countries, the Taliban encouraged Pashtun Kuchis to take ownership of Hazara lands. To add insult to injury, the Kuchis would demand a compensation from the Hazaras for the unlawful use of their lands.⁴⁶ Such expropriation has been a constant theme in the repressive policies of various Pashtun rulers, including the Taliban.

The Taliban's brainchild of cruelty towards the Hazaras also envisaged measures designed to starve the population by preventing humanitarian aid from reaching their cities and villages. This was coupled with the destruction of runways and blockading of roads, to make transfers of food almost impossible. The most affected by the blockade were small farmers and landowners living in mountainous areas, who were already experiencing chronic malnutrition.⁴⁷ Because of the Taliban blockade, they were forced to eat grass, which brought numerous health problems and caused a high number of deaths.⁴⁸ Overall, this tragic outcome was the Taliban's goal and an act of retaliation for the defeat suffered some months earlier, in

46 Amnesty International, "Afghanistan: The Human Rights of Minorities", 14 November, 1999, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa110141999en.pdf>.

47 I. Singh, 2001, op. cit.

48 D. Filkins, "Afghans Starve in Siege From Within", *The Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1998, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-may-08-mn-47605-story.html>.

their attempt to gain influence in northern Afghanistan. Once again, this brutality demonstrated genocidal intent.

2001 TO 2019: REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENTS AS MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the USA, and its subsequent military intervention in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, the Taliban moved to their safe havens in the then Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. Capitalising on the US and NATO presence in Afghanistan, the Hazaras reached out to Karim Khalili, who would be appointed as Second Vice President in the first and second Hamid Karzai administrations (2004-2014).

The first elected Afghan government was the outcome of a three-year long period of negotiations by the International Community with Afghan parties, which had started with the Bonn Conference in December 2001. The event was organised under the aegis of the United Nations (UN) and culminated in the Bonn Agreement – a roadmap for the implementation of a “broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government.”⁴⁹

Four major Afghan political parties took part in the Bonn Conference, but the Taliban and other Pashtun coalitions were excluded from the negotiations. In particular, Afghanistan was represented by: the Rome Group, an Afghan diaspora organisation, which had its main office in Rome and was made up of loyalists to Zahir Shah; the Cyprus Group, a less numerous diaspora living in Cyprus and headed by Humayun Jarir;⁵⁰ the Peshawar Group, attending the meeting with its

49 Quoted in N. Ibrahimi, 2017, op. cit.

50 Zahir Shah was the king who had been ousted in 1973 and had been living in the Italian capital since. Jarir was a prominent member of Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin and son-in-law of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, also known as ‘The Butcher of Kabul’ due to his acts of brutality and shelling of the Afghan

leader, Ishaq Gailani; and the United Front, a coalition of political figures who took over the country after the fall of the Taliban regime. The Popalzai Durrani Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, who was a member of the *Jabh-e-Nijat-e-Milli*, was appointed as Chairman of the Interim Administration. Of note, two Hazaras were chosen to be Vice-Chairmen (Sima Samar and Mohammad Mohaqqueq) along with one Tajik, one Uzbek and one Pashtun.⁵¹ Karzai's tenure would be extended during the June 2002 *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council), for another 18 months.

The interim government included five Hazaras, among others; namely Sima Samar, also in charge of Women's Affairs; Mohammad Mohaqqueq, who was appointed as Planning Minister; Sayed Mustafa Kazemi, Commerce Minister; Sayyed Hussain Anwari, Agriculture Minister; and Sultan Hamid Sultan, Transportation Minister.

In 2003, the Karzai interim administration ratified the Rome Statute of the ICC in the Hague, which established four core international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. Despite that, Hazaras as well as non-Pashtun groups and religious minorities have been persecuted since, mainly by the Taliban, which never recognised the elected governments, between 2004 and 2021, as the legitimate governments of Afghanistan.⁵²

The new Afghan constitution was introduced in 2004 and its drafters adopted an ambiguous stance on ethnicity. They listed 16 different ethnic groups as an integral part of the country, while Dari and Pashto were declared official languages. This did not translate into a discrimination against provincial

capital, which killed thousands of innocent civilians, during the civil war of the 1990s.

51 N. Ibrahim, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

52 However, widespread VHRs has always been perpetrated in Afghanistan also by the non-Pashtuns, sometimes due to internal feuds and power.

languages, which had been previously ignored, since they were separately recognised as local languages. Moreover, the constitution clearly stated that the President could belong to any ethnic group and banned political parties based exclusively on ethnicity. The President would share his power with two vice-presidents from two different ethnic groups. This helped create a perception of equal ethnic representation, but the mark left by vice-presidents on Afghanistan's internal and foreign policy, between 2004 and 2021, was all but relevant.⁵³

However, the unwritten law which stipulated that the President would be drawn from the Pashtuns continued to influence Afghan political life and confirmed a well-established tradition of Pashtun rulers. The US and NATO partners, as the British had done in the 19th century, indirectly supported Pashtun candidates, likely because they were considered stronger than candidates belonging to non-Pashtun groups and, as such, capable of maintaining political stability.⁵⁴ Inevitably, the ambiguity towards ethnicity would exacerbate tensions between different groups and permitted the mushrooming of political parties based on ethnic affiliation. The governments which were formed in the post-Taliban period were ethnically inclusive and this allowed the Hazaras to run ministries and government bodies. But, once again, the Hazaras would be the most discriminated against, by political rivals, and the most targeted by the Taliban and, after 2015, by ISK.

In 2009, HeW fragmented into four smaller groups, which were representative of different Hazara clans and interests.⁵⁵

53 N. Ibrahimi, op. cit., p. 218.

54 Historically, Pashtun rulers have been also supported by Pakistan.

55 In particular, Khalili's own faction was renamed as *HeW-Islami-ye Afghanistan* (Afghanistan Islamic Unity Party); Mohaqqeq created the *Hezb-e-Wahdat-e Eslami-ye Mardom-e Afghanistan* (Afghanistan People's Islamic Unity Party); Muhammad Akbari funded *Hezb-e-Wahdat Milli*

Each group claimed it was the legitimate successor of HeW, but the internal struggle would eventually weaken the party. Two of its most influential leaders, Mohaqqeq and Khalili, had already been fighting for supremacy within the party.⁵⁶ As aptly stated by Amiri in 2004, “each rival party under the name of Wahdat is a cloak sewn to fit the size of the main contenders of the political leadership of the Hazaras.”⁵⁷ The history of internal clashes repeated itself and proved detrimental to the Hazaras’ ambitions of achieving their political, social, and economic goals.

Karzai became the elected President of Afghanistan in 2004 and was re-confirmed as President in 2009, ruling Afghanistan until 2014, immediately before the downsizing of the NATO Coalition in Afghanistan which, as of January 2015, changed denomination from International Security Assistance Force,

Afghanistan (Afghanistan Islamic and National Unity Party); and HeW *Islami Millat Afghanistan*, led by Qurban Ali Erfani. N. Ibrahim, “The Dissipation of Political Capital among Afghanistan’s Hazaras: 2001-2009”, *Crisis State Research Center*, June 2009, 2023, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csdc-working-papers-phase-two/wp51.2-dissipation-of-political-capital.pdf>.

In 2013, in the period leading up to the 2014 elections, Akbari established a front, which consisted of three smaller Hazara parties. He was renowned for his political dwindling since he first supported the Pashtun candidate, Zalmay Rassul, but then parted with Abdullah in both the first round and the run-off. Abasin Zaheer, “4-party alliance set up to push for fair polls”, *Pajhwok*, August 20, 2013, <https://pajhwok.com/2013/08/20/4-party-alliance-set-push-fair-polls/>.

56 Khalili’s power base was located in the Hazarajat region and in the Herat province, while Mohaqqeq was influential in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif. T. Ruttig, “Afghanistan’s Paradoxical Political Party System”, *Afghanistan Analyst Network*, May 6, 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/special-reports/outside-inside-afghanistans-paradoxical-political-party-system-2001-16/>.

57 A. Amiri, 2004. “*Hizb-e Wahdat dar qiafe jaded-e a’an*” (The New Face of Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan), published on various weblogs in Kabul.

tasked with combat duties, to Resolute Support Mission, whose main task was to ‘Train, Advise and Assist’ the still underdeveloped Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

The 2004 Presidential elections confirmed that the country was still deeply divided along ethnic lines, as Karzai attracted the Pashtun votes, while the three opponents Mohaqqueq (Hazara), Yonis Qanuni (Tajik) and Abdul Rashid Dostum (Uzbek), were chosen mostly by their co-ethnic voters.

In the 2009 Presidential elections, Afghan society appeared to be more evolved and politically savvy. Each presidential candidate formed a ticket consisting of two vice-presidential candidates, who belonged to a different ethnic group from the presidential candidate. This strategy aimed at attracting voters from different areas and at reaching out to at least another two ethnic minorities. As far as the Hazaras were concerned, this would also lead to a further fragmentation of their vote, and to an overlooking of the much-needed reforms in their territories or neighbourhoods (i.e., Dasht-e-Barchi in Kabul, as noted by Afghanistan scholar, Melissa Kerr Chioventa⁵⁸). This issue is also exemplified by the political dynamics in the period leading up to election day. Karzai, for example, despite getting the support of influential Hazara leaders such as Khalili, Mohaqqueq, and Sadiq Modabbir, got an almost equal percentage of votes as another influential Hazara technocrat, Bashardost, who had never been familiar with the Hazaras’ issues. This candidate had rarely visited the Hazarajat and had previously criticised the strong ethnic sentiment prevalent among all the social sectors. Karzai’s presidential ticket suffered a big humiliation in the Hazaras’ stronghold of Daikundi province. Bashardost

58 M.K. Chioventa, “Discursive Placemaking And Acts Of Violence: The Dasht-e Barchi Neighborhood Of Kabul, Afghanistan”, *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, Volume 48, No. 1/2, pp. 13-49.

won with a 62.3 per cent consensus, while Karzai and his Hazara allies got 28.4 per cent of the votes.⁵⁹ This demonstrated that the Hazaras did not believe that their leaders, who were running along Karzai, would exert enough influence to impose their authority once they were elected.

The lack of reforms in favour of the Hazaras' middle and lower classes, between 2004 and 2009, also played a role in the defeat of the Karzai ticket in Hazarajat. This may have contributed to the prevailing sentiment of Karzai's running mates as solely focused on protecting their own vested interests. Conversely, Bashardost who, throughout his campaign, had been an outspoken critic of the corrupt ruling class, won most of the votes. Overall, the relevance of ethnic bonds in the south allowed the Karzai's alliance to get a landslide victory in Kandahar both in 2004 (95.9 per cent) and 2009 (82.2 per cent).⁶⁰ Such an overwhelming consensus for Karzai is even more relevant if we factor in the criticism that Pashtuns protested in the south, following his decision to choose Marshal Fahim Khan, a Tajik powerbroker, and a Hazara, as running mates.⁶¹

Despite the progress of the last decades in terms of education, reliance on formal political power rather than tradition informal bodies such as *jirgas* and local justice systems, and interethnic marriages (more practised in the north between Uzbeks and Tajiks), as well as a decreased ethnic consciousness, the 2009 election's pattern confirmed the centrality of ethnicity in Afghanistan. This factor explains why

59 A. Sahar, "Ethnicizing Masses in Post-Bonn Afghanistan: The Case of the 2004 and 2009 Presidential Elections", *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Volume 22, Number 3, 2014, pp. 289-314.

60 At the time when another Pashtun candidate, the future president Ashraf Ghani (2014-2021) was able to gain 6.5 per cent of the Pashtun votes in Kandahar. *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*

Mohaqqeq, who had won an overwhelming majority in 2004 (83 per cent) in Bamyan, Daikundi and Ghazni, was humiliated by Bashardost in the first two of these provinces and obtained a draw with Karzai in Ghazni. Mohaqqeq did not perform well five years later when he sided with Karzai, who had promised him five Ministries. Mohaqqeq, along with his fellow Khalili, the Hazara leader, started promoting their ticket, but the factors outlined above, as well as the Hazara ethnicity, played a bigger role and awarded victory to Bashardost. The winner in Hazarajat did not obtain a good result in the north, but performed quite well in Kabul (13 per cent) where he got the support of the local Hazaras. Yet, a large segment of the Hazaras voted for Abdullah Abdullah because they deem him more aligned to their positions than Mohaqqeq and Karzai. This demonstrated that Afghans were willing to shifting sides, voting for a Tajik leader who had promised them social reforms.⁶² Abdullah eventually lost to Karzai, who was re-elected after accusations of widespread fraud.⁶³

In 2014, after 10 years of Karzai's administration, which was characterised by a type of governance more in line with the historical Afghan tradition of previous governments, such as clientelism and heavy reliance on tribal customs, 12 candidates decided to run for president.⁶⁴ Abdullah was the winner with 45 per cent of the votes, while the Pashtun candidate, Ashraf Ghani, lagged behind with 35 per cent of the votes. The run-off, held in June 2014, reversed the first-round result and Ghani, after more than three months of reciprocal accusations of fraud, was

62 Ibid.

63 Cheragh Ali Cheragh, a Hazara surgeon from Kabul, was one of the two Abdullah running mates.

64 This inevitably contributed to the fragmentation of votes among such a high number of candidates and made it impossible for any of them to reach the required majority to be appointed as president following the first round.

elected President, while the US and the United Nations, having acknowledged the likelihood of irregularities in the electoral process, created an *ad hoc* position for Abdullah, who was appointed Chief Executive Officer (CEO).⁶⁵ The two leaders would then create the National Unity Government (NUG) which included Sarwar Danesh, who acted as second vice-president,⁶⁶ and Mohaqeq who remained politically active as second vice CEO.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the NUG proved to be weak and ineffective due to deep divisions between Ghani and Abdullah and their respective groups.⁶⁸ The Hazaras paid a heavy price in terms of rights and security and blamed the NUG and President Ghani for his collusion with powerful tribal leaders and powerbrokers, and for not protecting them.⁶⁹

65 Abdullah voters mainly came from the Tajiks and Hazaras, while Ghani was chosen by Pashtuns and Uzbeks. The Uzbek areas were the stronghold of Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ghani's first vice president. Ghani as a 'capable technocrat' may have been the ideal candidate for educated Hazaras, but his 'frame of communication' did not win the hearts and minds of rural Hazaras. This played into the hands of Abdullah who proved more appealing for the Hazarajat's peasants, even though Ghani had promised to implement reform in their favour. N. Ibrahim, "Framing ethnicity under conditions of uncertainty: The case of Hazaras during Afghanistan's 2014 presidential elections", *Conflict, Security and Development*, Volume 17, Number 6, 2016, pp. 635-652.

66 Danesh stepped in as Ghani's Hazara running mate, since Khalili could not run for a third mandate as per the 2004 Constitution.

67 Bamyan and Daikundi were still the main power bases of the two most influential Hazara leaders, Khalili who decided to support Ghani and Mohaqeq.

68 This is exemplified by the negative role played by Dostum who, in his capacity as first vice president, never worked in the interest of the NUG, becoming instead a liability for President Ghani. Dostum became a problem also for his former Northern Alliance partners, including the Hazaras.

69 Barnett. R. Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know*, OUP, USA, 2020, pp. 265-266.

The contested 2014 election gave strength to Hazara youth movements, which had first emerged in the years immediately after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. They strongly criticised the Ghani administration on the lack of social reforms, a sense of injustice and of being marginalised, both by the executive and the International Community. Three main movements epitomise the Hazaras' plight for reforms and safety: the Tabassum Movement,⁷⁰ the Enlightenment Movement,⁷¹ and the Uprising for Change.⁷² Such groups, which included representatives of other ethnic groups, were able to organise rallies throughout the country, but their lack of organisation and of political backing by co-ethnic leaders were among the main factors for their unsuccessful campaign and eventual demise. The difficult coexistence of different ethnic groups and their diverging agendas also contributed to their failure.⁷³

70 The Tabassum Movement was created in 2015, following the killing of 7 Hazaras in the province of Zabul in November 2015. It was named after a 9-year-old girl who was killed, along with her parents, in the incident. The bodies of the victims were transferred to Kabul, where their coffins were shown in front of the Presidential Palace. A huge crowd, made up of representatives of all ethnic groups, gathered to protest against the government, mainly for lack of security and social reforms. S. Bose et al., "Youth Protest Movements in Afghanistan" *United States Institute of Peace*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/02/youth-protest-movements-afghanistan>.

71 The Enlightenment Movement (*Junbesh-e-Roshnay*), was mainly active in 2016 and 2017. It opposed the rerouting of the Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan energy project from Hazara-dominated territories to the northern provinces through the Salang Pass. Such a decision would deprive the Hazaras of social and economic benefits. On 23 July 2016, ISK attacked a rally of Hazaras who were protesting the government decision, killing around 80 innocent people. S. Bose et al., 2019, op. cit.

72 The Uprising for Change (*Junbesh-e-Rashtakhiz-e-Taghir*) came into existence to protest a wave of attacks against the Hazaras in the spring and summer of 2017. S. Bose et al. op. cit.

73 Ibid.

To make matters worse, in early 2015, the local branch of ISIS, ISK emerged in the areas straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. ISK contested the Taliban as an insurgent group, as well as on their legitimacy to rule Afghanistan.⁷⁴ The other distinctive mark of ISK propaganda and insurgency has been the targeting of Hazaras throughout the country. Particularly, in 2017 and 2018, the Hazaras suffered from a series of attacks in Kabul and other major cities, coinciding with the period of the biggest influence and expansion of the group.⁷⁵ 2019 and the first half of 2020 were characterised by a dramatic reduction in ISK's attacks, largely due to an increase in the efficacy of the ANSF's operations against the group, which were supported by US's airpower.

Despite the failure of his government,⁷⁶ Ghani ran again for Presidency in 2019. This time around, he chose Amrullah Saleh, an influential Tajik, as his running mate. Ghani's

74 A. Jadoon et al., "The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan", *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 15, Number 1, 2022, pp. 1-23.

75 Initially, ISK's main area of operations was Nangarhar (2015). Then it expanded into other provinces in the following years. Between 2015 and 2019, ISK was responsible for 4,900 casualties in Kabul (3,900) and Jalalabad (1,000) alone. The vast majority of ISK' victims were Hazaras who were predominantly targeted by suicide attacks. In the same time period, ISK attacks in Pakistan caused 2,073 casualties, most of which were carried out in the capital of Baluchistan, Quetta. Once again, the Hazaras, along the Pakistani Sufis, were the most-hit community. A. Jadoon et al., 2022, op. cit.. See also N. Ibrahim and S. Akbarzadeh, "Intra-Jihadist Conflict and Cooperation: Islamic State-Khorasan Province and the Taliban in Afghanistan", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Volume 43, Number 12, 2018, pp. 1086-1107.

76 The NUG's main failure was its unwillingness to convene a constitutional *Loya Jirga* to amend the 2004 constitution and legitimise the new CEO political figure. The public stand of the government was also weakened by the postponement of the 2015 parliamentary elections to 2018, due mainly to security reasons. In Ghazni, due to a series of attacks, which also included the targeting of Hazaras in 2018, the election was not held.

main objective was to appeal to ethnic minorities, including the Hazaras, through a new narrative of trans-ethnic politics to create a shared sentiment of nationhood. However, this ambitious project never came to fruition due to the lack of trust in Ghani among senior Tajik leaders such as Muhammad Atta Noor.⁷⁷ Abdullah, once again Ghani's main political rival, won the majority of 18 provinces in the north, northeast, centre and west, which represent the strongholds of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras.⁷⁸ Despite these political setbacks and a lengthy process of vote-counting, due to accusations of fraud by competitors such as Abdullah, Ghani was re-elected as President of Afghanistan in February 2020.⁷⁹

Overall, the 2019 presidential election was characterised by accusations of widespread fraud and Afghans casting their votes along ethnic lines. With regard to the Hazaras, the fragmentation of their vote between Ghani's and Abdullah's presidential tickets resulted in reduced political weight and competition for power between Danish, Ghani's second vice president and Mohaqqeq, Abdullah's second CEO.⁸⁰ Once again, the Hazara political leaders were not willing to coalesce under a single strong figure and, in doing so, to capitalise on a stronger support base to implement much-needed reforms.

The short life of the second Ghani government, which saw the continuation of mutual distrust between the president and Abdullah, as well as of the prosecution of well-established

77 Barnett. R. Rubin, op. cit., pp. 264-265.

78 T. Johnson, "The 2019 Afghan Presidential Election: An Assessment of Problematic Processes and Results", *Afghanistan*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2021, pp. 19-49.

79 The election, initially scheduled for 2014, was delayed by the Independent Electoral Commission till March 20, 2019, and was eventually held on September 28, 2019.

80 Mohaqqeq had initially been Mohammad Anif Atmar's running mate, but then joined Abdullah after Atmar withdrew his candidacy.

politics aimed at safeguarding personal interests by other members of the executive, contributed to the absence of reforms in favour of the population.

The situations of the Hazaras in this period is aptly summarised by Melissa Kerr Chiovenda's findings that,

Until 2002, [the Hazara] had largely been excluded from government positions and participation and from educational opportunities. Between 2002 and August 2021, Hazara representation in government positions, participation in educational institutions and independent sectors of the Afghan economy increased, though members of the group were still heavily underrepresented in proportion to their demographic presence in the country.⁸¹

Thus, even during the most favourable period in the history of Afghanistan since 1880, the Hazaras were neglected and deprived of their rights.

Alizada, et al., in their report on violence against Hazaras, claimed that the community endured at least 294 incidents between July 2002 and June 2022, of which they were able to record 266 in detail. These 266 incidents resulted in 2,228 dead and 2,837 wounded.⁸² This study confirmed that non-state actors such as the Taliban and ISK resorted to systematic violence against the Hazaras and that neither the presence of

81 Written submission, M. K. Chiovenda, June 9, 2022 *Hazara Inquiry*.

82 B. Alizada et al., "Systematic Violence against Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical Overview and a Chronology of Incidents from July 2002 to June 2022", unpublished Draft, June 2022. Although no attacks were recorded in 2009, it is highly likely that oppression and hostile actions were carried out against the Hazaras in that year. Data from July to December 2022 have been collected by the author from ACLED, "Two Years Of Repression: Mapping Taliban Violence Targeting Civilians in Afghanistan", *ACLED*, August 11, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/11/two-years-of-repression-mapping-taliban-violence-targeting-civilians-in-afghanistan/>.

NATO troops nor the ANSF's COIN campaign significantly impacted on the attempts to wipe the Hazaras off the map of Afghanistan. The methods used by the Taliban and ISK, such as summary execution, suicide attacks, forced displacement and abduction, were typical of a strategy of genocide. [The findings of this study, aggregated by ACLED's 2023 report, are depicted in Appendix, Tables 1-4].

2020 TO THE PRESENT: FEAR OF RETRIBUTION AND ISOLATION

After almost 20 years as an insurgent force, the Taliban signed the Doha Agreement with the United States on February 29, 2020. The signing of the agreement set in motion the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was to be completed on August 31, 2021, despite the Taliban violation of the accord.

The Doha Agreement came after the failure of previous attempts, which had also involved China and Russia, to find a political solution to the Afghan conflict. In fact, on that day in February 2020, two agreements were signed to effectively implement a peace roadmap that would also involve Ghani's government: the Doha Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan and a bilateral United States-Afghanistan declaration.⁸³ The so-called intra-Afghan peace talks were supposed to start on March 10, 2020. However, the internal peace process never took off, mainly due to the Taliban's repeated violations of the agreement and their unwillingness to recognise the Ghani's executive as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.⁸⁴

83 T. Ruttig, "A Deal in the Mist: How much of the US-Taliban Doha agreement has been implemented?" *Afghanistan Analyst Network*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/a-deal-in-the-mist-how-much-of-the-us-taliban-doha-agreement-has-been-implemented/>

84 In particular, the Taliban refused to keep violence down after a two-week pause, which preceded and followed the Doha Agreement.

What empowered the Taliban was the US' decision to keep the Afghan government off the negotiating table, relegating it to a secondary role. Additionally, this strategy allowed the Taliban to negotiate from a position of strength in the lengthy and unproductive intra-Afghan talks at Doha, and to wait out the completion of the US and NATO withdrawal.

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban carried out a bloodless coup, becoming the *de facto* rulers of the country and ushering in a new era of backwardness, persecution, and violations of Human Rights, which would involve thousands of Hazaras.

Also, the Doha Agreement, along with a decreased pressure by US ground and air assets on ISK, contributed to the re-emergence of this group in June 2020, under the new leadership of Shahab al Muhajir.⁸⁵ Highly lethal attacks against the Hazara community continued to be a central part of ISK's strategy. The horror is exemplified by an attack against a Hazara girls' school in Kabul in May 2021, which killed or wounded more than 200 girls and teachers.⁸⁶ Unfortunately, the Afghan government, affected by internal feuds and pervaded by a growing feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness in the face of the Taliban advance, did little to protect the Hazara community. The ethnic and religious minorities, including the Hazaras, were the most affected and concerned about their future, and already felt abandoned at this early stage. Over time, the presence of ISK has become an existential threat to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan itself, and to foreign personnel and investment in the country.⁸⁷ However, the fact

85 The number of attacks rose from just three in June 2020, to 41 in June 2021.

86 A. Jadoon et al., *op. cit.*

87 In September 2022 the Russian Embassy in Kabul was attacked by an ISIS-K suicide bomber. In the first attack on a foreign diplomatic mission in Afghanistan since August 2021, two Russian diplomats were killed. On 5 December 2022, the Pakistan ambassador to Kabul was wounded

that ISK has, in the last two years, diversified its targets, has favoured the Hazaras, who share the weight of ISK's brutality with regional actors such as China, Pakistan, and Russia.

The Hazaras' fears were confirmed by the first acts of the new Taliban regime. After almost three weeks of secretive talks by its most influential leaders, Zabiullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesperson, announced the first 33-member cabinet on September 7, 2021. It was and still is an *interim* government, because the Taliban's aim was likely to communicate that this was just the first step and that they would seek the Afghan population's legitimation in the following weeks and months, by installing a system which would meet the demands of the international community. That entailed that Akhundzada, the supreme leader, was the only permanent position within the Emirate, while the rest of the cabinet members were supposed to be temporary. To everyone's surprise, Akhundzada appointed the 70-year-old Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, one of the co-founders of the Taliban in the 1990s and Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister between 1996 and 2001, as the new Prime Minister. Hassan Akhund was most likely chosen because he was close to Akhundzada and for his lack of political ambition, which made him the ideal candidate for different factions in the Emirate.⁸⁸ Taliban's top leaders, such as Sirajuddin Haqqani, leader of the powerful Haqqani Network, and Mullah Ghani Barader, former deputy of Mullah Omar and one of the negotiators in Doha, were not considered for

following an attack by ISK gunmen, at the Pakistan embassy compound in the Afghan capital. Finally, on 12 December 2022, a Chinese hotel was attacked by assailants in broad daylight in Kabul. Several Chinese workers were injured in the attack, which was claimed by ISK. Zia ur Rehman, "ISIS-K attack in Kabul compounds China's insurgency headaches", *Nikkei Asia*, December 18, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Terrorism/ISIS-K-attack-in-Kabul-compounds-China-s-insurgency-headaches>.

88 H. Abbas, *The Return of the Taliban*, Yale University Press, 2023, p. 86.

the premiership. The former was, instead, chosen as Minister of the Interior, while the latter was one of the Deputy Prime Ministers. Another influential leader, the son of Mullah Omar, Mullah Yaqoob, was appointed as the Minister of Defence.

The Hazaras, along with influential Pashtun and Tajik leaders close to Iran, were purposely excluded from the first cabinet. Overall, 30 ministerial positions went to Pashtuns and only two to Tajiks and one to the Uzbek leader, Mullah Abdul Salam Hanafi, who had long been a senior member of the Taliban, was appointed as Deputy Prime Minister. The exclusion of the Hazaras was expected, while senior Pashtun leaders such as Ibrahim Sadr and Zakir were not considered due to their closeness to Iran.⁸⁹ The fact that the Emirate ignored the requests of the international community, which had called for an executive which would represent all of Afghanistan's ethnic groups, raised eyebrows around the world, and even political leaders including the then Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who had initially welcomed the Taliban raise to power, were concerned about the absence of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras in the interim cabinet. Iran and even Russia officially showed their displeasure because, according to Afghanistan scholar Antonio Giustozzi, they had supported the Taliban's advance to Kabul in the 2021 spring and, as such, expected to be compensated by the inclusion of the very leaders they had supported in the executive.⁹⁰

In the following weeks and months, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's (IEA) spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid announced more lists of people who were appointed to

89 Antonio Giustozzi, "Russia and Iran: Disappointed Friends of the Taliban?" *RUSI Commentary*, September 30, 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-and-iran-disappointed-friends-taliban>.

90 Ibid.

ministerial positions, both at the central and local level. The Hazara representative, Abdul Latif Nazari, was appointed as Deputy Minister of Economy. Nazari, who had previously run as Vice President in the 2019 presidential elections, holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Tehran, and is one of the few highly educated members of the IEA. A second Hazara, Dr. Hassan Gyasi, was appointed as Deputy Minister of Public Health.

Unfortunately, attacks on the Hazaras continued after the establishment of the IEA in August 2021. The Taliban government has done little to protect the Hazaras who, in their view, continue to represent a marginal part of Afghan society. Additionally, the counterterrorism operations carried out by the newly established Afghan security forces have been only marginally effective and have demonstrated their incapacity to shift from an insurgent force to a government force. ISK still enjoys relative freedom of movement in Afghanistan in terms of regrouping, planning, and recruiting, especially among the Salafi sections of society. Such freedom will enable the group to conduct more attacks on the Hazaras in future.

Moreover, a typical form of discrimination against the Hazaras, which has been revived since August 2021, has been land grabbing of summer pastures by the Pashtun Kuchis in the Hazarajat region. The Taliban have set up special commissions and courts to deliberate on cases of contested land and harvest by Kuchis and Hazaras, which have most of the time been decided in favour of the former, in line with the historical alliance between the Kuchis and Pashtun rulers, which was first formed by Abdur Rahman Khan in the 19th century. This demonstrates the continuation of past policy towards the Hazaras, by the Taliban and that the decisions in favour of the Kuchis are part of a strategy aimed at intimidating minorities

and rewarding loyal groups for the support they provided before August 2021.⁹¹

The complete absence of measures in favour of the Hazaras has, once again, manifested in growing discontent, which has translated into brave Hazara women taking to the streets to demand more socio-economic rights and liberties. Unfortunately, such movements are still too weak, poorly coordinated and supported, both domestically and internationally, to bring about significant positive changes. The Taliban's violent methods to put down these protests have been met with indifference by the international community, thereby diminishing the likelihood of future movements.

As of August 2023, the Taliban have not only repeatedly failed to live up to their initial pledges to protect all Afghans, they have engaged in widespread violations of Human Rights against the Hazaras and other non-Pashtuns. The IEA has also implemented restriction on the religious ceremonies during the month of Muharram, which were usually held with a few limitations from 2001 to 2021.⁹² The Taliban claimed that their decision was based on security reasons, but the main reason was to prevent Shias from holding celebrations that Sunni extremists see as contrary to their version of Islam.

91 F. Foschini, "Conflict Management or Retribution? How the Taleban deal with land disputes between Kuchis and local communities", *Afghanistan Analyst Network*, December 22, 2022, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/political-landscape/conflict-management-or-retribution-hoe-the-taleban-deal-with-land-disputes-between-kuchis-and-local-communities/>.

92 RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, "Shi'ite Scholars Ask Mourners To Tone Down Muharram Observance After Taliban Imposed Restrictions ", *RFE/RL's Radio Azadi* , July 27, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-shia-muharram-taliban-restrictions/32522069.html>.

A growing number of reports,⁹³ demonstrate that inhuman treatment and forced displacements have been a distinctive brand of Taliban strategy, especially at the province and district levels. This suggests that, perhaps, some of their hostile actions against ethnic and religious minorities have been carried out independently, by local Taliban commanders or government officials. Afghan scholars Sitarah Mohammadi and Sajjad Askari, in their 2021 article on *Al Jazeera*, thus noted “a clear pattern of Taliban atrocities being committed across Afghanistan, which could mean that the Hazaras may be facing imminent ethnic cleansing.”⁹⁴ As of August 2023, researchers cannot back this up with solid evidence of a precise Taliban strategy, but can state that Hazaras have continued to experience oppression and isolation, and that their voices have been further silenced.

This also begs the question, what do we mean by ethnic cleansing? Mohammadi and Askari clearly hinted at the worst-case scenario, the Hazaras being wiped off the map of Afghanistan in the near future. Such a bleak scenario, which also stems from their own personal experiences, seems unlikely in the short to medium term (3 years). However, if we define ethnic cleansing as the erasing of their culture, traditions, language and heritage, this author thinks that this is already taking place in Afghanistan. As history points out, women have been the most targeted within Afghan society and the Hazara community. As rightly described by Pakistani scholar Hassan

93 S. Khalid, “Imprisonment Will Follow if Locals Refuse to Pay Money to Kuchis, Taliban Warns Hazaras in Ghazni’s Nawur”, *Hasht e Subh Daily*, December 30, 2022, <https://8am.media/eng/imprisonment-will-follow-if-locals-refuse-to-pay-money-to-kuchis-taliban-warns-hazaras-in-ghazni-nawur/>.

94 S. Mohammadi and S. Askari, “Why the Hazara people fear genocide in Afghanistan”, *Al Jazeera*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/10/27/why-the-hazara-people-fear-genocide-in-afghanistan>.

Abbas in his seminal book, *The Return of the Taliban*, the fact that many Hazara women are educated and socially engaged constitutes an additional reason for targeting them.⁹⁵

Another policy which follows these trends, seen after the establishment of the first Taliban rule in the 1990s, attempts to cancel the Hazaras' and non-Pashtun groups' culture by focusing on an anti-Persian language campaign throughout the country. This has caused a public outcry, since Persian is an integral part of Afghanistan's culture and is spoken by 80 per cent of the population. This demonstrates the Taliban's conviction that the Persian language is a threat to their rule, as well as the ignorance of the Kandahar-based Taliban leadership about the cultural diversity and wealth of Afghanistan, which they erroneously consider to be a liability rather than beneficial for the country. Overall, the anti-Persian campaign is part of their strategy to mould Afghan society according to their views of Afghanistan, as a Pashtun-dominated society. However, the Taliban's aim to erase the Persian culture will be very difficult to achieve, since it is a cultural and religious pillar of society, and any attempt to remove it would prove to be detrimental to internal cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

CONCLUSION

Since the rule of Abdur Rahman Khan, the Hazaras have been constantly targeted by the state as well as by non-state actors because of their origins and their adherence to the Shia branch of Islam. The violence set in motion by Abdur Rahman Khan and the isolation of the Hazaras within the Afghan society contributed to an increased sense of belonging to their ethnic group and the necessity to join efforts to face the threat mainly represented by the Pashtun. However, as demonstrated

95 H. Abbas, op.cit., p.114.

throughout the paper, this policy has been partially successful, because internal divisions have characterised the Hazara nation, and their elected political representatives have often put their interests before those of their co-ethnics.

Although the period from 1901 to 1979 saw an improvement in the general condition of the Hazaras in Afghanistan, they continued to be persecuted and under-represented at the political level. Once again, selfish policies of Hazara tribal elders contributed to their marginalisation. This continued under the Soviet occupation when the Hazaras proved to be unable to coalesce under the umbrella of a single warring faction and fought alongside smaller groups' loyalties, represented by influential Hazara powerbrokers. That came to an end in 1989, when they managed to create HeW, which claimed to be willing to fight against Hazaras' discrimination. Their unity did not last long and their fracturing contributed to the political instability, the breaking of the civil war and the Taliban's rise to power. The creation of the first IEA ushered in a new era of violence against the Hazaras, which ended only with the collapse of the Taliban system in 2001. Although the democratic governments of Karzai and Ghani allowed the Hazaras to be represented at the central and local level, the splitting of the Hazaras' vote was detrimental to their attempt to play a major role in Afghanistan. The emergence of ISK and the establishment of the second IEA have inaugurated a new era of persecutions and political isolation that is likely to continue in the short term (3 years).

In this regard, the absence of a US and NATO contingency plan to force the Taliban to abide by the Doha Agreement gave them free rein to start their conquest of Afghanistan, which culminated in the 15 August 2021 fall of Kabul into their hands. Overall, the Doha agreement instead of paving the

way for an inclusive “democratic” government, resulted in the establishment of the second IEA, not least because the US and NATO wanted out of Afghanistan, implicitly recognising that peace was not achievable through military means and that it was time the Afghans found a broad-based national consensus. The firmness of US and NATO allies to withdraw from Afghanistan was met with the weakness of Ghani’s government and the unpreparedness of the ANSF to face a more motivated Taliban force on their own.

Despite initial promises of a dramatic change with regards to the Hazaras, the measures implemented by the Taliban so far have demonstrated a complete disregard of the Hazaras’ needs and socio-economic rights and their discrimination has continued unabated. To aggravate the Hazaras’ situation, their persecution by Taliban local commanders, who act almost autonomously, has never been publicly condemned nor the perpetrators of brutal acts have been brought to justice.

The draconian measures imposed by the Taliban since August 2021 have produced a devastating effect on the financial means of ordinary Afghans, including Hazaras, who have been dying of starvation⁹⁶. These events along with the inhumane treatment and suffering Hazaras have received throughout history, is an open wound which no government or foreign presence can ever heal.

96 As a way of dealing with the famine and repercussions of Taliban government, Afghan families have resorted to selling internal organs to feed their children or using sedative drugs to get them to sleep. Two articles which discuss this are: Yogita Limaye, “Afghanistan: ‘I drug my hungry children to help them sleep’”, *BBC*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-63733683>; WFP Staff, “Record levels of hunger persist in Afghanistan: People require humanitarian assistance, livelihood support, jobs, and long-term investment to help solve the crisis”, WFP, May 9, 2022, <https://www.wfp.org/news/record-levels-hunger-persist-afghanistan-people-require-humanitarian-assistance-livelihood>.

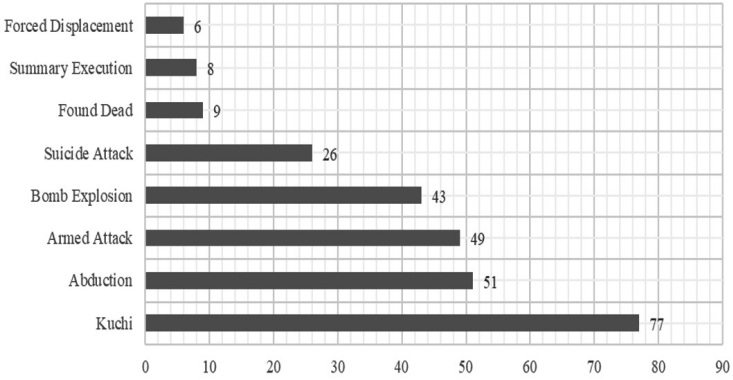
Persecution of the Hazaras of Afghanistan

The counterinsurgent operations against ISK have only been partially successful and as such the group's threat has remained significant for the Hazaras. The fact that Hazaras have suffered relatively less in terms of direct attacks by ISK is also due to a stronger emphasis in terms of attacks on countries such as China, Pakistan, and Russia.

Considering the above, the silence of the IC, including supra-national bodies, before and after August 2021, has indirectly contributed to the continuous discrimination against the Hazaras in Afghanistan. This has led to the rise of civil rights movements worldwide and pro-Hazara campaigns on social media, which have never been accompanied by concrete steps by foreign governments to promote the Hazara cause at the national and international level. The IC has so far unsuccessfully applied pressure to the IEA on matters of HRs and on the necessity to include non-Pashtun in the current executive, but this strategy has never specifically addressed the Hazaras' issue. The Taliban's stubbornness and firm intention to continue to ignore the IC's requests will likely prove to be a liability in the short to medium term (up to 3 years) because it can cause the IEA to implode due to growing internal divisions, which have been contained so far for the sake of projecting an image of cohesiveness. As previous power transitions in Afghanistan demonstrate, that wouldn't necessarily translate into more favourable living conditions for the Hazaras of Afghanistan if a broad-based national consensus, which contemplates the socio-economic rights of Afghan religious minorities and non-Pashtuns, is not reached. Such a consensus should also address the concept of Pashtunism, which should be reformulated as nationalism and include all Afghans regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation. This epochal change will enhance Afghanistan's image and status within the IC and prove to be greatly beneficial for all Afghans.

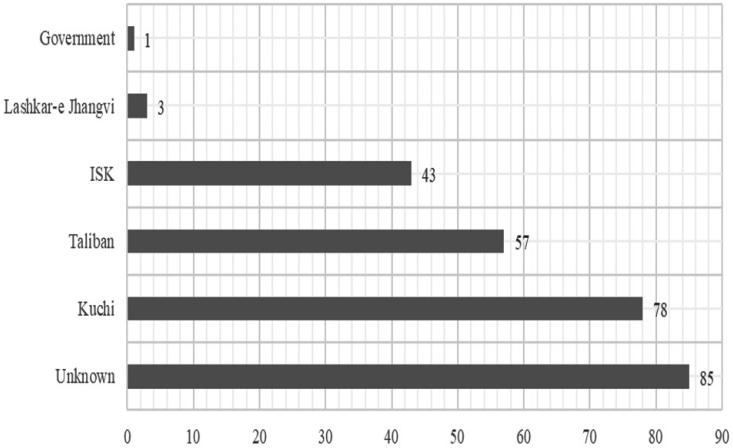
APPENDIX

Table 1. Incidents by Type July 2002 - December 2022



Source: B. Alizada et al., 2022 and ACLED 2023.

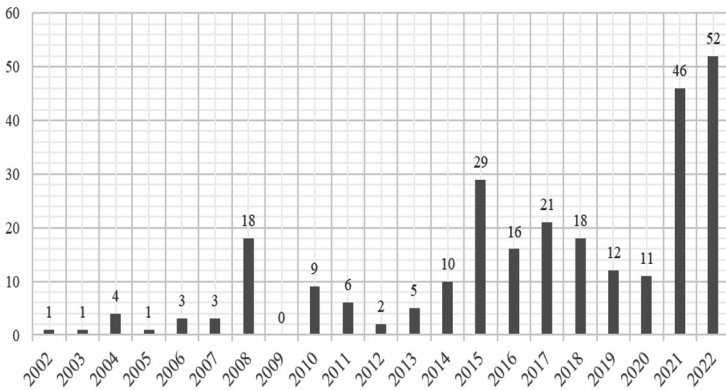
Table 2. Incidents by Perpetrator July 2002 - December 2022



Source: B. Alizada et al., 2022 and ACLED 2023.

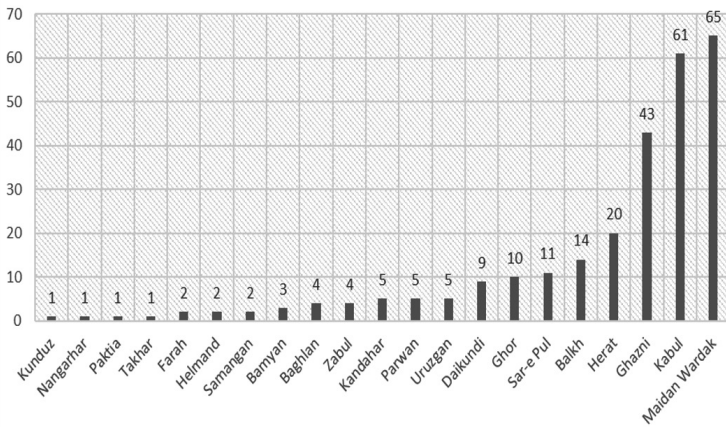
Persecution of the Hazaras of Afghanistan

Table 3. Incidents by Year July 2002 - December 2022



Source: B. Alizada et al., 2022 and ACLED 2023.

Table 4. Incidents by Province July 2002 - December 2022



Source: B. Alizada et al., 2022 and ACLED 2023.

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