

September 2017 update on Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return

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A. Introduction

This is the eleventh paper in my series on “Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return”, beginning in September 2012. In March 2017 I also published a paper focused on Mazar-e Sharif³, because of ongoing suggestions that this city might represent a viable safe haven for returning Hazaras; it is a revised version of an attachment to my November 2016 update.

Unfortunately, since the November 2016 update there has been further escalation of both (a) the territorial war between insurgents (“Anti Government Elements”) and the Afghanistan Security Forces (supported by the remaining Coalition forces) and (b) locally targeted violence (especially in the capital Kabul and the major cities Mazar-e Sharif, Kandahar, Herat and Lashkar Gah, and along the major roads). Four aspects stand out:

- The main “local” targets are foreigners and foreign complexes.
- Most of the victims are ordinary Afghans.
- Afghanistan affiliates of ISIS usually claim responsibility for “local” attacks.
- There has been a marked increase in sectarian violence, in particular targeting the Shia Hazara population.

In the first few months of 2017 there seemed to be limited evidence of escalation in the targeting of Hazaras in the high profile incidents reported to that stage, but that situation has now changed significantly. There have been at least 6 attacks on Shia (Hazara) places of worship in Afghanistan in the past 6 months, one in Herat and the rest in Kabul. Perhaps the most devastating incident was the August attack on Mirzawalang, a remote Hazara community in the northern province of Sar-e Pul at least when 50 villagers were killed and dozens injured. This attack seems to have been a joint Taliban/ISIS operation.

More generally, the fact that violence is not under control anywhere in the nation means that the Hazara population continues to be extremely vulnerable. This applies especially in the rural areas where the Taliban continue to gain ground and their historic enmity towards Hazaras is never far from the surface. Helmand province in the south and several provinces in the north are increasingly under Taliban control. The Afghanistan National Forces are under growing pressure and the government is calling on additional international assistance.

United Nations reports continue to paint a bleak picture. These well-documented summaries are supported by substantial media reports and expert commentaries.

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² “Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return” [this and the following updates all available at <http://www.bmrsg.org.au/research-material/afghanistan/>]

³ <http://www.bmrsg.org.au/compassion/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Viability-of-Mazar-2.pdf>

Furthermore Professor William Maley has augmented his November “update”⁴ (cited in my previous update) by adding significant commentary on the lack of security in Mazar-e Sharif and underlining its unsuitability as a safe haven, thus countering the Australian Government’s completely unfounded and potentially lethal assertions. This is highly significant, as are several other analyses by expert commentators, cited below.

B. Escalation of violence throughout the nation

There is universal agreement that the security situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate. The latest UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report⁵, released in July 2017, states that the number of civilian casualties (dead and injured) in the war in Afghanistan remained on “record high levels” in the first six months of 2017, with Kabul remaining the most affected city in the country. “*Any progress in protecting civilians from some types of violence is undermined by relapses in others*”⁶. The report notes that the other main “casualties” are the ‘internally displaced people’:

“During the period covered by the report, 157,987 Afghans were newly displaced – a 10 per cent increase over the same period last year. This brings the estimated total number of conflict-induced internally displaced Afghans to 1.2 million.”

There is abundant documentation of the following selected incidents, each involving multiple casualties.

- After a lull during the cold winter, high profile violence resumed on 10 January, 2017 with multiple bombings at government and tribal establishments in Kabul (a twin suicide bombing in front of the National Assembly), Kandahar (at the Governor’s guesthouse during a visit by the United Arab Emirates ambassador and his fellow diplomats), Lashkar Gah (capital of Helmand Province), and other locations. The Taliban claimed responsibility for all but one of the attacks. In total, at least 64 were killed and at least 94 were wounded.
- On 7 February a suicide bomb blast outside of the Supreme Court in Kabul killed 20 and injured 48 more.
- On 8 February 8 Red Cross workers were killed by suspected ISIS-K gunmen in the Qush Tepa District, Jowzjan Province.
- On February 11 – A Taliban suicide bomber killed 7 and wounded 20 people outside a bank in Lashkar Gah, Helmand Province.
- *[On 23 February the Taliban successfully took over the entirety of Shorabak District, Kandahar Province.]*
- On 1 March the Taliban attacked police, military and intelligence targets in Kabul, killing at least 15 and wounding dozens.
- On 8 March 4 ISIS militants attacked the largest military hospital in Kabul, killing more than 30 and injuring more than 50.
- On 12 March a suicide bomber crashed a vehicle full of explosives into a packed commuter minibus in Kabul, killing at least one and injuring at least 19.
- *[On 23 March Taliban fighters overran the district centre of Sangin District in Helmand Province.]*
- On 12 April an ISIS suicide bomber killed 5 and wounded several more in an explosion near the Afghan Defense Ministry in Kabul.
- On 21 April Taliban insurgents attacked Afghan soldiers near a mosque at a military base in Mazar-e-Sharif, Balkh Province, killing at least 140 Afghan soldiers.
- On 3 May a car bomb exploded near the US embassy in Kabul, targeting a NATO convoy, killing 8 and wounding over 25, ISIS claiming responsibility.

⁴ “On the Return of Hazaras to Afghanistan” , 16 March 2017 <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Maley-Hazaras-24.7.16.pdf>

⁵ *Afghan civilian casualties hit half-year record, with 5,166 dead or maimed – UN*, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54543#.Wch38fkjHcs>

⁶ Jelena Bjelica and Thomas Ruttig, *UNAMA Mid-Year Report 2017: Number of civilian casualties still at “record level”*, 18 July 2017 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/unama-mid-year-report-2017-number-of-civilian-casualties-still-at-record-level>

- On 17 May ISIS terrorists attacked the Afghan state television building in Jalalabad, leaving at least 6 civilians dead along with 4 terrorists.
- On 21 May a Taliban ambush killed at least 20 policemen and wounded 10 in Shah Joi district, Zabul province.
- On 21 May a German aid worker and Afghan guard were killed and a Finnish woman believed kidnapped, when gunmen stormed an international guest house in Kabul.
- On 26 May Taliban militants attacked a military base in Shah Wali Kot District, Kandahar province, killing at least 15 soldiers.
- On 27 May a suicide car bombing in Khost, Khost Province, killed at least 13.
- On 31 May (continuing to 3 June) a series of deadly attacks took place in Kabul (see below, page 4).
- On 6 June a bomb explosion outside the historic Jama Masjid (mosque) in Herat killed at least 7 people and wounded 15.
- On 10 June a Taliban infiltrator killed three U.S. soldiers and left another wounded in Achin district of Nangarhar province.
- On 15 June at least 4 people were killed when a suicide bomber struck at Al-Zahra Shia mosque in Dasht-e Barchi (the large Hazara enclave western Kabul) where worshippers had gathered for an important Shia holiday.
- [On 17 July Afghan security forces, supported by a US Marine unit and numerous US airstrikes, retook Nawa District in Helmand Province from the Taliban.]
- On 24 July over two dozen people were killed and more than 40 wounded after a Taliban-claimed car bomb attack struck a bus transporting government employees through a Shia neighborhood in Kabul.
- On 31 July security forces battled gunmen following a suicide attack outside the Iraqi embassy in Kabul, resulting in the death of 2 embassy employees and several assailants, and 3 people injured, Islamic State claiming responsibility.
- On 1 August a suicide attack on a crowded Shia mosque in Herat killed at least 31 civilians and injured more than 60 others (see below, page 6).
- On 3-5 August Taliban and ISIS militants carried out a joint attack on the village of Mirzawalang in Sayyad district, Sar-e Pul Province, battling with local Afghan police forces for nearly 48 hours, killing over 50 civilians (mostly Shiite Hazaras) and 18 local police and 28 local militia; 10 militants were killed and 12 injured. 235 villagers were held, but then released on 9 August. About 100 more hostages were not released (see below, page 6).
- On 9 August gunmen opened fire on a group of four female employees at Bagram military air field, north of Kabul, killing one and wounding a second woman.
- On 12 August a mortar attack targetted at a house in Faryab province killed at least 13 civilians, including women and children.
- On 24 August suicide attackers stormed a crowded Shia mosque in Kabul during Friday prayer, killing at least 20 and wounding dozens of others.
- On 13 September at least three people were killed in a suicide bombing at a checkpoint at the Kabul International Cricket Stadium during a T20 match.

Mazar-e Sharif

The 21 April attack on the large military base in Mazar-e-Sharif was especially significant because it showed the capacity of the insurgents to break through very tight security in an area that was still being considered to be relatively safe. It happened only a few weeks after Professor William Maley had warned⁷ of *“the danger of thinking that places such as Mazar-e Sharif or Herat can be ‘compartmentalised’, or understood without attention being paid to wider conflict formations within the country”*.

The attack on the military base in Mazar-e-Sharif also highlighted the continuing expansion of the active conflict zone in the north of the nation. Previously, the main

⁷ “On the Return of Hazaras to Afghanistan” , 16 March 2017 <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Maley-Hazaras-24.7.16.pdf>

focus was in the south and east, but now it is nation-wide. A DW editorial⁸ “*Why is northern Afghanistan increasingly unstable?*” published on 1 March 2017, discusses this point and concludes:

Northern Afghanistan can no longer be considered a safe region as militant violence increases. Central Asian countries that share Afghanistan's northern border have also become concerned about security.

Once considered the safest region of Afghanistan, many northern provinces have transformed into the new battlefield between Afghan security forces and its armed opponents. Incidents of Taliban fighters storming district capitals and launching suicide attacks in cities like Kunduz, Mazar-e-Sharif and Maimana are becoming more frequent.

Seven weeks later, the 21 April attack took place. No one should have been surprised.

Violation of Health facilities

The lack of security in Mazar-e Sharif was highlighted by the murder of a Spanish physiotherapist working in a Red Cross hospital on 11 September⁹. However this is symptomatic of a disastrous situation nationally. Reporting on the incident Sune Engel Rasmussen, an experienced expert on Afghanistan and one of the few independent foreign freelance journalists still living in Kabul, noted that the number of incidents related to health facilities and workers has spiked dramatically, from 41 last year to 86 as of the end of August this year¹⁰. Health facilities have repeatedly been abused as fighting positions, and earlier this year armed groups forced health clinics to close, depriving half a million people from access to healthcare. Government forces also regularly violate health facilities and this compounds the risks faced by those who are ready to provide humanitarian aid – not to speak of the impact on the local populations.

Kabul – 31 May to 3 June

A series of deadly attacks in Kabul at the end of May and early June greatly elevated the level of fear all over the country. In an article “*Fear penetrates Kabul after deadly cycle of violence*”¹¹, Shereena Qazi, summarises

Kabul has just suffered one of the bloodiest weeks in years, leaving its streets devoid of life and its residents gripped by fear - and feeling unprotected.

. . . .
Multiple assaults in the city highlighted the ability of fighters to strike even in the capital's most secure districts.

. . . .
The cycle of violence began on Wednesday when a powerful truck bomb ripped through the city's diplomatic zone. . . . At least 90 people, mostly civilians, were killed and hundreds were wounded. Officials described the attack as "one of the biggest" to have hit the capital.

Two days later, residents took to the streets to demand answers from the government, who they accuse of security and intelligence failures. Clashes between protesters and security forces broke out, resulting in the death of at least five people.

On Saturday, Afghan police and intelligence officials urged everyone to stay indoors, citing a threat of possible attacks targeting large gatherings of people.

. . . .

⁸ <http://www.dw.com/en/why-is-northern-afghanistan-increasingly-unstable/a-37768779>

⁹ BBC, “Red Cross physiotherapist killed by patient in Afghanistan”, 11 September 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41224533>

¹⁰ Sune Engel Rasmussen, 22 September 2017, “‘We are not safe’: aid workers fearful after Red Cross shooting in Afghanistan”, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/sep/22/we-are-not-safe-aid-workers-fearful-red-cross-shooting-afghanistan-mazar-i-sharif-lorena-enebral-perez>

¹¹ Aljazeera, 04 June 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/fear-penetrates-kabul-deadly-cycle-violence-170604074641834.html>

The triple explosion at the Tapa Marshal Fahim cemetery left at least 20 people dead, raising the death toll to more than 100 people dead in just four days of violence - and the numbers are rising.

. . . .

Amid the rising tension, police locked down much of Kabul city with checkpoints, while armoured vehicles were seen patrolling the streets.

Another significant article “*Why deadly Kabul bombing is crisis for all of Afghanistan*”¹² spells out the implications of these attacks for the nation as a whole, summarised by the sub-title:

“Rise in attacks on Kabul after years of city’s relative security a huge threat to the government, economy and civil society”

Even before the last of these attacks occurred the author wrote that:

The devastating bombing this Wednesday morning was confirmation that it has now become one of the most dangerous places in Afghanistan, and is another heavy blow to a weak and fractured government.

The rising tempo of attacks in Kabul pose an outside threat to the government, the fragile economy, to the foreign support that keeps Afghanistan running, to education, media and civil society, that all cluster in the capital.

The attacks are also disproportionately deadly to civilians, because most military and government targets in the city are heavily protected.

. . . .

Even before the latest atrocity, the United Nations had warned that this year was proving deadlier for civilians in Kabul than anywhere else in the country. Casualties in the capital were outpacing the restive eastern and southern provinces – Helmand, Kandahar or Nangahar – that were the cradle of the insurgency and had been the bloody focus of the war in recent years.

“It is not yet clear if the rising toll inside the capital is because insurgents are getting better at penetrating the city, because they are targeting civilians where they once aimed at more highly protected targets, or simply because the city’s defenders are failing more often.

Isis, which has a growing operation in Afghanistan and little compunction about slaughtering civilians, are obvious suspects. The attack would represent a worrying escalation in their capacities.

Conclusion

There is no reason to expect any abatement of the danger facing Afghanistan’s citizens. In fact veteran expert, Afghanistan (and Pakistan) journalist and author Ahmed Rashid has become extremely pessimistic. In his recent article “*Afghanistan: It’s Too Late*”¹³, Rashid states:

Afghanistan now faces a far deeper crisis than many seem to understand. Warlords and politicians—including cabinet members—are calling for the resignation of President Ashraf Ghani and his security ministers, accusing them of incompetence, arrogance, and stirring up ethnic hatred. There are as many as ten public demonstrations a day in the streets of Kabul, carried out by young people and by relatives of those killed in recent bomb attacks.

In early June multiple suicide bombings in Kabul killed over 170 people and wounded some 500. Terrorists managed to get a massive truck bomb into the heavily guarded diplomatic quarter, where it exploded, killing mainly civilians—a clear indication of collusion with security officers. Neither the Taliban nor the Islamic State claimed responsibility. The Taliban have now launched ground offensives to take more territory and to capture the

¹² Emma Graham-Harrison, The Guardian, 1 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/01/kabul-bombing-crisis-afghanistan-civilian-society-government->

¹³ 18 June 2017, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/06/18/afghanistan-its-too-late/>

northern city of Kunduz, a city of almost 300,000 that they tried twice last year to seize. If it falls now to the Taliban it would be the first major city they have re-occupied.

.....

Still, even more dangerous than the deteriorating security situation is the political crisis now unfolding in Kabul. The lack of trust between president Ashraf Ghani and his CEO or prime minister, Abdullah Abdullah, has led to a paralysis in governance and social services. Senior officials in the army and bureaucracy are choosing sides. Many bureaucrats and teachers have not been paid for months due to the lack of funds. Prominent warlords now turned politicians are increasingly siding with the opposition and demanding that Ghani resign and fresh elections be held.

.....

Nobody in Washington appears interested in exerting more political pressure on the Kabul regime, Pakistan, and the Taliban to begin negotiations that could lead to a ceasefire and a political agreement. To continue seeing the conflict only through the prism of war and troop numbers as the US does will only lead to continuing erosion of the government's legitimacy and loss of territory. **Taliban attacks will increase, there will be continued loss of territory, and the government may collapse. This is a recipe for failure.**

[emphasis added]

C. Violence targeted against Hazaras

The particular vulnerability to targeted persecution and violence of the ethnic Hazaras has been the main subject of my research over the past 5 years. The evidence has always been strong but this year it has become more compelling than ever. In his March 2017 update¹⁴ Professor William Maley drew attention to the February 2016 report of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan which states that:

In 2015, UNAMA observed a sharp increase in the abduction and killing of civilians of Hazara ethnicity by Anti-Government Elements. Between 1 January and 31 December, Anti-Government Elements abducted at least 146 members of the Hazara community in 20 separate incidents. All but one incident took place in areas with mixed Hazara and non-Hazara communities, in Ghazni, Balkh, Sari Pul, Faryab, Uruzgan, Baghlan, Wardak, Jawzjan, and Ghor provinces'

Maley argued that

*With the withdrawal of foreign forces, there is a great deal of apprehension amongst Afghans about the future of the country, and there is **a grave risk that Afghanistan will fall victim to what social scientists call a 'cascade'**, where even people who despise the Taliban decide to shift support to them because they think they are going to come out on top anyway. This is a well-recognised phenomenon (see Cass R. Sunstein, *Laws of Fear: Beyond the Precautionary Principle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp.94-98) and **it would likely create especially grave risks for people of Hazara ethnicity** since targeting Hazaras could be a device by which other groups might seek to establish their credentials in the eyes of the Taliban and their associates in groups such as the Haqqani network. . . . **Given this fluidity, it is a serious mistake to conclude that Afghanistan is safe for Hazaras. The disposition of extremists to strike at them has not disappeared.** [emphasis added]*

Without adding updated statistics the most recent UNAMA report has reinforced the conclusion that Hazaras continue to be targeted:

ISKP in particular continued to target Afghanistan's Shia minority in the first half of 2017. UNAMA attributed four such attacks to ISKP or ISKP-linked groups in three provinces (two in Herat and one each in Kabul and Sar-e-Pul). In January, unidentified armed anti-government elements killed eight coal miners, most of whom were Hazara, in the Tala wa Barfak district of Baghlan and further injured three others.

¹⁴ "On the Return of Hazaras to Afghanistan" , 16 March 2017 <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Maley-Hazaras-24.7.16.pdf>

Attacks on Shia places of worship

Further detail is provided by the reports¹⁵ of attacks on Shia places of worship – which are used almost exclusively by Hazaras. The usual method is a suicide bombing attack on a crowded mosque during Friday prayers. In most cases ISIS has claimed responsibility.

The most recent attack was on 24 August in the Khair Khana area of Kabul¹⁶. Mujib Mashal of The New York Times reports:

Suicide attackers stormed a crowded mosque in Kabul during Friday Prayer, officials said, killing at least 20 people and wounding dozens of others in the latest in a series of deadly attacks against Shiites in Afghanistan.

The Islamic State, which previously claimed deadly assaults against Shiite targets in the country, said its militants were behind the attack, . . .

Deadly attacks against Shiite Muslims in Afghanistan have increased in recent months, and a local affiliate of the Islamic State has claimed responsibility for many of them. On Aug. 1, the group attacked a Shiite mosque in the western city of Herat during evening prayer, killing almost 40.

Human Rights Watch, in a statement, said the deliberate targeting of a group of unarmed civilians in a place of worship amounted to a war crime.

“This contemptible act against a religious minority, claimed by ISIS’s Afghan affiliate, is a grim reminder that civilians bear the brunt of Afghanistan’s war,” said Patricia Gossman, senior Afghanistan researcher at Human Rights Watch.

In a poignant follow-up article¹⁷ Mujib Mashal pointed to a rising death and injury toll, quoting the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission as putting the number of dead at 40 with 90 wounded. He stated that **“at least six attacks on Shiite places of worship in Afghanistan have left more than 80 dead this year”**.

The attack on the on the large Jawadya Mosque in Herat, the main city in the west of Afghanistan, on 1 August, sent shock waves throughout the nation, especially among the Hazara community, because Herat had been considered one of Afghanistan's more peaceful cities. The incident demonstrated that the Sunni extremist could attack anywhere and at any time, with Shias the predictable target. The assault, which coincided with evening prayers in the crowded building, was owned by ISIS and came a day after ISIS claimed a deadly attack in Kabul near the Iraqi embassy. The BBC reported¹⁸ that the mosque, located in the predominantly Shia Muslim area, was severely damaged and the death toll had risen to 33, with a further 66 injured. The report noted that:

Areas dominated by Shia Muslims in Afghanistan have been hit by attacks repeatedly in the past year, by both IS and the Taliban. . . . Many of the casualties have been civilians, with injury numbers rising for the past five years as attacks increased.

Attack on isolated Hazara community

The 3-5 August attack on the remote village of Mirzawalang in Sayyad district, Sar-e Pul Province has resulted in outrage and deep fear among the Hazra community

¹⁵ For example “Suicide bomber strikes at Shia mosque in western Kabul”, Sune Engel Rasmussen, 16 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/suicide-bomber-shia-mosque-kabul-afghanistan>

¹⁶ For example “ISIS Claims Deadly Attack on Shiite Mosque in Afghanistan”, Mujib Mashal, NY Times, 25 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/world/asia/mosque-kabul-attack.html>

¹⁷ “Graves Fill an Afghan Mosque’s Garden After a Terrorist Attack”, 26 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/26/world/asia/afghanistan-kabul-mosque-terrorist-attack-isis-funerals.html?mcubz=0>

¹⁸ “Herat mosque blast: IS says it was behind Afghanistan attack”, 2 August 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40802572>

nationwide. Very significantly the local leaders anticipated the attack but received no response to their appeals for government protection¹⁹.

The provincial council of Mirzaolang village in the Afghan province of Sar-e Pul convened several times to demand help from the central government before their village was overrun by Taliban-aligned militants. The help never came.

By the time hundreds of Taliban from the Afghan provinces of Ghor, Faryab, Badghis, and Jawzjan, were gathering under the command of Sher Mohammad Ghazanfar, a local warlord, it was already too late. After closing all the roads leading into the village, the militants began to kill and abduct residents.

It is now almost certain that Taliban and ISIS militants carried out a joint operation, battling with local Afghan police forces for nearly 48 hours, killing over 50 civilians (mostly Shiite Hazaras) and 18 local police and 28 local militia; 10 militants were killed and 12 injured. 235 villagers were held, but then released on 9 August. About 100 more hostages had not been released at last report. Government troops later retook the village after several days of intense clashes with Taliban fighters²⁰.

Survivors fleeing the violence described the horror, detailing how fighters went from house to house shooting villagers.

Some villagers, including women and children, were beheaded.

The final Aljazeera report on this incident stated that:

The violence that the village populated mostly by citizens from the ethnic Hazara group witnessed on August 5 was shocking but also sadly predictable. Neighbouring villages were already under Taliban control and residents knew it was only a matter of time before the group moved on Mirzaolang. [emphasis added]

. . . . the sheer brutality of the attack in Sar-e Pul, going beyond anything the Taliban has done in its recent raids, can be understood only in the light of deeply disturbing ethnic prejudices towards the Hazara group that populate villages such as Mirzaolang. [emphasis added]

Car bomb in Kabul

Over two dozen people were killed and more than 40 wounded on 24 July after a Taliban-claimed car bomb attack struck a bus transporting government employees through a Shia neighborhood in Kabul.²¹

The bus was struck as it passed through a busy area of the capital that is home to many Shia Hazara, a persecuted ethnic community.

Multiple bodies and wounded people in the street, surrounded by shattered glass as security forces cordoned off the area.

The killed and wounded included many Hazara shopkeepers.

Expert analysis

The spate of deadly attacks targetted at Shia Hazaras has prompted serious analysis by Afghanistan experts. For example Masood Saifullah of DW has written²² that

¹⁹ Nicole Valentini¹⁹, Global Voices, 8 August 2017, "Afghanistan's Government Stood by as Militants Unleashed Hell on a Hazara Village", <https://globalvoices.org/2017/08/08/afghanistans-government-stood-by-as-militants-unleashed-hell-on-a-hazara-village/>

²⁰ "Afghan forces recapture site of village 'massacre'", Aljazeera, 15 August 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/afghan-forces-recapture-site-village-massacre-170815100236023.html>

²¹ "Afghans hold funeral for Shia Muslims killed in Kabul", 25 July 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/07/25/529644/Shia-Muslims-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Hazara-Kabul-Quetta>

*Taliban and Islamic State fighters have added a new twist to the Afghan conflict by carrying out a number of deadly attacks on the Shiite Muslim minority. **Experts warn of increased sectarian clashes in the future.** [emphasis added]*

Saifullah pays particular attention to the significance of the attack on Mirzawalang, mentioned above, linking it to the vulnerability of Shias at the national level.

Such attacks are not uncommon in the country, but what drew attention this time round was the accusation by Afghan authorities that fighters allied with the Taliban and the self-styled "Islamic State" (IS) terror groups jointly conducted these attacks.

. . . the development would add a new dimension to the already convoluted picture in Afghanistan and raise pressure on the nation's hard-pressed security forces.

It would also mark a turnaround in the relationship between the two outfits, which have been hostile to each other and vied for supremacy since IS gained a foothold in eastern Afghanistan in 2015. Fighters from the two groups have often engaged in bloody clashes against one another.

There is also a divergence in the two groups' goals. The Taliban are fighting to topple the Afghan government and impose Shariah, or Islamic law, in the conflict-ridden country. IS, for its part, wants to create a global caliphate.

But if it's confirmed that the two cooperated in carrying out the Mirza Olang attack, then that would support claims that both groups have joined hands in some cases to defeat their common enemy: the Afghan government. . . .

"The Taliban are worried that the Islamic State may be perceived as the more violent group in Afghanistan which could result in the Afghan government and the international community shifting their focus," Kabul University lecturer Faiz Mohammad Zaland told DW. "That is why they are committing such acts to keep up with the brutality carried out by IS and keep themselves at the center of the Afghan conflict," he added.

The latest attack also raised fears that the Afghan conflict is taking on a sectarian form, with the Taliban and IS now increasingly targeting the Shiite Muslim minority. [emphasis added]

Attacks on Shiite Muslims, mostly among the minority Hazara community, have increased since IS-affiliated groups emerged in parts of Afghanistan in 2015. . . .

Afghanistan has a long history of deadly tribal clashes and bloody civil war, and if not taken effective action, experts warn, violence along sectarian lines could have harsh consequences for the nation's already war-ravaged, indigent population. . . .

*"Afghanistan has been in a state of war for decades but we are seeing a new dimension to war with such incidents," Kabul-based political analyst Wahid Muzhdah told DW. **"More and more groups are targeting people based on their religious belief and the sect of Islam they follow,"** he added, stressing that such incidents were previously very rare in the Afghan conflict. [emphasis added]*

Observers see similarities between the current state of affairs in Afghanistan and those that led to bloody sectarian violence in countries like Iraq and Syria. They underline that the Afghan war will become more complex if the government's failure to protect religious and sectarian minorities continues.

D. Deportation of Asylum Seekers

Against the situation described above it is not surprising that there has been strong criticism of the seemingly uniform policy of western governments to deport many Afghan Asylum Seekers to the danger from which they fled. Indeed the current danger is patently much more serious than that which originally prompted the flight in pursuit of

²² "Taliban, IS attacks spark sectarian violence fears in Afghanistan", 08 August 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/taliban-is-attacks-spark-sectarian-violence-fears-in-afghanistan/a-40013927>

protection. Furthermore, forced deportations from Iran have been increasing greatly over recent years and there are now pressures from Pakistan to push Hazaras to join the thousands of non-Hazara refugees returning to Afghanistan as a result of a variety of pressures. A year ago Pakistan-based journalist Ahmed Rashid warned of the impending disaster: **“Why Afghan refugees are facing a humanitarian catastrophe”**²³

Hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees in Europe, Pakistan and Iran are being forced to return home to Afghanistan by the European Union, UN agencies and governments in the region.

An unprecedented humanitarian crisis is likely to be the result as the refugees - many of them destitute - return to what is effectively a countrywide war zone, with the Taliban attacking half a dozen provinces.

Moreover, the country's severe winter months are approaching, when essential supplies are even harder to obtain. The government in Kabul does not have the resources to help these refugees or resettle them as it focuses on the war, defending major cities and paying for the army's upkeep.

The EU is likely to accept many Syrian refugees because it considers Syria a war zone, but the EU does not consider Afghanistan as a war zone even though the country is torn apart by war.

Previous definitions by the EU that Kabul and provincial capitals are safe havens no longer hold true with half a dozen provincial capitals under siege by the Taliban.

[emphasis added]

Similarly, Pakistan plans to repatriate 1.6 million registered and another one million unregistered Afghan refugees - many of whom have been living in Pakistan since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. . . .

Without any declaration, the [Pakistan] government has geared up its bureaucracy and police to hound out Afghans and send them packing. . . .

Adding to the tragedy is the massive exodus of Afghans from their cities as the Taliban attack them. . . .

Many refugees are destitute, but others are used to living with housing, electricity and schools for their children - all of which will be unavailable when they return to Afghan cities. Many will migrate to Kabul, which is already over-populated with a fragile infrastructure that cannot cope with new arrivals.

. . . . A man-made humanitarian catastrophe could be the end result of these governmental policies.

What is even more disheartening is that no government, aid agency or any other group is trying to find a more equitable solution to the problem of Afghan refugees.

[emphasis added]

In the midst of war and poverty, nobody is speaking up for Afghans as they face even greater hardship and tragedy.

Anna Shea, Amnesty International's Researcher on Refugee and Migrants Rights, recently visited Kabul and reported on the plight of returned refugees.²⁴ She describes and analyses the prevalent overwhelming fear in Kabul:

Foreigners hide behind their sandbagged walls, barbed wire, armed guards and bulletproof vehicles. But many locals are terrified too, including those who fled the country but were recently returned against their will.

²³ BBC, 12 October 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37607785>

²⁴ Anna Shea, Amnesty, 4 June 2017, “They fled Afghanistan fearing for their lives but Europe forced them back”, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/they-fled-afghanistan-fearing-for-their-lives-but-europe-forced-them-back/>

There is every reason to be afraid. The fragile government struggles to make headway against the Taliban, which is likely more powerful now than at any time since 2001. Other armed opposition groups — including the so-called Islamic State — have seized control of parts of the country and carry out devastating attacks even in securitized areas of Kabul and elsewhere.

Shea is highly critical of the seemingly mindless application of the Memoranda of Understanding with Afghanistan, signed by a number of European countries (as well as Australia) through which the Afghanistan government agrees to readmit its citizens under certain conditions. She says that

their implementation must conform with international law, which prohibits states from transferring people if there is a risk of serious human rights violations.

Nonetheless, even as the situation in Afghanistan has unmistakably worsened, Western governments have escalated their efforts to return Afghans who fled war and persecution. [emphasis added]

*At an aid conference in October 2016, under pressure from the European Union, the Afghan government signed the EU-Afghanistan “Joint Way Forward,” a document that paves the way for the forcible return of an unlimited number of Afghans from Europe. **One unnamed Afghan government official called the agreement a “poisoned cup” the country was forced to accept in return for development aid.*** [emphasis added]

*Hundreds of returns have taken place since the agreement was signed six months ago. My colleagues and I recently spoke with Afghans deported from Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. **While everyone in Afghanistan is at risk, many of the returned people we spoke to were extremely vulnerable, and their returns likely violated international law.*** [emphasis added]

One forced returnee had never been to Kabul before. He said:

“I have nowhere to go . . . Maybe I will join the drug addicts in the west of the city, just to get some shelter.”

Another man is in danger of religious persecution for converting to Christianity. Like many others he left Afghanistan as a child, grew up in Iran, then fled to a European country.

He is terrified about what will happen to him in Afghanistan. Still in shock after being wrenched from his adopted country and faith community, he said: “I feel like I’ve fallen from the sky. I don’t believe I’m here.”

He, too, had never been to Kabul. “I don’t know anything about Afghanistan,” . . . “Where will I go? I don’t have funds to live alone and I can’t live with relatives because they will see that I don’t pray.”

Shea notes that these stories are “far from exceptional”:

Some deportees have already suffered violence after being forcibly returned to Afghanistan. An Afghan who returned from Germany in January 2017 was injured in a suicide attack near the Supreme Court just two weeks later, according to a recent report by the Afghan Analysts Network. Several other people — including young children — were injured in attacks by armed groups in Kabul, a member of the Afghanistan Migrants Advice and Support Organization told us.

Shea summarises:

None of these people should have been sent back. *When they walked out of the airport, the country was probably as unknown to many of them as it was to me — and they face far greater risks.*

European governments and leaders know Afghanistan is not safe. If they don't stop deporting people like [A] and [F], they will have blood on their hands. [emphasis added]

This analysis is entirely consistent with that of **Dr Liza Schuster**, Reader in Sociology, City, University of London, who has lived in Kabul for several recent years as a researcher on the situation. Her article “**Kabul is still not safe – but the EU is**

deporting people there anyway²⁵, published almost a year ago but unfortunately not noted in time for my November 2016 update, paints a devastating picture.

“All in all, more than 1.2m people have been internally displaced in Afghanistan; thousands more are being forced back from Pakistan and Iran. Kabul itself is bursting at the seams with displaced people. The city’s vast northern suburb of Kheir Khanna hosts thousands who’ve fled a week-long battle in the city of Kunduz, which displaced 24,000 people in the week before the attacks alone.

Many of the new arrivals in Kabul are sleeping in the open with no access to essentials and living in fear of terror attacks, which occurred regularly during the summer. There’s no knowing where or when the next attack will happen, but most expect the violence to escalate before the usual winter lull – except that last year, there was no lull. As temperatures drop in the coming months, people will die of cold and hunger, as outlined by Amnesty International in a 2016 report, “My children will die this winter”. [emphasis added]

Afghanistan’s economy is atrophic, unemployment is rapidly rising, and the political situation is extremely fragile. It is no place for people without support networks. [emphasis added]

....
And yet, according to European governments, the city is apparently still a safe place for people it intends to deport. [emphasis added]

Like Anna Shea of Amnesty, Schuster is highly critical of the “Joint Way Forward” agreement imposed on a reluctant Afghan government enabling the EU to deport an unlimited number of asylum seekers back to Afghanistan – *“which is already host to a huge number of displaced people”*.

Schuster notes that the European Council’s president, Donald Tusk, helpfully pointed out that an earlier deal with Turkey (upon which the “Joint Way Forward was modelled”)

would show migrants that there was no longer a path into Europe for people seeking a better life – even though the migrants in question were overwhelmingly refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq many of whom have no alternative but to risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean precisely because of the EU’s strict border controls.

She quotes Dimitrios Avramopoulos, an EU commissioner:

This approach will reward those countries willing to cooperate with the EU on migration management. Following the same logic, we need to ensure that there are consequences for those countries that refuse to meet their international obligation to take back their nationals who are irregularly present in other EU countries.

Schuster states that

The Afghan government has for six months been under unrelenting pressure to sign this deal – and yet EU officials publicly deny that the agreement for Afghanistan to take back rejected asylum seekers has any connection with the supply of aid.

The public denials have been shown conclusively to be public lies. In summary ***We have known for decades that governments ignore evidence that calls their policies into question, including evidence of high levels of violence in countries to which they intend to forcibly return people. But these denials about what the Joint Way Forward entails are shocking – every bit as shocking as the EU’s willingness to deport people to a deeply troubled and fragile country.*** [emphasis added]

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Australia’s complicity in such blatant international bullying and violations of Human Rights is equally shocking.

²⁵ October 14, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/kabul-is-still-not-safe-but-the-eu-is-deporting-people-there-anyway-66933>

E. Conclusions

Unfortunately there is no way to avoid the following conclusions:

- Afghanistan is an increasingly dangerous nation for all of its citizens
- Sectarian persecution and violence, especially in relation to mistreatment of Shias (almost exclusively ethnic Hazaras in Afghanistan) has escalated to a new level in the past year
- The Taliban (mainly Sunni Pashtuns) continue to make advances throughout the country and cannot be trusted to live in peace with the other ethnic and religious groups, especially Shia Hazaras.
- The Islamic State affiliates operating in Afghanistan are out of control and represent an ongoing threat to national security and a particular threat to Shias who are considered to be infidels.
- The Taliban and the ISIS cells continue to compete with each other for influence and prestige.
- Meanwhile the economy is in significant decline and the future is especially bleak for the 1.2 million internally displaced people and the hundreds of thousands of returnees from Pakistan, Iran and countries further afield.
- There seems to be little hope that the weak, corrupt and ethnically biased national government will be able to address any of these issues in the near future.

In relation to Hazaras, the conclusion stated almost a year ago holds true:

“Prospects are bleak for all Afghanistan Hazaras, both those who have little choice but to remain and the thousands who are fleeing. Any deportees will face an especially dangerous and difficult future.”

There is clearly no way that the Australian government can honestly or professionally maintain the fiction that it is reasonable to deport Hazara Asylum Seekers back to Afghanistan, perhaps based on the unfounded contention that cities like Mazar-e Sharif or Herat might provide viable relocation venues with demonstrably enduring safety. I have argued previously that the chances of survival would be extremely remote for any isolated Hazaras in such situations (let alone in the rest of the country) and the likelihood of harm would be extremely high. Events of the past year have reinforced this conclusion.

The opinion of such experts as Liza Schuster and Anna Shea, that the willingness of governments to deport refugees (even non-Hazaras) to Afghanistan is “shocking” and unthinkable, must be heeded and acted upon. “Blood is on their hands.”