

Mazar-e Sharif as a Relocation Venue for Deported Asylum Seekers

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Mazar-e Sharif, capital of Balkh province, located in the north of the nation, is Afghanistan's second largest city. It has suddenly emerged for consideration as a possible safe destination for Hazaras seeking asylum in Australia. If this city can be proved to offer enduring safety and viability, practically all Hazara Asylum Seekers can be forcibly deported there, however strong their primary claims might be. Such an agenda is now looking very possible, at least for young single men. The escalation of danger in Afghanistan has triggered a growing flood of refugees, most heading for Europe, and no doubt a majority of them Hazaras. Current Australian political commitment is not to offer them safety from the danger but to deter any of them from heading this way. Forced deportation would be calculated as a significant element in a deterrence strategy. It is therefore important to examine the theory that Mazar-e Sharif might possibly be a viable relocation option.

Background

There are three main issues: access, economic viability, and enduring safety for unconnected Hazara newcomers. Mazar-e Sharif once had a reputation as a relatively safe city with a strong economy. But that has changed in the last 5 years. Precise figures are hard to find, but a few years ago sixty percent of the population (totalling about half a million) were Tajiks, with 10% Pashtuns, 10% Hazaras, 10% Uzbeks and 10% Turkmen. The governor, Atta Mohammed Noor, is a Tajik, an extremely powerful ex-Mujahadeen leader and warlord, who opposes the Taliban and banishes anyone else who might try to stand up to him. His iron fist and promotion of economic progress entrenched him in power and established a measure of general tranquility. However the situation has changed.

Safety

The governor's influence no longer guarantees security, especially in areas beyond the city. The rest of Balkh province is certainly vulnerable to insurgent incursions. Even as early as November 2010, before the well-known escalation of insurgent activities all over the country, Governor Atta expressed concern that the insurgency was in the process of spreading throughout the entire province². He was concerned that there was no apparent coordinated plan to counter it. He believed that the police were still understaffed, had poor equipment and that they were not receiving the necessary assistance from the Afghanistan National Army. Following that there was certainly a marked increase in insurgent activity in 2011. Security-related incidents on the roads were reported, and there were cases where civilians had been caught in the crossfire³.

Jumping to 2014, it is clear that the governor's concerns were borne out. For example, as reported by the European Asylum Support Office⁴, the London-based private security company Edinburgh International stated in December 2014:

¹ Retired agricultural scientist, international development programs coordinator, and cross cultural consultant, trainer and researcher.

² Report Afghanistan: Security Report November 2010 – June 2011 (PART II) LANDINFO – 20 SEPTEMBER 2011, http://www.landinfo.no/asset/1842/1/1842_1.pdf

³ Ibid.

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/european-asylum-support-office/bz3012564enc_complet_en.pdf, January 2016

An increase in armed attacks is currently occurring in the regional hub Mazar-e Sharif and neighbouring districts of Balkh, raising the prospect of a brief revival in insurgent activity in line with seasonal trends. While such attacks remain almost exclusively directed against the national security forces, sporadic bombings in Balkh's major cities have been known to extend to civilian targets and could pose an indirect threat to the multitude of international and non-governmental agencies which operate from the city. . . .

After that:

- The Afghanistan government's own report from 2015⁵ noted that the latest figures showed that among the 5 largest cities, Mazar-e Sharif ranked second only to Jalalabad in terms of rate of increase in civilian casualties from the civil war in the first four months of the year.
- **"At the end of March 2015, in two separate incidents, unknown gunmen killed two persons in the streets of Mazar. One was a relative of a provincial council member, the other an official of the ministry of Foreign Affairs, believed to be a close relative to provincial governor Mohammad Atta Noor."**⁶ [emphasis added]
- A Taliban attack on the provincial prosecutor's office in Mazar-e Sharif in April 2015 resulted in at least 10 deaths and 60 people wounded⁷. Dr. Muhammad Afzal Hadeed, a member of the Balkh provincial council, who was at the site, said *"These kind of attacks haven't happened in Balkh in recent years, . . . It is worrying"*. (That puts an ominous perspective on the situation: the emphasis is not on the rarity of such events but on the portent of a new era of increased insecurity.)
- In July 2015 an Afghan MP from Balkh was reported⁸ to have said (in April) that 60 Hazaras had been kidnapped there over the course of just two months.
- In September 2015 two vehicles were stopped on a rural road in the Zari district of Balkh province and 13 Hazaras killed⁹.
- On 12 October 2016 a bomb blast killed at least 14 Shias and wounded 36 outside a mosque near Mazar-e Sharif,¹⁰. An 'Islamic State' affiliate in Afghanistan soon claimed responsibility for this attack.¹¹
- On 10 November 2016 a bomb attack on the German consulate in the centre of Mazar-e-Sharif caused the deaths of 6 people and injuries to at least 120¹².

It should not be forgotten that in December 2011 insurgents got right to the centre of Mazar-e Sharif and targeted Shias participating in an Ashura commemoration, reportedly with the intention of aggravating sectarian tensions. At least 4 people died. Earlier that year, three UN international staff and four international security guards were slain in Mazar-e-Sharif when a crowd of around 3,000 people protesting against the burning of a Koran in the United States unleashed their anger.

With the increasing spread of the Taliban influence all over Afghanistan the safety of Balkh province as a whole cannot be guaranteed. Note again the EASO report¹³ cited

⁵ State of Afghan Cities report 2015 (Volume-I English), <http://unhabitat.org/books/soac2015/>

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/european-asylum-support-office/bz3012564enc_complet_en.pdf, January 2016

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ <http://observers.france24.com/en/20150709-afghanistan-protests-taliban-hazara-police>

⁹ <http://www.dawn.com/news/1205117>

¹⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/afghanistan-attack-kills-14-worshipers-mosque-161012125748591.html>. Note also RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan, <http://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-ashura-shiite-balkh-deadly-bombing/28048205.html>

¹¹ Sune Engel Rasmussen in Kabul, 23 November 2016;

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/21/kabul-mosque-hit-by-deadly-suicide-bomb-attack>

¹² Fatal attack on German consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif, 11 November 2016,

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37944115>

¹³ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/european-asylum-support-office/bz3012564enc_complet_en.pdf

above. The Governor has already been busy trying to deal with insurgent advances in the countryside¹⁴, especially in the Chimtal area and other “restive zones” south-west of Mazar-e Sharif city. Casualty levels are high and in June 2015 a district centre was reported to be in Taliban hands.

Complicating the issue is the seething enmity between Pashtuns and Tajiks that goes back at least to the participation, even leadership, of the Tajiks in the “Northern Alliance” which helped to bring down the Taliban government in 2002¹⁵. Furthermore, if the Taliban forces or ISIS operatives were able to enter the city of Mazar-e Sharif, there is no doubt the Hazaras, as Shias, would be especially vulnerable. Certainly it can be said that not only is there well known enmity between Pashtuns and Hazaras, but there is historic tension between Tajiks and Hazaras. The governor certainly could not be counted on to protect the Hazaras of Mazar-e Sharif in the event of a Taliban attack.

This summary is clearly at odds with recent DIBP attempts to play down the danger. For example:

The city . . . is considered to be one of the safest cities in Afghanistan, even more so than Kabul. DFAT advice [March 2014!!] is that the Government has maintained effective control over Mazar-e-Sharif.

. . . insurgent attacks . . . remain almost exclusively directed at the national security forces, . . . Civilians have been victims in these attacks, but there is little evidence or indication of the direct or deliberate targeting of civilians or ethnic or religious groups.

. . . significant that there have been no major attacks against Hazara Shias in Mazar-e-Sharif since 2011, . . . country information that indicates the government has effective control and security over the city. . . .

Considering all the circumstances, [it is considered] there is not a real chance or risk of the applicant being seriously or significantly harmed by Islamic State in Mazar-e-Sharif, for reasons of his religion, ethnicity or any other reasons.

. . . the country information does not support a finding that low profile Hazara Shia . . . would face a real chance of being targeted for harm by AGEs such as the Taliban in urban areas like Mazar-e-Sharif.

. . . a returnee/failed (Hazara Shia) asylum seeker from the west, would not face a real chance of being seriously harmed for these reasons if he returned to live in a major urban area like Mazar-e-Sharif (or even Kabul).

Reference to the source indicates that the date when Mazar-e Sharif was “considered to be one of the safest cities of Afghanistan” was January 2014 at the latest. Obviously, as shown above, the situation has changed since then.

¹⁴ http://www.triplecanopy.com/fileadmin/user_upload/Reports/Afghan_Report_06_18_2015.pdf

¹⁵ For a summary see “Tajiks and their security in Afghanistan”: http://www.bmrsg.org.au/compassion/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Tajiks-and-security-Sept_2014-.pdf. Quotations:

The Tajiks are hated by the Taliban because of their reputation as Soviet supporters and because of their participation in and indeed leadership of the Northern Alliance. This alliance, a coalition of resistance groups consisting of Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks, was dominated by Tajiks and led by Tajik general Ahmed Shah Massoud of Panjshir. Masoud received assistance from his old enemy, Russia, as well as from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran, and thereby established the pejorative label “communist” attributed to Tajiks by Pashtuns.

Most significantly the Northern Alliance was recognised by the international community as the government of Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2002, as a result of US-led intervention by coalition forces. During the time of Taliban rule in the late 1990s Tajiks and other non-Pashtuns were suppressed and many Tajiks were killed. . . .

Memories are long and this historical opposition is not forgotten. It means that even though most Tajik’s share the Sunni Islam faith of the Taliban they are not immune from targeted violence. In general terms the Taliban do not accept the Tajik brand of Sunni Islam, which is considered to be too lax. While the Tajiks tend to be sympathetic to the application of Sharia law, they are generally not ready to embrace the extremist position of the Taliban.

As with security at the national level, the important issue is the **trend**. Insurgent violence around Mazar-e Sharif may not be extremely intense at the moment, although it is not insignificant, and the city may only be penetrated occasionally, but the portents for peace are not promising. Certainly the DIBP confidence cannot be justified. Both the Taliban and ISIS affiliates are capable of making inroads at any time, as has been well demonstrated.

The April 2016 *UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan*¹⁶ refer to the need for a proposed relocation venue to be “*durably safe*”, characterised by safety that is “*not illusory or unpredictable*”. “Durable safety” in Mazar-e Sharif hardly applies to the population in general, let alone to an isolated Hazara stranger without shelter or family support.

Economic viability

It is now clear that Mazar-e Sharif suffers the same economic malaise as other parts of Afghanistan. The severe economic downturn in Afghanistan since 2012 is universally known. This was specifically recognized in the Urban Poverty Report published by the Danish Refugee Council in November 2014¹⁷ and Mazar-e Sharif was not exempt from the consequences. For example, the report, published 3 years ago, notes:

“On the food expenditure scale, Mazar-e-Sharif displays particularly alarming levels . . .”
(Page 38)

Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif seemed to have been hit particularly strongly by the economic slow down with respectively 75% and 69% of households reporting a deterioration of their economic situation over the past 12 months. (Page 83)

*“This confirms previous observations showing that in the current context Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat do not fare well, despite their **previous economic dynamism**.”* (page 87, discussing nutrition) [emphasis added]

Without doubt, the economy of Afghanistan has deteriorated even further in the past 3 years, and this applies right across the nation.

Early signs of the economic downturn in Mazar-e Sharif were noticed by European expert on Afghanistan, Dr Antonio Giustozzi in December 2012¹⁸:

Furthermore, an economic downturn sending thousands of villagers employed in the building sites of Mazar back to their villages could provide a fertile recruitment ground for the Taliban in the future.

The Danish information in particular is clearly at odds with the rosy picture recently portrayed by DIBP, which is based largely on out-of-context quotations from the same source. Descriptions such as the following say nothing about the actual economic situation of Mazar-e Sharif:

“one of the biggest commercial and financial centres in Afghanistan” (Note: Kabul is bigger and it is demonstrably an economic basket case);

“unofficial capital of northern Afghanistan”,

“The Balkh Province has a tradition of high educational standards and has a comparatively high literacy rate, including for women . . . It is home to several universities”

Statements such as “*Mazar-e Sharif remains one of the more prosperous urban centres in Afghanistan*” are without foundation. Not only is the main source document¹⁹ that is used to

¹⁶ <http://www.refworld.org/docid/570f96564.html>

¹⁷ <https://drc.dk/media/1181597/urban-poverty-report-a-study-of-poverty-food-insecurity-and-resilience-in-afghan-cities.pdf>

¹⁸ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit Issues Paper, The Resilient Oligopoly: A Political-Economy of Northern Afghanistan 2001 and onwards, www.areu.org.af/.../1213E%20Resilient%20Oligopoly%20IP%20Dec%202013.pdf

support the case for prosperity 3 years out of date, but the quotations are misused. They do not represent the thrust of the report. In context, the statement “*Mazar-e-Sharif confirms its status as the economic hub of the North*” does not mean that the economy itself is necessarily vibrant or full of opportunity; the city remains the hub whether the economy is going well or not. The statement “*the economic dynamism and the relative safety of the city are important factors . . .*” is mentioned only in historical and relative terms - in relation to the city functioning as a “magnet” attracting people displaced from rural situations because of fighting and poverty (page 31). Later (page 87), discussing nutrition, the report notes: “*This confirms previous observations showing that in the current context Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat do not fare well, despite their **previous economic dynamism.***” [emphasis added] In comparison with the 3 other major cities, households living in Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat were shown to be particularly likely to have relied on the coping strategy of lowering the quality and quantity of food consumed over the previous 12 months. This is a clear sign of worsening poverty. The main message of the report is reflected in that statement and those quoted above.

One decision maker notes that Professor Alessandro Monsutti “*has described the situation of ordinary Hazaras as possibly better in Mazar than in Kabul*”, but that was said in January 2012, and it is hardly definitive anyway. The severe economic downturn in the subsequent 5 years has altered all the comparisons and there is now little data to indicate differences between the major cities in this matter.

In fact Hazaras are second class citizens in Mazar-e Sharif. A Hazara refugee who graduated from a university in Mazar-e Sharif has described a situation of discrimination and on-going frequent departures (to the barely more suitable Iran and Pakistan in the first instance)²⁰; the governor has replaced any Hazaras who were in public service positions, even senior positions, with Tajiks, and any of these well qualified Hazaras who remain in the area, often having little other choice, have to be content with menial jobs at best; even the well-connected struggle to survive.

Access

At first, the decision makers were suggesting that Mazar-e Sharif was safely accessible by road from Kabul. However this idea seems to have been abandoned now, and for good reason. There is certainly no doubt that the Taliban are targeting the main highway, the “ring road” that connects Kabul with the other major cities. A key focus is precisely on the long section between Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif, which passes through Baghlan Province. In fact Obaid Ali of Afghanistan Analysts Network has recently published a report on the subject: “*Taliban in the North: Gaining ground along the Ring Road in Baghlan*”²¹. Obaid Ali says:

The Taliban have made significant inroads in a number of strategic areas in the northern province of Baghlan over the past two years. They now pose a greater threat than ever to the Baghlan-Balkh highway, part of the Ring Road which here links Kabul to the north. The Taliban know that by blocking highways, they can effectively undermine the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), both psychologically and physically. . . .

The Taliban have been trying to intimidate people travelling along the Baghlan-Balkh highway since late 2015. Holding onto earlier territorial gains, they continued attacking ANSF check-posts along the highway and slowly expanded their grip over more territory, . . .

¹⁹ <https://drc.dk/media/1181597/urban-poverty-report-a-study-of-poverty-food-insecurity-and-resilience-in-afghan-cities.pdf>

²⁰ Personal communication 2016, based on the refugee’s direct experience up to 2009 and continuing contact.

²¹ <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/taliban-in-the-north-gaining-ground-along-the-ring-road-in-baghlan/>, 15 August 2016

In December 2015, the Taliban attacked the vehicle of General Hessamuddin Haqbin, former head of the Hairatan port in Balkh province and a prominent local figure. Haqbin himself was seriously injured, as were three other passengers. His bodyguard was killed. According to an Afghan media report, in that month alone, there were three major attacks on this part of the Baghlan-Balkh highway.

According to provincial council members, by the beginning of May 2016, Chashma-ye Shir was entirely under Taliban control. They were now regularly searching vehicles for ANSF personnel and government officials. . . .

Prospects for improved security in Baghlan in the second half of 2016 remain as bleak as they were during the first half, especially after the fall of Dahna-ye Ghorri on 14 August 2016, the first district to fall into Taliban hands in Baghlan province since 2001. Worsening security would mostly affect the local civilian population, but also threatens the many seeking to travel or transport goods to and from the northwest. One of the country's main communication routes remains at risk.

It must be emphasised that wherever the Taliban operate along the Highways, Hazaras are vulnerable. No Hazara wants to risk being the first to hit the headlines on a particular stretch of road. By any standard there is a real risk of serious harm for any Hazara travelling the highways of Afghanistan, not least the highway passing through Baghlan.

The only practical alternative for accessing Mazar-e Sharif is by air. Certainly there is a functioning modern airport about 20 km east of the city centre with regular international and local flights. However **no-one can guarantee that either the facility itself or the connecting road will remain free of insurgency control. DFAT advises Australians not to visit Mazar-e Sharif even though it is a famous tourist venue. If the city and airport are safe, one wonders why Australians are not encouraged to visit.**

Once inside the city metropolitan area a deportee would be like a bird in a cage. Safety and cost issues would make travel outwards very difficult. There would be no safe destination in Afghanistan anyway.

It is important to note that the 2016 UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines cited above emphasise the need for any proposed venue to be *“Practically, safely and legally accessible to the individual”*.

Accommodation and Family Support

The 2016 UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines recognise the importance of *“pre-identified accommodation and livelihood options”*. A deportee would be in the same situation as an internally displaced person and the scale and dire situation of IDP settlements in and around Mazar-e Sharif is well documented²².

Most critically, the importance of family connections for survival in Afghanistan, especially for Hazaras, must override all other considerations. The opinions of the experts in this area must not be ignored:

Professor Alessandro Monsutti (leading European expert on Afghanistan): *In Afghanistan, people are linked to their families and social networks. If you are from one place, you cannot readily relocate elsewhere. The state does not provide strong services. In a society where the state provides so little support, life is organised around social networks and face-to-face relations. If someone returns to Afghanistan, he or she could not live outside his or her traditional or family area.*²³ [emphasis added]

²² State of Afghan Cities report 2015 (Volume-I English), <http://unhabitat.org/books/soac2015/>

²³ *The Situation for Hazaras in Afghanistan*, 9 August 2010, para.55), quoted in William Maley, “On Relocation to Kabul of Members of the Hazara Minority in Afghanistan”, 19 November 2012, www.facebook.com/labor4refugees/posts/382792781806801

Professor William Maley: *The mere fact that there may be people of similar ethnic background living in a potential relocation destination does not overcome the problem of lack of social support. Ethnic identities do not in and of themselves give rise to the ties of personal affinity and reciprocity that arise from family connections.*²⁴

DFAT, July 2013: *. . . family or other connections are critical in regards to the ability to find both long-term shelter and employment.*²⁵

These opinions are affirmed by the 2016 UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines referred to above.

William Maley's warning²⁶ must be heeded: ***“An Hazara who is returned to a region in which he lacks strong social connections is likely to end up destitute, or be exposed to gross exploitation or criminal predation”.***

Summary

In summary, there is very little reason to believe that Mazar-e Sharif is safer and more viable than anywhere else in Afghanistan as a potential relocation destination for a forcibly deported Hazara.

²⁴ www.facebook.com/labor4refugees/posts/382792781806801

²⁵ DFAT Country Information Report Afghanistan, 31 July 2013

²⁶ <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Maley-Hazaras-24.7.16.pdf>