

# April 2018 update on Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return

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- Original paper: September 2012<sup>2</sup>;
- Collection of new material: 8<sup>th</sup> November 2012;
- Supplementary updates: 12<sup>th</sup> February 2013; 19<sup>th</sup> May 2013; 28<sup>th</sup> February 2014;
- Supplementary update and overview: 18<sup>th</sup> September 2014;
- Supplementary updates: 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2015; 14<sup>th</sup> September 2015; 8<sup>th</sup> February 2016, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2016; 26<sup>th</sup> September 2017;
- This update: 2nd April 2018

## A. Introduction

This is the twelfth paper in my series on “Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return”, beginning in September 2012, the latest published in September 2017<sup>3</sup>. In March 2017 I also published a paper focused on Mazar-e Sharif<sup>4</sup>, because of ongoing suggestions that this city might represent a viable safe haven for returning Hazaras.

Within days of publication of the September 2017 update there was an Ashura Day attack on a packed mosque of Shia Islam worshippers in Kabul<sup>5</sup>, continuing a tragic succession of deadly incidents aimed against ethnic Hazaras (essentially corresponding to Shias/Shi'ites in Afghanistan), especially over the previous 15 months. It coincided with communication to me of information indicating that Australian decision makers were continuing to deny the significance of dangers facing Hazaras in Afghanistan and consequently were continuing to reject most Hazara claims for protection. I therefore published an article<sup>6</sup> focused on the relentless and dangerous attitude of both Australia and many European governments, essentially maintaining denial of the abundant, professional and incontrovertible “country information”. The situation has not changed over the past 6 months, both in terms of continuing targeted attacks on Hazaras in Kabul and other parts of the country, and in terms of continuing rejection of claims for protection by Hazaras from Afghanistan.

This update highlights (a) the list of attack on Hazaras in Afghanistan in the past 6 months and (b) expert analysis of the Afghanistan context in relation to both the general security situation and the ongoing dangers faced by Hazaras.

## B. Attacks targeting Hazaras

The Ashura Day attack of 20 September 2017, referred to above, has been well documented. At least 5 people were killed and more than 20 injured<sup>7</sup>. The Afghanistan affiliate of Islamic State (ISKP or Daesh or ISIL) was believed to be behind the attack. A Reuters report<sup>8</sup> highlighted the consequent escalation of the already intense fear among the Hazara community. While the government had provided some basic training and weapons for a few hundred volunteer guards near mosques and other meeting places, this could cover only a few of Kabul's Shi'ite mosques,

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<sup>2</sup> “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/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bmrsg.org.au/compassion/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/September-2017-update-on-Hazara-Asylum-Seekers-from-Afghanistan-final-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bmrsg.org.au/compassion/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Viability-of-Mazar-2.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> “Kabul Reels After Attack on Another Shiite Mosque”, Mujib Mashal and Fahim Abed, 29 September 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/29/world/asia/afghanistan-suicide-bomb-attack-shiite-mosque.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bmrsg.org.au/latest-attack-on-hazaras-in-afghanistan-highlights-australias-murderous-head-in-the-sand-policy/>

<sup>7</sup> “Suicide 'shepherd' bomber kills several people near Kabul mosque”, BBC, 29 September 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41445289>

<sup>8</sup> “Afghan Shi'ites fear further attacks on Ashura celebrations”, 30 September 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-security/afghan-shiites-fear-further-attacks-on-ashura-celebrations-idUSKCN1C5073>

numbering more than 400. Security was increased in Kabul and other cities ahead of the Ashura Day celebrations, but it was inadequate to prevent the determined efforts of the anti-Shi'ite groups.

- Soon after this attack there were several other targeted bombings in various parts of Afghanistan. On 21 October 2017, in an article<sup>9</sup> entitled “*Dozens killed in twin bombings of mosques in Afghanistan: Suicide bombings in capital Kabul and Ghor province leave at least 70 dead, the latest in a series of attacks across the country*”, veteran Afghanistan expert Sune Engel Rasmussen reported that “*in a deadly week for Afghans, . . . nearly 200 people have been killed, the majority civilians*”. The number included 39 people killed (apart from at least 45 injured) when a suicide bomber detonated his explosives among some 100 worshippers in a Shia mosque in the western part of the Kabul.

***“The bombing at Imam Zaman mosque in Kabul hit a city reeling from a series of assaults against the country’s Shia minority.”***

***“Afghan Shias have found themselves under threat since militants loyal to Islamic State set their sights on Kabul last summer. Before the attack on Friday, 84 people had been killed and nearly 200 injured in direct attacks against Shia holy places or religious ceremonies this year, according to the UN.”***

***“Isis has claimed responsibility for most of the attacks.”***

In a subsequent report<sup>10</sup> Thomas Ruttig of Afghanistan Analysts Network noted that the number of deaths in the 20 October attack on the Shia mosque in Kabul had risen to 56. Ruttig maintained the theme that “*this year’s general patterns of terrorist attacks in Kabul and elsewhere were often directed against the Shia minority and claimed by ISKP*”.

- The next major attack on Shi'ites (Hazaras) was on 28 December 2017, a suicide bombing of a Shi'ite cultural centre in Kabul that also housed a news agency, Afghan Voice Agency<sup>11</sup>. At least 41 people were killed and 84 wounded. The Islamic State affiliate claimed responsibility for the attack. Toby Lanzer, the acting head of the United Nations mission in Afghanistan, commented:

***“Today in Kabul we have witnessed another truly despicable crime in a year already marked by unspeakable atrocities.”***

- Although fighting and generalised violence continued unabated in Afghanistan in the early months of 2018, there seemed to be a lull in high profile attacks specifically targeting Shias (Hazaras). However these attacks resumed on 9 March 2018 when at least 10 people were killed in a suicide bombing outside a mosque in Kabul’s Shi'ite community<sup>12</sup>. “*The attack provoked spontaneous angry protests in the streets around the mosque.*” This report reiterated that both Islamic State and the Taliban<sup>13</sup> continue to claim responsibility for attacks on Hazaras:

***“Both extremist groups are trying to provoke sectarian conflict between Afghan Sunnis and Shi’ites, and many of their attacks have been staged on Fridays, the Muslim holy day for both sects, or during Shi’ite periods of religious mourning and celebration. The violence became so frequent that the government last year trained and armed local Hazara men to guard community mosques.”***

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<sup>9</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen in Islamabad, additional reporting by Akhtar Mohammad Makoi, 21 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/dozens-killed-in-twin-bombings-of-mosques-in-afghanistan>

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Ruttig (edited by Sari Kouvo), Afghanistan Analysts Network, 7 November 2017, “The ‘Humvee Bomb’ Series: The October wave of Taleban attacks in 2017 context”, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-humvee-bomb-series-the-october-wave-of-taleban-attacks-in-2017-context/>

<sup>11</sup> Fahim Abed, Fatima Faizi and Mujib Mashal, 28 December 2017, “Islamic State Claims Deadly Blast at Afghan Shiite Center”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/28/world/asia/afghanistan-suicide-attack.html>

<sup>12</sup> Sayed Salahuddin and Pamela Constable, 09 March 2018, “At least 30 die in Afghan violence, including 10 in Kabul attack on Shiites”, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/at-least-30-die-in-afghan-violence-including-10-shiites-in-kabul-suicide-attack/2018/03/09/dc9f7db2-2396-11e8-badd-7c9f29a55815\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.17683b712217](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/at-least-30-die-in-afghan-violence-including-10-shiites-in-kabul-suicide-attack/2018/03/09/dc9f7db2-2396-11e8-badd-7c9f29a55815_story.html?utm_term=.17683b712217)

<sup>13</sup> Taliban or Taleban: I have made no attempt to standardise the spelling/ transliteration of the name.

- Within a few days there was a follow up attack near a Shi'ite shrine in Kabul<sup>14</sup> in which at least 31 people were killed and 65 wounded. This coincided with the 21 March Norouz holiday. Often called the Persian New Year, Nouroz is celebrated around the world, largely by Shi'ites, although its origins pre-date Islam and its religious links are not strong. A suicide bomber attacked a crowd of hundreds of people, certain to be almost exclusively Hazaras, who had gathered to celebrate. The Islamic State group claimed the bombing. The blast occurred outside Ali Abad hospital, close to Kabul University in the west of the city. The shrine has been attacked before, always at times when Shi'ites have gathered for cultural celebrations.
- Following the 21 March New Year attack, 23 year old Hazara woman Fatima Faizi wrote a poignant reflection on the situation<sup>15</sup>. Fatima is a reporter in the Kabul Bureau of The New York Times. Although she was not on duty at the time, she went to the scene:

*This would be the eighth suicide bombing I've witnessed here in Kabul, and I am sick to death of them.*

*People at the scene were angry and chased away all the other journalists. I guess because I was shaking so much nobody noticed me. . . .*

*I understand their anger. They don't want their agony to be material for journalists; in the moment of their awful sorrow, they don't want their spectacle to be shared by strangers. . . .*

*(But) I want the world to know about Afghanistan, about how they are killing my people. I also want them to know that I have not forgotten the face of a single one of those victims I've seen and I probably never will. . . .*

*The world has tired of the story of poor bombed-out Afghanistan. It's hardly news anymore: 150 killed on a Wednesday, 84 killed on a Thursday, 10 killed on a Friday, oh well. . . .*

*Often the police keep us journalists so far away that all we have is the numbers, and they are sometimes deliberately falsified, as happened last year in the Military Hospital Attack, where many think the death toll was triple what officials admitted.*

- Kabul was not the only city that saw violence against Hazaras in March 2018. On 25 March the Nabi Akram Shia mosque in the western city of Herat was attacked by two suicide bombers<sup>16</sup>. At least one person was reported dead and several wounded. “*The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS or ISKP) claimed responsibility for the attack.*”

### **C. Recent Occurrences of Targetted Violence in Afghanistan – the Overall Picture**

Detailed description and analysis of the overall picture of targetted violence in Afghanistan in the past 6 months is beyond the scope of this update. However some key references and summary statements are in order.

#### **1. The October 2017 wave of attacks**

The report by Thomas Ruttig<sup>17</sup> of AAN, cited above, adds in-depth information covering a series of high-profile insurgent attacks that took place almost simultaneously in Kabul as well as in five provinces in just the month of October 2017. Provincial and district centres were targeted, as well as ANSF installations and Sunni and Shia mosques. The overall number of people killed in these attacks was estimated to be over 200, with hundreds more injured. Ruttig concluded that:

<sup>14</sup> BBC, 21 March 2018, “Kabul Sakhi shrine: 'Dozens dead' in New Year attack”, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43484206>

<sup>15</sup> Fatima Faizi (Rod Nordland contributed reporting; credit Erin Trie of NYT), 24 March 2018, “This Is What I Do When I Hear the Bombs Explode”, [https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/24/world/asia/afghanistan-kabul-terrorism.html?em\\_pos=small&emc=edit\\_ti\\_20180325&nl=times-insider&nl\\_art=1&nlid=76072804e](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/24/world/asia/afghanistan-kabul-terrorism.html?em_pos=small&emc=edit_ti_20180325&nl=times-insider&nl_art=1&nlid=76072804e)

<sup>16</sup> Aljazeera, 25 March 2018, “Blast hits Shia mosque in Herat”, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/afghanistan-blast-hits-herat-mosque-casualties-feared-180325091324938.html>

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Ruttig (edited by Sari Kouvo), Afghanistan Analysts Network, 7 November 2017, “The ‘Humvee Bomb’ Series: The October wave of Taleban attacks in 2017 context”, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-humvee-bomb-series-the-october-wave-of-taleban-attacks-in-2017-context/>

**there is no 'stalemate' in the Afghan conflict, . . . On the contrary, the situation remains extremely dynamic and volatile.**

Ruttig noted that:

*One specific feature stood out in many of the attacks on the Afghan forces' installations, which was that the use of US-made armoured Humvee vehicles captured from the Afghan forces, which the Taliban<sup>18</sup> then turned into car bombs in order to breach military fortifications.*

The wave of attacks also coincided with various, as yet unsuccessful, recent attempts to start peace talks – involving the Taliban, the Afghanistan government and other political leaders, and international players.

Taking an historical perspective, Ruttig noted that the fighting is still highly intense and that small-scale fighting continues on an almost daily basis, only occasionally being mentioned in the media, but being reflected in the high number of Afghans displaced by conflict.

***By mid-October, UNOCHA had registered almost 300,000 new IDPs<sup>19</sup> in 30 of the 34 Afghan provinces, while all 34 provinces host IDPs.***

Several provincial capitals have long been under sustained heavy pressure from the Taliban, in particular Farah, Lashkargah (Helmand), Tirinkot (Uruzgan) and Kunduz. But now there are others that must be added to the list: Sarepul, Faryab, Ghazni and Pul-e Khumr (Baghlan).

Finally, the report concludes that the October 2017 wave of attacks

***has demonstrated that the Taliban are still capable of mobilising large numbers of forces across provincial borders and carrying out simultaneous attacks in various provinces. The substantial increase in both US and Afghan airstrikes has not deterred them.***

## **2. International Red Cross decision to reduce operations**

Significant symbolic commentary on the dangerous situation came in early October 2017 when the International Red Cross announced that it had decided to "drastically" cut Afghan operations<sup>20</sup> following several attacks that killed a total of seven of its staff in the first 9 months of the year, with four others abducted. The ICRC has been operating in Afghanistan for more than 30 years and has been running its fourth biggest humanitarian program in the world, with 1,800 staff. The decision particularly affected operations in the north, where facilities in Kunduz, Faryab, and Balkh provinces were closed or downsized. Detailed background on the Red Cross decision has been provided in an expert report by Australian photo-journalist Andrew Quilty<sup>21</sup>. Quilty quotes Dominic Parker, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Afghanistan:

***(Red Cross) are a hardcore agency, and they go to difficult places; if they themselves are being targeted directly, it's curtains."***

## **3. December 2018 – a bombing in Jalalabad to end the year**

The 28 December 2018 attack on a Shi'ite cultural centre in Kabul, mentioned above, was followed on 31 December by a bomb explosion at a funeral in the major city Jalalabad, 100 km east of Kabul<sup>22</sup>. At least 17 people were killed. No group immediately claimed responsibility, although Islamic State-Khorasan Province is active in the province and is the top suspect.

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<sup>18</sup> Taliban or Taleban: As noted above, I have made no attempt to standardise the spelling/ transliteration of the name.

<sup>19</sup> IDPs: Internally displaced persons

<sup>20</sup> Josh Smith, Reuters, 09 October 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-icrc/international-red-cross-to-drastically-cut-afghan-operations-after-attacks-idUSKBN1CE0AG>

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Quilty, 23 October 2017, "One Deadly Bullet Shatters Thousands in Afghanistan", [http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/23/with-a-single-deadly-bullet-hundreds-of-thousands-of-lives-affected-in-afghanistan-mazar-e-sharif-enebral-perez-spanish-red-cross/?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/23/with-a-single-deadly-bullet-hundreds-of-thousands-of-lives-affected-in-afghanistan-mazar-e-sharif-enebral-perez-spanish-red-cross/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign)

<sup>22</sup> garda.com, 31 December 2018, "Bombing kills at least 17 people in Jalalabad", <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/83991/afghanistan-bombing-kills-at-least-17-people-in-jalalabad-december-31>

#### 4. January 2018 – further escalation of violence across the country

January 2018 was marked by 4 deadly targeted attacks, mainly on civilians, in 9 days, in and near Kabul.

- Shock waves rang out across Afghanistan and beyond when on 21 January 2018 the six-story Kabul Intercontinental Hotel was attacked by a group of gunmen, with a death toll of (eventually) 22, including 14 foreigners<sup>23</sup>. Hostages were taken, the hotel was set on fire, multiple explosions were heard, and a gun battle ensued until the attackers were subdued after a 15 hour siege. More than 150 people who were rescued or managed to escape included 41 foreigners. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.
- On 24 January, six people died and at least 27 were wounded in an attack on the Save the Children office in Jalalabad, the major city 100km east of Kabul<sup>24</sup>. After a suicide car bomb explosion, gunmen stormed the offices using rocket-propelled grenades to blast their way inside. Afghan security forces fought the gunmen for nearly 10 hours, at one stage rescuing nearly 50 people from the basement of the building as fighting continued on the floors above. Three of the dead were Save the Children staff. Islamic State claimed responsibility.
- Within days there was a much larger incident which has become known as “the ambulance attack”<sup>25</sup>. On 27 January 2017 the Taliban drove an ambulance packed with explosives into a crowded Kabul street setting off an enormous blast that killed at least 95 (now updated to 103) people and injured 158 (now updated to 235) others. The force of the blast shook windows of buildings at least two kilometres away and shattered windows within hundreds of metres of the site. Some low-rise structures in the vicinity of the explosion also collapsed.

The explosion occurred on a guarded street that leads to an old Interior Ministry building and several embassies. Many ministry departments still have offices there, and visitors line up every day for routine business. The bomber drove past the first checkpoint, at the entrance to the street. The police had allowed it to pass because it was an ambulance, and one of the city’s main hospitals was just beyond the checkpoint. Police stopped the vehicle at the second checkpoint and then the driver detonated the explosive-laden vehicle.

A security alert had just been issued to foreigners warned that the Islamic State group was planning “to conduct aggressive attacks” on supermarkets, shops and hotels frequented by foreigners.

A poignant detail spoke volumes:

*At the site of the explosion, an old man, his clothes stained with blood, sat on the ground and wailed. He cursed the two leaders of the Afghan government — President Ghani and his coalition partner, Abdullah Abdullah — for the security lapses. He said his son was dead. “May God punish you, may Allah punish you both,” the old man repeated. “There is nothing left for me anymore — come kill me and my family, too.”*

The New York Times used its report on the incident<sup>26</sup> to comment on the recent history of violence in Afghanistan:

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<sup>23</sup> ABC, 22 January 2018, “Afghanistan raises Kabul hotel attack death toll to 18, including 14 foreigners”, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-22/kabul-intercontinental-hotel-18-dead-including-14-foreigners/9347848>

<sup>24</sup> Michael Safi, The Guardian, 25 January 2018, “Isis claims attack on Save the Children office in Afghanistan”, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/24/explosion-attack-save-the-children-office-jalalabad-afghanistan>

<sup>25</sup> Agence France-Presse, 27 January 2018, “More than 95 dead and 158 wounded in Kabul bombing claimed by Taliban”, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/27/huge-blast-rocks-centre-kabul/>

<sup>26</sup> Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar, 27 January 2018, ‘It’s a Massacre’: Blast in Kabul Deepens Toll of a Long War, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/world/asia/afghanistan-kabul-attack.html>

*The casualties were another reminder of how badly Afghanistan is bleeding. Over the past year, about 10,000 of the country's security forces have been killed and more than 16,000 others wounded, according to a senior Afghan government official. The Taliban losses are believed to be about the same.*

*And about 10 civilians were killed every day on average over the first nine months of 2017, data from the United Nations suggests.*

***The surge in violence across the country, particularly deadly attacks that have shut down large parts of Afghan cities, comes as the government is in disarray.***

The report noted that:

*Anger at the Afghan government for its dysfunction and ineffectiveness in the face of violence was palpable on the streets.*

- Barely had the dust settled after the famous 27 January “ambulance attack” in Kabul, when, on 29 January, 11 soldiers were killed and 14 wounded by gunmen who attacked an army outpost near a military academy outside of Kabul<sup>27</sup>. ISIS's affiliate group in Afghanistan claimed responsibility for the attack.

## **5. January 2018 – BBC research report**

On 31 January 2018 the Kabul office of the BBC World Service issued a high quality report<sup>28</sup> on the extent of Taliban control in Afghanistan. The BBC investigation – conducted during late 2017 – provides a rare snapshot of the security situation in every Afghan district between 23 August and 21 November. A network of BBC reporters across Afghanistan spoke to more than 1,200 individual local sources, in every one of the country's 399 districts, to build up a comprehensive picture of all militant attacks over that period. These conversations happened either in person or by telephone and all information was checked with at least two and often as many as six other sources. In some cases BBC reporters even went to local bus stations to find people travelling in from remote and inaccessible districts in order to double check the situation there.

***“Months of research across the country shows that the Taliban now control or threaten much more territory than when foreign combat troops left in 2014.”:***

***Taliban fighters, whom US-led forces spent billions of dollars trying to defeat, are now openly active in 70% of Afghanistan.***

*The Afghan government played down the report, saying it controls most areas.*

*But recent attacks claimed by Taliban and Islamic State group militants have killed scores in Kabul and elsewhere. . . .*

*The BBC research also suggests that IS is more active in Afghanistan than ever before, although it remains far less powerful than the Taliban. . . .*

*The extent to which the Taliban have pushed beyond their traditional southern stronghold into eastern, western and northern parts of the country is clearly visible from the BBC study.*

*In the areas defined as having an active and open Taliban presence, the militants conduct frequent attacks against Afghan government positions. These range from large organised group strikes on military bases to sporadic single attacks and ambushes against military convoys and police checkpoints. . . .*

***During the research period, the BBC study found 122 districts (just over 30% of the country) did not have an open Taliban presence. These areas are ranked as under government control, but that does not mean they were free of violence.***

*Kabul and other major cities, for example, suffered major attacks - launched from adjacent areas, or by sleeper cells - during the research period, as well as before and after.*

<sup>27</sup> Julia Macfarlane, 29 January 2018, “11 killed in attack claimed by ISIS, the latest in spate of violence in Afghanistan”, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/soldiers-killed-latest-afghanistan-attack-claimed-isis/story?id=52677703>

<sup>28</sup> Shoaib Sharifi and Louise Adamou, BBC World Service, Kabul, 31 January 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116>

The BBC's research has been reviewed by the Kabul-based Afghanistan Analysts Network, which has been reporting on Afghanistan since 2009. Co-Director Kate Clark said:

*Such a well-researched investigation into the Afghan war is rare and very welcome. The findings are shocking, but unfortunately not surprising - they ring true as an accurate mapping of the extent of the conflict. . . . But it is disturbing to realise that each bit of orange shading on the map translates into lives lost and damaged.*

*“Local people and officials the BBC spoke to said IS now has a presence in 30 districts - not just in the east but also in places like Khanabad and Kohistanat in the north. The group is fighting both the Afghan military and the Taliban for territorial control. During 2017 the number of attacks attributed to the group increased, with many targeting urban centres and often Shia Muslims . . . “*

*“IS does not fully control any district at present. However the group has seized parts of the northern district of Darzab<sup>29</sup>, displacing hundreds of people from their homes.”*

The study concluded:

***Meanwhile there is no prospect of an end to the conflict and a new generation of Afghans live in the shadow of violence.***

## **6. March-April 2018 – another wave of violence**

As noted above, in March 2018 there was a new wave of high profile violence, much of it targetted against Shia Muslims (Hazaras). It is worth adding information on the overall situation.

- The month began with a car bomb attack near Australian Embassy vehicles in Kabul, killing a 12 year old girl and wounding 22 other people<sup>30</sup>. No militant group claimed responsibility for the attack.
- Then followed the 9 March “burst of violence around Afghanistan” in which more than 30 people died, mentioned above, reported by Salahuddin and Constable<sup>31</sup> of the Washington Post. Apart from the Hazara deaths in Kabul, the casualties included 10 police officers killed in a Taliban ambush in one area of Takhar, 8 Afghan soldiers killed in a separate Taliban attack, and 6 members of the Afghan security forces killed in other scattered attacks.
- On 18 March 2018 it was reported that five (later updated to 8) policemen were killed and two others wounded in a Taliban attack on their check-post in Ghazni province, south of Kabul.
- On 19 March 2018 three people were killed and at least 8 wounded when a motorcycle bomb exploded at a rally in Jalalabad city, 100 km east of Kabul<sup>32</sup>. No group has claimed responsibility for the blast.
- The New Year attack on Hazaras on 21 March has been noted above.
- The next major incident was reported as occurring on 10 April when at least 13 Afghan troops were killed in Taliban attacks in the Shindad district of the western province of Herat.<sup>33</sup> The Taliban were blamed for the attack, although no militant group has so far

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<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that Darzab is less than 200 km to the southwest of the large and strategic city Mazar-e Sharif, and therefore the strong ISIS presence could represent a further potential threat to the security of Mazar-e Sharif.

<sup>30</sup> AAP, AP, News Corp Australia Network, 03 March 2018, “Car bomb explodes near Australian embassy vehicles in Kabul”, <http://www.news.com.au/world/middle-east/car-bomb-explodes-near-australian-embassy-vehicles-in-kabul/news-story/7df4796f52ebb853a11e3a35235e6cc0>

<sup>31</sup> Sayed Salahuddin and Pamela Constable, 09 March 2018, “At least 30 die in Afghan violence, including 10 in Kabul attack on Shiites”, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/at-least-30-die-in-afghan-violence-including-10-shiites-in-kabul-suicide-attack/2018/03/09/dc9f7db2-2396-11e8-badd-7c9f29a55815\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.17683b712217](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/at-least-30-die-in-afghan-violence-including-10-shiites-in-kabul-suicide-attack/2018/03/09/dc9f7db2-2396-11e8-badd-7c9f29a55815_story.html?utm_term=.17683b712217)

<sup>32</sup> Radio Free Europe, 19 March 2018, “Three Killed In Blast Outside Hekmatyar Rally In Afghanistan”, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-blast-jalalabad-hekmatyar-3-killed/29109003.html>

<sup>33</sup> Radio Free Europe, 13 April 2018, “At least 13 Afghan Troops Killed In Taliban Attacks” <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-at-least-13-troops-killed-in-taliban-attacks/29164326.html>

claimed responsibility. At the same time there were reports indicating deadly attacks in Paktia province, responsibility owned by the Taliban.

- The 10 April violence occurred just before the UN reported that more than 700 civilians had been killed and nearly 1,500 wounded in Afghanistan in the first three months of 2018<sup>34</sup>. The UN figures are considered a conservative estimate because they need at least three independent sources to officially register a case.

**Clearly there is little hope of security for the people of Afghanistan any time soon. Hazaras are among those who are especially vulnerable because of religious and ethnic targeting.**

## **7. Evidence of further deterioration of security, even in the most “secure” places.**

Historically the city of Mazar-e Sharif has been regarded as among the most secure places in the nation. This image was shattered by a series of attacks in and around the city in 2016 and 2017, as reported in my most recent update. While there have been no reported major violent incidents in the past 6 months, there is certainly evidence of further deterioration in the security of the city during that time.

- In January 2018 a civil society activist highlighted the increasing number of illegal armed men in Mazar-e Sharif, leaving the city *“in a state of anarchy”*<sup>35</sup>. He called for the government to take appropriate steps. Observers had noted the presence of *“people like Daesh and Taliban in the city”*, and commented that *“the presence of such people had created fear among public members”*. *“Security officials also confirmed the presence of illegal armed men but said the situation would not improve overnight.”*
- A March 2018 report<sup>36</sup> noted the ineffectiveness of security measures in Mazar-e Sharif and the impact of the tensions between Governor Atta Mohammad Noor and President Mohammad Ashraf Ghanī Ahmadzai. (Ghani has dismissed Atta from his position, but Atta, a declared candidate for the 2019 presidential elections, has refused to go.)

***“The security situation is worsening in Mazar-i-Sharif with each passing day after differences developed between Governor Atta Mohammad Noor and the Presidential Palace.”***

These reports are mentioned here because (a) they support the view of most experts (cited in my previous updates) that there are no safe havens in Afghanistan, and (b) they counter any attempts to maintain the fiction that Mazar-e Sharif could qualify as a safe relocation venue for forced repatriation of “failed” Hazara asylum seekers.

## **D. Implications for refugees and refugee policy – a key article**

It is widely reported that refugees continue to flow from Afghanistan in large numbers, not only Hazaras but other religious and ethnic groups who seek to escape the violence, insecurity and economic problems. As I have indicated many times, the policy of European governments and the Australian government to deny protection to these refugees as a matter of policy, is both relentless and inhumane. Many refugees have been forcibly returned in spite of the overwhelming evidence that there is no safe haven and that extreme suffering would be inevitable. No doubt the policy of deterrence is a major underlying reason. A recent article<sup>37</sup> by Karen McVeigh emphasises the brutal consequences of forced deportation. It is worth quoting, almost in its entirety. It speaks powerfully for itself.

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<sup>34</sup> Radio Free Europe, 12 April 2018, “UN: Over 700 Civilians Killed In Afghanistan So Far In 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-un-over-700-civilians-killed-first-three-months-2018/29162861.html>

<sup>35</sup> Zabihullah Ehsas, 25 January 2018, “Illegal gunmen seen behind insecurity in Mazar-i-Sharif”, <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/01/25/illegal-gunmen-seen-behind-insecurity-mazar-i-sharif>

<sup>36</sup> Zabihullah Ehsas, 07 March 2018, “Mazar-i-Sharif garrison failing to bar illegal gunmen: Residents”, <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/03/07/mazar-i-sharif-garrison-failing-bar-illegal-gunmen-residents>

<sup>37</sup> Karen McVeigh, The Guardian, Global Development, 25 January 2018, “ ‘Now is not the time’: violence forces refugees to flee Afghanistan again: Political rhetoric about country’s safety dismissed after study shows 72% of returnees forced into renewed flight”, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jan/25/violence-forces-refugees-to-flee-afghanistan-again>



McVeigh reports a study commissioned by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, and states that almost three-quarters of Afghan refugees who return home are forced to flee again due to violence. In fact the research found that 72% of those who have returned to Afghanistan after living as refugees abroad have been displaced at least twice.

The survey found that the vast majority of displaced families do not receive aid assistance.

*Jan Egeland, the secretary general of the NRC, said Norway, Britain, Pakistan and Iran should “freeze deportations and rethink their policies” on the war-torn nation.*

**“The rhetoric that things are better in Afghanistan and therefore we can return people is not correct. Immigration ministries are saying it’s safe to return, but this shows it’s not true,”** Egeland said.

**“Now is not the time to deport Afghans. War-torn Afghanistan today is no place to be returned to. Decision-makers are likely to regret the massive involuntary returns at a time when conditions are worsening all over Afghanistan. It can destabilise the whole region and lead to immeasurable suffering among families deported.”**

*Last year, Britain and other European countries were accused of breaching international law as it emerged that the number of asylum seekers forced to return to Afghanistan had tripled at a time when civilian casualties were at a record high.*

*Despite Afghanistan being reclassified from “post-conflict” to “active-conflict” by the UN in 2017, asylum acceptance rates for Afghans have declined sharply over the past two years, the NRC report found.*

*Afghans constitute one of the largest and longest-displaced refugee groups in the world, with 3 million people living in Pakistan and Iran. **More than 1 million Afghans have been newly displaced by conflict in the past two years – a threefold increase in less than five years. In 2017, an average of 1,200 Afghans were forced to flee each day, the report said.***

*Egeland said humanitarian organisations were “not even coming close” to reaching those recently internally displaced and that, following the targeting of Save the Children in Jalalabad by Isis, aid organisations – “hanging on by our fingernails” – were considering how to respond.*

*The NRC linked the rising trend in displacement to the withdrawal of foreign troops, escalating violence and the rising number of areas under control of anti-government forces. About 94% of the 2,500 IDPs surveyed said they fled because of violence, conflict or persecution, a 19% rise from 2012.*

*The study said that hundreds of thousands of refugees pressured to return from Iran and Pakistan over the past few years has deepened the challenges for the humanitarian community and the Afghan government, which lacks capacity at a local level to address displacement-affected communities.*

## **E. Conclusion**

It is difficult to avoid repeating the conclusion stated in my update of September 2017:

**“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.”**

***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.”***