



## Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group

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# Hazaras in the Crosshairs under the microscope

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This paper is available on our website:

[bmrsg.org.au/research-material/afghanistan/](http://bmrsg.org.au/research-material/afghanistan/)

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## Introduction

A recent paper published by the Afghan Analysts Network: “*Hazaras in the Crosshairs? A scrutiny of recent incidents*”<sup>2</sup> by Qayoom Suroush has stirred up a great deal of discussion in Afghanistan. The detailed analysis is prefaced by a summary:

*“Eight abductions of groups of people have been reported since late February by officials, activists or media as having targeted ethnic Hazaras. The first was also the biggest: the abduction of 31 bus passengers in Zabul on 23 February 2015. Other crimes ‘against Hazaras’ have been reported from Ghazni, Farah, Daikundi and Balkh. AAN’s Qayoom Suroush has been examining the incidents in detail to see if there is a new trend of targeting this ethnic group. **He finds much of the reporting has been full of mistakes with assumptions relayed as fact. With the possible exception of the Zabul mass abduction, he finds little to back up a notion of a new trend of ethnic targeting, but does say the reporting points to how vulnerable many Hazaras feel.**”* [emphasis added]

It is known that the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) is using this paper as a source of “adverse information” to present to Hazara asylum seekers as possible justification for denying them Australian protection. A recent DIBP communication states:

***“This article indicates that in spite of the fears of Hazaras, there is no current evidence Hazaras are being systematically targeted in Afghanistan. The exception appears to be the recent Zabul abduction, but those taken have been kidnapped rather than killed, and the goal of the kidnapers remains unclear.”***

The author has recently reinterpreted the meaning of his paper. In a communication to a particular academic friend he seems to indicate that it is being misunderstood. He states that the research (a) does not mean there is no discrimination and violence against Hazaras; rather the eight incidents examined show how widely Hazaras are at risk of being targeted and (b) does not mean that if someone is not being targeted for a new political agenda or ethnicity, it is fine/legal to kidnap or kill them. He says he has tried to show that though Hazaras are not being targeted systemically, yet they are the easiest target in Afghanistan since they do not have a strong tribal lobby and any military wings to defend them. He says that the risk of sect based violence increases each day, though there has been no trigger yet and we do not know how long it might take. He says the research does not say anything about the future and he makes it clear that **the report should not be used for departing/rejecting asylum seekers.**

**This is significant, in part because it clearly represents backing away from the original conclusions. Whatever the case, I believe that while there is any risk DIBP may rely on this paper it must be analysed thoroughly and its conclusions confronted.**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/hazaras-in-the-crosshairs-a-scrutiny-of-recent-incidents/>

## Analysis

**I contend that the author's case is far from being made. Apparently it suits DIBP to accept the conclusions of the paper uncritically, but because these conclusions potentially impact life and death issues and decisions, they must be examined carefully and professionally.**

*[NB the spelling "Taliban" is used consistently here, including in all quotations; the original article had about an equal mix of this with the variant "Taleban"]*

## **Eight incident reports are examined in the AAN paper.**

*The AAN examination of each report is quoted in full (in this italicized font) in order to facilitate ready reference.*

### **1. 23 February 2015, Shahjoy district of Zabul province, 31 bus passengers kidnapped**

*"On 23 February 2015, a group of gunmen stopped two buses driving from Herat province to Kabul as they passed through Shahjoy district of Zabul province and kidnapped several dozen of the passengers. One female passenger described later how the gunmen first collected all cell phones and national ID cards from the passengers, then separated males from females, then Hazaras from non-Hazaras, and finally took away 31 Hazara men, leaving the other passengers on the road. Another eyewitness, who also said that all the hostages were Hazaras, said the kidnapers had worn black masks and military uniforms and spoke Pashtu and Dari.*

*Two months later, the majority of abductees, possibly all, are still being held. Some reports (see for example here) have talked about an old man having died because of the "cold weather" and one ANA soldier who was among the abductees having been found beheaded. (1) The public and the national and international media, almost in unison, have spoken of an incident deliberately aimed at Hazaras, even though the identities, motivation and goals of the kidnapers in fact remain unclear. But if the list of hostages is scrutinised, the assumption that all are Hazaras is not certain and the man who was beheaded – if this report is accurate – was not Hazara, but Tajik. Among the families of the hostages camped out in Zarnigar Park, protesting what they perceive as the government's inadequate response, there is also a Tajik family who believes their son is among the Zabul hostages.*

*Allegations to be found in the many, often contradictory sources of information as to the aim of the kidnapers vary from the kidnapers wanting to target Shias to them being Taliban and wanting to swap the hostages for prisoners. The Taliban have denied carrying out the abduction, though, and no other armed group has claimed the kidnapping. Some members of parliament from Zabul still told Tolo News that the passengers had been kidnapped with the help of Mansur Dadullah, a senior Taliban commander and brother of the notorious Mullah Dadullah who was killed in 2007. Mansur was reported to have joined the Islamic State group, operating from Zabul, but if he had, he is back with the Taliban, according to an interview he gave to Radio Tehran on 5 April 2015 in which he also denied having been involved in the kidnapping of the 31 passengers. He said that "foreign fighters who fled from Pakistan kidnapped the passengers" and wanted to exchange them for "family members" imprisoned by the government (interview in Pashto here). He did not mention the ethnic background of the passengers as being of importance.*

*This fits with what the chairman of the Zabul Provincial Council, Attaullah Haqparast, told Tolo News on 10 April 2015. He claimed the kidnappers had asked for a prisoner swap. He, too, said the kidnappers were “foreigners” and added, “We have sent our elders several times to the kidnappers, and their translator talked to us. They have demanded the release of twelve prisoners.” (Afghanistan’s National Security Council reportedly rejected the deal.)*

*Efforts to free the hostages seem to be stuck at the moment. Rescue operations by Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have, so far, failed. After one mission launched at the beginning of March, Vice President Sarwar Danesh said the ANSF had killed more than 100 insurgents (including some foreigners) and arrested “the leader of the group responsible for the abduction,” whom he named as Mullah Abdullah Kakar. He gave no further information about the man’s political background or possible aims. However, none of the abductees were, in fact, released. Some Hazara elders and activists now claim that no such operation took place and that the government lied about both operation and arrest.*

*In the end, the evidence that Hazaras were specifically targeted comes from two passengers who were let go and who said the kidnappers had separated Hazaras from the non-Hazaras. This may have been due to ‘ethnic targeting’ – or they could have chosen the Hazaras because, for example, they have the weakest political and tribal lobby and any backlash against the kidnappers would be smaller. When, hopefully, the hostages are freed, things may become clearer.”*

### **Comments and analysis**

- Two eyewitnesses said that all the hostages were Hazaras.
- The fact that one hostage was reported as a Tajik is hardly a good reason to cast doubt on the whole story. It must be remembered that Tajiks are also at enmity with Pashtuns.
- The aim and identity of the kidnappers is hardly relevant. The point is that Hazara men were targeted – for whatever reason and by whomever. It does not matter whether it was ‘ethnic targeting’ – or tactics (based on ethnic selection) to reduce the strength of any backlash. Hazaras were chosen – exclusively or almost exclusively. Nothing can seriously moderate that reality.
- What is not emphasised in the paper is that the government has been very quiet and passive, not taking immediate positive steps to track down the perpetrators.

#### **2. 15 March 2015, Qarabagh (Ghazni), Taliban stopped a car coming from Jaghori district and took ten passengers, all of whom were Hazaras.**

*On 15 March 2015, another ‘Hazara kidnapping’ was reported, this time in Qarabagh district of Ghazni province (where about half of all citizens are Hazaras). Taliban stopped a car coming from Jaghori district (another Hazara-dominated district) and took ten passengers, all of whom were Hazaras. However, they released them only hours later, after the Taliban had interrogated the travellers and warned the women to wear “proper Islamic attire”, meaning burqas rather than the large headscarves or chadors favoured by many Hazara women. This kind of road block is common across the country, including in insecure Qarabagh district where there is little Afghan National Army (ANA) presence. With both districts having large Hazara communities, chances are that Hazaras will often face such incidents, but such road blocks also hit the local Pashtun population.*

Nevertheless, soon after this incident, social media users and news agencies started speculating about Hazaras being systematically targeted, quickly jumping from assumption to 'fact'. The Shia News Association, an Iran-based news agency, for example, tweeted about a "continuation of Hazara kidnappings."

### Comments and analysis

- There could be many reasons for the subsequent release of the captives; being held even for a few hours is not insignificant, especially when it is accompanied by interrogation and warnings.
- That this kind of road block is common across the country is beside the point. The question is how the "victims" are treated after each hold up. Are Hazaras treated differently from non-Hazaras once the vehicle has been stopped?
- The statistical argument that because Qarabah and Jaghori districts have large Hazara communities, "*chances are that Hazaras will often face such incidents*" must be questioned. Other possibilities must be considered and addressed. For example it could be argued that it is precisely because Hazaras are the main travellers on Hazarajat roads that the Taliban target those roads. Anyway this does not explain the persistent reports indicating that Hazaras are selected from vehicles and abducted, killed or tortured, and non-Hazaras are spared.
- That such road blocks also hit the local Pashtun population is not significant by itself. The key question then is how those Pashtun travellers are treated after the vehicle has been stopped and passengers identified.
- "*Jumping from assumption to 'fact'?*" Here the key word in the alleged "assumption" is "systematically". The original wording of the "speculations" is not provided, but the example quoted from the Shia News Association about a "*continuation of Hazara kidnappings*" shows that, at least in one case, a statement about "*continuation*" has been interpreted narrowly as "*systematically*". "Continuation" carries no implication of systematic action; it could just as easily have been continuation of sporadic events or continuation of random events. If this example is representative then the accusation being made must be questioned. Continuation of Hazara kidnappings is more than an assumption, it is a fact. The Shia News Association (at least) was not jumping from an assumption to a fact; it was simply reinforcing the facts.

### 3. 17 March 2015, Farah province, Tolo News said six Hazaras traveling from Herat were abducted by masked gunmen:

*"On 17 March 2015, another 'Hazara kidnapping' was reported, this time from Farah province. Tolo News said six Hazaras traveling from Herat were abducted by masked gunmen. However, according to Farah Governor Asef Nang there had not been a kidnapping of Hazaras; rather, he said, Afghan soldiers "went missing" on the way from Farah to Herat province. He did not even want to confirm that the soldiers had been kidnapped (with the governor later speaking of only one abducted soldier). It also remains unclear how many of the potential victims were Hazara, with local media reporting, for example, four out of the six being Hazara. It seems likely that if the six had indeed been abducted, insurgents took them because they were soldiers. AAN, talking to locals and security officials, could not find evidence for this incident being specifically Hazara-related."*

### Comments and analysis

- AAN accepts that there was an incident involving six people. However it has not established whether or not the incident included abduction, how many of the victims, if any, were Hazaras, and how many, if any, were soldiers. This would suggest that there are insufficient grounds for simply writing off the TOLO news report that “*six Hazaras . . . were abducted by masked gunmen*” and the local media reporting that four out of the six were Hazaras.
- No evidence is presented for the claim that “*it seems likely that if the six had indeed been abducted, insurgents took them because they were soldiers*”. This is far from a substantiated contention that the victims were definitely not Hazaras.
- The Farah governor’s versions of events may perhaps be accurate, but in general he would be the most likely to have reasons (political at least) to contradict media reports and the least likely to have access to accurate and unbiased alternative information.
- While AAN finds no evidence that the incident was “*specifically Hazara-related*” (which is not the same as saying no Hazaras were among the 6), it does not address the opposite thesis: is there evidence that the incident was specifically not Hazara-related?

4. 25 March 2015, Afghan media reported another ‘Hazara kidnapping’, with the Taliban abducting “20 Hazaras” in Daikundi province as they travelled from Kandahar:

*“A few days later, on 25 March 2015, Afghan media reported another ‘Hazara kidnapping’, with the Taliban abducting “20 Hazaras” in Daikundi province as they travelled from Kandahar. On the same day, the Taliban rejected the report and said that they had only stopped the vehicle, not detaining anyone, because of the ongoing fighting between them and ANSF in the area and would allow the travellers to pass as soon as the area was safe. They did so on 28 March 2015.*

*At this point, the BBC also found out that the travellers who had been affected, had not been Hazaras, but rather (Shia) Baloch.*

*With much of the media apparently not noticing these at least contradictory details of the accounts available, reporting of the incident increased anxiety among Hazaras. One social media user wrote, “I ask all leaders to take action and stop such kidnappings. It is a tragedy that one ethnic group can be targeted like this in today’s Afghanistan.”*

**Comments and analysis**

- The Taliban denial of any abductions does not prove much; they are not known for accurate reporting.
- While the BBC claimed that the victims were not in fact Hazaras, at least they confirmed the basic story of 20 people being abducted (thus contradicting the Taliban message).
- It remains unproven who has the detail right, Afghan media or the BBC? Is the BBC automatically more reliable?
- It is interesting that the Baloch (if this is the correct ID) are identified as Shia, when most Balochs are Sunni. How did the BBC learn this? Did the abductors know this?

- After the Afghan media reported ‘another Hazara kidnapping’ it is understandable that this was accepted at face value. If they were wrong in this case, that does not change the overall reality being debated in this research.

5. 30 March 2015, five men – who were indeed Hazaras – were reportedly kidnapped in Balkh province:

*“Since then, there have been five more incidents which appear to have been wrongly labelled as having deliberately targeted Hazaras, strengthening a picture of Hazaras being pursued despite a weak evidential basis. For example, on 30 March 2015, five men – who were indeed Hazaras – were reportedly kidnapped in Balkh province. However, as also portrayed by the BBC, it seems the victims were probably taken because they were known to be wealthy coal merchants. A provincial council member told AAN that the kidnapper, whom he alleged was a local illegal militia commander, had asked for a ransom. If true, there seems to have been no political or ethnically-motivated agenda behind the abduction.”*

**Comments and analysis**

- That the victims were probably taken because they were known to be wealthy coal merchants does not eliminate the relevance of them being Hazaras. They are at one end of a spectrum. Very often it is specifically Hazaras of substance who are targetted – for their land, animals, crops, buildings, vehicles and other property. Sometimes they or their family members are chosen to be held for ransom. As Hazaras they are vulnerable to exploitation, being practically without political or other support. [Note: another version of the original report indicates that only one of the three was a wealthy coal merchant, which would probably weaken the ransom argument.]
- *“If true, there seems to have been no political or ethnically-motivated agenda behind the abduction.”* It is not quite so simple. It is impossible to separate out the factors. Because of their ethnicity Hazaras are especially vulnerable. And because they have a weak political base (related largely to their historic enmity with the majority Pashtuns and Sunnis) they are especially vulnerable.

6. 1 April 2015 the Killid Group reported 13 Hazaras as kidnapped in Sar-e Pul’s Balkhab district. The Taliban released four of their hostages in early April and the remaining nine on 14 April 2015:

*“The Killid Group reported 13 Hazaras as kidnapped in Sar-e Pul’s Balkhab district on 1 April 2015. The Taliban released four of their hostages in early April and the remaining nine on 14 April 2015. The reasons for the abduction remain unclear, but AAN was told by members of the provincial council that the person who had initiated the abduction, the district’s Taliban shadow governor Hashim Quraishi, was Hazara himself. Local officials said, “Well, this kind of thing happens all the time.” (As an example of “this kind of thing” happening “all the time”, armed men, kidnapped 12 people on 11 January 2015 in Sar-e Pul and, after killing two of them, released the rest. However, as ‘Hazara kidnaps’ were not yet on the radar, the ethnic identities of the hostages were not reported at the time.)”*

### Comments and analysis

- That the reasons for the abduction remain unclear is irrelevant: the Hazaras were kidnapped and there must have been reasons.
- That the initiator of the abduction was alleged to be the district's Taliban shadow governor Hashim Quraishi who was a Hazara himself, is not significant. Quite a few Hazaras have joined the Taliban for their own safety and benefit, and this must involve embracing the Taliban's fundamentalist Sunni philosophy and agenda which includes persecuting Shia Hazaras.
- That "this kind of thing happens all the time" hardly says anything except that such incidents are under-reported.
- The 11 January 2015 incident in Sar-e Pul does not prove anything. Anyway it is simply not true that 'Hazara kidnaps' were "not yet on the radar at that time", certainly at national and international level.

7. 1 April 2015, in Ghazni's Qarabagh district, a group of gunmen stopped two cars with 20 passengers – who were indeed Hazara – taking them hostage for a day:

*Another reported 'Hazara kidnapping' on 1 April 2015, again in Ghazni's Qarabagh district, involved a group of gunmen stopping two cars with 20 passengers – who were indeed Hazara – and taking them hostage for a day. However, it transpired that the travellers were random victims taken with the aim of creating leverage over the police. Before the kidnapping, a local girl had delivered herself to the police and been taken to a shelter in neighbouring Jaghori district. It is not clear why the girl had sought shelter, but the hostages were released after police brought her back to her family (leading one to wonder about the current situation and the safety of the girl; read AAN's reports on domestic violence and the role of the authorities here)."*

### Comments and analysis

- This story lacks sufficient detail for definitive analysis or for countering the suggestion that "the travellers were random victims".
- However it seems hard to avoid a conclusion of targeting. Starting with Hazara hostages, leverage with the police would probably not work if the police were Pashtuns. So the police must have been Hazaras. They needed to be persuaded to return a girl in Hazara custody to her family from whom she was fleeing, presumably Pashtuns, linked to the gunmen. In this case the hostages must have been selected for their ethnicity. A random mix would not do.

8. 14 April 2015 in Ajrestan district of Ghazni province, four Hazaras from Malestan district were kidnapped and killed:

*"Finally, the most recent 'crime against Hazaras' was reported on 14 April 2015 in Ajrestan district of Ghazni province, a Pashtun district surrounded by largely Hazara-populated areas, including Jaghori district, Nawur district and Daikundi province. Four Hazaras (from Malestan district) were kidnapped and, soon after, killed. AAN spoke to local Hazaras in Malestan who said they were at a loss as to why such a thing had happened, "We have not had tensions between Pashtuns and Hazaras here in 25 years," they said. Here too, the perpetrators appear to have had goals other than ethnically-motivated ones. Ghazni's deputy governor, Muhammad Ali Ahmadi, told Deutsche Welle that the Taliban had taken the four as leverage in an attempt to negotiate the release from jail of their commander and his men, who had been arrested the day before in Jaghori district. The*

Taliban released a statement condemning the killing and rejecting any involvement, though. They blamed “Kabul’s spies,” meaning the NDS, of trying to “cause ethnic and sectarian violence.”

### **Comments and analysis**

- That the Taliban had done the deed was not disputed.
- That the alleged reason was leverage in negotiating a release from jail of Taliban members is beside the point. Hazaras were kidnapped and killed, whatever the reason.
- That the Taliban released a statement condemning the killing and blaming someone else hardly proves their innocence. The Taliban are fragmented and one section does not answer for another. Anyway someone did it. Hazaras are clearly vulnerable.

## **Afghan Analysts Network (AAN) overall analysis**

### **“Routine behaviour for the Taliban**

*So, what to make of this series of incidents? From what the Afghan media and activists have reported, one could construct a coherent picture of systematic violence against Hazaras. The Wall Street Journal said on 20 April 2015 that “Afghanistan has largely been spared the sectarian strife that plagues other parts of the Muslim world, but many Hazaras see the kidnapping as an indication they, too, now are a target.” And the New York Times wrote, on 22 April 2015: “A wave of kidnappings followed by numerous beheadings of members of Afghanistan’s Hazara ethnic group have spread alarm and anger among a people who historically have been this country’s most persecuted.” But this picture is both misled and misleading.*

*Take the NYT piece for example. The piece was headlined, “Taliban are said to target Hazaras to try to match ISIS’ brutality”. Yet, its report that the four men from Malestan (case eight) had been beheaded (its source for this was the Ghazni police) does not seem to have been true. AAN was told by family members and neighbours, who had buried the four men on Monday that the corpses were intact. They had not been beheaded they said: “They were simply shot.” The New York Times article also claimed an additional case of brutality against Hazaras: six men from Daikundi who were ‘found dead’ in Ajirestan district. However, none of the security officials, local journalists, residents and two MPs from Daikundi contacted by AAN had heard of any killing in the province in recent weeks.*

*There also appears to be some problem with the sampling. Strangely, the incidents claimed as Hazara-targeted are mostly kidnappings. If Hazaras were indeed being targeted, there would surely be other, less personnel-intensive and more varied opportunities of harm, such as drive-by shootings, assassinations or robberies. In general, it is not unusual for Taliban to stop and hold travellers – of all ethnicities – and interrogate and search them. Doing so, they usually try to identify those who are earning their living as soldiers or government officials, or others associated with the state. It also serves as a convenient way to generally intimidate the civilian population, projecting the Taliban’s power over people’s daily lives. There have been, over the years, many examples of such incidents – including on the road that featured in two of the recent incidents, the insecure Qarabagh road to Jaghori district of Ghazni, which locals call “a nightmare.” In short, the reported ‘Hazara kidnappings’ in Qarabagh on 15 March 2015, in Farah on 17 March 2015, in*

*Daikundi on 25 March 2015 and in Sar-e Pul on 1 April 2015 look to be fairly routine behaviour for the Taliban and carried out regardless of the ethnicity of travellers.*

*And then, of course, there have been other, similar incidents over the past months – whether insurgent, criminal or personal – that hit Pashtuns or Tajiks or Uzbeks. Two recent ‘non-Hazara kidnappings’ were the five – Pashtun – NGO workers killed on 10 April in Uruzgan (reason yet unknown) and the 19 staff (ethnicity not reported) of a demining NGO kidnapped by a group of armed men in Paktia because, AAN was told by one source, they had been clearing an area that the Afghan government wanted to use for a future military camp. Two days later the deminers were released.*

*Scrutinising the individual incidents which activists and media are citing, there seems to be, for now, no evidence that Hazara are being systematically targeted (the Zabul abduction of the 31 bus passengers is the only case where it seems Hazaras may have been targeted, but even there the initial motivation and the goal of the kidnappers remains unclear).*

### **Yet the fear is real**

*However, the reaction to the reporting – and sometimes the reporting itself – clearly shows that Hazaras feel very vulnerable. Hazaras generally live in areas where traveling means navigating passes through high, otherwise impassable mountains and through areas where other groups predominate. Hazaras are easily identifiable and, although there are some Sunni and Ismaili Hazaras, the group is largely perceived as Shia. Afghanistan has experienced ethnic-based bloodshed in the past during the war, with Hazaras as both victims and perpetrators – although sectarianism of the kind seen in Pakistan, Iraq and now Syria has been rare. Nevertheless, there is a fear that insurgents and other groups might change tactics.*

*The reasoning sounds like this: The Taliban, although currently presenting themselves as a national movement for all Afghans regardless of sect or ethnicity, are largely made up of Sunni Pashtun mullahs. Also, this year has seen an increase in foreign fighters moving into Afghanistan after Pakistani operations drove them out of their stronghold in North Waziristan last summer. These fighters tend to be more vicious and more reckless than the Taliban (it is not their country, after all) and potentially more sectarian-minded. The savagely sectarian Islamic State might also gain ground in the country (although, see AAN reporting here on how the Daesh threat has so far been overblown). Moreover, other countries in the region with previously harmonious intra-ethnic and intra-sect relations (such as Syria and Yemen) have recently descended into bloody, sectarian chaos.*

*The recent trend of reporting kidnappings as aimed at Hazaras, for the moment, appears to say less about the actual dynamics and trends within the insurgency (or among criminal elements), but a great deal about how vulnerable Hazaras feel about their safety.*

*More recently, a video clip with the logo of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was released that shows two masked men beheading an Afghan Army soldier and asking the government to respond to what they say is their demand or they will kill all hostages. Some news agencies like BBC World reported the soldier was one of the Zabul hostages, although the IMU fighters do not specifically mention the 31 hostages or indeed specify their demand to the government. It is also not clear if the beheaded soldier, who was from Andarab district of Baghlan province, was among the 31 hostages. He was certainly not Hazara. After the linking of this*

*murder to the Zabul hostages, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) swiftly said the soldier had not been among the Zabul hostages.”*

### **Comments and analysis**

Not every point in the AAN analysis above will be addressed in detail below. The following seem to be the most salient issues.

- **AAN rejects the notion of systematic violence against Hazaras saying “this picture is both misled and misleading”.**

I seriously question whether AAN’s conclusion is proven. “Systematic violence” is a “straw man”, hard to define and hard to prove either way. What is found is violence that is frequent and increasing. It would seem just as valid to start with the notions of “sporadic violence” or “random violence” and test these in the same way.

Case 8 above is quoted as an example. The New York Times piece headlined “*Taliban are said to target Hazaras to try to match ISIS’ brutality*” is attacked. Four men from Malestan district of Ghazni province are reported as having been beheaded, but AAN says “*They were simply shot.*” Only the method is in dispute, so it is hard to know what is demonstrated. It was still violence against Hazaras. Inability to confirm the NYT report of an additional case of brutality against Hazaras is probably significant, but NYT are unlikely to just make up stories, so this is still inconclusive.

- **Alleged sampling problems.**

**AAN claims that because Hazaras are mostly kidnapped and not shot, assassinated or robbed, they are not being targetted on ethnic grounds.** The logic is not obvious.

AAN claims that in general, it is not unusual for Taliban to stop and hold travellers of all ethnicities and interrogate and search them in order to identify soldiers and government officials, and to generally intimidate the civilian population. Therefore, they argue, the recently reported ‘Hazara kidnappings’ in Qarabagh, Farah, Daikundi and in Sar-e Pul “*look to be fairly routine behaviour for the Taliban and carried out regardless of the ethnicity of travellers*”.

That conclusion is simply not warranted. It fails to analyse what happens after each interrogation. Reports of some incidents make it clear that ordinary non-Hazaras are released while Hazaras, especially males, are detained — at least. The targetting happens at the time of “interrogation” and it may be multifaceted: focus on soldiers and officials does not exclude interest in Hazaras.

The concession that the reported kidnappings of Hazaras “look to be fairly routine behaviour for the Taliban” is highly significant. It points to a much higher incidence of violence on the roads than is being reported internationally.

- **‘Non-Hazara kidnappings’**

That there have been incidents of ‘non-Hazara kidnappings’ in recent months does not seem to prove anything. The Taliban and others are known to have multiple agendas, and the list certainly includes targeting Shias.

- **Initial motivation and goal of the kidnappers**

That this “remains unclear” is hardly proof of anything. The events happened.

- **Hazaras feel very vulnerable**

This is common knowledge and hardly surprising. The admission can scarcely be avoided.

- **Other insurgents**

That other groups besides the Taliban are active in Afghanistan does not prove anything. Each time there is violence there is a perpetrator. Hazaras are being targeted by someone or other. The key point is that Hazaras are being victimised. It is important to identify the culprits, but that is a secondary issue.

- *“Reporting kidnappings as aimed at Hazaras . . . appears to say . . . a great deal about how vulnerable Hazaras feel about their safety. This article indicates that in spite of the fears of Hazaras, there is no current evidence Hazaras are being systematically targeted in Afghanistan”.*

**As argued above, apart from the word “systematically”, that is a totally unwarranted conclusion. To the victims, the question of “systematically” does not arise. To deliberately frame the issue in such terms is to introduce a fudge factor that is almost impossible to analyse and facilitates avoidance of the escalating reality of targeted violence against Hazaras.**

## General Response – Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)

**The conclusions of AAN are at serious odds with both the relevant RRT decisions of recent years and published information from DIBP’s own primary authority, DFAT.**

### RRT decisions

Elizabeth Maree Thompson, **a leading expert on the Hazaras of Afghanistan and Pakistan, analysed published Refugee Review Tribunal reasoning in relation to Afghan Hazara Shia males since the introduction of Complementary Protection legislation in March 2012** (<http://www.apf.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=8a8f9d87-30b5-42dd-ae7f-da7f49237bcf&subId=32140>). Thompson summarises:

*In a large proportion of published Afghan, Hazara Shia cases in which the question of harm along the roads arises, decision-makers come to the same conclusion: that the person in question would face serious harm.*

Very significantly the criteria of ethnicity and religion were usually accepted as significant grounds for recognition of refugee status:

*There are a large number of other positive refugee cases of Afghan Hazara Shia males from the same period, but the particular cases outlined herein recognise the threat based on group identity - race and religion - more than on the individual circumstances such as employment with US forces or NGOs central to other decisions.*

Thompson emphasizes the point:

*These 18 decisions acknowledge that while Taliban road blocks potentially affect all travellers . . . Hazaras and Shias are a particular target of the Taliban; that the threat of serious harm for Hazaras and Shias at Taliban checkpoints is for the essential and significant reasons of their race and religion. These decisions are based on both historical and current evidence of the Taliban movement's ethnically and religiously based hostility towards Hazaras. [emphasis added]*

### **RRT member Alison Murphy**

(<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/cth/RRTA/2013/319.html>) provides an instructive example:

*In any event, even assuming that Jaghori is currently safe for Hazara Shias, the Tribunal finds that on his return to Afghanistan, the applicant would be required to travel to Jaghori from Kabul across roads that are either under the control of the Taliban, regularly vulnerable to Taliban attacks or otherwise unaccessible because of seasonal weather and poor condition. . . . The Tribunal accepts that a Hazara Shia such as the applicant would be highly vulnerable if he found himself stopped at a Taliban roadblock in such circumstances. . . .*

*The Tribunal accepts that the primary motivation of a number of the attacks by Taliban and Taliban-related groups on travellers on these roads may be criminal, in so far as the motivation is to successfully extort money from travellers, rather than for a Convention reason. **However, in light of the long-standing persecution of Hazara Shias by the Taliban, the Tribunal finds that if a Hazara Shia were to encounter one of these Taliban or Taliban-related groups while travelling, the chance of the Hazara Shia receiving worse treatment at the hands of that group than a traveller who is not a Hazara Shia cannot be said to be merely remote.** The Tribunal also finds that, in circumstances where, according to the available country information, the form of harm that travellers have suffered includes arbitrary detention, physical assault and death, that **it is likely that the difference in treatment to which a Hazara Shia would be subject at the hands of these groups compared to a traveller who was not a Hazara Shia will amount to serious harm.** [emphasis added]*

In conclusion Thompson notes that in every Hazara Shia case from this part of Afghanistan (“the Hazarajat”, especially Ghazni, Daikundi and Bamiyan provinces) there is recognition by RRT decision makers of a high likelihood of these people being tortured or killed along the highways by the Taliban. [emphasis added]

### **DFAT**

To get a sense of the dangers reported by the Australian government's own agencies Thompson quotes from DFAT cable **CX310678**: *Afghanistan Hazara community: Situation update, Australia: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2 July, 2013:*

*Many of our contacts report that security on the roads linking Kabul to Bamiyan and Ghazni has deteriorated in the last two years. There have been more and more documented cases of abductions and targeted killings perpetrated by the Taliban (and the Haqqani network) on Highway Two. These incidents have mostly occurred on the section of Highway Two which connect Kabul to the central highlands through Maidan Shahr, Jalriz, Behsood I and II districts in Maidan Wardak. One incident has also been documented on the Ghorband road between Kabul and Bamiyan in Parwan. Some attacks are likely attributable to criminal activities, rather than insurgent groups.*

***Hazara MPs from Ghazni and Bamiyan and several credible civil society contacts have told us that 'dozens' of Hazaras have been killed on these roads in 2013. [emphasis added]***

*. . . there is a widespread fear among Hazaras in Kabul of using these roads to travel to the central highlands, and **contacts described to us elaborate protective security measures employed by Hazaras to avoid detection or to deceive those who conduct hostile checkpoints.** None reported considering travelling by night. [emphasis added]*

### Conclusion

**The AAN paper contains many deficiencies and should not be regarded as a definitive analysis of the situation. At the very least it must be compared with other reports and treatments of the subject, taking into consideration the bigger picture and the documented trends over the past 5 years. The overwhelming evidence is not only that the main roads of Afghanistan are dangerous for all travellers, but that Hazaras are especially vulnerable to mistreatment whenever they are caught up in a road block – whether perpetrated by the Taliban or by someone else.**