

Confronting Misconstrued Histories: Creativity Strategies in the Hazara Struggle toward Identity and Healing

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This paper explores creative means of nonviolent social struggle among the Hazara people of Afghanistan as an effective and widespread response to the violence and oppression they have endured for more than a century both in and outside of Afghanistan. Systematic ethnic and religious persecution against Hazaras, who are majority Shi'a, by extremist Sunni, usually Pashtun groups has attempted to destroy their culture and belittle their identity. However, despite available means of armed resistance, most Hazaras have seen violence as a last resort and have chosen to creatively confront their situation in more subtle yet powerful ways such as education, academic research, political activism, and the arts. At their core, these strategies serve not only as means of resistance, but more importantly as a way to collectively acknowledge and remember lost history, recreate lost identity, and thereby open the way for healing.

Acknowledgments

The nature of the subject naturally led to a unique research approach. While a variety of written primary and secondary sources provided an essential understanding of historical narratives and debates, the lifeblood of my argument and insights flows from interviews with a number of Hazara leaders, public figures, and activists in several fields and diverse locations from Kabul to Australia and Norway. I am indebted to these consultants for their insights and thankful for the time spent in discussion of these topics, leading to a much-refined understanding. All

material is used by permission. Some ideas were also gleaned from my own earlier conversations and experiences in Afghanistan, working as a civilian volunteer at a public orphanage in 2003 and 2004 and serving as a U.S. military officer in 2010-2012.

1. Introduction

For at least a century and a half, the Hazara people of Afghanistan have suffered multi-fronted attacks on their land, human rights, cultural history and ultimately, their identity. Responses to various kinds of physical and psychological violence have included armed resistance, such as during the 1890s in confrontation with Abdur Rahman Khan, and political organization, participation and activism, especially in the 1970s and 80s. Recent decades have seen unprecedented developments in the unification and fortification of a Hazara ethno-cultural identity, partly in response to the most recent threats from extremist Sunni groups like the Taliban and Lashkar-e Jhangvi.¹ The emerging Hazara identity is broader than in previous times, which included highly localized identities and were somewhat de-linked from a Shi'a religious designation that would exclude some Hazaras. In the context of continued violence and discrimination, along with an uncertain future despite perhaps unprecedented opportunities, Hazara people both inside and outside of Afghanistan are pursuing creative means to reclaim a misconstrued narrative of their history and heal wounded aspects of their cultural identity. The most prominent strategies today are education, academic research, political activism, and the arts.

While these efforts aim to restore and celebrate a distinctive sense of what it means to be Hazara, their agenda is not separatist one, but rather seeks to assert basic human rights and claim a balanced role in the context of a multi-ethnic nation whose constitution technically guarantees freedom of religious practice and ethnic equality. This project has sought to explore

1. A Pakistani-based group, Lashkar-e Jhangvi pursues a violent sectarian agenda against Shiite groups and individuals in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. It claimed responsibility for the 6 December, 2011 attack on the 'Ashura procession in Kabul that killed more than 50 worshippers. See Bill Roggio, "Suicide bomber kills scores in attack at Kabul mosque." 6 Dec 2011. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/suicide_bomber_kills_61.php

several creative approaches to discovering and recognizing the realities of Hazara history, atrocities included, in order to heal and move into the future as a part of a nation still fragile but full of vibrant possibilities.

First, a summary of historical background lays the foundation for understanding the ethnic-religious strife that informs and necessitates creative Hazara efforts toward restored identity and healing. A review of the historical trends of oppression and violence perpetrated against the Hazaras shows that while these incursions have generally been veiled in religious language, with at least two *jihads* declared a century apart against the Shi'a *kafirs*,² the underlying motivations have almost always been political, and the underlying prejudice primarily ethnic.

This paper will demonstrate the centrality of each of the strategies that are at the core of Hazara efforts to create space for recognition of their unique identity and participation in Afghanistan's future through an intentional healing process. I first describe the strategy of education and academic research, examining the ways these two prongs of an intellectual-academic approach uniquely contribute to strengthening Hazara identity and socio-political participation. The second strategy of political activism incorporates national and international aspects, with a specific emphasis on recent examples of engagement in a complex political-religious landscape and international emphasis on broadly inclusive human rights narratives. The third and final strategy addressed in this paper encompasses the creative arts, with specific emphasis on visual arts (painting, photography and film), music, and poetry.

There are two additional potential strategies that I have chosen not to highlight in this paper. The first is armed resistance, which notably occurred during the 1890s when Hazara lands were violently overrun.³ In the 21st century, the majority of Hazaras, like most citizens of Afghanistan, wish to see an end to the decades of violence and bloodshed that have plagued their nation. By some accounts, the Hazaras were the only group

2. *Jihad* is an Arabic word meaning struggle, sometimes interpreted as a Muslim's inner struggle with sin, but more often referring to literal, religiously-motivated war against *kafirs* or "unbelievers," sometimes translated as infidels.

3. For a full account of the Hazara Wars of Independence, see Hassan Poladi (1989), 150-178.

to completely disarm after 2001, and so they are highly motivated to see that the government ensures the full disarmament of other groups (such as the Pashtun Kochis) and prevent the formation of armed local militia groups. There is a palpable resolve to work toward peaceful and nonviolent solutions among Hazaras with whom I have spoken.

The other potential strategy is utilizing religion as a rallying point for collective identity and action through glorification of and identification with martyrdom. While many sectors of Hazara society hold profound religious beliefs, my research revealed that the utilization of religious narratives was generally seen as exclusionary and divisive. One of the major misconstructions of Hazara history and identity has been that Hazaras are monolithically Shi'a. In fact, not all Hazara are Shi'a, and not all Shi'as in Afghanistan are Hazara. On the contrary, it seems that internal tensions within the Shi'a community account at least in part for the general avoidance by Hazara activists of Shi'a religious narratives as a major cohesion strategy.

As a revealing example, recent tensions stemmed from efforts by conservative Shi'a elements led by Ayatollah Mohammed Asef Mohseni to codify a "personal status" law that included provisions allowing a husband to refuse to feed a wife who refused him sex. The law, signed by President Karzai in 2009,⁴ would have applied only to Shi'as, accounting for about 15% of the population. Yet many Hazaras, who tend to have a more respectful and open-minded view of women, were outraged. They, along with other international entities including the United States, condemned the law as highly regressive,⁵ concerned that it opened the door to marital rape. Images of the resulting protests show crowds of *Hazara* women protesting the law proclaimed by some as a victory for sectarian accommodation.⁶ While religiously-based strategies for inspiration or

4. See article, "Law For Afghan Shi'a Stirs Anger And Concern." April 02, 2009. http://www.rferl.org/content/Law_For_Afghan_Shia_Stirs_Anger_And_Concern/1573589.html

5. Aziz Royesh provides an account of the conflict in his blog entry, <http://azizroyesh.blogspot.com/2010/08/one-hundred-ninety-days-my-presentation.html>

6. See article and images at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1170175/New-Afghan-law-does-allow-marital-rape--lets-men-refuse-feed-wives-deny-sex-says-cleric.html>. 16 April 2009.

identification may still be relevant in some contexts, my research did not show it to be significant for Hazaras in today's Afghanistan.

2. Background

The Hazara people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan, making up between 10-20% of the population,⁷ while Pashtuns (referred to as “Afghans” in early writings) make up about 40%, Tajiks about 25%, Uzbeks around 6%, and the rest Kyrgyz, Qizilbash, Nuristani, and others.⁸ Many questions remain – and many assumptions are made – about the origins of the Hazara people. The most common version of Hazara ancestry is that they are descended from the Mongol invading armies who swept southwest Asia during the 13th and 14th centuries. Other versions say they are descended from tribes in Western China, Tibetans and Gorkhas, or substantially related to the Tajiks.⁹ The most convincing arguments describe substantially Turkic origins, combined with Mongolian and Persian influences.¹⁰ A recent theory is that the Hazaras are related to the ancient Khazar people, who flourished in the Caucuses and Central Asia around the “Khazar” (Caspian) Sea during the Middle Ages.¹¹ Most all versions agree that the Hazara people have been inhabitants of lands that compose modern-day Afghanistan for at least 600 years, with many estimates in the thousands of years.

The question of origins is important because ethnicity has been a primary factor in discrimination against the Hazaras, who take deep pride

7 The last official census conducted in Afghanistan was in 1979, although that one was incomplete, according to *Afghanistan's Web site*, accessed 13 Dec 2012. <http://www.afghanistans.com/information/people/EthnicityLanguages.htm> Estimates consistently place Hazaras at 10-20% of the population, while Pashtuns are said to constitute 40-50% percent (some sources, including the one above, like to say “more than half” the population, which is not confirmed).

8 Peter R. Blood, ed. *Afghanistan: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 2001, accessed 12 Dec 2012. <http://countrystudies.us/afghanistan/index.htm>

9 Poladi, 2-5.

10 Such theories are described at length by Poladi, Mousavi, and others.

11 This theory was shared with me by Kamran Mir Hazar in an interview on 10 Dec 2012. He, along with about 250 others, participated in a genetic study that revealed only about 10% similarity with Mongolian gene patterns, instead showing 20-25% overlap with Turkic and Central Asian people groups such as Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs. Other clues potentially point in this direction, such as the Hazaras' modern day use of “Khazar” instead of Caspian Sea, and Temirkhanov's 1972 volume on a “new history” of the Hazaras, entitled, *Khazareistsy*.

in their cultural history and genealogies. What is most deeply engraved in the minds of Hazaras is the persecution they have suffered over the past century and a half at the hands of successive rulers and governments of Afghanistan. Accounts of persecution date back to the early 1800s and the rule of Amir Dost Mohammad. One example is the attack by Afghans (Pashtuns) on Hazaras gathered in Kabul for the Shi'a religious mourning ceremony of Muharram in 1832.¹² Until the 1890s, however, the Hazaras maintained a high degree of independence and self-rule, concentrated in the central highlands of modern-day Afghanistan known as the Hazarajat. The first period marked by egregious and widespread violent oppression was the reign of Abdur Rahman Khan, also known as the "Iron Amir."

Perhaps the most chilling insight into the events of this time period can be gleaned from an excerpt of a letter sent by Amir Abdur Rahman in 1892 to the Sunni Mullahs of Afghanistan:

Let it be known to all the respectable Mullas and preachers that the infidels, namely, the Shias, who, at the instigation of those devils, the priests, have thought fit to abuse the Khalifas, are also living in Afghanistan... If they persist in their false faith, they should all be put to death, and their property confiscated in accordance with the divine doctrine and the precepts of the Prophet... If they do not listen to the advice and preaching of the Sunnis, it will be absolutely necessary that they should be put to death. Those Sunnis, who will not act willingly in this matter, will also be counted infidels.¹³

Multiple sources¹⁴ say that during this period, 50-60% of the Hazara population was killed, beginning with their leadership, while the rest

12 Poladi, 143.

13 See "Religious decrees calling Hazaras infidels and to be killed," with portions taken from "Diaries of Kandahar: HAZARAS In the View of British Diaries (1884 – 1905)." <http://www.hazara.net/taliban/fitwa.html> http://www.hazara.net/downloads/docs/Hazaras_In_the_View_of_British_Diaries.pdf respectively. Also see the a copy of an original *firman* (governmental decree) from Mullah Omar, circa http://www.hazara.net/downloads/docs/mullah_omar_farman_late_2001.jpg

14 Several of my interviews cited this figure, also see <http://www.hazara.net/persecution/persecution.html>

fled, were enslaved, or left destitute. Patterns of exile and emigration beginning during this era have led to the growth of large communities of Hazaras in Iran, concentrated in Mashad, and in Pakistan, concentrated in Quetta.

Abdur Rahman Khan was famous for being ruthless. One of his legendary campaigns involved subduing the Nuristanis, whose rugged, mountainous land was then known as *kafiristan*, since they were considered altogether pagan. After converting them to Islam at sword-point, he declared their region would be called *Nuristan*, or “Land of Light,” instead of “Land of Infidels.” The Hazaras most likely suffered the most because it was they who instigated and were able to carry out several uprisings against government in Kabul during the 1880s and 1890s, which Pakistani-born Hazara author Hassan Poladi calls the “Hazara Wars of Independence” and recounts in detail.¹⁵ While they inflicted significant casualties on the Afghans, the government had the support of the British and eventually defeated the rebellion, exacting an incalculable human toll, including the subsequent enslavement and mass displacement of Hazaras. His ultimate project, however, was to bring the maximum amount of land under his control as part of the Afghan nation: an imperial-political rather than religious motivation.

During the early and mid-1900s, similar kinds of ethnocentric policies continued, though they were not as ruthless as those of Abdur Rahman. Pashtun nationalism (also referred to as Pashtunism) was partially inspired by fascism in Europe, especially Germany, including the “research” and re-writing of Afghanistan’s history to exclude or minimize the unwanted nationalities. According to Hazara scholar Sayed Askar Mousavi, “until the 1970s, the killing of Hazaras was declared by Pashtun clerics as an accepted and sanctified means of gaining God’s favor and securing for oneself a place in Heaven.”¹⁶ After a period of secular reform during the time of King Amanullah Khan (reigned 1919-1929) and a chaotic time of conflict following his deposition, Mohammad Nadir Khan came to power.

15 Poladi, 182-234

16 Sayed Askar Mousavi (1998), 162

As Shah, supported by Afghan tribes from the region of Pakistan and Afghanistan known as “Pashtunistan,” Nadir Khan carried out a campaign of assassinations against leading Hazara and Shi’a figures, giving orders to “kill as many... as possible, so their lands can be confiscated and distributed among us.”¹⁷ King Nadir (Nadir Shah) was eventually killed by a Hazara high school student, which did not help alleviate tensions.¹⁸

Although slavery was officially abolished in Afghanistan in 1923,¹⁹ one of the results of persecution and subjugation was that the Hazaras became the lowest class in a caste-like system where they were consistently relegated to hard, menial work such as street sweepers and servants, accompanied by psychological as well as physical abuse. Despite the persistence of this situation throughout the 20th century, many Hazaras rose to prominent positions in society and government. Fayz Mohammad Katib reached the position of court historian under King Habibullah (1901-1919).²⁰ Their situation improved somewhat under King Zahir Shah’s monarchy (1933-1973) and Mohammad Daoud’s Republic (1973-78), but even more so under the Soviet-backed rule of the PDPA (People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan), from 1978 to 1992. More Hazaras became educated and Hazara leaders such as Abdul Wahid Sorabi and Sultan Ali Keshmand served in high political offices, with Keshmand as Prime Minister from 1981 to 1988.²¹ Simultaneously, the 1980s saw the participation of the Hazaras in the resistance movement against the Soviet occupation, sometimes backed by Iran and sometimes allied with Sunni Mujahideen groups until the Soviet withdrawal and collapse of the PDPA government in 1992.

Hazaras found themselves in the middle of the violent power-struggle that followed, sometimes making unlikely (and temporary) alliances with the Pashtun groups when the Tajiks had the upper hand in Kabul.

17 Mousavi, 164

18 Saleem Javed, “A brief history of Hazara persecution.” 3 March, 2012. <http://www.thefriday-times.com/beta2/tft/article.php?issue=20120302&page=5.1>

19 See Article 10 of Afghanistan’s 1923 Constitution. <http://www.afghangovernment.com/Constitution1923.htm>

20 Amin Saikal, “Afghanistan: The Status of the Shi’ite Hazara Minority,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 32:1 (2012), 82. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2012.665623>

21 Ibid.

The Hazara stronghold, located in the south-west of the city to this day remains one of the most devastated areas. A significant development after the fragmented resistance movement of the 1980s was the consolidation of nine different Shi'a jidahi groups into *Hizb-e Wahdat* or "Unity Party," founded in 1989. The founder and first secretary general of Wahdat was Abdul Ali Mazari, who was also primarily responsible for transforming the party into a platform for the rights and political demands of the Hazaras in the early 1990s.²² Somewhat surprisingly, Mousavi cites what he calls a "revival" in Hazara society, with a "rapid increase in political, social, cultural awareness as direct outcome of active presence in resistance war."²³ This awareness, says Mousavi, guided the development of sense of ethnic identity, self-determination, and social justice as primary objectives for the Hazaras, even moving toward unity between Sunni and Shi'a Hazaras in favor of the struggle for national recognition and participation in the country's political life. Mazari and *Hizb-e Wahdat* made three demands: the formal recognition of their religion, a change to the oppressive policies of previous administrations, and the participation of Shi'as in the decision-making process.²⁴

The struggle for Kabul came to an end with the arrival of the Taliban, a movement of religious "students" mobilized and trained in Pakistan who were essentially a front-group for Pakistan's strategy of using Afghanistan as a recruiting and training ground for *jihadis* (religious fighters) in its struggle with India.²⁵ The Taliban era brought a new wave of systematic persecutions of Hazaras and other minorities. In a chilling déjà vu of Abdur Rahman's decrees a century prior, the Taliban issued this *fatwa*:

22 See biographical article, "Abul Ali Mazari," <http://www.afghan-web.com/bios/yest/mazari.html>

23 Mousavi, 189

24 Mousavi, 190

25 This idea is often referred to as "strategic depth." Several excellent works have discussed this ill-understood aspect of Afghanistan's invasion by the Taliban, backed by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI). Among them are Terry Glavin's *Come From the Shadows: The Long and Lonely Struggle for Peace in Afghanistan* (2011) and Bruce Reidel's *Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America, and the Future of the Global Jihad* (2012).

Hazara[s] should study their... history... Everywhere in Afghanistan... will be our territory... If you want to live along with other Afghan ethnic groups, you should never think of sharing and participating in the future government structure. Hazaras! Where are you escaping? If you jump into the air we will grasp your legs, if you enter the earth we will grasp your ears. Hazaras are not Muslim. You can kill them. It is not a sin.²⁶

Numerous massacres and atrocities from this period are well documented. A Human Rights Watch report published in 2001 cited the emergence in 1994 of the Taliban, “militant Sunni Muslims who tend to regard Shia as not being true Muslims...” and documents one of their first large-scale massacres in August 1998, “when Taliban forces in the multiethnic northern city of Mazar-i Sharif killed at least 2,000 civilians – most of whom were Hazaras.”²⁷ Other massacres killing dozens or hundreds took place in Yakaolang, Herat, Bamian, and Kabul. Some estimate the death toll to have been more than 15,000 Hazaras.²⁸ The Taliban also killed Abdul Ali Mazari, the respected Hazara leader of *Hizb-e Wahdat*, in 1995, throwing him out of a helicopter, which sent shock waves through the community. In an infamous act of cultural vandalism and psychological warfare, in 2001 the Taliban destroyed the giant 1000-year-old Buddhas of Bamiyan valley. While few Buddhist live in Bamiyan today, Hazaras consider the enormous stone statues to be part of their cultural heritage, literally carved out of the valley’s towering cliff walls, marking the place as a center of Buddhist worship and pilgrimage in pre-Islamic times.

It is certainly impossible to sum up in a few paragraphs what the Hazara people have suffered for more than a century of targeted

26 Issued by Mullah Niazi of the Taliban Militia, 10 August 1998. <http://www.hazara.net/taliban/fitwa.html>

27 See “Afghanistan: Massacres of Hazaras in Afghanistan.” Human Rights Watch Report, Vol. 13, No 1(C), Feb 2001. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/afghanistan/>

28 See “Hazara People Timeline (1890-2012): Victims of Genocide, Slavery, War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity.” <http://www.hazarapeople.com/2011/11/27/hazara-people-timeline-1890-2012-victims-of-genocide-slavery-war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity/>

ethnic-religious discrimination and violence. Recent accounts of increased persecution in Pakistan, where perhaps one million Hazaras live, deserves an entire analysis of its own. Despite this situation, beginning in the 1990s and accelerating after 2001, the Hazara people have been steadily making a way for themselves: to process and gain recognition for the atrocities that have taken place, yet move beyond them to play a critical role in the reconstruction and socio-political life of Afghanistan. Along with political activism and the creative arts, many Hazaras have seen education as the key to thwart further persecutions and claim their rightful place in society.

3. Approach #1: Education

Throughout the 1900s, Hazaras experienced a kind of cultural isolation and a scarcity of educational opportunities even more dire than that experienced by the rest of Afghanistan. Mousavi describes how they sought to overcome this challenge “by retreating into their traditional culture and social structures, using these as tools to undermine the government.”²⁹ This process also put them into contact with the international Shi’a community, since many sought to gain an education through the *madrassa*, or religious schooling, system. The madrasas of Iran, Iraq and Syria hosted throngs of these Afghan students in search of learning, 90% of whom were Hazara.³⁰ Niamatullah Ibrahim, a researcher working with the think tank Afghanistan Watch, describes this phenomenon in his article “Shift and Drift in Hazara Ethnic Consciousness: The Impact of Conflict and Migration.” Before the spread of modern education systems, he says, these religious institutions [in Qom, Iran and Najaf, Iraq] were the dominant centres of learning and literacy and as a consequence the central source of ideas and knowledge of the Hazaras.³¹ Two of the first three

29 Mousavi, 169

30 According to Binderman (1987), 1000-1500 Hazara students were attending the madrasses of Najaf in the 1960s, numbers which significantly increased in the following decades. Cited in Ibrahim (see next note).

31 Niamatullah Ibrahim, “Shift and Drift in Hazara Ethnic Consciousness: The Impact of Conflict and Migration,” Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series, 27 September 2012, page 8.

published works on the history of the Hazaras were written by graduates of these madrasas, and represent the first serious attempts to construct a historical and spatial identity of the Hazaras, according to Ibrahimimi.

Acquiring an education, then, has long been perceived and utilized by Hazaras as a means of resistance against systematic ethnic and religious discrimination. Through the written as well as oral transmission of historical knowledge, educated members of the community began to articulate a shared history through the stories of dispossession, mass migration, violence, and political marginalization. Even as the Taliban were sweeping across the country from Kandahar to Herat and then to Kabul, with their famous prohibitions of girls' education and women's participation in society's public life, Hazaras were focused on education. The co-educational Bamiyan University opened in 1997, only to be closed down by the Taliban in 1998 when they finally took the city. One of the founders was Humera Rahi, a poet, literature professor and member of the women's committee of Hizb-e Wahdat.³² Her example, along with those of the many prominent Hazara women who play important roles in the academic, social, and political life of Afghanistan, highlights the contrast between the oppressive ideas of the Taliban and those of other major groups in Afghanistan such as the Hazara. Bamiyan University reopened in 2004 and is today a thriving center for higher education for both men and women.

Aziz Royesh, director of Marefat High School in Kabul, expresses a passionate vision for the role education can and should play: not only for Hazaras, but for all citizens. "Education is the main key to help people discover themselves," he says in a blog post in 2010.³³ In the same post, he lists key points about education, including the following:

32 Rosemarie Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan Under the Taliban*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2001, 83.

33 Aziz Royesh blog, <http://azizroyesh.blogspot.com/2010/08/one-hundred-ninety-days-my-presentation.html>

- “People should regard education as [a] prime need;
- People should regard education as a long-term necessity not a short-term project;
- People should invest [in] education based on their own homegrown resources, not merely on foreign aids and assistance;
- People should let boys and girls... get education;
Civic education should be included in the whole curricula of the schools;
- The culture of violence and hatred should strongly be addressed and talked about.”³⁴

Royesh exemplifies all of these points in the development his own school, which he began in Pakistan during the height of the civil war, drafting their own textbooks. After the fall of the Taliban, they moved to Kabul to start from scratch in a “four-room bombed-out muddy building” in a low-income Hazara community called *Dasht-e Barchi*, just south of Kabul.³⁵ Both in Pakistan and Afghanistan, he focused on engaging the community to build trust, not only to send their boys and girls to school but to view investing in their education as possibly the most important investment they could make in their future.

“Above all,” writes Royesh, “Marefat has succeeded in developing a new vision among the community. The poverty-stricken ethnically suppressed Hazara community is now proud of having their kids in school where humanism, democracy, human rights, social studies, liberal interpretation of the faith is part of its regular curricula.”³⁶ Hundreds of

34 Ibid.

35 A moving account of Marefat school is also found in the opening of Terry Glavin’s *Come From the Shadows: The Long and Lonely Struggle for Peace in Afghanistan* (2011)

36 Royesh blog, *ibid.*

Marefat graduates have gone on to higher education, received scholarships from other countries, and acquired successful jobs in their communities. Royesh, who himself never made it past the 5th grade, has just completed a 700-page book recounting his personal witness, beginning with the late 1970s, covering “everything shaping the image of the present Hazara compared to its past.”³⁷

Other accounts of the high regard Hazaras have for education are ubiquitous. A 2010 *New York Times* article entitled “Hazaras Hustle to Head of Class in Afghanistan” tells the story of Mustafa, a Hazara high school student who aspires to study nuclear physics at a western university. “The Pashtun had the opportunities in the past, but now... Hazaras have these opportunities,” he says. “We can take our rights just by education.”³⁸ The article describes “a revival based on education,” with efforts like Aziz Royesh’s Marefat school at the core. Mustafa’s classmate Qasim reflects that Afghan rulers wanted to exploit Hazara people, not wanting them to become leaders in the country. But that will change, he says. “By studying we can dictate our future.”³⁹

Education was also a key topic in “The Story of the Hazara People,” a radio report by the Australian program Rear Vision. Australia is home to one of the highest numbers of Hazara refugees, many of whom have arrived there in un-seaworthy boats, or died trying. One of the guests on the program, Australian professor William Maley, shares this perspective:

Hazaras typically have seen education as a route of exit from the marginalised social status to which other groups have been inclined to consign them. And for that reason they’ve tended to study very hard when the opportunity presents itself and to seize any opportunity that comes along in terms of education... The former chancellor of Kabul University... was a Hazara.⁴⁰

37 From e-mail correspondence with Aziz Royesh, 7 Dec 2012.

38 Richard A. Oppel and Abdul Waheed Wafa, “Hazaras Hustle to Head of Class in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, January 3, 2010, accessed 9 Dec 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/04/world/asia/04hazaras.html?pagewanted=all>

39 Ibid.

40 “The Story of the Hazara People,” Rear Vision: Radio National, 5 August 2012, accessed 9 Dec 2012. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/rearvision/hazara/4165942#transcript>

There are still many challenges ahead. An interview with a recent college graduate and human rights activist, Habibullah Athaee, revealed the overt prejudice toward him and fellow Hazaras that still exists in the classroom. Noticing the high number of Hazaras in a university classroom, he quoted one professor as exclaiming, “Wow wow, too many Hazaras in this class! Ok, we will see how many of you can resist until the end!”⁴¹ The double meaning suggested by the last phrase seems to suggest a reference to the bitter Hazara “rebellions” or “wars of resistance” as they were called by the Pashtun government of Abdur Rahman Khan. Nevertheless, Hazara students are not deterred and are flooding in ever-increasing numbers to Afghanistan’s universities, with students in the Hazara-majority provinces of Bamiyan and Daikundi passing their entrance exams at a far higher rate than those of other provinces.⁴² Many Hazaras see education as an avenue to positions of greater influence, in order to be able to shape the future and the socio-political agenda from a variety of angles. Education also informs citizens about their legitimate socio-political role and encourages them to be involved.

4. Approach #2: Political Participation and Activism

The political participation and activism of Hazaras both inside Afghanistan and abroad has seen a dramatic increase in recent years. This section briefly explores the reasons for this explosion of activity and its significance as a strategy in re-writing the misconstrued narrative of Hazara history, re-integrating and shaping their identity as a people. A few brief profiles and examples demonstrate the breadth and rich possibilities of this approach in two major areas: domestic political participation and activism, and international activism.

According to Afghan scholar Amin Saikal, there are two major reasons that the Hazaras have become bigger players in the last ten years

41 Interview with Habibullah Athaee, recent university graduate living in Kabul. Received over e-mail, 8 Dec 2012

42 See Oppel and Wafa; also discussed in interview with Kamran Mir Hazar on 10 Dec, 2012, in the context of students from Daikundi province specifically.

than their numerical strength would warrant. The first, he says, involves the very bitter historical experiences they have endured, which instead of rendering them victims has taught them to “remain vigilant of changing situations and take advantage of every opportunity... in order to maintain and strengthen their viability as one people.”⁴³ He argues this is facilitated by the traditional Hazara national character as a hard-working and entrepreneurial people with high levels of adaptability and high potential for organization and mobilization. The second reason, he says, is the growth of civil society, facilitated by a US-led push for democratization and a pluralist political order, creating channels for the Hazara community to promote and defend their interests.⁴⁴

4.1 Domestic Activism

Since 2001, Hazara leaders have leapt into public view in prominent positions. The following examples will demonstrate the extent to which they have successfully sought political participation and “a place at the table” to shape decisions, just as Mazari and *Hizb-e Wahdat* articulated in the early 1990s. A prominent example is Karim Khalili, the current vice president to Afghani President Hamid Karzai. The Deputy Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament (the Wolesi Jirga), inaugurated in January, 2011, is a Hazara by the name of Ahmad Behzad.⁴⁵ The group has also won an unanticipated number of seats in parliament, sweeping all 11 seats in the Pashtun-majority province of Ghazni. One of Ghazni’s elected representatives, Mohammed Alizada, expressed this positive vision: “We have been legally elected, and we are ready to go to parliament. We have the passion of a new generation behind us... We will do our best to represent the whole province.”⁴⁶ The article also described continuing ethnic tension and discrimination, citing the perspective of Amin Ahmadi, dean

43 Saikal, 83

44 Ibid.

45 Saikal, 84

46 Pamela Constable, “Afghanistan’s Hazaras Gain Clout in Disputed Parliamentary Elections,” *The Washington Post*, 24 Dec 2010. Accessed 13 Dec 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/23/AR2010122304577.html>

of two small Shiite colleges in Kabul. In Ahmadi's view, it was not such "happy news" that the Pashtuns had lost so badly in Ghazni's legislature race. He commented that "This is a multiethnic country, and all groups need to be represented... Our greatest enemy is ethnic nationalism."⁴⁷ This perspective is an important one because prospects for healing in the Afghanistan's future are dependent on overcoming ethnic divides, not engendering new ethno-centric projects.

While presidential and parliamentary positions are elected, many positions in Afghanistan are appointments, including governorships, cabinet positions ministerial posts. Afghanistan's first and, thus far, only female governor, is Dr. Habiba Sarobi, appointed by President Karzai in 2005 to govern Bamiyan province.⁴⁸ She had previously served as Minister for Women's Affairs. Dr. Sima Samar, who has been active over the last few decades for human rights causes, is now the Chairperson of the International Human Rights Commission in Kabul, also an appointed position. When I spoke with her in 2011, she was adamant about the access to education, but also passionate about bringing to light and dealing with war crimes, in order to successfully move beyond them.⁴⁹ While these are only a few of many positions, both elected and appointed, held by Hazara leaders, they give a sense of the scope of Hazara involvement in today's government.

Beyond political positions, Hazaras are also actively involved in shaping other aspects of the national social fabric, such as the military, civil society organizations, and media. In 2010 I met the new class of female officer candidates to be commissioned into the Afghan National Army. Standing proudly at the helm of their formation right after their swearing in ceremony was Haniffa, a petite ethnic Hazara who told me enthusiastically, "This is the most important day of my life."

A variety of civil society organizations including cultural centers,

47 Ibid.

48 See http://www.afghan-web.com/woman/female_governor.html

49 The author was deployed in Afghanistan as a United States Air Force officer from March 2010-April 2012. The conversation with Dr. Sima Samar took place in the context of outreach on behalf of the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF's) Anti-Corruption Task Force.

think tanks, activist organizations, and blends of the three exist in Afghanistan. One of these is Afghanistan Watch, whose director, Jalil Benish, I first met in 2003. Besides composing reports of media coverage of important human rights and transparency issues, his organization has hosted groundbreaking training for female researchers from Hazara backgrounds, to work on transparent election monitoring.

4.2 International and Internet Activism

There are unfortunately many harrowing stories of the obstacles Hazaras, as well as civil society activists from all ethnic groups, face in today's Afghanistan, whether from governmental entities discomfited by pressure to be more fair or transparent, or from extremist groups. The intensity of the threat environment has meant an extension of the trail of political refugees to places like Australia and Europe (with smaller numbers making it to the United States, who has been more reticent to grant political asylum than some of Afghanistan's other international partners). One of the consequences of this has been the development of a global network, which is especially strong among Hazara refuge-seekers concerned with the Hazara cause. One of them is Kamran Mir Hazar.

Kamran Mir Hazar, journalist and webmaster for the radio news program "Salaam Watandar" and editor of the online newspaper "Kabul-Press," sought political asylum in Norway after being arrested and detained twice in what he calls the "Guantanamo of the NDS,"⁵⁰ Afghanistan's National Security Directorate in Kabul.⁵¹ His crime? Publishing reports alleging that high-level government officials were involved in corruption. He was held in a tiny cell for five days, barred from contact with the outside world or access to a lawyer. He now works from Norway, continuing as editor of Kabul Press and writing poems, one of which revolves around his encounter with the NDS.

Mir Hazar's continued participation in human rights activism

50 The National Security Directorate (NDS) is Afghanistan's domestic intelligence agency.

51 "Web journalist detained twice, threatened by security agents," 4 July, 2007, <https://cpj.org/2007/07/afghanistan-web-journalist-detained-twice-threaten.php>

from Norway exemplifies another avenue of involvement that this community has found to impact the movement toward recognition, identity, and healing. Researcher Niamatullah Ibrahimi cites a shared unity “that can be observed in the spontaneous organization of protests by the Hazara diaspora in dozens of cities around the world against targeted killings of Hazaras in Quetta, Pakistan.”⁵² Not only the killings in Pakistan, but other recent atrocities carried out in Afghanistan have drawn the attention of such groups and individuals. Websites have also collected substantial resources on the historical and contemporary persecutions of the Hazara people, and serve as hubs for international activism. The sites serve to inform, network, and spur collective action. These functions play a critical part in moving toward healing, as they serve to recognize the realities of Hazara experience and suffering but reject a stance of helplessness of victimization. The sites are virtual town squares, where Hazaras and their supporters can rally, get information, discuss issues, gain strength and inspiration from community, and organize for collective action.

Once website which informs as well as rallies collective action is hazara.net, which has coordinated petitions and campaigns against inhumane treatment and violence. One of their tabs specifically invites you to “take action,” no matter who you are in the world. While “hazara.net” is highly activism-focused, hazarapeople.com has an even broader scope. It is a vast electronic warehouse of historical documents, news, and opportunities for action and connection, not only in the arena of campaigning against ethnic or religious violence, but in all areas of Hazara life and interest, including art.

5. The Arts: Force of Forgetting and Virus Writing

The final strategy this project examines as a way to confront the wounds of the past and move toward the future is art. While this topic is rich and deep, with many other potential creative avenues besides the ones represented, with a focus on two powerful examples: visual art, through

⁵² Ibrahimi (2012), 2.

the work of Hazara artist and curator Khadim Ali and poetry, through the verses of Kamran Mir Hazar. While these creative approaches may not be as direct as signing a petition or standing in a protest, they are every bit as powerful, and play a critical role in connecting with the soul of the Hazara people, to reach those forgotten places, to remember or reconstruct events and emotions in a way that may be jarring but is necessary for healing.

5.1. The Force of Forgetting

Khadim Ali lives in Australia, where he arrived after a harrowing journey from Pakistan on a boat that should not have made it across the Indian Ocean. His art knows the dark language that speaks to places left untouched, underground, intentionally or forcibly forgotten. In 2011 he curated a show in Karachi, Pakistan called “The Force of Forgetting,” featuring his own art along with the art of three other Hazaras, including a calligrapher, a filmmaker, and another painter. “The force of forgetting doesn’t mean to forget a history of pain,” wrote Khadim Ali, “but the inability to express that memory. For this we need a silent artistic language to speak about these suppressed memories.”⁵³ That silent language, in this exhibition, took the form of ghostly bloody strokes in Sher Ali Hussainy’s “Scream” series and triumphant stills from Sahraa Karimi’s documentary “Afghan Women Behind the Wheel.” It took the form of Khadim Ali’s “haunted lotus,” trailing a long sharp tongue from amid bared teeth and spilling its own tangled intestines in mid-flight. It took the form of thick, dark layers of calligraphic lines pointing and stabbing at each other from across the page. Brett Adlington, the director of Lismore Regional Gallery where the exhibition was displayed, wrote:

Despite this history of discrimination, the artists uphold an enduring connection to Afghanistan and pride in being Hazara. Poetic and emotionally charged, the works... draw on Afghanistan’s rich

53 Khadim Ali, “The Force of Forgetting” Art Installation. 19 March-23 April 2011. Intro. <http://www.crossart.com.au/index.php/Exhibition-catalogues/View-category.html>

54 Brett Adlington, “The Force of Forgetting” Art Installation. 19 March-23 April 2011, pp 2-3. <http://www.crossart.com.au/index.php/Exhibition-catalogues/View-category.html>

cultural heritage and tell a Hazara story of this war-torn country.⁵⁴

One of the pieces that initially inspired the idea for the project was a sketch of dark sunflower, in black, white, and red, staring down at its roots. One day Khadim showed this sketch to Asad Buda, a leading Hazara philosopher, who brought up the term, *faromushiye etebaari*, or the force of forgetting. They spoke about how Afghanistan was a “haunted land,” with bodies buried in it, a soil full of blood and bombs – and especially the genocide of the Hazaras. In our interview, Khadim explained further: “There are different forces that push us to forget about our past... [people] who say, you have to forget about your history, start a new life. And I am ready to forget... if you LET me forget.”⁵⁵

He told stories of some of the many discriminatory practices Hazaras still experience in Afghanistan, how the weight of their history is always being thrown at them even while people say “forget.” In 2007 he taught an art class to non-Hazara students, who after 3 months in class with him confided, “Ustad (teacher), we thought Hazaras were *moosh-khor* (mouse-eaters), unclean, and bitter, but you have changed our minds.”⁵⁶ Their raw language simultaneously revealed deep prejudice that still pervades ethnic relationships in Afghanistan, and the potential for that to change through contact and education. “I want peace in Afghanistan,” Khadim would tell the students. “I can’t treat you as the murderers of my great-grandparents, or take their revenge from you. This is the reality in Afghanistan. We have to face it.”

Khadim’s art is part of facing, rather than forgetting – or facing, in order to forget. In the same exhibition, Ali Baba Aurang’s work “layers darkness and blackness over and over with his beautiful and intense style of *‘siyah-mashq...’* [black-practice] as though a huge phase of history has been forcibly embedded down at the bottom of memory, and it is breathing.”⁵⁷ Discussing Aurang’s art, which draws inspiration from the established calligraphic “black-practice” of filling the entire page with writing, Khadim explains that you can’t actually read it except at the peripheries.

55 Interview with Khadim Ali

56 Ibid.

57 Khadim Ali, “The Force of Forgetting” Art Installation

“You feel the darkness and the pain but you do not exactly want to read... the intensity of it all.” These creative expressions begin to process the social trauma experienced by the Hazara people, creating something to replace the images of the minarets built of Hazara skulls at the main public cross-roads. What they are creating is not blue skies and daisies, but it belongs to them. They feel it, and they own it. Slowly, they can begin to heal from a history of loss by re-claiming their most important possessions – beginning with their memories.

5.2. Virus Writing

A memory was what inspired poet Kamran Mir Hazar’s poem “Virus Writing.” It was one of his last memories in Afghanistan – when he was arrested and detained by authorities in Kabul. When we spoke about the role of creativity, art, and poetry in healing the wounds of the Hazara people, addressing their situation and strengthening a sense of identity, he was careful to clarify his view of poetry. “The responsibility of a poet is... to create new spaces, [through] layered language. Poetry is not a donkey to carry ideology.”⁵⁸ One of Mir Hazar’s poems is built with layers of memory – memories of his last month in Kabul. When he was detained for words published in his newspaper that pointed the finger at corrupt authorities, his captors keyed on the offense of his words. “You’re writing viruses,” they said.⁵⁹ Thus the name of his poem (also the title of his forthcoming book), a few of lines of which read:

You watch imagination wandering through paths, over the paths,
You throw the leash at yet another word,
Trying to subdue this wild one,
And if you fail,
You stop functioning,

58 Interview with Kamran Mir Hazar.

59 Ibid.

60 Original Dari and English Translation available at <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/17428/auto/VIRUS-WRITING>

Like a computer crashed.⁶⁰

A virus is like a disease – yet ironically Mir Hazar’s writing was a step in the direction of diagnosing and treating the real disease: the corruption that these intimidation tactics were being used to hide. “The poem has no choice but to stop writing itself,” reads a line of the poem, cleverly referencing the self-duplicating design of viruses, as opposed to his poem. If education is opening the mind to new ideas and opening paths to new careers, if activism is naming the offenses, calling for attention and redress, if art is layering the memories in color and paint as a way to face them, then perhaps poetry is laying in words a road to healing, each mile a new form or new way of looking at life: the pain and the beauty. And hopefully words like Kamran Mir Hazar’s will spread rapidly and powerfully like a virus – except one spreading healing instead of disease.

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