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For an Afghan Minority US Involvement has been a Blessing and a Curse

By Sharif Hassan

It was a typical Friday noon in late September. Boman Ali Ahmadi his wife and their two teenage sons went to the Hussianya Shiite mosque in Kabul to perform the Friday prayer. Afterward, they met outside to head home. They'd only walked one block when an Islamic State suicide bomber detonated his explosive vest on a crowded street.

Ahmadi was among the five people killed; his wife and sons were among the two dozen wounded, with one son suffering serious shrapnel injuries to the head. In the months since, the family has struggled emotionally and financially, forced to rely heavily on donations from wealthy friends and relatives.

“He was the only breadwinner,” Nazeer Hussian Haidari, a cousin, said of Ahmadi. “It is really hard for the family.”

All the victims of the Hussainya mosque attack were Shiite Muslims, members of the branch of Islam that is practiced in central and some parts of northern Afghanistan. Shiites are a minority group long persecuted in Afghanistan. Most Shiites are Hazaras, also an ethnic minority. Hazaras enjoyed a period of peace and even prosperity after the U.S. invasion in 2001. Now they are victim of their own success; both as a religious and ethnic minority and as beneficiaries of international support, they are once again a target for discrimination and attacks.

“The life is getting more difficult since 2014,” referring to former President Barrack Obama’s troops withdrawal deadline, Mohammad Reza Ehsan, 27, a Hazara, student in India said. “ISIS and other groups are targeting Hazaras.... and government doesn’t stop the targeted killings.”

Ehsan got an India-funded scholarship last year, now he is doing master’s degree in Economic policy.

“Hazaras are defenseless. This is a serious problem,” he said.

Hazaras, who make up about 20 percent of the Afghan population, have been brutally oppressed throughout their history: forced from their lands, slaughtered in ethnic or religious conflicts, and crushed when they tried to rise up. Their leaders have been killed or imprisoned.

Treated as second-class citizens of Kabul society, many Hazara, who have distinctive Asian facial features, were confined to menial jobs as porters, cleaners and servants for much of the last two centuries.

In the late 1990s, under the Taliban regime, a hardline Sunni Pashtun group, thousands of Hazaras were once again tortured and massacred.

But soon after the Taliban were defeated with the US-led invasion, schools were re-opened in Hazara regions, a new generation went to universities, later entered the job markets with new skills. They were hired by international organizations. Their community thrived economically. They were politically astute and turned out in higher numbers in elections giving them political power over other ethnic groups. In sports and arts, they shined in national and international competitions. Young Hazara singers, both male and female, won championship titles in music festivals in Afghanistan and abroad.

That success did not go unnoticed by militant groups. Their rapid rise has angered many hardline Sunni insurgent movements who are fighting against the democratic government that Hazaras are part of it.

ISIS’s core belief is to apply draconian laws in Muslim countries. They believe art, elections, women activism, and music are Haram – the values that Hazaras have embraced and nurtured since 2001. The terror organization, also believes Shias are apostates, a crime that is punishable by death in Islam. At least 10 Shiite mosques, protests and gatherings have been attacked across Afghanistan since 2016. At least 374 have been killed and more than 750 wounded in those attacks.

ISIS carried out its first attack on Hazaras in July 2016, when thousands of them held a peaceful demonstration against the government in Kabul. At least 80 were killed and hundreds were killed in the attack by suicide bombers and gunmen. Most of the protesters killed were highly educated women and men. In November that year, another Shiite mosque, Baqir-ul-Olum, came under ISIS attack also in Kabul. More than 30 were killed and dozens were injured in the attack.

In August a Shiite mosque, Jawadia, was stormed in Western province of Herat, 29 were killed and several dozen wounded. Few days later another Shiite mosque, Imam Zaman, was targeted in Kabul, at least 28 died and many more were wounded. The latest attack was carried out on late December that killed at least 41 and wounded over 85.

The rise of such deadly attacks may slow the progress of Hazaras.

Hundreds of families struggle with economic hardships after they lost the breadwinners in such attacks. Haidari said the hard days for Ahamdi's family of six – the mother and five teenagers – may begin soon. The donations may not last forever.

“The future of the family is ambiguous,” he said, adding almost a wish. “God is kind.”

Ehsan, the student in India, said the higher percentage of Hazara youth hold degrees from the university in Afghanistan and abroad but they cannot find jobs. As a result, the unemployment rate is highest among Hazara educated youth, he said. The targeted killings and high unemployment rate force them to flee Afghanistan, he added.

Hundreds of thousands of Afghan youth have emigrated to Europe between 2014 to 2017. The exact percentage of ethnic mix of refugees is not available because Europe's refugee data refers to the nationality not the ethnicity of the refugee. But media reports and the sources interviewed for this story say Hazaras make up a higher percentage of the people who have fled Afghanistan. For instance, over 70 percent of Afghan asylum seekers in Sweden are Hazaras, Kasim Hussein, a Swedish Committee official, estimated in a Reuters article published in 2016. Ehsan's younger brother, who fled to Germany in early 2015, told him that of about 60 Afghans in two boats from

Turkey to Greece, nearly 40 of them were Hazaras. Mojtaba Tavakoli, an immigrant in Austria said over 60 percent of the asylum seekers in the country were Hazaras in 2015.

Mojtaba Tavakoli was 13 when he and his older brother Morteza Tavakoli, 18, left Afghanistan to Europe in 2007. The older brother drowned in waters between Turkey and Greece but Mojtaba Tavakoli survived and made to Austria. Now, 24, he is a PHD student in Scientology.

“I think it is hard for Hazara youth to progress under Ghani government,” he said, referring to President Ashraf Ghani who has been leading the country since 2014.

Persecution and mass immigration is nothing new for Hazaras, they were long massacred and forced from their lands. But the recent wave of attacks may have been triggered by another reason: Most young Hazaras embracing western liberal values in a country where most people moving toward Islamization. Hazaras are on the front line of a culture war, pushing social boundaries and challenging Islamists. More Hazara women are visible outside the home. They make up the majority of women civil society activists, organizing rallies on the streets and working in international organizations. In a country where most women cannot leave their homes without permission, Hazara women are appointed as district and provincial governors. The community’s younger generation is more open compare to most of their peers among other ethnicities. They criticize the religious leaders openly on social media. They are attracted to liberal arts, like music graffiti and paintings. Even nude painting, a culture taboo in the country, is not off limits for some young Hazara artists.

Their embrace of democracy and other values perceived as “western” have made them especially attractive to international groups working in the country.

“We are open-minded. We are not conservative,” Halima Habibi, 24, said. “We really want change. We have been through a lot,” she said, referring to the historical oppression. “We don’t want to be oppressed.”

Habibi, daughter of a construction worker, won a U.S. embassy scholarship in 2014, now she

studies Business Administration at American University of Afghanistan, the most prestigious university in the country. She said the equal opportunity provided by the U.S. has helped Hazaras thrive.

“Everyone has equal right,” she said.

Habibi said she has survived four attacks. The Afghan parliament, which was close to Habibi’s office in Western Kabul, came under attack in June 2015. Taliban suicide bomber targeted a local TV station’s transportation bus killed seven employees and wounded 25 in January 2016. Habibi, who worked for the station then, usually took the bus, but she survived because she left the office earlier and took a taxi to the university to attend a class she had that day. She was also among the protesters in July 2016 when ISIS deadly bombers and gunmen killed more than 80 and wounded hundreds in Kabul. Few months later gunmen attacked American University of Afghanistan killed 12 in August 2016. Habibi was at the campus when it was attacked also in Kabul.

“We got no other choice,” she said. “We can’t stop living.”

For some Hazaras, social openness in Western countries poses a direct threat back home. For instance, Mojtaba Tawakoli, the Ph.D. student in Austria, said he cannot go back to visit his home country because he supports LGBTQ community and believes in evolution theory of Charles Darwin.

“I wouldn’t have been able to live in Afghanistan,” he said. “It was impossible to survive with the ideology I have.”

Homosexuality is considered a sin, punishable by death in Islamic countries including Afghanistan. And Darwin’s evolution theory is considered un-Islamic as it contradicts Koranic explanation of human being’s creation.

Hazaras welcomed democracy in the hope that it could protect them as a minority. There are only two Hazara dominant provinces out of 34 – Bamyan and Daikondi. They also live in eight other

provinces mixed with other ethnicities. Member of parliament and the president are elected by popular votes in Afghanistan electoral system. Hazaras' turnout in election is far higher than any other ethnicities. Popular vote system helps them to influence election results, despite being a minority.

For instance, in the 2010 parliamentary election the turnout among Hazaras was far higher than other ethnic groups in Ghazni, a province which has a mixed population of Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras. After the election result was announced, Hazaras won all the eleven seats in Ghazni. Former president Hamid Karzai initially refused to accept the vote because he was concerned that the result would further alienate Ghazni Pashtuns who were already sympathetic to the Taliban. Karzai reluctantly accepted the result only after the UN mission in Afghanistan intervened in favor of Hazara candidates. There is no official data available on ethnic mixture of Ghazni but the local residents say about 50 percent of the population in the province are Pashtuns, around 48 percent Hazaras, and the remaining two percent includes Tajiks and other minorities.

“The Hazaras are most invested in the democratic process,” said Melissa Kerr Chiovenda, an anthropologist and Hazara expert at the University of Connecticut told AFP in 2014. “They understand the importance of voting. It’s a way for them to advance themselves and to try to improve their position – whether politically or culturally.”

In parallel with terrorist attacks, non-violent verbal attacks have also intensified against Hazaras on social media lately – sometimes by elite Pashtuns.

“People who sold Afghanistan to British during second Anglo-Afghan war should go back to Mongolia where they came from,” Bahar Jalali, a former professor at the American University of Afghanistan, tweeted two month ago. A follower asked who they were? She replied, “Hazaras who were spies for British during the second Anglo-Afghan war.”

There is no historical evidence to confirm her account on connections between Hazaras and the British empire during the second Anglo-Afghan war in 1878.

Jalali is an Afghan-American who used to work as an advisor to the government's National Security Council and her father, Ali Ahmad Jalali, is the government's ambassador to Germany. The motive behind her hateful tweet remains unclear.

The discrimination in the academic environment has also been rampant – even in more cosmopolitan schools and universities in inner cities.

Nasir Ahmad Kaihan entered Education University in Kabul in 2007.

In first day of the class, a Pashtun professor, Shamsuddin Shams, greeted each student individually in the class by shaking their hands. As he shook hands he would jokingly predict the future of the students in the years to come. He told one that he would become a minister, told others they would become members of parliament or professors. When it came Kaihan's turn, one of the two Hazara students in the class, Shams looked at his Asian feature.

“You will become a mason,” he told Kaihan, referring to the history when Hazaras typically were masons, porters and cleaners.

Kaihan graduated in 2011, later got a job with a USAID project. He worked there up to July 2016 when he departed to the U.S. Now Kaihan, 30, is a Fulbright Scholar getting master's degree in Education Leadership at Western Michigan University in Illinois. Kaihan's story is an example of the dramatic progress Hazaras made after the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

As the progressive and media-friendly Hazaras thrived, the U.S. media covered them extensively, often portrayed them as “[Afghanistan's success story](#).” The New York Times, Christian Science Monitor and the Washington Post were doing stories on Hazara's dark past, “servants, cleaners, porters, sidelined for generations, and in some instances massacred” and how they hustled “[to head of class](#),” in new Afghanistan.

As U.S.-allied young liberal Hazaras thrived, they also became the target of verbal and sometimes deadly violent attacks – even before the rise of ISIS.

In 2011, a suicide bomber targeted a Shiite shrine in central Kabul and killed at least 80 worshipers, mostly Hazaras, on the holy day of Ashura. In 2014, gunmen stopped two minibuses in Central province of Ghor, identified 14 Hazara passengers, including three women and a child, tied their hands on their back, then shot them dead by the side of the road. Both attacks were carried out before ISIS also known as Islamic State announced its presence in Afghanistan. The details on who were behind the attacks remain murky. Taliban, the main insurgent group fighting the government, publicly deny involvement in any targeted attacks against Hazaras.

In 2013, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who led Hezb-e-Islami, then the second largest insurgent group after the Taliban, openly threatened Hazaras. In a message published on Hezb-e-Islami's official website, Hekmatyar said foreign forces supported the "minorities," to divide Afghanistan. He criticized the government for letting Shiite Hazaras rule their local governments. Labeling Hazaras as internal supporters of foreign forces, he warned them of "painful consequences," after the withdrawal of foreign troops which was scheduled in 2014. Hekmatyar gave up the insurgency and joined peace process earlier this year. He currently lives in Kabul.

The number of attacks on Hazaras increased dramatically after ISIS found a foothold in Afghanistan. The exact number of ISIS fighters in Afghanistan are unknown, but media reports put the number from several hundred to a thousand. They are a mixture of Pakistani, Afghans and central Asian hardline Sunni militants. ISIS have not been able to expand their territory due to intensive air strikes carried out by the U.S. forces. After three years, they control or contest several dozen miles square in eastern parts of the country. No details available on connection between ISIS in Afghanistan and the main ISIS in Syria and Iraq but the terror group usually claims responsibilities of the attacks on Hazaras via its official news agency Amaq.

Human Right Watch (HRW) called the recent attacks a war crime.

"Insurgents who carry out atrocities against a specific ethnic or religious community are committing war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity," said Patricia Grossman, senior Afghanistan researcher for the HRW said in a statement published on the organization's website.

The U.S. embassy in Kabul issued an unusual statement praising Hazaras after a deadly attack on a mosque that killed at least 28 and wounded more than 50 worshipers in August.

“The United States has a great respect for the Hazara community and their resilience in the face of these horrific attacks,” Hugo Llorens, the former U.S. ambassador in Kabul said. “Attacks against these Afghans because of their ethnicity and religious beliefs cannot continue.”

Despite its brutal attacks on larger cities, ISIS doesn't pose a major threat to the government. The Taliban controls more territory than any time since 2001. The U.S. watchdog, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) said in a report released earlier this year that the Taliban controlled or contested 40 percent of the country in first quarter of the year. They made inroads into northern Afghanistan, out of their traditional hotbed in south and east. As they expand, more Tajiks and Uzbeks, who are also Sunni Muslims, the same branch of Islam Taliban practice, join them in fight against the government. But the Taliban and other insurgent groups have not been able to destabilize Hazara provinces. The community's districts and provinces are safe heavens in country deeply drowned in violence.

Hazaras say militant groups may not give up targeting Shiites – not anytime soon.

Just three weeks after the Hussianya mosque attack, an ISIS suicide bomber targeted another Shiite mosque in western part of Kabul. At least 39 were killed and over 80 wounded in the attack. Images circulating on social media showed bloods stains on the walls of the mosque and corpses on the floor.