



Australian Government  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



# DFAT Thematic Report

Hazaras in Afghanistan

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# 1. Purpose and Scope

1.1 This Thematic Report has been prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for protection status determination purposes only. It provides DFAT's best judgment and assessment at time of writing and is distinct from Australian Government policy with respect to Afghanistan.

1.2 The report provides a general, rather than an exhaustive, country overview. It has been prepared with regard to the current caseload for decision-makers in Australia without reference to individual applications for protection visas. The report does not contain policy guidance for decision-makers.

1.3 Ministerial Direction Number 56 of 21 June 2013 under s 499 of the *Migration Act 1958* states that:

Where the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has prepared a country information assessment expressly for protection status determination processes, and that assessment is available to the decision-maker, the decision-maker must take into account that assessment, where relevant, in making their decision. The decision-maker is not precluded from considering other relevant information about the country.

1.4 This report is based on DFAT's on-the-ground knowledge and discussions with a range of sources in Kabul, including the Afghan government, human rights organisations, civil society activists, refugee advocacy groups, UN agencies, and representatives of the international community. It takes into account relevant and credible open source reports, such as UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reports, US State Department Afghanistan Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, reports from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), credible news reports, and reports from international non-government organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Where DFAT does not refer to a specific source of a report or allegation, this may be to protect the source.

1.5 Information on the situation in Afghanistan more broadly can be found in the 18 September 2015 DFAT Afghanistan Country Information Report, and in the 18 September 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Conditions in Kabul. This report replaces in part the 26 March 2014 DFAT Thematic Report on Hazaras in Afghanistan and Pakistan; see also the 15 January 2016 DFAT Thematic Report on Shias in Pakistan.

## 2. Background Information

2.1 Ethnic Hazaras have lived in Afghanistan for centuries. They are a mix of eastern and western Eurasian peoples, which makes them visibly distinct from other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Hazaras are overwhelmingly Shia Muslims, mostly of the Twelver Sect (*athna asharia*), with a small Sunni minority.

2.2 While demographic data for Afghanistan is unreliable, it is estimated that around three million Hazaras live in Afghanistan—approximately nine per cent of the population and the third largest ethnic group. Sizeable Hazara communities are also found in Pakistan, Iran, the Gulf states, Australia, Europe and the US. Because of the importance of family and ethnic community networks in Afghan life, the presence of Hazara diasporas abroad often acts as a significant factor in the decision of Hazaras to leave Afghanistan, and in their choice of destination.

2.3 Hazaras living in rural Afghanistan tend to speak Hazaragi, a dialect of the Persian (Farsi) language. Many Hazaras in major urban areas such as Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif no longer speak Hazaragi, but rather regional varieties of Persian. Hazaras, particularly in urban areas, may also speak other languages, including Pashto and English.

### Areas with large Hazara populations

2.4 The Hazara-majority provinces of Bamiyan and Daykundi, as well as parts of Ghazni, Ghor, Uruzgan and Wardak provinces, are referred to collectively as the 'Hazarajat'. Sizeable Hazara populations are found in most other major urban areas in Afghanistan, particularly Kabul.

### Hazarajat

2.5 Bamiyan Province has a population of approximately 600,000, and is around 75 per cent Hazara, with Tajik and Pashtun minorities. Daykundi Province, created in 2004 from the Hazara-majority districts of neighbouring Uruzgan province, has a population of around 400,000. The ethnic composition of Daykundi is similar to that of Bamiyan.

2.6 Ghazni is an ethnically diverse province located south of Kabul. The population of Ghazni is estimated to be between 1.1 million and 1.5 million, of which around 50 per cent is Pashtun, 40 per cent Hazara and ten per cent other ethnic groups.

### Kabul

2.7 Kabul is the largest city in Afghanistan, and the nation's capital. Data on the population of Kabul is unreliable, including information on the city's ethnic composition. However, there are credible reports that the current population of the city and surrounding area is more than four million, around 13 per cent of the estimated population of Afghanistan, having grown rapidly over the last decade. Estimates of the Hazara population in Kabul vary between around 1.6 million to two million, or 40-50 per cent of Kabul's population. This would make Hazaras the largest ethnic group in Kabul, alongside significant numbers of Tajiks, Pashtuns and minority ethnic groups. Most Hazaras in Kabul live in the west of the city, including many who live in informal and illegal settlements.

### Recent History

2.8 It is estimated that 60 per cent of the Hazara population of Afghanistan was killed or displaced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century under the reign of the Pashtun Emir Abdur Rahman Khan. Enmity between some members of the Hazara and Pashtun communities has been strong ever since.

2.9 The takeover of Kabul and most of Afghanistan by the predominantly Sunni Pashtun Taliban in 1996 resulted in a period of repression and conflict for Hazaras. For example, thousands of fighters and civilians were killed in fighting for Mazar-e-Sharif in 1997-98, during which at least 2,000 Hazaras were killed by the Taliban in reprisal for earlier killings of Taliban fighters. As a result of these incidents, many Hazaras fled Afghanistan to Pakistan and elsewhere.

2.10 Hazaras have made significant social and economic gains in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, albeit from a very low base. This has been driven in part by the general improvement in living conditions across Afghanistan over this period, and in part by the end of the Taliban regime, which had routinely discriminated against Hazaras.

2.11 Nonetheless, the general slowdown in economic growth across Afghanistan since 2014, driven partly by the gradual withdrawal of the international community, raises questions about whether these gains can be maintained or extended. DFAT assesses that uncertainty about the future security, economic and political situation in Afghanistan is an important factor driving emigration from Afghanistan, including for Hazaras. For more information on these general issues, see the 18 September 2015 DFAT Afghanistan Country Information Report.

## Security situation

2.12 There are many areas of Afghanistan that are contested by insurgent forces, and no part of the country can be considered free from conflict-related violence. While the government retains control over much of the country, particularly in the provincial and district centres, some districts are openly contested, with varying levels of control exercised by the government and insurgents.

2.13 Ethnic tensions exist throughout the country at a local level and can result in sporadic violence. For example, each year sees seasonal clashes over land rights and access to natural resources between nomadic Pashtun Kuchi tribes and Hazaras. Intra-ethnic group violence also occurs occasionally, particularly between different Pashtun tribal groups. The threat of conflict-related violence faced by Hazaras is similar to that faced by members of other ethnic groups.

2.14 The conflict in Afghanistan is complex, and allegiances between groups can change quickly and belie generalisation or ideological coherence. Arrangements of convenience exist, even between groups popularly perceived, or portrayed, as adversaries. For example, information from credible Afghan sources suggests that an arrangement existed between Hazara communities and networks of the Taliban (loyal to deceased commander and faction leader Mansour Dadullah) to allow safe passage for Pashtun Taliban through Hazara dominated areas in Ghazni. As reported, the arrangement broke down after the killing of two Taliban commanders. DFAT's sources suggest this was a catalyst for the spike in kidnappings and executions of Hazara through 2015 in Ghazni and Zabol. Subsequent to the factionalisation of the Taliban in the wake of the acknowledgement of Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Omar's death, there have been unconfirmed reports of Hazara militia cooperating with Taliban loyal to Mullah Akhtar Mansour against the Dadullah faction and its Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) allies in Zabol province in November 2015. This fighting resulted in Dadullah being killed and his network effectively destroyed.

2.15 Given the underlying complexity of the sometimes flexible allegiances involved, as well as the general deterioration in the security situation in Afghanistan, it is overly simplistic to attribute the recent increase in kidnappings and attacks against Hazaras (see 'Road Safety' below) to a simple 'Hazara versus Taliban' issue. Nonetheless, the frequency of these incidents has increased, and the security situation for Hazaras remains fluid.

2.16 Some Hazara groups expressed serious concerns about their safety and security during DFAT consultations for this report, fearing that they will be targeted for violence or discrimination because of their ethnicity and/or religion. These concerns are partly driven by the historical treatment of Hazaras in Afghanistan, particularly during the period of Taliban rule.

2.17 DFAT assesses that, in the current environment, people from all ethnic groups are at risk of violence from anti-government elements, but no particular group is systematically targeted solely on the basis of ethnicity. Although ethnicity or religion is sometimes a contributing factor, especially in the kidnappings of civilians travelling by road between Kabul and the Hazarajat, insurgent groups typically target people associated with the government and the international community, or those who appear wealthier than other Afghans, rather than targeting specific groups (such as Hazaras) on the basis of ethnicity (see below).

## Kabul

2.18 The government maintains effective control over Kabul, although insurgent and criminal violence is common. Insurgents regularly conduct high-profile attacks in Kabul. DFAT assesses that the primary targets for insurgent attacks are government institutions, political figures, the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, personnel associated with NATO's Resolute Support Mission and other coalition forces, other security services, the diplomatic representatives of some countries, and international organisations. Such attacks often cause significant casualties amongst civilian bystanders in addition to those being specifically targeted. Kabul saw a marked increase in the number of incidents in 2015 compared to 2014. According to a Mission Resolute Support report for January-April 2015, insurgent attacks in Kabul were up around 60 per cent on the same period in 2014. For more information on the security situation in Kabul, see the 18 September 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Conditions in Kabul.

## Bamiyan and Daykundi provinces

2.19 While the situation remains fluid, the security situation in Hazara-majority areas, such as Bamiyan and Daykundi provinces, tends to be better than that in other parts of Afghanistan (although security incidents occur regularly across the country). Security for Hazaras in most (but not all) districts in these provinces tends to be better in part because Hazaras make up the vast majority of the population in these areas, which has two effects: because of the ethnic homogeneity, there are fewer opportunities for ethnic tension; and because Hazaras are visually distinct, non-Hazaras can find it difficult to infiltrate these areas without detection. This assessment was confirmed in a discussion with the governor of Daykundi Province in September 2015. The mountainous terrain of the Hazara region also offers a form of natural protection, with few routes for outsiders to traverse these provinces.

2.20 In 2013, a DFAT delegation directly observed the security situation in Bamiyan town as being relatively secure, and assessed that there was a low risk of violence targeted at Hazaras because of their ethnicity. DFAT is not aware of any information that would alter this assessment.

2.21 Some areas of these provinces are relatively more secure than others. In Daykundi province, for example, the southern areas bordering the province of Uruzgan tend to be less secure than other areas of Daykundi, due in part to the fact that this area forms an unofficial border between majority Hazara communities and majority Pashtun communities, providing increased opportunities for localised ethnic violence. There is also greater Taliban presence in these areas. In Bamiyan province, the Kahmard, Saighan and Shibar districts in the north east of the province reportedly experience higher levels of violence by armed anti-government elements. For example, in June 2015 there were reports that the Shibar district governor had been ambushed by Taliban insurgents while travelling to his office in the district. The governor reportedly escaped unharmed.

2.22 DFAT assesses that, while some parts of Bamiyan and Daykundi provinces experience higher levels of insecurity than other areas in those provinces, they are still considered safer than many other parts of Afghanistan. Insurgent attacks that do occur in these provinces tend to be targeted at government officials rather than at groups or individuals on the basis of their ethnicity. Overall, Hazara populations in the majority of areas within Daykundi and Bamiyan provinces are generally able to move within these areas without facing undue security risks.

## Ghazni province

2.23 Pashtun-majority districts in Ghazni Province are not safe. The threat level in these districts is high due to the presence of the Taliban and other insurgent groups. According to the US Department of State Country Report on Terrorism 2014, Ghazni was one of the most violent provinces in Afghanistan in terms of attacks on defence forces, international forces and civilians. Insurgent attacks, community violence and kidnappings are common throughout large parts of the province. While limited credible information is available, the security situation in Ghazni appears to have deteriorated since the beginning of 2014—coinciding with the decline in security more generally across Afghanistan—including in some of the majority-Hazara areas such as Jaghori district. Credible sources have reported that the Hazara-dominated Ajristan district is extremely unsafe. Roads linking Hazara-dominated areas in Ghazni with Kabul also suffer from a high level of insecurity (see 'Road safety' below).



## Other provinces

2.24 Most areas of Afghanistan outside of Kabul and the Hazarajat generally have high levels of insecurity, and are considered dangerous for people of all ethnicities, including Hazaras. DFAT assesses that Hazara minorities living in Pashtun-majority areas across Afghanistan are less safe than those living in Kabul or Hazara-majority areas.

## Road safety

2.25 Afghanistan's road network, particularly in the mountainous central highlands, is generally poor. Travel in winter is even more difficult, and roads at higher altitudes can be cut by snowfalls for long periods during winter. Speeding and unsafe driving further aggravate these problems—the majority of deaths on Afghan roads are caused by traffic accidents.

2.26 Insecurity compounds the poor condition of Afghanistan's limited road network, particularly those roads that pass through areas contested by insurgents. The Taliban, other anti-government groups and criminal elements target the national highway and secondary roads, and unofficial checkpoints manned by armed insurgents are common. Official checkpoints—operated by Afghan National Army (ANA) or Afghan National Police (ANP) with the aim of improving the security on the roads—can be operated by poorly-trained, poorly-paid personnel, and corruption is common. There are reports that, in some cases, Hazara truck drivers are prevented from passing through these checkpoints; only Pashtun drivers are allowed to pass.

2.27 Criminals and insurgents on roads tend to target people who appear wealthy or are associated with the government or the international community in attacks that can include kidnapping for ransom. People from all ethnic groups are vulnerable to these attacks. It can be difficult to ascertain the motivation for attacks, and to separate criminal attacks from insurgent activity.

2.28 There have been a series of reported incidents of Hazaras being kidnapped since late 2014, including the February 2015 kidnapping of 31 people—almost all Hazaras—while travelling on two buses through Zabul province (see also the 18 September 2015 DFAT Afghanistan Country Information Report). According to the UNAMA 2015 mid-year report on the protection of civilians in Afghanistan, of the 196 conflict-related abduction incidents country-wide in the first six months of 2015, only ten incidents involved Hazaras. All but one of the kidnappings of Hazaras occurred in areas of mixed Hazara and non-Hazara communities. A total of 97 Hazaras were reported as being abducted, 67 of whom have been confirmed as being subsequently released. The motivations for the abductions reportedly included financial gain, intimidation and extracting concessions from other parties to the conflict such as a hostage exchange. For example, on 14 April 2015 anti-government elements abducted 14 Hazaras in Ghazni province, reportedly to exchange them for insurgents held by pro-government forces. Four of these abductees were reportedly killed when the insurgents' demands were not met. The remaining ten hostages were later released. DFAT notes that the UNAMA reports only covers abduction incidents that are perpetrated by parties to the conflict, and excludes incidents perpetrated by criminals and tribal or other groups that do not have a connection with the conflict. Incidents of kidnap and ransom tend to be under-reported.

2.29 There were several incidents of Hazaras being kidnapped in Ghazni Province in the second half of 2015, including a group of seven Hazaras (four men, two women and a nine-year-old girl) who were kidnapped in Ghazni Province in October and later murdered, their bodies being found in neighbouring Zabul Province in early November. The killings led to thousands of people—mostly Hazaras but also Pashtuns, Uzbeks and Tajiks—marching in the streets of Kabul to protest the killings and call for the perpetrators to be punished. There was speculation that the killings were carried out by Da'esh, and local Taliban leaders claimed to have tried and immediately hanged the perpetrators. However, authorities from the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) were reported in the media as suggesting that the Taliban were responsible—it is unclear which faction may have been involved. DFAT notes that the Dadullah-aligned faction of the Taliban is based in Zabul province, but it was effectively destroyed in Taliban inter-factional fighting in November, during which Dadullah himself was killed.

2.30 The killings of the seven Hazaras followed a number of other kidnappings involving Hazaras in recent months, coinciding with a further deterioration of the general security situation across Afghanistan in the second half of 2015. DFAT concurs with the assessment of other organisations—such as UNAMA in its mid-year report on the protection of civilians in conflict—that the primary motivations for these abductions can include holding hostages for ransom, prisoner exchanges, and a perception that the abductees have links with the government or the international community. For example, four people (three Hazaras and one Pashtun) were kidnapped in Ghazni Province in August 2015, and later killed after the perpetrators were unable to organise a prisoner swap. These four people were reportedly targeted because of their links to the

government—officials claimed they were contractors working on a government-funded construction project—rather than ethnicity. In a separate incident, 12 Hazaras were kidnapped from Ghazni Province earlier in August 2015. Two of the victims escaped, while the remaining prisoners were reportedly released following negotiations led by local tribal elders.

2.31 While ethnicity is rarely the primary motivating factor in these incidents, DFAT assesses that ethnicity can be a contributing factor, particularly in the choice of victim, in some circumstances. For example, in November 2015, militants stopped a number of buses travelling through Zabul Province on their way to Kandahar from Kabul. The gunmen reportedly asked passengers for identification documents, and only took away the Hazara passengers. Some of the passengers were later released, although around nine remain unaccounted for.

2.32 Multiple credible sources informed DFAT that some bus companies are refusing to sell tickets to Hazaras because of the risk to their vehicles and drivers of being stopped by insurgents or criminals because of the possibility of Hazaras being on board. There are also credible anecdotal reports of ‘spotters’ being used at bus stations to call ahead and alert insurgents as to which buses are carrying Hazara people. It is unclear whether this targeting is being conducted because of the Hazaras’ ethnicity, because of a perceived association with the government or international community (see below), or because Hazaras can often appear wealthy, making them an attractive target for kidnap and ransom. Furthermore, Pashtun kidnappers may be less likely to kidnap other Pashtuns, partly due to the risk that this could create a cycle of inter-tribal violence and retribution; Hazaras may represent a lower risk target from the kidnappers’ perspective.

2.33 While no ethnic group is immune from kidnappings, DFAT assesses that Hazaras travelling by road between Kabul and the Hazarajat face a greater risk than other ethnic groups. It is unclear whether this is due to ethnic targeting or is a result of the high numbers of Hazaras travelling on this route. On the basis of consultations in Kabul with government authorities, international agencies and civil society organisations, DFAT assesses that, if a bus with a mixture of ethnic groups on board is stopped in these areas, ethnic Hazaras (and other non-Pashtuns) are more likely to be selected for kidnapping or violence than are Pashtun passengers. While ethnicity may not be a primary motivation for an abduction incident, it may have an influence on the selection of victims.



## 3. Treatment of Hazaras

3.1 Under the Taliban regime, Hazaras faced systemic official and societal discrimination and violence. According to an August 2013 report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), minorities in Afghanistan, including Hazaras, have made significant gains, albeit from a very low base, since the removal of the Taliban from power in 2001. This assessment is consistent with information presented to DFAT during consultations in the preparation of this report. Afghanistan's Hazara population has made strong gains in terms of politics and education over this period. For example, Hazara candidates won all the lower house seats in Ghazni, despite being a minority of the province's population. In addition, Afghanistan's Second Vice President, Sarwar Danish, is an ethnic Hazara from Daykundi Province who was elected on the same ticket as President Ghani. Vice President Danish replaced former Vice President Karim Khalili, another ethnic Hazara, from Wardak Province. It is important to note, however, that often-quoted figures showing high levels of Hazara electoral success may be misleading, as the government treats all Shias as Hazaras, notwithstanding that there are significant populations of non-Hazara Shias and a number of Sunni Hazaras. For example, the Minister for Commerce, Trade and Industries, Humayoun Rasa, is ethnically a Bayat (Turkic Shia), and the Minister for Telecommunications, Abdul Razaq Wahidi, is ethnically Tajik but religiously Shia—both are considered Hazara by the government.

3.2 While conditions for Hazaras have improved greatly since 2001, they still face societal discrimination, partly as a result of earlier practices of official discrimination. For example, until 2001 there were few Hazaras employed in senior government positions. Due to the important role that ethnic, tribal and familial connections play in day to day life for all Afghans, Hazaras are still underrepresented in senior levels of government bureaucracy. The historical enmity between Afghanistan's Pashtun and Hazara communities contributes to the Hazara community's perceptions of ongoing discrimination and targeting for violence.

### Religion

3.3 Almost all Hazaras are Shia Muslims, predominantly from the Twelver Sect. Articles 2 and 3 of Afghanistan's Constitution establish Islam as the official religion, and stipulate that 'no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam', and that the 'provisions of adherence to the fundamentals of the sacred religion of Islam and the regime of the Islamic Republic cannot be amended'. Article 62 requires that presidential and vice-presidential candidates be Muslim, and government ministers and members of Parliament are required to swear an oath of allegiance and obedience to the principles of Islam.

3.4 Afghanistan's Constitution and laws formally recognise some separate legal rights for Shias. Article 131 of the Constitution provides that Afghanistan's courts shall apply Shia jurisprudence in certain civil cases where all parties are Shia. In 2009, parliament passed a Shia 'personal status' law, which recognised different practices on issues such as marriage, divorce and inheritance among the Shia community. DFAT therefore assesses that official discrimination on the basis of religion—including between Sunni and Shia Muslims—is low.

3.5 Any discrimination faced by Shias in Afghanistan, including the Hazara community, is more likely to be societal in nature, primarily as a result of the important role played by ethnic, tribal and familial networks in Afghan society and the dominance in many areas of the Sunni majority. Such discrimination generally occurs as a result of a positive preference for members of one's own family/tribal/ethnic/religious group, rather than negative discrimination against others. Hazaras' perceived linguistic and religious connections with Iran can also be viewed with suspicion in Afghanistan.

3.6 Purely inter-faith violence is rare in Afghanistan, although attacks against Shias do occur, particularly during rituals or significant dates that are observed by Shias but not Sunnis. For example, in November 2012 a group of Sunni students at Kabul University attempted to prevent (predominantly Hazara) Shia students from observing Ashura. The confrontation led to violence, leaving at least one student dead and at least

eight more wounded. In December 2011, more than 80 people were killed when a suicide bomber detonated amongst a large crowd of people at Kabul's Abu Fazl Mosque during Ashura commemorations. This attack was reportedly claimed by Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and was one of three coordinated attacks in Afghanistan aimed at Ashura commemorations, with smaller scale attacks occurring in Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar. The attacks were targeted at Afghan Shias (including, but not exclusively, Hazaras), reportedly with the intention of aggravating sectarian tensions.

3.7 All groups in Afghanistan are vulnerable to violent attacks by insurgent and/or terrorist organisations, regardless of religious belief. This is as true for Hazaras as for other groups. DFAT is not aware of any credible evidence that everyday Hazaras are currently being systematically targeted on the basis of the Shia religion. Hazara religious and community leaders may be at risk of being specifically targeted for violent attacks if they are known or perceived to support the government or preach anti-insurgent messages, but DFAT assesses that this targeting is due to political affiliation rather than their Shia religion. Generally, sectarian violence in Afghanistan is rare, and DFAT is not aware of any significant violent attacks in recent years against Hazaras on the basis of their religion.

## Ethnicity

3.8 Article 22 of Afghanistan's Constitution, introduced in 2004, forbids any kind of discrimination or distinction between the citizens of Afghanistan.

3.9 In practice, ethnic, tribal and family affiliations are important factors in almost every aspect of life in Afghanistan. For the majority of Afghans, including those in major cities such as Kabul but especially in rural areas, this kinship is central to identity and acceptance in the community, including for finding shelter and employment. As such, Afghans tend to live in areas where their ethnic group constitutes the local majority. Outside of major urban areas, most Afghans live in ethnic-based communities with their own traditions and customs. Even in major cities, Afghans tend to live alongside members of their own ethnic group.

3.10 DFAT is not aware of any official policy of discrimination pursued by the government on the basis of ethnicity. Hazaras are active in the Afghan community, particularly in politics, education and civil society. This does not, though, equate to Hazaras having power, and Hazaras are underrepresented in senior government positions.

3.11 However, some societal discrimination exists. As noted above, societal discrimination tends to occur in the form of nepotism in favour of particular ethnic and religious groups, rather than negative discrimination against a particular group. For example, Hazaras have been removed from director positions in core departments such as the Office of Administrative Affairs, and have been replaced by Pashtuns who are often distant relatives of senior government officials. While Hazaras do face this type of discrimination by other ethnic groups, these other groups can face similar discrimination in Hazara-dominated areas.

3.12 The seasonal migration of nomadic Pashtun Kuchi herders from southern parts of Afghanistan to pastures in the central highlands has regularly been a cause of ethnic conflict with the region's Hazara population. These clashes have led to deaths and injuries among both Kuchis and Hazaras, and the displacement of Hazaras from their villages. While the government has worked to mediate the disputes between the two groups—including through annual mediation processes and compensation payments to Kuchis who have been denied access to grazing lands—clashes continue to occur. For example, in June 2015 there were reports of clashes between Hazaras and Kuchis in Wardak Province, which resulted in the deaths of two people from each side. According to these reports, armed Hazaras subsequently abducted five Kuchis from the local markets in retaliation.

3.13 The improvement in conditions for Hazaras since 2001, and in particular the focus on education, has resulted in some tension with other ethnic groups that have not experienced a similar level of educational achievement. For example, Hazara students at Kabul University staged an eight-day hunger strike in front of parliament in May 2013 in protest about ethnic discrimination and nepotism among the university's leadership. In response to perceptions of Hazara dominance of tertiary education, in July 2013 the government proposed to replace the current merit-based system with a provincial quota system for university entrance, which would have the effect of limiting some ethnic groups' access to higher education. Legislation on this proposal has not been passed by the Parliament, and this reform proposal does not seem to be a priority for the Ghani government.

## Economic situation

3.14 Unemployment and underemployment are high across Afghanistan. During consultations in Kabul in preparation for this report, a consistent theme from Hazara and non-Hazara representatives was the concern over employment opportunities. These concerns—consistently prioritised ahead of concerns over security—were highlighted by people in Kabul and the Hazarajat. Hazaras from across Afghanistan regularly travel for employment opportunities, including large numbers of people who travel to Iran in the hope of finding work. DFAT assesses that the low level of development and poor economic opportunities in Afghanistan act as a strong ‘push factor’ for both internal relocation within and emigration from Afghanistan. This is true for Hazaras, as well as the rest of the Afghan population.

### The Hazarajat

3.15 The mountainous terrain, geographic isolation and lack of arable land in the Hazarajat combine to limit economic and employment opportunities in the region. Infrastructure in these areas is also severely underdeveloped. For example, around 80 per cent of roads in Bamiyan are unpaved, restricting the movement of goods and people. Despite the construction of solar and hydroelectric facilities in the region, access to electricity remains limited. Hazara communities have complained about the lack of infrastructure investment by the government and the international community. DFAT notes that, while infrastructure in the Hazarajat remains particularly underdeveloped, inadequate development and infrastructure funding is a broad issue across many parts of the country.

3.16 The Hazarajat is heavily dependent on agriculture for economic and employment opportunities, and is highly vulnerable to droughts and floods. The withdrawal of the international community from Afghanistan, including the New Zealand-led provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Bamiyan and the Polish-led PRT in Ghazni, has also had a negative impact on economic activity in the region.

3.17 Although many Hazaras seek employment and other opportunities outside the Hazarajat, some of those who have settled in Kabul and elsewhere in Afghanistan also derive income from seasonal work in the central highlands and in other provinces, especially in the spring and summer when farming activity is at its peak. Travelling for the purposes of seasonal work is common for poor people in Afghanistan, regardless of ethnicity.

### Kabul

3.18 While wages and the quality and availability of public services in Kabul tend to be somewhat higher than in other parts of Afghanistan, large parts of the city remain extremely poor. Kabul’s economy is based on trade and other service industries, although there is some agriculture in the areas around the city. In addition, a small number of larger private businesses have set up facilities in and around Kabul, including in food processing, textile production and light manufacturing.

3.19 Since 2001, economic growth in Kabul has been driven by unprecedented inflows of international assistance as well as the substantial presence of international forces and organisations. The recent drawdown of the international presence and associated reduced aid and other financial flows are having a major impact on Kabul’s economy.

3.20 Because of the city’s size and growth, Kabul offers a greater range of employment opportunities than other areas of Afghanistan. Over the last decade, employment growth has been strongest in Kabul’s services sector. Although there are no reliable statistics, unemployment and underemployment are widespread in Kabul. Many people rely on irregular day-work, particularly in the construction industry. These people tend to suffer poor economic and social conditions. This is as true for Hazaras as it is for people from other ethnic groups.

3.21 Because of their traditional focus on education, including for girls, Hazaras tend to be relatively well qualified for roles in the public service and the international community. However, partly as a legacy of previous periods of discrimination against Hazaras and the importance of familial and tribal connections in Afghan life, Hazaras tend to be underrepresented in senior civil service positions.

### Health care

3.22 The health system in Afghanistan has improved significantly since 2001, but from a very low starting point. Basic public health care is free, and freely available in Kabul, but medicines are often expensive or

expired, which can exclude the poor from treatment for common illnesses or provide sub-standard or ineffective treatments. Medical facilities, while still basic, tend to be better in Kabul than in other parts of Afghanistan. Private practices tend to provide higher quality care. The Hazara community operates a number of relatively high quality private medical facilities in Kabul.

3.23 There are approximately 60 health facilities in Bamiyan and Daykundi that offer basic healthcare. The availability of care has improved significantly, with high immunisation rates, since 2001. However the overall quality of healthcare services remains poor; specialist care is not available in the central highlands, and there have been problems attracting doctors to the region because of its isolation. Poor transport infrastructure and security concerns can mean that medical supplies can be limited in areas outside Kabul, including the Hazarajat. This situation has worsened with the deterioration of the security situation across Afghanistan. While some Hazara-dominated districts are relatively safe compared to other parts of the country, transport to these areas can be difficult, and many donors have more limited access than in the past. This restricts the extent to which donors can assist with the provision of health services, and also makes it difficult to assess the situation on the ground.

## Education

3.24 Access to education in Afghanistan has improved greatly since 2001, particularly for girls. Traditionally, many Hazaras have placed a high value on education, including for girls and women. Almost 90 per cent of Hazara children receive education and are generally encouraged to consider further education options where family circumstances allow. Girls constitute almost 50 per cent of students in Bamiyan.

3.25 There are currently more than 350 schools operating in Bamiyan and Daykundi, attended by 160,000 students. Bamiyan also hosts a small university, reportedly with 3,600 students, but has struggled to attract qualified lecturers.

3.26 Some families from the Hazarajat send their children to Kabul for courses during the winter, where the Hazara community operates a number of private schools. The quality of Hazara-run schools tends to be better than many other schools in Afghanistan, demonstrated by relatively high university acceptance rates.

## Political opinion (actual or imputed)

3.27 While reports vary, there are at least 55 officially registered political parties in Afghanistan. Many of these represent the interests of particular ethnic groups, including Hazaras, who have been very active in politics since 2001. Hazaras typically have high rates of voter participation, which has resulted in a disproportionately high representation of Hazaras in the lower house of the Afghan National Assembly.

3.28 DFAT assesses that Hazara groups are able to freely hold protests in Kabul and other major urban centres. For example, in March 2015, hundreds of protesters gathered in Ghazni City and Kabul in an attempt to pressure authorities to rescue the 31 people (mostly Hazaras) kidnapped in Zabol Province the previous month (see 'Road safety' above). These protests were held peacefully, with no disruption from either the government or insurgent groups. Hazara civil society groups tend to be small, fragmented and poorly organised, with no stable structure and limited funding. Nonetheless, they are able to operate freely without intervention from the authorities, using a range of media including television, radio and social media.

## People associated with the government or the international community

3.29 Insurgent and terrorist groups, including the Taliban, openly target government officials and people associated with the international community. These individuals are often subject to intimidation, threats, abduction and killing. These attacks occur throughout Afghanistan, including Kabul. For more information on politically motivated attacks see the 18 September 2015 DFAT Country Information Report on Afghanistan.

3.30 Due in part to improvements in the situation of the Hazara community since 2001, Hazaras are widely perceived to be affiliated with both the government and the international community. Many Afghans, including Hazaras, travel abroad to Iran, Pakistan, Europe or other western countries to seek employment or educational opportunities. There are also large communities of Hazaras living overseas, including in Australia. This is not to suggest that all Hazaras face the same level of risk as those working for the government or the international community. Rather, the perception of Hazaras having disproportionately benefitted from the ousting of the Taliban regime, or the perception of links with the international

community, may in some circumstances be a contributing factor in the choice of target for an attack that would have happened anyway. These concerns are particularly evident with regard to Hazaras travelling by road between Kabul and the Hazarajat (see 'Security situation' above).

3.31 DFAT assesses that, with the exception of those travelling by road between Kabul and the Hazarajat, low-profile Hazaras who have spent time in western countries face a low risk of violence as a result of those international links. People, including Hazaras, who are openly affiliated with the government or the international community by way of employment, public statements or other associations, face a high risk of being targeted by anti-government elements across Afghanistan. This is true for people of all ethnicities.

## 4. Other Considerations

### State Protection

4.1 The ongoing insurgency and deteriorating security situation across the country mean that the government does not exercise uniformly effective control over all parts of the country. Government control tends to be better in major urban centres; insurgents operate more freely in rural and remote areas. As a result, the government lacks the ability to adequately address human rights issues, protect vulnerable groups and prosecute human rights violators in some (particularly rural) areas of the country. In rural areas, many Afghan groups—including Hazara groups—maintain their own local militias to protect themselves from criminals and insurgents, in the absence of effective state protection mechanisms.

4.2 DFAT is not aware of any information to suggest that Hazaras are significantly less able to avail themselves of state protection than are Afghans from other ethnic groups. For more detailed information on the general situation with regard to state protection in Afghanistan, see the 18 September 2015 DFAT Afghanistan Country Information Report.

### Internal Relocation

4.3 Large urban areas in Afghanistan are home to mixed ethnic and religious communities and offer greater opportunities for employment, access to services and a greater degree of state protection than many other areas. As Afghanistan's largest urban centre, Kabul provides the most viable option for many people for internal relocation and resettlement. This applies to those internally displaced by conflict and natural disasters, economic migrants and returnees to Afghanistan. Relatively good economic opportunities (compared to the rest of Afghanistan) and greater levels of security are important motivations for migration to Kabul. However, despite having better conditions than the rest of the country, Kabul remains one of the poorest cities in the world and regularly experiences serious security incidents.

4.4 While no parts of the country are completely free from violence, there are relatively safe areas for Hazaras to reside within Hazara-majority areas of the Hazarajat, particularly parts of Bamiyan and Daykundi, as well as in western Kabul. While these areas are generally more secure than other parts of Afghanistan, there are significant risks for people travelling by road between these areas (see 'Road safety' above).

### Government policy on internal relocation

4.5 Article 39 of Afghanistan's Constitution guarantees Afghans' rights to 'travel and settle in any part of the country, except in areas forbidden by law'. Presidential Decree 104 of 2005 stipulates that all internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees should return to their place of origin or an adjacent province. The Government's Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MORR) has allocated plots of land in these areas for resettlement. In practice, many people choose to remain in Kabul because of the greater economic opportunities available, or are unable to return to their areas of origin due to family/tribal disputes or the risks associated with the security situation.

### Ethnicity

4.6 Traditional extended family and tribal community structures of Afghan society are the main protection and coping mechanisms for people in Afghanistan, who rely on these networks for their safety and economic survival, including access to accommodation and an adequate level of subsistence. People tend to move and settle in large groups, often with several other families, for this reason. As a consequence, large groups of people can arrive in a particular area, resulting in rapid population growth and a strain on infrastructure and services.



4.7 Kabul's size and diversity mean that there are large communities of almost all ethnic, linguistic and religious groups present in the city, including Hazaras. Given the growth of Kabul's population since 2001, many individuals may have members of their extended family in Kabul who can assist with their relocation. Ethnic-based violence in Kabul is rare. Relative ethnic homogeneity in the Hazara-dominated areas of Bamiyan and Daykundi means that these areas are also relatively free of ethnic-based violence.

4.8 DFAT assesses that, notwithstanding road safety concerns and issues with security in Afghanistan, there are generally options available for members of most ethnic and religious minorities, including Hazaras, to relocate from other parts of Afghanistan to relative safety in Kabul. This relocation is more likely to be successful where the individual travels as part of a larger group, or has already established networks that can assist with the provision of basic necessities.

### Other factors affecting internal relocation

4.9 In practice, DFAT assesses that a lack of financial resources and lack of employment opportunities are the greatest constraints on successful internal relocation. This is compounded in Kabul by the city's relatively high cost of living, particularly the cost of housing.

4.10 Internal relocation is generally more successful for single men of working age, provided they are able to make use of family or tribal networks. Unaccompanied women and children are least likely to be able to successfully relocate to urban areas, particularly if these networks are lacking.

### Treatment of Returnees

4.11 Returnees from western countries are almost exclusively returned to Kabul. While some families are returned, most returnees tend to be single men travelling alone. While men of working age are more likely to be able to return and reintegrate successfully than unaccompanied women and children, the lack of family networks for single men can also impact on their ability to reintegrate into Afghan community. The relatively better economic opportunities available mean returnees often choose to remain in Kabul. There are no tracking mechanisms for these returnees, so it is difficult to assess the conditions they face. There are plausible, but anecdotal, reports of returnees from western countries turning up in drug communities. DFAT assesses that, because of Kabul's size and diversity, returnees would be unlikely to be discriminated against or subject to violence on the basis of ethnicity or religion. There is a large Hazara population living in Kabul.

4.12 DFAT assesses that Hazara returnees who are not directly associated with the government or the international community currently do not face a higher level of risk upon return than do returnees to Afghanistan from other ethnic groups. However, Hazaras who are initially returned to Kabul who then seek to travel by road to the Hazarajat may face a heightened risk of violence or kidnapping along these roads. For more general information on the treatment of returnees to Afghanistan see the 18 September 2015 DFAT Country Information Report on Afghanistan.