



Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group

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Tajiks and their security in Afghanistan

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September 2014*

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Tajiks and Hazaras

The plight of Tajiks in Afghanistan should be understood against the situation of the Hazaras. The Hazaras of Afghanistan are justifiably famous as the most persecuted people group in the world. The Taliban and their fellow travellers such as the Laskar-e-Janghvi are extremist Sunni Muslims and they regard the Hazaras, who are generally Shia Muslims, as infidels and therefore worthy of death. In Afghanistan the Taliban are derived from members of the majority Pashtun ethnic group.

Hazaras are also hated because of their participation in the so called Northern Alliance which resisted the Taliban from 1996 to 2001. They are especially vulnerable to targeted violence because of (a) their mongoloid features which make them easily identifiable on sight and (b) their traditional commitment to gathering for Shia ceremonies such as the annual celebration of Ashura Day.

Waves of Hazara refugees have fled from Afghanistan over the over the past several decades resulting in more than 4 million of them being scattered in 70 countries. At the end of 2012 the Taliban leaders in Afghanistan emphasised publically that it is their duty to kill Hazaras. Over the next year hundreds of thousands of Hazaras fled from their homes and headed for Iran and Pakistan as the U.S. was pulling back, and 38,000 of these managed to get into industrialized nations to apply for asylum.

Vulnerability of Tajiks

Less famous than the Hazaras as refugees but almost as vulnerable to persecution are the Tajiks who represent about a quarter of the population of Afghanistan, the second largest ethnic group. The Tajiks are concentrated in the north and west, but have spread all over the country. Mountain Tajiks are farmers or herdsman and are generally very poor. Plains and urban Tajiks are usually well educated and are involved in the government bureaucracy and work as tradesmen and artisans. The tribal organization has essentially disappeared, having been replaced by village and family ties, and a strong sense of community loyalty. Unlike Afghan Pashtuns, there is no specific Tajik social structure. In many instances, especially in Kabul and the central plains, Tajiks have adopted the social and cultural patterns of their neighbors.

The Tajiks are hated by the Taliban because of their reputation as Soviet supporters and because of their participation in and indeed leadership of the Northern Alliance. This alliance, a coalition of resistance groups consisting of Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks, was dominated by Tajiks and led by Tajik general Ahmed Shah Massoud of Panjshir. Masoud received assistance from his old enemy, Russia, as well as from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran, and thereby established the pejorative label "communist" attributed to Tajiks by Pashtuns.

Most significantly the Northern Alliance was recognised by the international community as the government of Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2002, as a result of US-led intervention by coalition forces. During the time of Taliban rule in the late 1990s Tajiks and other non-Pashtuns were suppressed and many Tajiks were killed.

Although led by a Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, the interim government that was set in place in 2002 was dominated by ethnic Tajiks. However in certain areas of the nation Tajiks continue to participate in inter-communal warfare, primarily against the majority Pashtuns. For this reason, together with their prominent role in ousting the Taliban regime, the Tajiks face discrimination in pro-Taliban areas. Tensions have been further heightened by the September 2011 assassination, by a Taliban militant, of former Tajik president Burhanuddin Rabbani, who had been heading the High Peace Council in charge of peace negotiations.

Memories are long and this historical opposition is not forgotten. It means that even though most Tajik's share the Sunni Islam faith of the Taliban they are not immune from targeted violence. In general terms the Taliban do not accept the Tajik brand of Sunni Islam, which is considered to be too lax. While the Tajiks tend to be sympathetic to the application of Sharia law, they are generally not ready to embrace the extremist position of the Taliban.

However it must be emphasised that further generalisation should be made only with great care. In the years of suppression of the Taliban through the intervention of Western forces after 11 September 2001, many Tajik leaders emerged and established positions of power and influence – in politics, business, academia and the security forces: police and army. Often they were, and continue to be, in direct competition with Pashtuns and this has reinforced the tensions between the two groups. For the time being, these middle and upper class urban Tajiks are relatively safe from persecution. It is the scattered Tajiks who live in the Pashtun, Uzbek and Hazara dominated regions who are at risk. They can be picked off by the Taliban or other enemies without effective restraint or reprisal. In the central and southern areas where they do not have much traditional land they tend to congregate in the towns and small cities.

The key point to note is that neither numerical strength nor representation in influential sectors of society are factors that lead to effective protection for all Tajiks. Almost any pretext may be used to trigger targeted persecution and violence against individuals. While, compared with Pashtuns and Uzbeks, they are not as obviously different in appearance as the Hazaras, this does not provide ultimate protection. Nor does adherence to Sunni Islam safeguard them firmly.

Summary

The main threat to the security of the citizens of Afghanistan is the growing presence and activities of the Taliban and their sympathisers. In summary, key reasons for Taliban action against anyone are:

- perceived links with or even sympathy towards Western forces and organisations
- perceived support for the central government
- adherence to Shia “heresy” or even perceived laxity in Sunni Islam practice
- history of Soviet support.

Pashtuns are generally not scrutinized against these factors as strongly as other ethnic groups, but certainly identified Tajiks are noted because of the underlying seething enmity with Pashtuns based on indelible memories of recent history. The lingering taint of “communist” arising from support from the Russian invaders will not go away.

Clearly it can be argued that country information that applies to Hazaras is relevant to Tajiks as well, especially in terms of underlying historical enmity and misgivings about religious commitment. Tajiks face escalating threats to their safety in light of (a) the withdrawal of coalition troops and (b) the increased dominance of the Taliban and their friends. The threat was highlighted in January 2014 when, just before a deadly suicide bomb attack on a Kabul restaurant, some Taliban leaders told the BBC's John Simpson that it was now back in control of large areas of Afghanistan and was confident of returning to power after Western troops left.

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