Khadija Abbasi,
Reza Hussaini,
Atefeh Kazemi and
Abdullah Mohammadi

DISPLACEMENT OF THE HAZARA PEOPLE OF AFGHANISTAN

Complex Histories

Forced Migration Studies

Collection Editors
T. ALEXANDER ALEINIKOFF
&
LAURA HAMMOND

LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

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T. Alexander Aleinikoff
& Laura Hammond

We dedicate this book to those who are forced to uproot from all that is familiar and who strive to construct a new homeland coloured by hope and longing.

First published in 2025 by Lived Places Publishing
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781916985339 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781916985353 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781916985346 (ePUB)

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Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing
P.O. Box 1845
47 Echo Avenue
Miller Place, NY 11764

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Abstract

Interweaving personal narratives with critical analysis, the authors of this book highlight the complex, multidimensional experiences of forced migrants. Through the lens of the Hazara, an ethnic group with a homeland in Central Asia, we examine the emergence of informal survival networks, including smuggling networks, the ongoing racialization and exclusion of migrants seeking a homeland, the contested notion of 'return' and the challenges of navigating asylum systems in the Global North. By situating the Hazara experience within broader discussions of migration, racism, and policy, this book offers a nuanced understanding of the intersection between forced migration, history, identity, and mobility.

Key words

Hazara, Afghanistan, Iran, UK forced displacement, exile, refugee, smuggling, return, repatriation, asylum, racism

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our critical friend Liza Schuster, who so generously made time to listen to us and help us navigate and validate our emotions and feelings while we recalled and dug into the unpleasant memories of the past to write this book. She tirelessly encouraged us to continue. We also appreciate our peers in this volume who collectively created a safe space for us to express our thoughts and doubts. The writing of this book has been a cathartic experience and we are grateful.

Note on language

In Iran, people from Afghanistan are referred to disparagingly as *Afghani* (in Afghanistan, Afghani is used for the currency). *Afghani* has become a term of abuse by Iranians. In European languages, Afghan is used to refer to people and things from Afghanistan. Inside Afghanistan, the use of the word Afghan is very political. The government has been actively encouraging people to use the term Afghan for all citizens of Afghanistan. However, for non-Pashtun groups in Afghanistan, the term 'Afghan' is synonymous with 'Pashtun'. For many non-Pashtuns, the imposition of 'Afghans' to describe all citizens of Afghanistan is considered as a deliberate act by the governments to homogenise this country and dominate non-Pashtun identities. In response, some non-Pashtuns are arguing for a shift to 'Afghanistani', but its use is still infrequent and contested. For this reason, in spite of our discomfort, we use Afghan in this book to refer to all people from Afghanistan, but the reader should bear in mind the political, colonial, and discriminatory context in which this word is often used.

There are two national languages in Afghanistan, Dari/Farsi and Pashto, as well as several other languages. Farsi is an ancient language, used throughout the Persian empires, which included the territory of modern Afghanistan. In 1964, a political decision was taken to rename the Afghan variant of

Farsi as Dari as part of a drive to create an Afghan nation. We have decided to use Farsi as all of us grew up speaking Farsi and are attached to the work of Farsi speaking poets such as Rumi, who was born in Afghanistan.

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Learning objectives

As you read through the book, we hope that you will be able to reflect on some of the ways our stories challenge the dominant narratives around forced migrants, particularly those who eventually make their way to Europe or North America.

As a first learning objective, identify at least three ways that our experiences have been shaped by social structures, including laws and policies, as well as conflict, economics, and history.

But our stories have also shown that migrants are not just passive victims of these structures—describe how we have negotiated, challenged, been defeated by, or overcome these structures.

All the authors here have experienced different migrant statuses, whether refugee, student, labour migrant, highly skilled migrant, or undocumented migrant. Critically examine the different categories into which migrants are forced, and the value and limitations of categories for those who construct them and the people to whom they are applied.

The experiences of the authors here demonstrate how racism has been interwoven into every stage of our lives, and how each different experience of forced migration exposed us to a new variation of hostility, whether based on our physical being, our perceived religion, our accent and culture, or our migration status. Articulate what you have learned about the processes of racialisation, and the link between migration and racism.

Policy is largely shaped by the three accepted durable solutions in relation to forced migrants: return, resettlement, or integration into the host community, and these describe the outcomes for many people, but do not represent a solution for all forced migrants or only following prolonged periods where none apply. Critically reflect on some of the problematic assumptions underpinning these solutions.

This book is part of a series on forced migration, and details the migrations forced upon all four of us. While inevitably, we did make choices and shaped our migration to an extent, it was definitely not freely or lightly chosen—it was often a reaction to negative events and forces. And yet, we have made the best of our experiences. Drawing on the stories below, describe the costs and benefits to migrants of migrating.

1
Introduction

Human beings have always moved, not all human beings and not all the time, but it is as natural for humans to move as it is for them to be sedentary. Looking across millennia, that movement was often driven by necessity—the need to find food, hospitable lands for crops and livestock, markets for goods, and safety from conflict and persecution. This is particularly true for the Hazara people of Afghanistan and so we hope that this book will illustrate migration experiences common to peoples across the globe. Although we consider Hazarajat, the central area of Afghanistan, our ancestral home, over centuries Hazaras have been forced to leave and to return to Afghanistan.

Mobility and immobility, both chosen and forced, are equally part of our history, a history that is only now being written, and written by Hazara scholars. This is important as, until recently, the history of Afghanistan has been written either by non-Afghans or by dominant groups in Afghanistan that do not include the Hazara. For us, this book is an act of resistance to the discrimination we face. Migration is not just the act of a victim—it is people deciding to resist racialization and victimisation by seeking out places where they can achieve their full potential.

The authors of this book are Afghan scholars who have experienced migration and exile. We are all Hazara and have all grown

up in Iran. **Atefeh Kazemi** is a PhD student in anthropology at McGill University, Montreal; **Khadija Abbasi** is a Teaching Fellow at SOAS, and currently in Manila and wrote her PhD at the Geneva Graduate Institute on the experiences of young transnational Hazaras; **Reza Hussaini** is a researcher, currently doing his PhD at City, University of London, but now in Sacramento; **Abdullah Mohammadi** is an M.A. graduate in Demography from the University of Tehran and currently works for the Mixed Migration Centre, and lives in Stockholm. Khadija has been through the UK asylum system, was granted refugee status, and now has British citizenship. Abdullah and Reza were evacuated from Kabul in August 2021. Reza and his family went first to Poland before being brought to the UK as he had a student visa. They then moved to the US. Atefeh was the last to leave Iran in August 2024.

We belong to a small but growing community of Hazara scholars who are adapting to academia in exile. Within this community, working across a range of disciplines and on a wide variety of topics, a subcommunity is focused on analysing the experiences and history of our people, and as we will show, migration plays a central role in that history. Although belonging to a minority that has experienced discrimination and persecution, and having experienced racism ourselves, we recognize that we four are privileged. Most Hazaras, including our parents, have not had access to higher education or white-collar jobs. Fewer still have managed to travel beyond the countries neighbouring Afghanistan. Our upward social mobility is recent, and we have all either shared or witnessed the restrictions experienced by those who have not had our opportunities.

Many Hazaras are migrants by birth, born in exile but with no access to the citizenship of our birthplaces when those birthplaces are Iran or Pakistan, condemned to die as migrants even if we never leave those countries. We have been labour migrants for decades, often highly skilled but condemned to unskilled labour. We have moved back and forth across neighbouring borders, shifting between legal and social categories—each of us writing here has been at different times, (and sometimes simultaneously) students, workers, refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, or returned migrants. We have 'returned' to Afghanistan but been unable to return to our village or province, and so remain displaced within Afghanistan.

The stories here illustrate this complexity. They overlap in places as we share some similar experiences. In the rest of this chapter, we provide the context and history necessary to understand each of the stories.

History of Hazara migration

Today, the Hazara can be found in many Afghan provinces, and there are significant populations of Hazaras in Kabul, Herat, and Mazar, but our homeland is regarded as Hazarajat in central Afghanistan. Hazarajat today includes the provinces of Bamiyan and Daikundi, and several adjacent districts in the provinces of Ghazni, Uruzgan, Wardak, Parwan, Baghlan, Samangan and Sar-e Pul. Migration has long been a survival strategy for Afghans (Monsutti, 2005), including Hazaras, though there is also a population of Hazaras, especially in rural areas of Afghanistan like Bamiyan, who have never moved. But all of us, within our family circles, have relatives who have left the country, in most cases

due to poverty or persecution, and more recently, prolonged drought in Hazarajat drove thousands to leave for the cities. To understand the forced migration of the Hazaras, we outline the history of Hazaras in Afghan society, which has been a history of persecution, flight and resistance. This history shows clearly that academic categories cannot capture the complexity of forced migration.

There is no **majority** ethnic group in Afghanistan, but the largest **minority** groups are the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras. There has not been a complete census in Afghanistan since 1979, so we only have rough estimates of a population that has been marked by high birth rates, high mortality, and high migration. There are different estimates that suggest the Pashtuns make

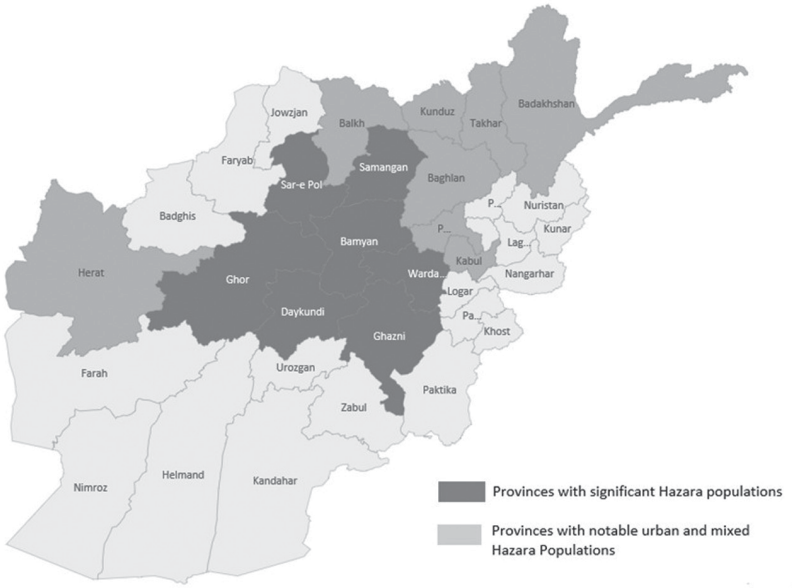

Figure 1.1 Map of Afghanistan showing provinces, ethnic spread and neighbouring states

up 40–47 per cent of the population, Tajiks 12–27 per cent, and Uzbeks approximately 9 per cent, with other ethnicities, such as Turkmen, Aimak, and Balouch, each accounting for less than 5 per cent. Today, the Hazaras make up about 20 per cent of the population of Afghanistan but before the genocide, (see below) we were the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan (Mousavi, 2018). These populations are not spread evenly across the country, and some provinces are dominated by one ethnic group. In our case, these were the central provinces of Afghanistan, but as we show below, our position in Hazarajat has been undermined.

Hazaras are physically distinct from Afghanistan's other ethnic groups (though we are physically similar to Uzbeks and Turkmen), with features more usually found in East Asia. We are often racialized based on our physiognomy, which makes it easy to identify and target us, not just in Afghanistan, but also in Iran and Pakistan where most Hazaras have sought refuge. We have often been subjected to racialized mockery and stereotyping, including derogatory remarks about our physical appearance or perceived differences in cultural practices, which have served to marginalize and dehumanize us. Khadija was once asked by a classmate if she could see well with her 'narrow' eyes. Our physical features have been intertwined with racial assumptions made about us—that we are fit only for physical labour, that we are incapable of intellectual labour, and undeserving of autonomy and power, such that Hazaras in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan are treated differently. This racialization, and the racism it engenders and justifies, is a theme that we explore below and in our individual chapters. Schuster (2010) has argued that migration

and racism are intimately linked, and our experience is a testament to that linkage.

Most other ethnic groups, including the dominant Pashtuns, belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, while Hazaras are Shia, and considered *Rafizi* (heretics), an accusation used even today to justify our persecution in Afghanistan. A minority of Hazaras belong to the Ismaili sect, and some are Sunni, but whatever our religion, we stand out physically and are easy targets. However, the precarious position occupied by the Hazaras today can be traced back to the actions of one person in particular. In the nineteenth century, we accounted for nearly two-thirds of the population (Minority Rights Group International, 2008). There had been earlier tensions between Hazaras and Pashtuns; then with the approval and support of the British government, Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901), ruler of Afghanistan, set out to Pashtunise Afghanistan by confiscating land from non-Pashtuns and settling Pashtuns across the country (Bleuer, 2012).

As noted by Bleuer, 'since Abdur Rahman's rise to power, almost every Afghan ruler until 1979 had a policy of attempting to "homogenise" the peoples of Afghanistan. As part of this process …[of] "Pashtunisation," the Afghan government used Pashtun nationalist ideology, land confiscation, discriminatory taxation policies, and forced resettlement that favoured the Pashtuns' (2012, 70). Abdur Rahman Khan moved all ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, around the country to consolidate his power and create Pashtun domination in strategic areas. In Hazarajat, parts of which had been independent, this Pashtunising policy alongside heavy taxes, sectarian conflict, corruption, and violence of the government forces led to a rebellion in 1892.

Abdur Rahman Khan declared jihad against the Shias and sent a large army (supported by British military advisers) to put down the rebellion. They captured Urozgān, where the rebellion originated, and massacred the local population: 'thousands of Hazara men, women, and children were sold as slaves in the markets of Kabul and Qandahar, while numerous towers of human heads were made from the defeated rebels as a warning to others who might challenge the rule of the Amir' (Mousavi, 1998, cited by Monsutti, 2003). Between 1888 and 1893, more than half of the Hazara population was massacred or fled to neighbouring countries and farther afield and their lands were confiscated, and distributed among non-Hazaras (Mousavi, 2018; Ibrahimi, 2017). The memory of these events and the massacres that have followed, which amounted to a genocide, are a source of ongoing trauma for the Hazara people. It has coloured our relationship with a Pashtun-dominated Afghan state that has continued to single us out for harassment and persecution, even as relations with individual members of the dominant minorities have sometimes been supportive and warm.

When distinctions are made between political refugees and economic or labour migrants, it is important to understand that such distinctions do not make sense for Hazaras (and many other groups) when discrimination and persecution have economic consequences. The poverty driving Hazaras to seek work in Iran was a direct result of discrimination and persecution. The grant of Hazara lands to Pashtun nomads by Abdur Rahman Khan meant that the Hazaras who stayed often became tenants on their own land. Later, attempts were made to impose discriminatory taxes on Hazaras. Both of these strategies have returned under the

second Taliban regime. The enforced impoverishment of Hazara people obliged many to become seasonal migrants to Kabul, Herat, and Mazar, and to Mashhad in Iran and Quetta in Pakistan. Hazaras worked as day labourers in construction or as porters in the markets, where once again racialization by the host states and societies confined us to particular areas and occupations, as Atefeh shows in Chapter 3. Refugees need to work to survive and support their families, but this is often used as an excuse to label us economic migrants, thereby exempting us from the protection that refugee status might afford us (Schuster, 2016).

The communist era 1979–1989

The forced displacement of Hazaras (and other Afghans) accelerated first due to the severe drought of 1978, and then the Soviet intervention in 1979, which led to a decade of conflict between the Soviet forces and the Afghan resistance fighters or *Mujahedin* (Kakar 1995). We Hazaras are not a homogeneous group; some of us supported the communist government and others the *Mujahedin*. Much of the fighting in Hazarajat was between different Hazara groups (Ibrahimi, 2017). In June 1979, following an unarmed uprising by Shia in the Chindawol area of Kabul, the Communist government launched an attack. Over two days, many were killed, while others were taken away and their deaths were only confirmed by a Dutch War Crimes Investigation years later in 2012.

It is estimated that 1.5 million Afghans died in that decade and millions fled to Iran and Pakistan, though a few found their way to other countries, including Britain and Germany. Hazaras mostly fled to places with already existing Hazara communities, such

as Mashhad in Iran and Quetta in Pakistan. Up until this point, migration outside the country had mostly been by men, with families left behind in Afghanistan (Hussaini et al., 2021). But the war between the Soviets and the *Mujahedin* saw whole families, and in some cases villages, displaced. Although Hazaratown, a Hazara ghetto in Quetta, expanded at this time, at least half of those Afghans who went to Pakistan were confined to refugee camps, especially around Peshawar.

In Iran, the situation was different. Ayatollah Khomeini, who had just taken over leadership of Iran, welcomed Shia refugees from the Soviet occupiers as *Muhajir*, religious refugees fleeing what was seen as a Soviet attack on Islamic ways of life. However, although some Afghans in Iran are recognised as refugees by UNHCR, the Iranian Republic has never recognised us as refugees according to the 1951 Convention, to which it is a signatory. The concept of *Hijrat* initially ensured that as Shias in Iran we could rely on the religious duties of our hosts to protect those who had fled for religious reasons (Safri, 2011). As noted by Safri, 'by describing the Afghans as refugees who struggled to maintain religious faith in the face of a Soviet campaign seeking its eradication, both Pakistan and Iran simultaneously positioned themselves as performing a righteous function' (2011: 589). Although Iran had signed the Geneva Convention and the New York Protocol, the government chose to designate Afghans as *Muhajir*, rather than refugees, giving them Blue Cards (identity cards).

Most Iranian scholars (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007; Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008; Vossughi and Mohseni, 2016) emphasise the generous welcome given to Afghan refugees, citing the words

of Ayatollah Khomeini 'Islam has no borders', the social benefits Afghans were allowed to access, such as subsidised health care and free primary and secondary education, and the economic costs to the state: 1.5 million refugees, mostly Hazaras, were allowed to settle in Iranian cities, including Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, and Qom, though since then the number of zones forbidden to us has increased to 16 provinces, and many cities. The restrictions imposed on us within cities have trapped us in ghettos such as Golshahr in Mashhad, Pakdasht in Tehran, Shahr Qaem in Qom, or Zeinabiyye in Isfahan. In the third chapter, Atefeh focuses on the collective experience of Hazara youth growing up in Golshahr, most of whom are Iran-born, and explores how they perceive themselves as *muhajirs* in Iran, where the term '*muhajir*' was stripped of its initial religious connotation by the 1990s.

Hazaras growing up in Iran emphasise the economic contribution we made to different sectors, which explains that early welcome. The discovery of oil in Iran (and in the Gulf States) created a massive demand for labour, in particular manual labour (Safri, 2011). Safri (2011) and Monsutti (2008) both point out that Afghans had to apply for work permits that only allowed them to work in mines, brick factories, and construction. We responded to labour shortages because we were not confined to camps but were self-settled around the country, often following the demand for labour. Although economic changes in Iran led to an economic downturn and increased unemployment, Hazara men were welcomed into the army, where we fought alongside Iranians in the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988).

However, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, together with the

death of Ayatollah Khomeini, saw a shift in the attitude of the Iranian government towards Afghan refugees. There were posters in Afghan neighbourhoods telling us it was time to go 'home'. The pressure increased as the 1990–1991 Gulf War sent a quarter of the Iraqi population across the border to Iran. Iran was hosting 3 million Afghan and 1.5 million Iraqi refugees, who were less visible than we Hazaras. But it had become impossible for most of us to return to Afghanistan (approximately 600,000 Afghans, not all Hazaras, did return), not least because of the civil war that erupted.

Civil war

Following the removal of Najibullah, the Communist president of Afghanistan, civil war broke out in 1992. After the *Mujahidin* (resistance fighters) took power that year, fighting between the different factions broke out. Violent attacks occurred in Kabul between the different forces, killing many Hazaras, including unarmed civilians, and many Hazara women were raped (Ahmad). In February 1993, hundreds of Hazara residents in the Afshar district of West Kabul were massacred by government forces under the direction of Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmed Shah Massoud, joined by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and his *Ittehad-i-Islami* group. The fighting saw the utter devastation of large areas of Kabul, particularly those inhabited by Hazaras (Afghanistan Justice Report 2005).

Once again, Afghanistan saw the displacement of millions of people, much of it internal, but significant numbers migrating once again to Iran and Pakistan, while some made longer journeys to Europe, Australia, and the US. We also learned at this time that

it was not only our neighbours who did not want us—Europe's asylum policies were becoming more restrictive and new laws were introduced in Britain and Germany.

The Taliban 1993–2001

In spite of factors causing continued displacement within and from Afghanistan, host states increased the pressure on refugees to return. At the same time, during a period of increased unemployment in Iran, the Blue Cards were declared invalid and there was a shift from the term *Muhajir* to that of *Awaregan* (displaced person), which did not have the same positive connotation.

According to Safri (2011: 593), 1.3 million Afghans were repatriated from Iran between 1992 and 1995, despite continuing conflict and insecurity in Afghanistan. This coincided with a more general shift in the mid-1990s, including by UNHCR, from

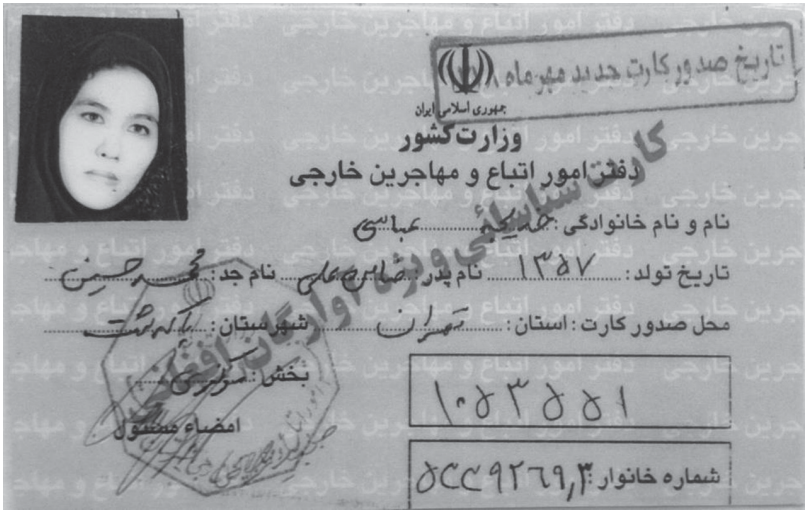

Figure 1.2 Khadija's Blue Card on which the diagonal line says: The identification card for the Afghan Awaragan

a preference for resettling refugees to one of repatriation, and it was no longer necessary for that repatriation to be voluntary (Chimni, 2004). Instead, it was now the state's right to decide whether it was safe enough to return refugees to their state of origin. As Chimni points out, states from the Global North had no grounds to criticise states such as Iran or Pakistan who were hosting and repatriating many more refugees than they were, but there was little evidence that they were against this policy, even as more Afghans were leaving in response to the brutality of the Taliban regime (Langenkampf, 2003). The shift towards temporary protection and to keeping refugees in their regions, as well as to 'imposed return' (abandoning the 'voluntary' element), had serious implications for Afghans, especially after the fall of the Taliban. From this time on, it became extremely difficult for people to seek asylum in the Global North without the help of smugglers, as Abdullah describes in Chapter 2.

The republic 2001–2021

The period following the fall of the Taliban regime saw massive changes in Afghanistan: the arrival of foreign armies, thousands of aid workers and NGOs, new opportunities, a continuing conflict, and ebbs and flows of migration in and out of the country. New opportunities, such as access to education and different, more skilled employment opportunities arose for Hazara people. We became increasingly visible as business people, parliamentarians, civil society activists, and in the media. However, we were still subject to discrimination as described by Reza in Chapter 4 and Khadija in Chapter 5 and had often to set up our own schools, universities, businesses, and media companies. For those of us

who travelled to Afghanistan from Iran hoping to find a home and end our exile, it was a shock to see how Hazaras were treated in our *watan*, our homeland. We found ourselves discriminated against not just because of our physical appearance and religion, but because we came with Iranian accents and manners.

Immediately after the US attacks in December 2001, the borders of Afghanistan had been sealed by its neighbours, so that the number of refugees was relatively low—about 200,000—while the number of IDPs soared from 1.2 to 2 million. Most IDPs were in poorly serviced camps, with little access to food or medical support and with no institutional protector similar to UNHCR for refugees (Cohen, 2002). Adding to the IDP population were returnees. Safri (2011) points out that very quickly Afghans were expected to 'return' to Afghanistan and those who remained in Iran and Pakistan after the fall of the Taliban were reconstructed as 'labour' or 'undocumented' migrants instead of refugees. Afghans returned rapidly from Iran and Pakistan—too rapidly according to UNHCR, so that in 2002, the new government was completely overwhelmed, and the country was unable to cope. Within the first two years, more than 5 million people had returned to Afghanistan, but most were unable to return to their homes in rural areas—approximately 50 per cent settled in and around Kabul.

Afghanistan continued to experience instability and insecurity. In December 2009, Obama tried to break the stalemate by ordering a surge in the number of troops, but two years later began to reduce the numbers significantly. 2014 was a difficult year. With the reduction in foreign troops, insecurity had worsened, not helped by the inconclusive presidential elections. US Senator

John Kerry visited Kabul and negotiated a power-sharing government with Ashraf Ghani as President and his rival Abdullah Abdullah as Chief Executive of the government. However, negotiations between the two over who would allocate which Ministry contributed to ongoing instability. This had an impact on security and saw international companies and NGOs withdrawing from Afghanistan, which in turn weakened the economy, increased unemployment, and strengthened the Taliban. This period saw increased attacks and casualties.

Internationally, war in Syria was driving millions of refugees northwards, mostly to Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, but also to Europe. When Angela Merkel responded by saying that these arrivals were manageable, Afghans who had found life more and more difficult in neighboring countries sought solutions outside the region. However, Europe's warm welcome was short-lived, and the reception quickly turned hostile. In March 2016, the EU signed a deal with Turkey, according to which Turkey agreed to prevent Syrians and Afghans from travelling on to Europe in exchange for 3 billion euros in aid and easier access to the EU for Turkish citizens. A few months later, the EU succeeded in bullying the Afghan government into signing the Joint Way Forward by threatening to withhold 1.5 billion euros in development aid (Hussaini and Schuster, 2022). To access the aid, the Afghan government was forced to agree to accept forced returns and prevent 'illegal' migration.

The second coming of the Taliban

In 2017, a new President, Donald Trump, took office in the US and began negotiating with the Taliban, and in February 2020, the US

and the Taliban announced the Doha Agreement, under which the US agreed to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 2021. By the time Biden took office in January 2021 and confirmed the withdrawal of the remaining 2,500 troops, the Taliban were already in control of half of Afghanistan. It was assumed that the Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) would take over responsibility for security, though in reality, it was acknowledged that the Taliban would probably re-take power within a year of withdrawal. Instead, they swept back into power in August, entering Kabul on Sunday, August 15, 2021.

The shock in the capital was profound. In the days before their arrival, people were flooding into the city, ATMs were emptied, and the skies were filled with the clatter of helicopters as foreigners fled. The day the Taliban arrived, tens of thousands of people gathered at the airport hoping to flee. In Chapter 4, Reza describes the trauma of those days. The evacuation was officially completed by the end of August, and people could no longer leave by air.

For those left behind, the situation deteriorated rapidly. Our habitual destinations of Iran and Pakistan closed their borders. The Hazara community, already marginalised and persecuted, faced heightened threats under the Taliban regime. The Taliban's history of targeting Hazaras for their ethnic and religious identity raised immediate concerns for their safety. As a result, thousands of Hazaras sought refuge in neighbouring countries, primarily Iran and Pakistan, despite the closed borders and perilous journeys. Checkpoints multiplied, and at each one, we were required to hand over bribes, cash, jewellery, or some other valuables.