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# THE POLITICS OF SURVIVAL IN THE FACE OF EXCLUSION: Hazara and Shia Actors Under the Taliban



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**Political Landscape**

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Since the Taleban's return to power, an array of Hazara and Shia Muslim groups and individuals have tried to position themselves vis-à-vis the new order in an effort to protect a community that feels particularly vulnerable. The struggle over who gets to speak for the community has revived old intra-communal rivalries and factionalism, weakened their position and rendered them susceptible to division and manipulation. So far, the Taleban's public messaging towards Shias and Hazaras has largely been conciliatory, as they sought to establish control, but has not been backed by positive action. Ali Yawar Adili (with input from Martine van Bijlert) provides an overview of the main Hazara and Shia political actors and their positions as they advocate for protection, political inclusion and religious recognition.

# INTRODUCTION

The sudden Taliban capture of power in August 2021 sent shockwaves throughout Afghanistan. Fears of what life would be like under the new Sunni Muslim clerical regime were particularly pronounced among Hazaras and Shia Muslims, more generally,<sup>1</sup> who have bitter memories of the Taliban's previous rule<sup>2</sup> and had largely resisted Taliban infiltration and domination during the Islamic Republic.<sup>3</sup> The stakes are now high for Hazaras and Shias, who, despite their shared faith, are a diverse and overlapping group – and in this report are referred to, for reasons of shorthand, as Shias/Hazaras.

Fears that Afghanistan's new rulers could reverse the legal recognition of the Shia Islamic sect were heightened when Taliban officials [indicated](#) soon after they took power that they might revert to King Zahir Shah's 1964 constitution (which, unlike the Republic's 2004 constitution, does not recognise Shia/Jafari jurisprudence). Then there were media reports, in January 2022, that the Taliban had [sacked](#) all Hazara judges. Further fuelling anxieties was a manifesto titled "The Islamic

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<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan's Shia population includes Sayeds, Qizilbash and Farsiwan, with Hazaras by far the largest group. Among ethnic Hazaras, the overwhelming majority are Shia 'Twelvers' (believing in twelve divinely appointed Imams after the Prophet Muhammad), but there are also smaller communities of Ismaili Shias that parted ways with Twelver Shia based on their belief that Ismail the son of the sixth imam should have succeeded him as the seventh imam) and Sunnis.

<sup>2</sup> During the first Emirate, some Hazara/Shia leaders, for example, former MP Muhammad Akbari chose a course of pragmatic cooperation with the Taliban. Others, including Mohaqeq and Khalili led their Wahdat-e Islami faction into the Northern Alliance and resisted Taliban rule. In areas which they lost, regained and lost again, the Taliban carried out collective punishments against civilians sharing an ethnicity with the opposition: those targeted included Hazaras (Twelvers and Ismailis), Sayeds, Uzbeks and Tajiks. For more detail, see our July 2021 report, [A Quarter of Afghanistan's Districts Fall to the Taliban amid Calls for a 'Second Resistance'](#), in which we also noted other atrocities perpetrated in the north in the 1990s and early 2000s, including three massacres in Mazar-e Sharif/Faryab – of Taliban prisoners of war (1997 and 2001) and of mainly Hazara civilians in 1998. We also mentioned how, in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's 2001 defeat, factions of the Northern Alliance committed abuses against Pashtun civilians, as documented by [Human Rights Watch](#) in April 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Shias and Hazaras had been on both sides of the war in the 1980s – both mujahidin and communist – but when the Taliban emerged in 1994, inevitably, few Hazaras or Shias joined this new Sunni clerical faction. In the post-2001 insurgency, the Taliban, a majority Pashtun group, did make new inroads into Tajik and Uzbek populations, who share a Sunni Muslim faith. It has meant that Hazaras/Shias have particularly few connections in the administration.

Emirate and Its System,” authored by the Taleban’s Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani, which was released in spring 2022, during the holy month of Ramadan. It argued that justice and judgements should be based only on the Hanafi Sunni school of jurisprudence and that allowing other jurisprudence would undermine the “Islamic system” (see a critical review of the book [here](#)). In practice, the Taleban have been referring Shia Afghans’ personal (family and marital) matters to the informal justice system, with other legal issues going through the formal Hanafi-based court system.

After the Taleban announced their interim cabinet with no Hazara or Shia representation whatsoever, the community’s de facto political exclusion became a point of significant concern. Since then, the situation has only slightly improved with the appointment of three Hazara deputy ministers, but the Shia/Hazara still hold no cabinet-level posts.

This report looks at the leaders and groups that have scrambled to respond to the Taleban’s dramatic takeover and domination of Afghanistan. They are a mix of leaders and officials from the old mujahedin factions, marked still by old rivalries and enmities, along with new politicians who emerged from the churn of electoral politics, large protest movements, the university and clerical establishment. There are even one or two Hazara/Shia Taleban. They include:

- The old guard leaders who held senior government positions under the Republic and were leaders or senior members of mujahedin groups (Muhammad Mohaqeq, Muhammad Karim Khalili, Sarwar Danesh and Muhammad Sadeq Mudaber). They are outside the country but maintain in-country contacts through their aides and party networks. Initially, they did not support armed resistance, hoping instead that the Taleban would form a government inclusive of Hazaras/Shias, but have since become more vocal in their criticism of Taleban policies and behaviour. Although they have hinted at the possibility of armed resistance, they have not taken any concrete steps so far.
- Three aides to Mohaqeq, Khalili and Mudaber who remained in Kabul and formed an ad hoc coalition early on to engage with the Taleban in order to secure Hazara/Shia representation in the government. All three are longstanding acquaintances of the Taleban and used to serve as their leaders’ focal points with the movement. Two have recently been appointed to government positions.

- Several cleric-led Shia organisations have sought to represent the community, including the old Shia Ulema Council of Afghanistan, the newer General Council of Hazaras, which was established by Kabul-based Grand Ayatollah Vaezzada after the Taleban takeover, and the Assembly of Shia Ulema and Influential Persons of Afghanistan led by Sayed Hassan Fazelzada; it had already lobbied in favour of the Taleban before the takeover. Sayed Hashem Jawadi Balkhabi, a rare Shia member of the Taleban, is included in this section because he is close to Fazelzada. He has been speaking on behalf of the Taleban since the takeover and was given a role in defusing tensions between the Kuchis and villagers in the spring of 2022.
- Several newer politicians who have been seeking to expand their influence, including former MP Jafar Mahdawi and Deputy Minister for Economy Abdul Latif Nazari. Both have academic backgrounds and were in contact with the Taleban before the takeover. Since then, they have discouraged Hazaras from any confrontation with the Taleban.

Readers will note the complete absence of women in these groups. There were several prominent female Hazara politicians with prominent roles during the Republic. They are now in exile, and unlike the male exiled leaders, their voices have faded since the takeover. They include former head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission Dr Sima Samar, former Bamyan governor and member of the team negotiating with the Taleban in Doha Dr Habiba Sarabi and MP Shah Gul Rezayi. That having been said, Hazara girls and women have been at the forefront of protests against Taleban restrictions on women and the continued targeted attacks against Hazaras and Shias (see Rukhshana Media report [here](#)).

Hazara/Shia representatives seeking to raise their community's concerns have access to several senior Taleban leaders. However, apart from courteous rhetoric, the Taleban have yet to meet their demands, which focus on political representation, including at the ministerial level, the legal enshrinement of their rights and protection of their land and property. They have also called for more decisive action against the sustained brutal attacks against their mosques, education centres and neighbourhoods – a pattern of targeted attacks that began under the Republic in 2016. The community did experience a brief respite following the Taleban takeover, but the attacks resumed a little over a month after the fall of the Republic (see this January 2022 AAN [report](#)).

So far, the strategy taken by Hazaras/Shias, post-August 2021, could be described as the politics of survival, characterised by an avoidance of armed resistance and attempts at pragmatic engagement and collaboration with the current rulers in an attempt to reduce the community's vulnerability. Actual influence upon the new administration remains limited.

## THE OLD GUARD

The leaders of the major Hazara-dominated parties – Muhammad Mohaqeq, Muhammad Karim Khalili and Muhammad Sadeq Mudaber – as well as, along with Mohaqeq and Khalili, another former vice president, Sarwar Danesh, have been outside the country since the Taleban takeover. On the day the Republic collapsed, Khalili and Mohaqeq had just arrived in Pakistan as part of a high-level delegation involved in a last-ditch effort to negotiate a transitional government through Pakistani mediation. Mudaber had left Afghanistan the day before, while Danesh tried to flee the country the day the Taleban captured Kabul but got stuck at Kabul Airport and, according to his own account (see his 17 August 2021 Facebook post [here](#)), arrived in Turkey a day later.<sup>4</sup>

### Muhammad Mohaqeq

Mohaqeq, who hails from Balkh province, is the leader of *Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami-ye Mardom* (People's Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan), which split from the main *Hezb-e Wahdat* (*Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan*, or Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan) still led by Karim Khalili in 2004. Under the Republic, he moved back and forth between holding government positions and being a vocal critic of the government.<sup>5</sup>

Following the Taleban takeover, Mohaqeq initially hurled criticism at the old regime and the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan, saying the Taleban takeover was both good and bad: good because it had done away with a “hated predatory, corrupt and discriminatory government”

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<sup>4</sup> Danesh was resettled in New Zealand with his family in December 2021. Mohaqeq and Mudaber currently live in Turkey. Khalili lives in France.

<sup>5</sup> Mohaqeq served as vice-president and Minister of Planning under President Hamid Karzai in the interim administration following the fall of the Taleban in late 2001. He ran as a candidate in the 2004 presidential election, where he ranked third, and was elected as MP in the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections from Kabul with the highest number of votes. He resigned from parliament to join Dr Abdullah as his second running-mate in the 2014 presidential election and served as the second deputy chief executive in the National Unity Government from 2014 to 2019. He was a political advisor to President Ashraf Ghani before the collapse of his government, even though he was also highly critical of the Ghani administration.



Hezb-e Wahdat Mardom leader Muhammad Mohaqeq.  
Photo: Mohaqeq's Facebook page, 11 January 2023.

His cautious optimism was supplanted by criticism after the Taliban excluded Hazaras and Shias from the government and announced their all-male, all-clerical and overwhelmingly Pashtun interim cabinet on 7 September 2021 (see AAN report on the interim Taliban cabinet [here](#)). He [called](#) the appointments an “unacceptable” move that showed the Taliban’s thinking about governance, human rights and respect for the will of the people had not changed.

In the months that followed, Mohaqeq became more strident in his criticism. After the Emirate failed to reopen girls’ secondary school in March 2022, he called the Taliban an “ignorant class” who had no knowledge of religion. In early April, after the media reported

that Nafisa Balkhi, a Hazara midwife in Mazar-e Sharif, had been kidnapped, tortured and killed by the Taliban, Mohaqeq provided his own detailed account of the reported atrocity and added that Nafisa was the fifth young Hazara woman killed by the Taliban and dumped in a field.

In May 2022, he joined forces with other anti-Taliban factions and figures largely based in Turkey, in the High Council of National Resistance to Rescue Afghanistan (*Shura-ye A’li Moqawamat-e Melli baraye Nejat-e Afghanistan*). This council which includes jihadi leader Abdul Rab Sayyaf, Jamiat leaders and Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum [held](#) its first meeting in Ankara, Turkey on 17 May and announced, among other things, its support for the ongoing armed resistance against the Taliban. Following the 30 September 2022 attack on Kaaj Education Centre in a Hazara-majority neighbourhood in west Kabul, Mohaqeq said he would now have to allow those seeking his authorisation to start the resistance (see media report [here](#)). A few days later, he [told](#) a Twitter Space session that he would soon start his own armed resistance across Hazarajat. In practice, however, neither Mohaqeq nor the Council has made any explicit moves to fight.

## Muhammad Karim Khalili

Khalili, from Behsud district of Maidan Wardak province, is the leader of Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami (Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan). He served as second vice-president from 2004 to 2014 under former President Hamid Karzai and as chairman of the High Peace Council under President Ashraf Ghani, from 2017 to 2020. Over time, Khalili became increasingly critical of the Ghani administration, including of Ghani's second vice-president Sarwar Danesh, whom he had originally introduced as minister of justice under Karzai and then fielded as Ghani's second running-mate in the 2014 presidential election.



Hezb-e Wahdat leader Muhammad Karim Khalili.  
Photo: on Khalili's Facebook page, 19 July 2021.

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover, Khalili took a soft position. Three points stood out in his early statements (published on his Facebook page [here](#) and [here](#)). First, he thanked the Taliban leadership for announcing a general amnesty and said he hoped it would extend to all levels. Second, he described the complete withdrawal of foreign forces as an “important event” that could provide

an opportunity for self-determination, independence, and “a self-constituted order” (ie, an order borne out of domestic dialogue and national consensus). Third, he called on the Taliban to consider the survival of the new political order by garnering broad internal support and responding to international imperatives.

When the Taliban announced the interim cabinet, Khalili [criticised](#) it as “a mono-group, mono-ethnic and mono-gender administration” that, if not reconsidered, would contribute to the continuation and intensification of the crisis in the country. Months later, in a May 2022 [message](#), Khalili warned that if the Taliban refused to submit to the legitimate demands of the people, he would “not stay silent forever” and would “use any possibility to ensure the people’s right to determine their own destiny.” Two days later, in an [open letter](#) to the UN Secretary-General and other UN bodies on what he called the “genocide” of the Hazara community, he alleged that – during a humanitarian crisis,

Khalili has met Mohaqeq and Mudaber in Turkey in an effort to establish a unified Hazara political platform, but they have not been able to agree on the leadership arrangement. Khalili did not join the High Council of National Resistance to Rescue Afghanistan, although he was invited, a choice which angered some of the Council’s senior members.<sup>6</sup> Khalili has also not joined another group in exile, the National Movement for Peace and Justice [established](#) in Germany by former foreign and interior minister Hanif Atmar, former head of the team negotiating with the Taliban in Doha, Masum Stanekzai and others in October 2022.

## Sarwar Danesh

Danesh, who hails from Daikundi, was Khalili’s deputy until they fell out in 2019. He served as Minister of Justice and then of higher education in the Karzai administration and as second vice-president under Ghani from 2014 until the fall of the Republic.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, during an online meeting in September 2022 commemorating former president Burhanuddin Rabbani’s death, Dostum accused Khalili of receiving money from Pakistan to not participate in the council’s meetings (see the video minutes 9:50- 10:20 [here](#)). Khalili’s party [issued](#) a statement on Khalili’s Facebook page condemning Dostum’s remarks and calling on him to apologise. Another senior Wahdat member, the former higher education minister Abbas Basir, did join the High Council of National Resistance.



Former Second Vice-President Sarwar Danesh.  
Photo: Sarwar Danesh press office Facebook page,  
2 August 2021.

Twelve days after the Taliban takeover, Danesh [issued](#) a statement on his Facebook page with 14 “fundamental positions and demands,” which included calls for the protection of public and private property, the establishment of a “legitimate elected system,” retaining the Republic’s constitution until a Loya Jirga approved a new one, and adhering to all effective laws unless amended or revoked by a legitimate authority. He stressed the recognition of Jafari jurisprudence as a fundamental redline for the Shias. Danesh later criticised the Taliban’s cabinet as characteristic of their despotic nature, “which today’s world cannot accept,” on his [Facebook](#) page.

After a year of relative silence, Danesh [announced](#) on his Facebook page the establishment of the Justice and Freedom Party in late October 2022. Its founding statement was a damning review of the situation under the Taliban. It accused the Taliban of “impos[ing] an autocratic, mono-ethnic, mono-gendered and totalitarian regime on the country” without domestic and international legitimacy. The statement seemed to open the possibility for armed resistance, saying that, given the Taliban’s behaviour, “all reasonable ways of fighting autocracy and oppression” were legitimate and that they would “use all tools, if necessary.”<sup>7</sup> The new party proposed federalism as the future political system for Afghanistan to “ensure the legitimate rights of all,” a position echoed by Khalili’s party a few days later (see its statement on Khalili’s Facebook page [here](#)).

<sup>7</sup> Dr Rasul Taleb, a former presidential advisor and member of the negotiation team under President Ghani, introduced himself to the media as spokesman and head of the new party’s political committee and Danesh as the interim head of the party. Taleb said that due to the prevailing security environment, he would not disclose the names of the party’s central committee, which had 45 members, and that they would come out as necessary. Taleb clarified that the party considered armed struggle the legitimate right of those already fighting the Taliban and that they would consider it their own legitimate right if the Taliban did not pave the way for change (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Unlike the other leaders, Danesh does not have a declared or known representative in Afghanistan.

## Muhammad Sadeq Mudaber



Hezb-e Ensejam leader Sadeq Mudaber.  
Photo: Mudaber's Facebook, 8 July 2022.

Mudaber, who hails from Maidan Wardak province, is the leader of *Hezb-e Ensejam-e Melli* (National Coordination Party of Afghanistan). He was director general of the influential Office of Administrative Affairs under former President Karzai.<sup>8</sup> Mudaber has been the quietest of the four leaders. In a [statement](#) four days after the fall of the Republic, he said he hoped Taliban officials would exercise “prudence, foresight and sympathy” in preventing chaos and a repeat of past mistakes. He called on them to form an inclusive government, restore government institutions and respect civil liberties.

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<sup>8</sup> Mudaber had been with Harakat-e Islami, but broke away to join Abdul Ali Mazari's Hezb-e Wahdat during the civil war.

Since then, he has issued only a few other statements. In early March 2022, for instance, he [called](#) on the Taliban to consult the people on the political system, recognise the fundamental rights of all ethnic, religious, political and social groups, stop arbitrary detentions and house-to-house searches and restore women's political and social rights. In a 2022 Nawruz [message](#) published on his Facebook page, he reiterated his call for consultations to form a government in which all segments of society feel represented and stressed that increased public discontent would pave the way for the continuation of war. This seems to be the closest he has come to public criticism of the Taliban so far. Mudaber is currently not formally part of any group, but is said to be cooperating with the High Council of National Resistance to Rescue Afghanistan.

Overall, the positions of all four leaders in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover seem to have been affected by the general perception, or hope, that the Taliban had indeed changed or that a backroom political deal had been reached. This was expressed in the muted optimism that the Taliban might include the Hazara/Shia community in their new government. Khalili and Mohaqeq, in particular, seem to have placed faith in the words of Pakistani officials supporting an inclusive government.<sup>9</sup> All four leaders have declared, explicitly or between the lines, that they did not support an armed resistance.<sup>10</sup>

Since then, as the Taliban excluded the Hazara/Shia community from the government and failed to protect them from sustained targeted attacks, all four leaders now implicitly or explicitly support the possibility of armed struggle against the regime. However, in reality, they have not made any tangible moves to open a front against the Taliban. In the absence of broader anti-Taliban resistance elsewhere in the country, a resistance front in the Hazarajat remains unlikely.

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<sup>9</sup> This was, for instance, illustrated by Khalili's 18 August 2021 statement that all Pakistani officials they had met had "clearly expressed their support for the demand for the formation of an inclusive government based on the will of all people, personalities and political organisations and ethnic groups of Afghanistan."

<sup>10</sup> Mohaqeq [told](#) BBC Persian that it had actually been a long time since he had considered the possibility of military resistance against the Taliban, since the Republic had dismissed so many Hazara generals and the Hazara areas lacked the military equipment and wherewithal for such an undertaking.

## AIDES TO THREE OF THE LEADERS, WITH LONGSTANDING TALEBAN CONTACTS

While three of the old guard leaders (Mohaqeq, Khalili and Mudaber) have become increasingly vocal in their opposition to the Taleban, their aides in Kabul have been following a different path. These men, who had a history of contact or cooperation with the Taleban, formed an informal coalition early on to lobby on behalf of the Hazara/Shia community and started meeting senior Taleban officials.

The three aides are:

- Sheikh Madar Ali Karimi, a Hazara from Bamyan, who has long been a close aide to Khalili and was his contact point with the Taleban before the takeover;
- Sayed Sufi Gardezi, a Shia from Gardez in the southeastern province of Paktia, who served as district governor of Yakowlang under the previous Taleban regime. After 2001, he became a close aide to Mohaqeq and served as his contact person with the Taleban;
- Ahmad Hussain Sangardost, a Hazara from the Behsud district of Maidan Wardak province, who surrendered to the Taleban in 1998 when he was a local commander in Mudaber's then-breakaway faction of Harakat-e Islami.<sup>11</sup> Sangardost was later an MP and one of the founding members of Mudaber's Republic-era Ensejam-e Melli party.

Khalili's aide Karimi told the author in June 2022 that their ad hoc coalition was made up of what he called the "remnants" of the three main Hazara-led parties whose leaders were now in exile. He said it was a move born out of necessity and pressures from within and outside the Hazara community, because the Hazara/Shia community was more vulnerable than any other ethnic group. Those who remained in Afghanistan, he said, had to "deal with the mullahs [Taleban]." He described the three men as "*taleb-shenas*," or 'talebologists' (people who know and understand the Taleban) who were negotiating with the Taleban for the community's political rights.

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<sup>11</sup> See Ibrahim, Niamatullah, 'Hazaras and the Afghan State: Rebellion, Exclusion and the Struggle for Recognition,' London: Hurst & Company, 2017, page 206.

Beginning in November 2021, the three started meeting Taliban leaders, including acting Deputy Prime Ministers Mawlawi Abdul Kabir (see Sufi Gardezi's reports on his Facebook page [here](#) and [here](#)) and Abdul Salam Hanafi (see Sufi Gardezi's report on his Facebook page [here](#)) as well as acting Minister of Defence Mullah Muhammad Yaqub while he was visiting Bamyan, the centre of the Hazarajat (see Sufi Gardezi's report on his Facebook page [here](#)).



Left to right: Hussain Sangardost, acting defence minister Mullah Muhammad Yaqub, Sayed Sufi Gardezi and Sheikh Madar Ali Karimi during Mullah Yaqub's visit to Bamyan.  
Photo: Gardezi's Facebook page, 4 June 2022.

While Karimi said the coalition was their own initiative and did not represent the views of their “elders” abroad (referring to Khalili, Mohaqeq and Mudaber), he did admit that they were in contact with them, but they did not “dictate their views as leaders.” The coalition's top priorities, Karimi said, were the protection of life, public property and honour, and political representation in the government proportionate to the community's numerical strength. He noted that although

tangible results were few, all senior leaders, including supreme leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, had called Hazaras “religious brothers,” which he considered significant progress, given that “the same Talebs used to call us *rafizi* (rejecters),” a pejorative term used by extremists such as Daesh to denounce Shias and justify killing them.

Concerning representation, he said that when the Taleban’s cabinet was first formed in September 2021, he received a message from Prime Minister Mullah Hassan Akhund saying that, now that the ministers had been appointed, they (the Hazaras) could introduce governors, deputy ministers and heads of independent institutions. In reply, Karimi said he told the messenger:

*Just as Mullah Omar is respected among the Taleban for always adhering to his words, the Hazaras had a legendary leader in Abdul Ali Mazari, who told the Hazaras that they would not be represented as long as they were not part of major national decision-making, which is [mostly] taken in the cabinet.*

Their requests for political representation have been partially met, through their own appointments to government posts. In December 2022, Karimi was appointed ([see this tweet](#)) Deputy Minister of Urban Development (a position that had reportedly been offered to Hazara Taleban commander Mawlawi Mahdi Mujahed, but he turned it down and went to his home district of Balkhab where he rose up against and was defeated by the Taleban in summer 2022). Mudaber’s aide Sangardost now serves as district governor of Balkhab district in Sar-e Pul province. Karimi told the author on 25 December that Sufi Gardezi, Mohaqeq’s aide, would soon be appointed, either as governor of Daikundi or chief of Bamyan police. Karimi emphasised that while they were now serving as government employees, their mission to secure the community’s political representation continued and that a Hazara and Shia delegation would soon travel to Kandahar for discussions with Taleban leader Mullah Hibatullah.

## THE MAIN CLERIC-LED SHIA ORGANISATIONS

Since political parties have ceased operating officially under the Taliban,<sup>12</sup> religious leaders and councils have assumed greater prominence as possible vehicles for political mobilisation. As a result, political figures who used to lead their own political factions or were part of the government under the Republic have been trying to use religious organisations as platforms for both protection and influence. However, the fragmentation of the field, with at least five councils vying for influence and leadership, means that none can claim to speak for all or even most Hazara and/or Shia.

The main Shia and/or Hazara councils include:<sup>13</sup>

- The Shia Ulema Council of Afghanistan was established in 2003 under the leadership of Ayatollah Asif Mohseni. Traditionally the main religious Shia council, it has suffered from internal factional and ethnic controversies;
- The General Council of Hazaras was established in early 2022 by the relatively young Grand Ayatollah Ghulam Abbas Vaezzada Behsudi;
- The Assembly of Shia Ulema and Influential Persons of Afghanistan, led by Sayed Hussein Fazalzada, was the first – and so far only – Shia religious group to officially come out in support of the Islamic Emirate.

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<sup>12</sup> In April 2022, Afghanistan International [reported](#) that the Taliban had dissolved the department in the Ministry of Justice responsible for registration and oversight of political parties. A letter from the ministry said there was no need to retain the department since it didn't have anything to do. A source in the ministry was quoted that by disbanding the department, the Taliban wanted to ban political party operations in the country. On 4 September 2022, Taliban Deputy Minister of Justice Abdul Karim Haidar said there was no need for political parties in Afghanistan (see this media report [here](#)). A day later, the ministry [issued](#) a statement on its website clarifying that the country's geography and political circumstances were not ready for political party activities, since the citizens were not happy with them. "When the people get acquainted with politics and when political parties understand their real responsibility," it said, "there is the possibility that the parties will be allowed to operate."

<sup>13</sup> Other councils that are not discussed in detail here include the Council of Imamiya Ulema led by Jafari Kunduzi, which split off from the main Shia Ulema Council, and the Supreme People's Council for Unity and Solidarity of Hazara and Shia that seems to have gathered in response to the controversy surrounding the Mosalla-ye Shahid Mazari in Dasht-e Barchi, an intra-community dispute over a complex, looked at later on in this report.

## Shia Ulema Council of Afghanistan

The Shia Ulema Council long predated the Taleban takeover. It was established in 2003 by several prominent Shia clerics, including the founder of the mujahedin group, *Harakat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan* (the Islamic Movement of Afghanistan), Ayatollah Asif Mohseni, who died in August 2019; founding member of Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan, Qurban Ali Erfani, who died in October 2015 and; the current chairman Ayatollah Muhammad Hashem Salehi, who was elected to the post after Mohseni's death.<sup>14</sup>

The council's current chair Ayatollah Hashem Salehi is a Hazara from Surkh-o Parsa district in Parwan province and runs a seminary, Madrasa-ye Resalat, in Kabul. His deputies are Ahmad Ali Sheikhzada Chendawoli and Muhammad Akbari, who is the leader of the Hezb-e Herasat-e Islami (Islamic Protection Party of Afghanistan). Both deputies are Qizilbash. The council's secretary is Sayed Hussain Alemi Balkhi, a former MP and minister of refugees and repatriation in the National Unity Government. He is a Sayed.

After the Taleban returned to power and the main Hazara and Shia political leaders fled the country, this council was one of the first major Shia religious organisations to become active again as it sought to position itself as the representative for the entire community. Several Shia Ulema Council members who had held senior or influential positions in the previous government have also looked to this council as a possible source of personal protection. Individual Shia Ulema Council members who looked to the council as a possible source of personal protection in the immediate aftermath of the Taleban takeover included: council chair Ayatollah Salehi who was a religious affairs advisor to President Ghani; his deputy Muhammad Akbari, a two-time MP and senator, who was one of the Shia/Hazara leaders who surrendered to and cooperated with the Taleban's first Emirate, rather than, taking up arms against them, as Khalili and Mohaqeq did; the council's secretary Alemi Balkhi who was Minister of Refugees and Repatriation and; Niamatullah Ghaffari from Helmand, who was an MP twice.

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<sup>14</sup> Other founding members of the Shia Ulema Council, according to one of its members, included Wahdat party member Yusuf Waezi, who died in October 2014 and three men who are still alive and active: Khadem Hussain Nateqi Shafayi, Muhammad Karami and Muhammad Hussain Mohaqeq. This council is led by a chairman with two deputies and an executive board comprising 25 members that is annually elected by its general assembly. The executive board meets weekly and is the main decision-making body within the council.



Shia Ulema Council of Afghanistan chair Ayatollah Hashem Salehi with glasses in the middle, his first and second deputies Ahmad Ali Sheikhzada Chendawoli and Muhammad Akbari on his right respectively and the council's secretary Sayed Hussain Alemi Balkhi on his left.

Photo: The council's Facebook page, 2 December 2022.

Nine days after the Taliban takeover, the council [praised](#) the “decisiveness and prudence of the [Taliban] security forces” when ensuring the security of the Ashura ceremonies. They had proceeded, freely and without incident mere days after the takeover and had even been [visited by](#) senior Taliban officials. The council also commended the Taliban's general amnesty and said that security and political officials should deal seriously with violations of the amnesty by “imprudent individuals” across the country, in order to earn public trust. Around the same time, the council began to engage with Taliban officials. On 25 August 2021, a group of council members led by second deputy Akbari [met](#) the head of the Taliban political committee, Sheikh Shahabuddin Delawar.

In an effort to establish itself as the community's main representative, the council held a series of consultative meetings that resulted in a document called “Views and Demands of the Shia Community,” which the author has seen. The six fundamental demands were:

- Continued recognition of Jafari jurisprudence and its implementation in matters not regulated by the constitution or other laws;
- Representation of all ethnic groups and Islamic denominations in a commission to draft a new Islamic constitution;
- A government inclusive of all ethnic groups and Islamic sects;
- Inclusion of members of all Islamic sects in the country's judicial organs, including the Supreme Court, primary and appeal courts;
- Free primary, secondary and higher education for all and religious studies curricula based on the jurisprudence of all Islamic sects;
- Balanced reconstruction of the country and revision of administrative units (provinces, districts), based on population figures.

The council formed the Commission for the Pursuit of Views and Demands of the Shia Community, on 27 December 2021, with Alemi Balkhi as its spokesperson, and tasked it with pushing for the council's demands with the Taliban. Alemi and a group of other commission members submitted a copy of the document mentioned above to acting Minister of Refugees Khalil ul-Rahman Haqqani on 2 February 2022, who welcomed their views and promised to facilitate the commission's meetings with other senior Taliban leaders, including the prime minister (see this report on the council's Facebook page [here](#)).

A member boasted that the council had asked for a meeting with Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada in Kandahar<sup>15</sup> and was thus "pursuing their demands from the top, not through the ministers," a reference to other Hazara/Shia groups who were 'merely' meeting Taliban ministers.

The Taliban have, in turn, also reached out to the council, particularly in the beginning, as they sought to control the environment and build support among the Shia community. However, the promised meetings with Akhundzada, the prime minister and his deputies have never materialised.

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<sup>15</sup> The request for the meeting with the Taliban leader must have been a déjà vu for the council's deputy, Akbari, who, after surrendering to the Taliban during their first regime, travelled to Kandahar as part of a delegation of Hazara commanders to meet Taliban founder and leader Mullah Muhammad Omar. The delegation at the time was not taken very seriously and Mullah Omar only met them for half an hour – hardly enough time for them to outline their demands (see this 2009 paper by Niamatullah Ibrahim [here](#)).

The council received a major blow to its status vis-à-vis the Taliban on 13 May 2022 when armed intelligence forces from Kabul's Police District (PD) 6 disrupted a consultative meeting of its Commission for the Pursuit of Views and Demands of the Shia Community. According to media [reports](#), the Taliban's intelligence forces insulted the ulema and forcefully removed all participants, including the senior council members. The commission released a statement ([see it on Ayatollah Mohseni's TV Tamandon website here](#)) condemning the incident as an "outrageous and unfortunate act" and an insult to the entire Shia community, especially since they had coordinated the meeting with the local police department (four PD6 personnel had been stationed at the gate of Madrassa-ye Resalat where the meeting was held). Although the head of PD-6 intelligence, Sheikh Mawlawi Aminullah Waqar, promised to identify and punish the perpetrators, no apology was issued. Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahed later [told](#) Afghan Voice Agency (AVA) that the security forces had responded to reports of a possible "heart-wrenching incident," which did little to explain the behaviour of the security forces or the fact that the meeting's banners had been torn from the walls.

The council has tried to use its contacts with Taliban officials to lobby for Hazara/Shia demands and position itself as the main Shia and Hazara representative body.<sup>16</sup> However, it does not seem to have been widely recognised as such. On the contrary, the council's assertiveness provoked competition and pushback from other Shia and Hazara groups. For instance, former Daikundi MP and senior member of Khalili's party Asadullah Sadati told the author in May 2022 that the council's aspirations to represent the whole Hazara/Shia community were "unrealistic" because the main drivers of the council – Akbari, Alemi, Sheikhzada and Mohseni's sons – were all non-Hazaras and its Hazara chairman, Ayatollah Salehi, lacked influence. In fact, the council is generally perceived to be dominated

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<sup>16</sup> Salehi introduced the council as the primary channel for Afghanistan's Shia community in his meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ishaq Fayyaz in February 2022 and told him that they were pursuing Shia demands in cooperation with other Shia parties and organisations. (Fayyaz is a Hazara Grand Ayatollah from the Jaghori district of Ghazni province who is based in Najaf, Iraq; see AAN's previous reporting [here](#)). In December 2022, in an apparent move to carve out religious legitimacy, the council's secretary Alemi Balkhi [reported](#) on his Facebook page that a delegation of the council had met Ayatollah Fayyaz again and that Fayyaz had said that he endorsed the peaceful platform so far adopted by the Shia Ulema Council, and that since the Taliban had changed, so the Shia community should engage with them and not confront them. A WhatsApp message from Fayyaz's son Mahmud Fayyaz later [circulated](#) on social media stating that the Ayatollah's meeting with the delegation did not imply his endorsement of or concurrence with their position.

by the various Harakat-e Islami factions, the most prominent of which was led by the late Ayatollah Mohseni. Harakat had joined the Rabbani government in the 1990s, accused the Mazari-led Hezb-e Wahdat of gratuitous warmongering and bloodshed, and clashed with Hezb-e Wahdat on several occasions for territorial control and influence in the western part of the capital. These rifts can still be felt.

The council's past and the background of some of its most prominent members have also stood in the way of a strong appeal among the mainstream Hazara community. For instance, the council, especially its former chairman Ayatollah Mohseni, had played a central role (see this Human Rights Watch statement [here](#)) in passing the controversial Shia Personal Status Law during the Republic, after many Hazara leaders had rejected it. More recently, the council's second deputy Akbari, who had broken away from Hezb-e Wahdat in 1994 to join the Burhanuddin Rabbani government, caused a stir on 27 May 2022 when he described Wahdat's policy decisions in west Kabul during the civil war in the early 1990s as "utter savagery." This insulted many Hazaras who continue to hold the Wahdat party and its founder Abdul Ali Mazari in high regard and who view the party's past through the lens of their struggle for political and religious rights.

Earlier, during a 27 December 2021 meeting, the council's first deputy Sheikhzada had intentionally not included ethnic Hazaras when naming the ethnic groups he said constituted the Shia community. The moderator tried to justify the omission by saying the Hazaras were the main body of the Shia community and did not need to be named, but Sheikhzada insisted he had omitted the Hazaras on purpose, because the Hazaras had also omitted other groups, like the Sadat and Qizilbash, in the last 20 years (see an eyewitness account [here](#)). This provoked strong reactions among Hazara activists on social media, including Sadati, who [said](#) on his Facebook page that those who had a problem with "our identity and existence do not need to advocate for us."

The council's efforts to play a leadership role for the Hazara/Shia community have also been undermined by the existence of what one of the members described as "parallel councils," created by "some Sadat and non-Sadat circles." This includes the two councils that have split from the Shia Ulema Council: the Imamiya Ulema Council under Muhammad Hussain Jafari Kunduzi (see footnote 9) and the Assembly of Shia Ulema and Influential Persons of Afghanistan under Sayed Hassan Fazelzada (more on which, below).

These dynamics leave the Council of Shia Ulema in a precarious position. The internal factional and Hazara/non-Hazara controversies mean that it cannot be universally seen as a representative mouthpiece. Its vulnerable position vis-à-vis the Taliban, in the aftermath of the raid on its office, has also undermined the council's potential for influence. The senior Taliban officials they meet have generally been courteous but non-committal. Moreover, those contacts did not protect their meeting from being disrupted, nor were they given assurances that such state intrusion would not happen again.

## Grand Ayatollah Ghulam Abbas Vaezzada Behsudi and the General Council of Hazaras

Ayatollah Vaezzada, a Hazara from the Behsud district of Maidan Wardak province, is a senior Shia cleric based in Kabul, where he runs the Dar ul-Ma'aref Ahl ul-Bait seminary. Vaezzada was declared a *marja* (source of emulation), the highest rank for a senior cleric, and assumed the title of Grand Ayatollah in July 2019.<sup>17</sup> Several senior Hazara political figures, including Khalili, Mohaqeq, Mudaber and Danesh, paid congratulatory visits to his office and announced their support for the new Afghan *marja*.

Since the Taliban takeover, Vaezzada has also tried to cast himself as a leader in the struggle to secure protection for the Hazara and Shia communities. He has also faced pushback from Hezb-e Wahdat affiliates in the concomitant rivalry over who gets to represent them.

Vaezzada was the first Hazara religious leader to respond to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, declaring that he would not leave the country and that no one from his family was abroad (see his 16 August statement published on his office Facebook page [here](#)). He was sceptical of the Emirate's general amnesty and noted that it would be difficult for the Taliban to secure public confidence given their track record. He called on the people to remain calm, but urged the Taliban to treat the public well and leave a good legacy, now that they were responsible for the security, blood, property, and dignity of all Afghans.

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<sup>17</sup> A *marja* or Grand Ayatollah is the highest Shia religious authority, whose *fatwas* (religious decisions) are observed by those who follow him as a source of emulation. Every Shia *marja* must publish a *risaleh*, or comprehensive manual on the application of sharia in daily life, for the use of his followers. Vaezzada published his *risaleh amaliya* (treatise on practical law) in November 2019 (see the report on his website [here](#)).



Grand Ayatollah Vaezzada inaugurating the General Council of Hazaras and Ethnic Groups of Afghanistan.  
Photo: Vaezzada's Facebook page, 18 February 2022.

He also called on the Shia Grand Ayatollahs in Najaf and Qom to help the Afghan people weather the current humanitarian crisis (see his 30 August 2021 open letter published on his office Facebook page [here](#)). He noted that for centuries the Shia in Afghanistan had been sending their *wujuhat* (obligatory alms and payments) to Najaf and Qom and stressed that it was now time for the people of Afghanistan to benefit from what he called the “Imam Zaman insurance” (referring to the judicial alms paid to the *maraj* in the name of the Twelfth Shia Imam).

Vaezzada embraced a more public spotlight on 18 February 2022 when he launched the Shura-ye Sarasari Hazara-ha wa Aqwam-e Afghanistan, or General Council of Hazaras and Ethnic Groups of Afghanistan, which carries a more explicitly ethnic undertone than the Shia Ulema Council. During his speech at the general council's inauguration in west Kabul (full video on his office Facebook

page [here](#)), Vaezzada said that uniting the three big Hazara groups – Ismaili, Sunni, and Twelver Shia – was only a start and that the ultimate goal was to unite all Afghanistan’s ethnic groups.<sup>18</sup> He thanked the Taleban for granting a licence for the gathering, but also raised the issue of Hazara political participation in power and announced his plan to form a commission that would sit with Taleban officials to discuss Hazara demands.

He also mentioned his wish that one day, a girl would be able to travel from Badakhshan to Kabul alone and undisturbed, or a woman from the south to Faryab – an implicit reference to his belief that, contrary to the Taleban’s ban, there is no prohibition on women travelling without a *mahram* (a close male relative) under sharia. Coming from a marja, this sets the Shia clerics apart from Taleban leaders in their views on women.

Several prominent Hazara figures did not attend the council’s inauguration ceremony, including Khalili’s aide Madar Ali Karimi and the former MP Sadati. Speaking to the author, both later commented on the relative inexperience of the young Grand Ayatollah.<sup>19</sup> Since then, there has been little significant activity on the part of Vaezzada’s council. A source working with the Grand Ayatollah told the author on 8 October 2022 that they had realised there was little room for the council’s activities, but refused to go into details as to whether they had come under any pressure from the Taleban. He said that, for now, the main order of business for Hazaras was to save themselves from the “massacres” (referring to the continued targeted attacks, usually attributed to the Islamic State of Khorasan Province, against the community in west Kabul).

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<sup>18</sup> Other speakers at the inauguration were Mawlawi Serajuddin Badakhshi from the General Council of Sunni Hazaras of Afghanistan and Besmillah Attash representing Ismaili Hazaras, showcasing the intention to unite the three main Hazara groups.

<sup>19</sup> Karimi told the author that although he and the other aides respected Vaezzada as “a young marja,” they were not in favour of him entering politics. Sadati, on the other hand, said he thought Vaezzada had the potential to become an important player since he belongs to the justice-seeking current and, as a marja and a prominent Hazara, represented something the Shia Ulema Council did not have, but that his lack of political experience had undermined his position.

## The Assembly of Shia Ulema and Influential Persons of Afghanistan and rare Shia member of the Taliban, Sayed Hashem Jawadi Balkhabi

The first Shia group to formally announce its support for the Taliban was the *Majma-ye Ulema wa Mutanaffezin Tashayo Afghanistan*, or Assembly of Shia Ulema and Influential Persons of Afghanistan. They did so on 26 December 2021 during a joint gathering with another group, the *Ejma Estiqlal wa Solh* (Consensus for Independence and Peace). Taliban deputy foreign minister Abbas Stanekzai and senior advisor to acting interior minister Anas Haqqani participated in the event (media reports [here](#) and [here](#)).

The Assembly of Shia Ulema and Influential Persons was established in 2020<sup>20</sup> and is led by Sayed Hassan Fazelzada, son of the late Ayatollah Sayed Abul Hassan Fazel. He is considered controversial by many in Hezb-e Wahdat circles because he resigned as chairman of Hezb-e Wahdat's Supreme Supervisory Council in 1992 and joined the Rabbani's government, at a time when it was in bitter conflict with Wahdat. The other group, the Consensus for Independence and Peace, about which little is known, is led by Attaullah Sadeq Shaghasi, reportedly a Shia from Kandahar with longstanding connections to the Taliban.

Both Fazelzada and Shaghasi had already been meeting Taliban officials before they declared their support and have continued to do so. In those meetings, they have tended to reiterate three things: (1) the importance of the Doha agreement for the country's independence, national unity and brotherhood among ethnic groups, which is unlike the Bonn Conference (following the ousting of the Taliban from power in 2001) that, they say, paved the way for occupation and regional prejudices; (2) the fact that they have always supported the Islamic Emirate and will continue to do so; and (3) the claim that they have helped prevent any rebellion against the Emirate in Shia-majority areas.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In a November 2021 [interview](#) on the Assembly's YouTube channel, its spokesman Muhammad Shakeri said the assembly had been formed two years earlier. Its logo also shows 2020 (1399) as the year of its establishment.

<sup>21</sup> For an example of their remarks on the Doha agreement, see a readout of their 16 April 2022 meeting with acting Minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs Mullah Nurullah Nuri [here](#); for claims that they have helped prevent rebellion in the Shia-majority areas, see a media report on their 27 May 2022 meeting with Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar [here](#).

It appears that the assembly had been preparing to switch sides before the fall of the Republic. Its Eid ul-Adha statement, issued on 20 July 2021, called for the withdrawal of foreign forces and a return to “Islamic principles and national values” as a “way out of the current crisis.” It also called on people not to leave their political destiny in the hands of a few, but to take it into their own hands.

One of the key figures in the Assembly of Shia Ulema and Influential Persons is Fazelzada’s brother-in-law, Sayed Hashem Jawadi Balkhabi. He is also one of the few declared Shia Taleban.



A meeting of the Assembly of Shia Ulema and Influential Persons of Afghanistan titled “Doha Agreement, the beginning of Independence” in Kabul.

Photo: The assembly’s Facebook page 28 February 2022.

Balkhabi, a 55-year-old Sayed from Sar-e Pul’s Balkhab district, only came into the spotlight after the Taleban takeover.<sup>22</sup> He studied religion in Qom in Iran, where his family still lives. During the Republic, he was arrested and imprisoned for over ten years in Pul-e Charkhi and Bagram prisons on charges of spying for Iran and acting

<sup>22</sup> Jawadi Balkhabi was not a well-known figure before the Taleban takeover, although there had been some mentions. Razaq Mamun, in his 2010 book *Rad-e pai-ye fer'on dar terur-e Ahmad Shah Massud* (The Pharaoh’s Footprints in Ahmad Shah Massud’s Assassination), mentioned Jawadi, although not in relation to the assassination itself, saying he held Iranian citizenship and was an Iranian spy. Copies of conflicting identity documents with varying father’s names (respectively Sayed Haidar and Sayed Abbas) have circulated on social media. Some of these documents suggest Jawadi served in the Iranian military and holds an Iranian driving license.

against national security. During this period, he became close to high-ranking members of the Taleban, including current Chief of Staff and cousin of Interior Minister Haqqani, Ishaq Haqqani. He has, however, claimed that he was linked to the movement long before that, calling himself “perhaps the only Shia Hazara Mawlawi” who had worked with the Taleban during their first emirate.<sup>23</sup>

Like thousands of other prisoners, Jawadi was released from Bagram prison when the Taleban captured Kabul in August 2021. After his release, he attended Muharram commemorations with several high-ranking Taleban members, where he spoke on behalf of the new administration. He assured the audience that the Taleban had changed and asked the people to support and cooperate with their new government.

The Taleban did not give Jawadi an official position until late March 2022, when he was appointed head of a 20-member council to resolve the issue between Kuchis and villagers in Behsud. For more on this, see our recent report, [Conflict Management or Retribution? How the Taleban deal with land disputes between Kuchis and local communities](#). The meetings resulted in a six-point agreement which, according to a council member, had been verbally communicated by the Maidan Wardak governor as the “Islamic Emirate’s decision.”<sup>24</sup> Jawadi also travelled to Sheikh Ali district in Parwan province with his second deputy as well as Ayatollah Veazzada’s representative Ibrahim Ghasemi Helmandi, to try to mediate between Kuchis and villagers there, but apparently did not achieve much. Jawadi is said to have his eye on the position of district governor of his home district of Balkhab.

Jawadi and his brother-in-law Fazelzada are also at the centre of a controversy within Kabul’s Shia community over the Mosalla-ye Shahid Mazari that has recently reared its head again.

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<sup>23</sup> In a recent interview with a Russian journalist from ITAR-TASS news agency (video [here](#)), Jawadi said he joined the Taleban and worked in the interior ministry for five years before NATO ousted the Taleban regime in 2001 and remained part of the movement until the National Directorate of Security (NDS) arrested him in 2010. As a result, he said he had no concerns, having worked with the Taleban for about 25 years.

<sup>24</sup> The six-point agreement that was negotiated by Jawadi’s Behsud council included a general amnesty for all legal and criminal cases related to the disputes between Kuchis and villagers; access to the area for Kuchis with properties there, provided they have documents to prove it and; a prohibition applying to both sides on carrying arms when travelling.

## An intra-community dispute over a complex



Hazara and Shia representatives, including Sheikh Madar Ali Karimi, Jafar Mahdawi and Asadullah Sadati, meet with Deputy Prime Minister Mawlawi Abdul Kabir to demand the protection of Mosalla-ye Shahid Mazari.

Photo: Sadati's Facebook page, 20 November 2022.

In 2020, the former government built a large complex in a previously open space in the Hazara-majority neighbourhood of Dasht-e Barchi in west Kabul, where it was used for religious and political gatherings. It was always known as Mosalla-ye Shahid Mazari, a reference to the founder of Hezb-e Wahdat, Abdul Ali Mazari, who was killed by the Taliban in 1995. The dispute, in essence, involves two related arguments. The first is what the complex should be called – Mosalla-ye Shahid Mazari Mosalla-ye Khatem al-Anbiya, a reference to the Prophet Muhammad. The other is the question: to whom did then President Burhanuddin Rabbani give the parcel of state land on which the Mosalla is built? Jawadi and Fazelzada have long claimed that the land was given to Fazelzada's father and thus belongs to their family. The various Wahdat factions, on the other hand, claim the land was designated for public use and was given to the people of Dasht-e Barchi, not to a specific individual, a position apparently supported by the former government.

Sarwar Danesh, then vice-president, Muhammad Mohaqeq and Asadullah Sadati all participated in the ceremony laying the first cornerstone in July 2020 (see this Bokhdi News report [here](#)).

Controversy erupted only after the Taliban takeover when the signboard of Mosalla-ye Shahid Mazari was taken down. The removal of Mazari's name, coupled with rumours that Jawadi had obtained a letter from the Ministry of Interior ordering the Mosalla to be vacated, led to an outcry on social media and concern among Hazaras. Jawadi was forced to back down from his claim that his family owned the land, reportedly after an intervention by, among others, Ayatollah Vaezzada. In an interview [posted](#) on his YouTube channel, Jawadi portrayed the situation as a misunderstanding, saying that only the Mosalla's security personnel had been asked to leave, so that they could be replaced. On 1 September 2021, representatives from the various Wahdat factions, in coordination with Taliban officials, reinstated the signboard with Mazari's name (media report [here](#)).

The issue has, however, not gone away and has led to a recent series of meetings between the Mosalla's board of trustees and almost all the main Wahdat-linked Hazara and Shia leaders in the county – including Sadati and Mahdawi, Ayatollah Vaezzada's head of office, Mohaqeq's aide Sufi Gardizi and Khalili's aide Sheikh Madar Ali Karimi. On 19 November 2022, they released a statement (see it on Sadati's Facebook page [here](#)), calling themselves the Supreme People's Council of Unity and Solidarity of Hazaras and Shias of Afghanistan, and called on the Islamic Emirate to protect the "Great Mosque of Martyr Mazari as a place of public benefit and public endowment." They warned "opportunistic individuals and circles who intended to capture and sell the Mosalla's land" to stop their encroachment and stressed that the history of the land, dedicated by the government of the time, was clear and was supported by credible documents. They declared that they were prepared to take legal action against anyone who made claims to the contrary. Karimi, who at the time had not yet been appointed as a deputy minister, told the author that they had met Deputy Prime Minister Mawlawi Abdul Kabir, Minister of Public Works Abdul Mannan Omari and other officials, and would continue to lobby for the protection of the Mosalla and its land.

## NEW LEADERS EXPAND THEIR INFLUENCE

Several ‘newer’ Hazara leaders, who had emerged in the last decade through electoral politics and Hazara mobilisation, and who did not leave the country, have also sought to expand their influence. These include the former MP and founder of the 2012-established political party, *Hezb-e Mellat* (Nation Party of Afghanistan), Jafar Mahdawi, and one of the three Hazara deputy ministers in the current government, Dr Latif Nazari.

### Jafar Mahdawi

Mahdawi, a Hazara from Lal wa Sarjantal district in Ghor, had been a deputy leader of Mohaqeq’s People’s Islamic Unity Party, which fielded him as a candidate in the 2010 parliamentary elections for Kabul. Soon after, he forged a separate political path and established his own party. He supported Ashraf Ghani in the 2014 presidential election, but turned against him after Ghani refused to give him a cabinet post. Mahdawi was one of the leaders of two mass protest movements, Tabassum in 2015 and Rushnayi in 2016.<sup>25</sup> He was unsuccessful in the 2018 parliamentary elections and joined former president Hamid Karzai’s political team during Ghani’s second term. More recently, Mahdawi became deputy head (Subh-e Kabul report [here](#)) of *Harakat-e Nejat-e Afghanistan* (Afghanistan Rescue Movement), led by former Minister of Finance and Ambassador to Pakistan Omar Zakhilwal which was launched on 25 March 2021, seven months before the Taliban takeover (see BBC Persian report [here](#)).

It is widely believed that Mahdawi was already in touch with the Haqqani network before the fall of the Republic, through Zakhilwal and Karzai’s chief of staff Abdul Karim Khoram. He had also already started making pro-Taliban remarks before the collapse. For example, on 22 June 2021, he tweeted:

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<sup>25</sup> The Tabassum protest in 2015 was in response to the beheading of seven Hazara travellers by the Taliban, demanding greater protection from the government (AAN reporting [here](#)). The Rushnayi protest movement sought to overturn the government’s 2016 decision to reroute an important power line from Turkmenistan so that it would no longer pass through the Hazarajat (AAN reporting [here](#)). Both protest movements showcased the capacity of Hazara leaders to mobilise massive crowds.

*The people of Afghanistan are fed up with the oppression, discrimination, injustice, tyranny and corruption of Ghani's puppet government. Were it not for the bitter memories of the Taliban's previous conduct and the concerns over its recurrence in the future, people all over Afghanistan would welcome the Taliban with floral wreaths.*

Within days of the Taliban takeover, Mahdawi started meeting high-ranking Taliban officials and posting about it on social media (see for instance [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). He appears particularly close to Anas Haqqani, repeatedly praising him on Twitter (for instance, on 30 January 2022, [calling](#) him “a big and invaluable asset for the country”).



Jafari Mahdawi (left) in a meeting with acting deputy minister of economy Dr Abdul Latif Nazari (right) and deputy minister of public health Dr Hassan Ghiyasi (middle).

Photo: Mahdawi's Facebook page, 10 June 2022.

About three months after they came to power, Mahdawi hosted a gathering in support of the Taliban, attended by the Deputy Minister of Information and Culture, Zabihullah Mujahed. Mahdawi called Ghani's government “the darkest point in Afghanistan's history” and praised the Taliban for ending the “war

and corruption” and improving security. He said he hoped a more inclusive government would be formed in the “weeks or months ahead.” Since then, he has continuously argued that there are only two options: constructive and positive engagement with the Taliban or a descent into anarchy and the ascendance of ISKP (see for example his January 2022 [interview](#) with Pajhwok).

Mahdawi took credit for the appointment of Dr Hassan Ghiyasi as deputy for policy and planning in the health ministry, saying he had proposed the Iran-educated Hazara physician to the Taliban (see his interview with the Student News Network [here](#)). When announcing the second round of cabinet appointments on 21 September 2021, Taliban spokesman Mujahed made a point of saying the cabinet included minorities’ representation and singled out Ghiyasi as a Hazara member (Etilaat Roz report [here](#)).

## Dr Abdul Latif Nazari

Since then, two more Hazara deputy ministers have been appointed, Dr Abdul Latif Nazari, as [Deputy Minister of Economy](#) on 25 December 2021 and Madar Ali Karimi as Deputy Minister for [Urban Development](#) on 1 December 2022. The other major non-Pashtun groups, the Tajiks and Uzbeks, are also underrepresented in the Taliban’s government, but the Hazaras are the only major community to hold no position higher than deputy minister.<sup>26</sup>

Nazari has been the most prominent of the three Hazara deputy ministers. Dr Nazari is from Ghazni and holds a PhD in international relations from Tehran University. He is the founder of *Eslahat* (Reforms) Daily (which was publishing until at least early 2022, see this [Facebook post](#)) and head of the private Gharjestan University’s founders’ board. He was previously a member of Mohaqeq’s party, ran unsuccessfully first for parliament in Kabul in 2018, and a year later as second [running-mate](#) to Ahmad Wali Massud (chair of the foundation named in honour of his brother, mujahedin leader, Ahmad Shah Massud). Nazari [told](#) BBC Persian that he had travelled to Iran before the collapse of the Republic and had been there when he received a call from Taliban acting Minister of Economy Qari Din

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<sup>26</sup> During the insurgency, there were sizeable numbers of Tajiks and Uzbeks in Taliban ranks, as well as Tajik and Uzbek ministers in the first Emirate. Shia members of the Taliban, Hazara or non-Hazara, were notable for their rarity. For information on one of the few, see our 2020 report, [The case of Mawlawi Mehdi and Balkhab District: Are the Taliban attracting Hazaras?](#)

Muhammad Hanif, whom he lauded as a “kind-hearted individual” to return to Afghanistan.

Nazari had been in contact with the Taliban’s political office in Doha in recent years, particularly with Hanif and the now head of the Olympics Committee Nazar Muhammad Mutmain (see media report [here](#)). In April 2022, Afghanistan International TV channel [reported](#) that it had photos showing the Pakistani military hosting Nazari many times. In response, Nazari told the BBC that no country, political leader, or circle within the Taliban had been behind his appointment, nor had he requested it. He added that he had probably been appointed due to his expertise.

Unlike the other Hazara deputy minister, Dr Hassan Ghiyasi, who has been very quiet (and Karimi spent just a few weeks in the job), Nazari has tried to play a political role by encouraging the Hazaras to engage with the Taliban. In February 2022, as reports about a possible uprising in the Hazara heartland emerged,<sup>27</sup> Nazari travelled to Bamiyan, apparently at the Taliban’s behest, to discourage any possible mobilisation and to rally local people to demand the unfreezing of Afghanistan’s assets. He told a gathering that the people who adopted a “confrontational approach” towards the Taliban were mainly outside the country and would not be the ones who would be harmed. Nazari called for engagement with the “current political order” because the two alternatives were Daesh or civil war, and Hazaras would be particularly vulnerable in both scenarios. He also argued that since the Taliban had shown that the United States and NATO could be defeated, the “colonial powers” were now “furious and taking revenge” by freezing the country’s assets.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In February 2022, the Taliban dispatched 1,500 troops from Paktia to Bamiyan. The commander of the 5th Brigade of the Mansuri Corps Mullah Muhammad Shirin [said](#) some groups were seeking to destabilise the province (but did not name them). Similarly, the Taliban chief of police for Daikundi Sediqullah Abed told a public gathering that every day their leaders said the situation in Daikundi was “in jeopardy.” He warned they would “cut off the heads” of “whoever disobeyed the system, whether they were sons of Daikundi or from outside the province.”

<sup>28</sup> Six days after Nazari’s speech, there was a small demonstration in Bamiyan where people with disabilities and their families called for the unfreezing of Afghanistan’s money. Some protestors [told](#) local Radio Nasim later that they had been called to receive assistance and were then told they had to participate in the rally. No assistance was distributed.

## CONCLUSION: A DIVIDED COMMUNITY STRUGGLING FOR PROTECTION AND REPRESENTATION

When President Ashraf Ghani's government collapsed and the Taliban took over, Hazaras and Shias found themselves in a complicated position. In the final years of the Republic, many of their leaders had become deeply disillusioned by both the Ghani government and the international presence, particularly given that the community was going through a wave of brutal targeted attacks. In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover, and faced with a fait accompli, they expressed relief that the Ghani government had come to an end. Many Hazara leaders held out hope that the Taliban would not take revenge on those they saw as having supported the old government and the foreign military presence and establish a relatively inclusive political order. All, including the old guard leaders who were abroad, took a soft position as they awaited the Taliban's first moves.

This politics of survival seemed to have reduced the community's initial vulnerability to military pressure and reprisal attacks by the Taliban following their capture of Kabul. However, they have not secured political representation at the cabinet-level or the enshrinement of political and religious rights. Many Taliban officials have shown themselves willing to meet with Hazara and Shia representatives and their public messaging has been conciliatory. These public gestures have, however, been undermined by the Taliban government's failure or inability to protect the Hazara/Shia community from targeted attacks. On the contrary, under the Taliban, Hazaras and Shias have been subjected to increasing harassment and forced displacements.<sup>29</sup>

The community is, moreover, becoming increasingly vulnerable to collective punishment by the Taliban as they act swiftly to pre-emptively crack down on any possible mobilisation in Hazarajat, especially given that several of the old guard leaders have – at least rhetorically – opened up the possibility of armed resistance against the Taliban.

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<sup>29</sup> A particular trend has been the reopening of decades-old judicial cases of past confrontations between Hazaras and Kuchis/local Pashtuns, with local Taliban authorities siding with the Kuchi/Pashtun side, meting out collective punishments against which the Hazara and Shia residents find themselves without recourse (see recent AAN [reporting](#) here).

The various religious leaders and councils that have stepped forward to take on a more political role, initially assumed greater importance as the Taleban used religious platforms to consolidate their power. However, those leaders and councils soon found their influence to be very limited and their positions vulnerable. Individuals with longstanding relations established under the previous Taleban regime, in prison, or through informal dialogue in recent years, have used those relations to engage with the Taleban. They are now being gradually co-opted, but seemingly not in return for much influence.

As the multitude of leaders and groups emerged, each vying for a central role in representing the Hazara and Shia community, the familiar spectre of intra-communal fragmentation reared its head. The open pushback by Wahdat affiliates against the assertiveness of the Shia Ulema Council, which they believe is dominated by mainly Harakat factions is a case in point. The dispute over the Mosalla-ye Shahid Mazari also illustrates how the historical fragmentation of Wahdat continues to reverberate within the community, undermining the potential to join forces in their shared demands for protection, recognition and political representation.

As a result, the various groups remain hamstrung by factional rivalries and unable to apply concerted pressure on the government. Instead, they are vulnerable to manipulation by the Taleban officials who remain accessible to the various groups, but often use these contacts for public messaging without responding to their concerns or demands.

Cover photo:

Grand Ayatollah Vaezzada and Taleban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid at a gathering organised by Jafar Mahdawi in Kabul where some Hazara/Shia elders pledged their support to the country's new rulers.

Photo: Aref Karimi/AFP, 25 November 2021.

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