

From the darkest day into the night: The plight of refugees fleeing Afghanistan

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Protests in London. Photo: Unsplash/Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona

Demographics

There are several different ethnic groups in Afghanistan, including Pashtuns (42%), Tajiks (27%), Hazaras (9%), Uzbeks (9%), Turkmen (3%) and Baloch (2%).¹ In terms of religious demographics, 80% are Sunni Muslim, 10-19% are Shia Muslim (around 90% of whom are Hazara), and 0.3% adhere to other religious or belief groups.²

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1 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Afghanistan www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Afghanistan%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf
2 APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, Afghanistan <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/afghanistan/>

Boy sitting on destroyed tank on the hills over Kabul City in Afghanistan

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Introduction

Afghanistan’s politics, economics and society changed significantly on 15 August 2021, when the government fell following the US military withdrawal and the Taliban’s takeover of the country’s capital, Kabul. The Taliban’s swift advance prompted several thousand Afghan men, women and children to leave their homes and head for neighbouring countries, fearing the group’s long history of violence, targeted oppression and persecution of minorities and vulnerable groups.

For many Afghans, the takeover heralded a return ‘to the darkest days,’³ as UN Secretary-General António Guterres described it. Among those who fled was the then president, Ashraf Ghani. In his statement President Ghani expressed that he left to prevent further bloodshed, adding that ‘the Taliban have won with the judgement of their swords and guns, and are now responsible for the honour, property and self-preservation of their countrymen.’⁴

Since the Taliban takeover, there has been growing concern over the safety and security of vulnerable groups, the stripping away of the fundamental rights and freedoms laid out in the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and an increase in human rights violations, including of women’s rights and the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Afghanistan is becoming increasingly dangerous for religious, sectarian and ethnic minorities. Many have fled, and there have even been reports of house-to-house searches, terrorist attacks targeting religious minorities, and other crimes under international law necessitating the urgent attention of the international community.

Several UN human rights experts have warned of a bleak outlook for Afghanistan if the international community does not ‘dramatically step up efforts to urge *de facto* authorities to adhere to basic human rights principles.’⁵

3 United Nations, ‘We Cannot, Must Not Abandon People of Afghanistan, Secretary-General Tells Security Council Meeting, Stressing “the World Is Watching”’, 16 August 2021 www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm20853.doc.htm
4 Al Jazeera, ‘Taliban enters Afghan presidential palace after Ghani flees’, 15 August 2021 www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/15/taliban-continues-advances-captures-key-city-of-jalalabad
5 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Afghanistan: UN human rights experts warn of bleak future without massive turnaround’, 12 August 2022 www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/08/afghanistan-un-human-rights-experts-warn-bleak-future-without-massive-turnaround

Timeline

1. 1996-2001: First Taliban takeover

From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban regime used brutal force to impose their religious dogma and cultural views. The group directed that women were not allowed to go to health centres, were to be kept out of education and employment, and were not permitted to leave their homes without a male family member accompanying them. The Taliban also imposed the burqa on women. Punishments for not wearing it ranging from threats to beatings. Women mistakenly showing their feet or ankles would also be penalised.⁶

In June 2001, an Italian-funded hospital in Kabul was forced to shut down for some time to ensure the safety of its female workers from the religious police.⁷ Religious, sectarian and ethnic minorities also endured severe discrimination and violence under the initial Taliban regime. Converts from Islam were particularly vulnerable. Anyone who decided to convert was deemed an apostate and would face the death penalty.

Members of the Hazara community endured violence due to their Shia religious identity and their ethnicity. The Taliban did not hesitate to kill Hazaras or to express discriminatory and violent views about them. Their policy concerning Hazaras was clear: they wanted to eradicate them. For example, previous Taliban spokesperson and Governor of Balkh, Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi stated, ‘Hazaras! Where are you escaping? If you jump into the air we will grasp your legs, if you enter the earth we will grasp your ears. Hazaras are not Moslems. You can kill them. It’s not a sin. Oh Hazaras become Moslems and pray to God as us. We won’t let you to go away. Every border is in our control.’⁸

Such statements from leaders like Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi highlight the terrifying extent of violence permitted against Hazaras. Their words and actions reveal an intention to eradicate the entire population. Since Hazaras were viewed as heretical non-Sunni Muslims, the Taliban believed extreme violence with genocidal intent was justified.

Other minority communities were also targeted, including the Sikhs and Hindus, who were forced to distinguish their religious identity by wearing yellow

armbands.⁹ However, this rule was abandoned following strong international criticism.

The Taliban not only committed targeted violence and discrimination against religious minority groups; they also limited their religious activities. A Taliban decree issued in June 2001 banned proselytising by non-Muslims, which was made punishable by death, or deportation if the accused were foreigners.¹⁰

On 3 August 2001, Dayna Curry, Heather Mercer and 22 other people were imprisoned because of their activities with Shelter Now (a Christian humanitarian aid group in Germany), which were deemed to be in breach of the ban on proselytising. However, following the events of 9/11, the United States (US) and its allies invaded Afghanistan on 15 November 2001 in military action that was termed ‘Operation Enduring Freedom,’ precipitating the fall of the Taliban regime.

Ms Curry and Ms Mercer were released after the Taliban fled Kabul in the wake of the invasion.¹¹

However, prior to being routed, the Taliban dealt a blow to religious and cultural heritage in March 2001 by destroying two sixth-century statues of Buddha in the Bamiyan valley.¹²

2. 2002-2004: Transitional government

During the period of the transitional government, there were several violations of, and restrictions on, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

2.a: The constitution

Article 2 of Afghanistan’s 2004 constitution stated that ‘the sacred religion of Islam is the religion of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Followers of other faiths shall be free within the bounds of law in the exercise and performance of their religious rituals.’¹³

However, Article 3 stated that ‘no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan.’¹⁴ Additionally, the constitution stipulated that activities within Afghanistan, such as its laws and education, should be based on and comply with Islamic beliefs.

6 United States Department of State, ‘Report on the Taliban’s War Against Women’ 17 November 2001 <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/6185.htm>
7 United States Department of State, Afghanistan, 2002 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2002/14020.htm>
8 Co-operation Centre for Afghanistan, Department of Human Rights, ‘Ethnic cleansing in Mazar: eye witnesses stories’, September 1998 www.afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/azu/3964/azu_acku_pamphlet_hv6322_7_e845_1998_w.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
9 AP News, ‘Facing IS, last embattled Sikhs, Hindus leave Afghanistan’, 27 September 2020 <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-discrimination-islamic-state-group-kabul-archive-b310aecece22454cc5918756e245810c>
10 United States Department of State, Afghanistan, 2002, *ibid.*
11 *ibid.*
12 Washington Post, ‘Taliban destroys Bamiyan Buddha statues in 2001’, 29 July 2015 www.washingtonpost.com/video/world/taliban-destroys-bamiyan-buddha-statues-in-2001/2015/07/29/8e0c35ca-362f-11e5-ab7b-6416d97c73c2_video.html
13 Constitute Project, Afghanistan’s Constitution of 2004 www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Afghanistan_2004.pdf?lang=en
14 *ibid.*



Taliban security personnel in Badakhshan province. Photo: Omer Abrar/AFP via Getty Images

Moreover, the constitution stated that Afghan courts must resort to Hanafi shari’a law in cases where there are no applicable rulings, laws or judgements. Article 130 provided, ‘If there is no provision in the Constitution or other laws about a case, the courts shall, in pursuance of Hanafi jurisprudence, and, within the limits set by this Constitution, rule in a way that attains justice in the best manner.’¹⁵

2.b: Blasphemy

As the Criminal Code did not directly mention blasphemy, courts relied on Islamic law to adjudicate, and anyone accused of blasphemy could face capital punishment. Unfortunately, ‘blasphemy’ encompasses any communication deemed anti-Islamic, which led to further restrictions on liberties. For instance, in March 2004, the Afghan government approved a media law that banned writings considered anti-Islamic, allowing for the arrest of journalists and others with the consent of a 17-member commission made up of government officials and journalists.¹⁶

What is considered ‘anti-Islamic’ remains unclear and could be used to target and restrict the rights of religious minorities, lawyers, journalists and human rights activists. For example, in 2002 Sima Samar, the Minister for Women’s Affairs and one of two women in Hamid Karzai’s interim cabinet, was accused of insulting Islam and was charged with blasphemy. On 13 June the newspaper *Mujahed* described her as ‘Afghanistan’s Salman Rushdie’ and contended she had committed blasphemy in an interview where she reportedly stated she did not believe in shari’a law. Ms Samar protested that she had not insulted Islam, and did not know what she had done wrong. It appears that being an outspoken woman and a member of the Hazara community were counted against her. Fortunately, the charges were eventually dropped.

2.c: Apostasy

Similarly, apostasy, or in this instance the conversion from Islam to any other religion,¹⁷ is not clearly articulated in the country’s criminal law. It is classified in the seven crimes composing the Hudud.¹⁸ Under Islamic law, Hudud crimes carry penalties that include amputation, flogging and death.

Under shari’a law beheading is viewed as suitable punishment for male apostates, while life imprisonment is suggested for women. Additionally, the government can seize property from individuals accused of apostasy, or hinder them from inheriting property. The criminalising of the right to follow a religion or belief of one’s choice encouraged societal hostility and violence towards converts to minority religious or belief groups. It was reported that between June and September 2004, five Afghan Christians, including Mullah Assad Ullah, were stabbed, or assaulted until they died by Taliban adherents.¹⁹ The Taliban spokesman Abdul Latif Hakimi described how ‘a group of Taliban dragged out Mullah Assad Ullah and slit his throat with a knife because he was propagating Christianity.’²⁰

3. 2004-2021

3.a: Women’s rights

In the past Afghan women played a significant role in Afghanistan’s politics. They received the vote in 1919. In 1921 forced marriage was outlawed, polygamy was controlled, families were encouraged to send girls to school, and women were encouraged to unveil and were given the freedom to wear what they wished. In the 1950s the purdah system of gendered separation was abolished; in the 1960s a new political constitution brought political equality; and in 1978 the Afghan Women’s Council was created. ‘By then, women held jobs as scientists, teachers, doctors, and civil servants.’²¹

While the Communist era (1978–1987) saw an extension of women’s rights, particularly in urban areas, the Mujahidin period (1992-1996) witnessed creeping restrictions and violence, as women in Kabul were abducted from homes and offices, and subjected to violations including murder by different factions.

The situation deteriorated even further under the Taliban: ‘Rape and violence against women and girls was rife. Afghan women were brutalised in the law and in nearly every aspect of their daily life. A woman in Kabul had the end of her thumb cut off for wearing nail varnish, for example, in 1996.’²²

However, between 2004 and 2021 women began to regain their rights and freedoms. From February 2016, over 150,000 female members were elected to Community Development Councils (CDCs) by

secret ballot, covering 361 districts in every one of Afghanistan’s provinces.²³

Additionally, Habiba Sarabi became the first woman to govern an Afghan district (Bamiyan), and was one of four women to participate in talks with the Taliban in Doha towards the end of 2020.²⁴

In 2009, the law on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) was passed, which punished the use of violence against women and negative customs such as ‘child marriage, forced marriage, forced self-immolation, *baad* (giving away a woman or girl to settle a dispute) and 18 other acts of violence against women, including rape and beating.’²⁵

The passing of the law and progress in representation marked important advances in the rights and freedoms of Afghan women.

Yet efforts towards protecting women’s rights and freedoms continued to face challenges. While the number of acts of violence against women and girls reported to authorities increased, prosecutions and convictions remained low, with most cases settled by mediation. In a comment on this issue former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay observed that although the passing of the EVAW was monumental, ‘implementation has been slow and uneven, with police still reluctant to enforce the legal prohibition against violence and harmful practices, and prosecutors and courts slow to enforce the legal protections in the law.’²⁶

Moreover, in a 2013 report jointly authored by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) entitled ‘A Way to Go’, despite a 28% increase in cases of forced marriages, domestic violence and rape being reported in 16 provinces since 2012, the use of the EVAW as the basis for charges against perpetrators rose by just 2%.²⁷

It would appear that not enough was being done by the Afghan authorities to ensure justice for women who had been victims of forced marriages, domestic violence and rape, despite the new laws at their disposal.

3.b: Ethnic and religious minority rights

Between 2004 and 2021 there was a degree of improvement in the situation of ethnic and religious minorities.

According to USCIRF,²⁸ the socio-political position of Shi’a Muslims improved as some assumed roles in the government, media and in the private sector. The organisation also noted that Hindus and Sikhs had been represented in the Afghan parliament since 2016, with a reserved seat, and also had jobs in government.

3.c: Violence and discrimination

The increase in religious minorities represented in politics, and their growing influence in various areas, was heavily overshadowed by the significant violations they experienced from 2004 to 2021.

Baha’is were obliged to practise their faith in secret, following a verdict of the Supreme Court in 2007 which proclaimed the community was ‘blasphemous.’²⁹ Muslims who adopt the Baha’i faith were categorised as infidels, alongside other Baha’is, and since the ruling the Baha’i community has remained in hiding.³⁰

The Hazaras have long endured attacks, discrimination and violence.³¹ For example, the 23 July 2016 attack in Deh Mazang Square, in which two suicide bombers targeted majority Hazara protesters who were expressing their dissatisfaction with a government decision to redirect a power project, was described by Mohammad Hussain Hasrat as ‘the deadliest and horrific incident in recent decades in Afghanistan [sic].’³² The Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) claimed responsibility for the double suicide bombing.

15 ibid.
16 Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, ‘National Laws on Blasphemy: Afghanistan’ <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/national-laws-on-blasphemy-afghanistan>
17 United States Department of State, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Afghanistan www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/afghanistan/
18 Apostasy, revolt against the ruler, theft, highway robbery, adultery, slander, and drinking alcohol.
19 World Evangelical Alliance, ‘Afghanistan: Kabul Apostasy Trial’ <https://worldidea.org/news/afghanistan-kabul-apostasy-trial/>
20 Barnabas Today, ‘Five Afghan Christians (2004) Taliban Targets’, 7 August 2022 www.barnabastoday.com/2022/08/resources-heroes-of-our-faith-five-afghan-christians-2004-taliban-targets/
21 Forces.net, ‘Before The Taliban: When Kabul Was The “Paris Of Central Asia”’, 4 August 2021 www.forces.net/operations/afghanistan/taliban-when-kabul-was-paris-central-asia
22 Amnesty International, ‘Women in Afghanistan: The Back Story’, 24 November 2022 www.amnesty.org.uk/womens-rights-afghanistan-history
23 Centre for Public Impact, ‘Building trust in government: Afghanistan’s National Solidarity Programme (NSP)’, 30 March 2016 www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/building-trust-in-government-afghanistans-national-solidarity-program
24 France 24, ‘First female Afghan governor calls US withdrawal “a big mistake”’, 16 September 2021 www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-interview/20210916-former-bamiyan-governor-calls-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-a-big-mistake
25 UN News, ‘UN reports “slow, uneven” use of Afghan law protecting women’, 8 December 2013 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/12/457292-un-reports-slow-uneven-use-afghan-law-protecting-women>
26 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, ‘Mixed results on implementation of the EVAW law over the past year’, 8 December 2013 <https://unama.unmissions.org/mixed-results-implementation-evaw-law-over-past-year>
27 UN News, ibid.
28 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Afghanistan, ibid.
29 APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, Afghanistan, ibid.
30 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Afghanistan: Factsheet www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20Factsheet%20-%20Religious%20Minorities%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf
31 There are numerous examples of Hazara persecution and cannot be covered extensively in this report.
32 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Over a Century of Persecution: Massive human rights violation [sic] against Hazaras in Afghanistan’, February 2019 www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/SR/Call/mhhasrat.pdf



They also stated³³ the assault was intended at ‘cleaning the world from the *sherk*³⁴ of the *rawafidh*.³⁵ Around 80 people died, and hundreds were wounded. Among them, four children were killed³⁶ and eight were wounded. The Taliban condemned the incident.

Sikhs have repeatedly been victims of targeted attacks. In July 2018, a suicide assault aimed at the Sikh community took place in Jalalabad.³⁷ Approximately 17 Sikhs died, including Awtar Singh Khalsa, the sole Sikh candidate taking part in the 2018 parliamentary elections. It was reported that the police were moving in a vehicle to meet President Ashraf Ghani as the bomber attacked.³⁸

The bomber aimed for the vehicle as it was travelling through Mukhaberat Square, and the blast severely damaged properties.

The attack was later claimed by the Islamic State (IS). UN chief António Guterres stated in response to the incident that ‘any attack deliberately targeting civilians is unjustifiable and in clear violation of international law,’ and called on ‘all parties to uphold their obligation to protect civilians, including minority communities, and cease targeting civilians and civilian facilities.’³⁹

In 2008, Taliban militants shot and killed a Christian aid worker, Gayle Williams.⁴⁰ The Taliban accused her of evangelising and had ordered her execution.

4. August 2021: The second Taliban takeover

On 15 August 2021, the Afghan government collapsed, and the Taliban took control of the country’s capital. In an official press conference on 17 August, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said that the ‘Islamic Emirate’ would not seek revenge on anyone, while pledging that women’s rights and press freedom, as *recognised within its cultural framework*, would be respected.⁴¹ Given the group’s antecedents, the reference to its ‘cultural framework’ did little to assuage anxieties.

Disturbing and credible allegations of house-to-house searches, summary executions, forced marriages, enforced disappearances and the killings of members of ethnic minority communities have cast further doubts on these assurances. Some of the reported violations may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity.

During his address⁴² to the Security Council on 16 August the Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the UN warned that residents in Kabul were living in ‘absolute fear,’ echoing concerns expressed by the UN Secretary-General regarding violations against women and girls.⁴³ Although Taliban leaders promised an inclusive government, they announced in September 2021 the creation of a male, religiously and ethnically similar executive.

33 Afghanistan Analysts Network, ‘With an Active Cell in Kabul, ISKP Tries to Bring Sectarianism to the Afghan War’, 19 October 2016 www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/with-an-active-cell-in-kabul-iskp-tries-to-bring-sectarianism-to-the-afghan-war/
34 *Sherk* means idolatry.
35 *Rawafidh* means rejectionists.
36 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, ‘AFGHANISTAN: Human Rights and Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict’, October 2016 https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/23_july_suicide_attack_against_peaceful_demonstration_-_18_oct_2016.pdf
37 APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, Afghanistan, *ibid*.
38 BBC, ‘Afghanistan blast: Sikhs among 19 dead in Jalalabad suicide attack’, 1 July 2018 www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44677823
39 UN News, ‘Afghanistan: Bring “architects” of latest “appalling” suicide bombing to justice, says deputy UN mission chief’, 2 July 2018 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/07/1013722>

40 NBC News, ‘Taliban kill Christian aid worker in Kabul’, 20 October 2008 www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna27275646
41 Guardian, ‘Taliban seek no “revenge” and all Afghans will be “forgiven”’, 17 August 2021 www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/17/taliban-seek-no-revenge-and-all-afghans-will-be-forgiven
42 YouTube, United Nations, ‘Afghanistan: Permanent Representative of Afghanistan addresses the Security Council (16 Aug 2021)’, 16 August 2021 www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQEaOcIZkls
43 United Nations, ‘We Cannot, Must Not Abandon People of Afghanistan, Secretary-General Tells Security Council Meeting, Stressing “the World Is Watching”’, *ibid*.

Wider security concerns

There are concerns regarding the possibility of a renewed threat to regional and international peace and security, given the Taliban's previous history of providing a haven for terrorism and radicalisation.

The Taliban has fuelled concerns further by placing at the helm of the country's affairs perpetrators and people who have encouraged many horrific attacks. For instance, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, the leader of the government, is on the UN sanctions list.⁴⁴ Also, Sirajuddin Haqqani, appointed to serve as an interior minister, is the

leader of the militant group Haqqani network,⁴⁵ and is wanted by the FBI 'for questioning in connection with the January 2008 attack on a hotel in Kabul, Afghanistan, that killed six people, including an American citizen.'⁴⁶

By placing in prominent official roles men who are implicated or have participated in extreme acts of terror, and who are intolerant of differing views or beliefs, the Taliban has sent an uncompromising message regarding human rights and fundamental freedoms.

⁴⁴ Al Jazeera, 'Profile: Mohammad Hasan Akhund, the head of Taliban government', 7 September 2021 www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/profile-mohammad-hassan-akhund-the-head-of-taliban-government

⁴⁵ BBC, 'Hardliners get key posts in new Taliban government', 7 September 2021 www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58479750

⁴⁶ FBI, Most Wanted: Sirajuddin Haqqani www.fbi.gov/wanted/terrorinfo/sirajuddin-haqqani



Deteriorating situation of minority religious and belief communities

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)⁴⁷ reported a resurgence in violence against Shia Muslim minorities, and especially the Hazara, in its mid-year report released in July 2021. Sectarian attacks against Hazaras were largely claimed by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), including a sequence of non-suicide improvised explosive device (IED) attacks. Overall, from 1 January to 30 June 2021, UNAMA recorded 20 cases directed at Shia/Hazaras, leading to 500 civilian casualties, of whom 143 were killed and 357 injured.

Other religious minority communities also faced targeted assaults by ISIS-KP, along with a lack of protection from government security forces.

In his first report to the Human Rights Council the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan expressed serious concerns 'about the situation of minorities since August 2021. Their places of worships, [sic] educational and medical centres have been systematically attacked, and their members have been arbitrary [sic] arrested, tortured, summarily executed, evicted, marginalised and in some cases forced to flee the country.'⁴⁸

Many religious minority groups continue to practise in private due to concerns about being punished if they are caught. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reported in 2021 that Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is and non-believers 'are unable to express their faiths or beliefs openly because they face dire consequences, including death, if discovered by the Taliban.'⁴⁹

1. Shia Hazara community

May and June 2021 saw around eight IED attacks on transportation carrying Hazaras.⁵⁰

An investigation by Amnesty International uncovered that Taliban fighters had murdered nine Hazara men from 4 to 6 July 2021 in Mundarakht, Malistan district.⁵¹ According to this investigation, six were shot while three were tortured until they died. One of them was 63-year-old Jaffar Rahimi, who was beaten and suffocated with his own scarf. The individuals who arranged his burial stated his body was bruised all over, and the muscles in his arms had been cut off. Attacks such as these have caused many religious minorities to flee the country.

On 30 August 2021 Taliban forces killed 13 Hazaras in Daykundi province. According to Amnesty International, a 17-year-old girl was among those who were murdered. Eleven of those killed were previously with the Afghan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF), and two were civilians. The investigation further revealed that nine ANDSF members had been killed.⁵²

On 8 October 2021 a suicide bomb attack occurred at the Said Abad Mosque in the northern city of Kunduz, where many Shia Muslims worship.⁵³ The attack killed around 50 people and injured 100, and was claimed by IS-K. UN Secretary-General António Guterres condemned the 'horrific' attack and demanded that 'the perpetrators must be brought to justice.'⁵⁴

However, on 15 October 2021, another suicide bombing took place at a Shia mosque, this time in the southern city of Kandahar; further undermining any Taliban effort to be an effective guarantor of security. The attack killed over 50 people and injured more than 80.⁵⁵ According to CSW sources, IS-K, which claimed responsibility for the attack on 8 October, was also expected to claim responsibility for this attack.

⁴⁷ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 'Afghanistan: Protection of civilians in armed conflict – Midyear update: 1 January to 30 June 2021' https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2021_26_july.pdf

⁴⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan', 6 September 2022 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc516-situation-human-rights-afghanistan-report-special-rapporteur>

⁴⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Afghanistan: Factsheet, ibid.

⁵⁰ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 'Afghanistan: Protection of civilians in armed conflict – Midyear update: 1 January to 30 June 2021', ibid.

⁵¹ Amnesty International, 'Afghanistan: Taliban responsible for brutal massacre of Hazara men – new investigation', 19 August 2021 www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/afghanistan-taliban-responsible-for-brutal-massacre-of-hazara-men-new-investigation/

⁵² Amnesty International, 'Afghanistan: 13 Hazara killed by Taliban fighters in Daykundi province – new investigation', 5 October 2021 www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/afghanistan-13-hazara-killed-by-taliban-fighters-in-daykundi-province-new-investigation/

⁵³ BBC, 'Afghanistan: Deadly attack hits Kunduz mosque during Friday prayers', 9 October 2021 www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58842793

⁵⁴ United Nations, 'Secretary-General Condemns "Horrific" Attack at Kunduz, Afghanistan Mosque', 8 October 2021 www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm20958.doc.htm

⁵⁵ CSW, 'Suicide attack on Shia mosque in Kandahar after Friday prayers', 18 October 2021 www.csw.org.uk/2021/10/18/press/5454/article.htm



Afghan refugees

IS-K stated that it would go after Shia residences and buildings ‘in every way, from slaughtering their necks to scattering their limbs.’⁵⁶ US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price condemned the attacks, emphasising that every Afghan has the right to worship without harm.⁵⁷

In October 2021, the Taliban forcibly removed hundreds of Hazara people from the south Helmand and north Balkh regions.⁵⁸ According to local media sources, residents were given only five days to appeal to the court in Mazar-e-Islam,⁵⁹ and if it did not make a ruling within the stipulated period the removal of the Hazaras from the North Balkh region could go ahead. Muzafar Ali, previously a political analyst for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, described the eviction as ‘a kind of revenge because these people never supported Taliban when they were fighting against America.’⁶⁰

In November 2021, the Taliban took down the statue of Abdul Ali Mazari, a Hazara leader who was killed during his time as a detainee of the Taliban in Bamiyan.⁶¹

On 30 September 2022, a suicide attack on the Kaaj Education Centre occurred as students were preparing for an examination, claiming the lives of at least 19 people and injuring at least 27 others. The Centre is located in the predominately Shia Muslim neighbourhood of Dasht-e-Barchi in Kabul.⁶²

2. Ahmadi community

There are approximately 450 Ahmadi Muslims in Afghanistan, a decrease from 600 in 2017. Ahmadi Muslims are very vulnerable, as they are viewed as heretical by both Sunni and Shi’a Muslims due to differing theological perspectives. In its 2021 report, USCIRF outlined how Ahmadi Muslims ‘have experienced a long history of persecution in Afghanistan, including public stoning in the early 19th and 20th centuries.’ Presently, Afghan Ahmadis follow their beliefs in private because of the ongoing oppression and prejudice against them.

3. Christian community

It is estimated that there are around 10,000 to 12,000 Christians in Afghanistan, many of them converts from Islam, who are viewed as ‘apostates.’⁶³ Many have been forced to flee the country. Those who have stayed in Afghanistan live with the risk of being killed if discovered.

4. Jewish community

In September 2021, Zebulon Simentov, the last member of the Jewish community in Afghanistan, left. He had lived under the previous Taliban regime. However, this time he was warned that an even more extremist group could murder or abduct him.

Religious minority refugee testimonies

1. Hazara refugee, Pakistan

My name is **Surraya** (means Brightest Star). My father named me this because he was delighted by my birth and wished me a future as bright as the brightest star. Unfortunately, he did not know that I would end up with a life that foresees no future. I am 33 years old and single.

I was born to a refugee family in Iran in 1989. We are seven siblings, and I am the middle one. We all were born in Iran but could not get nationality since Iran is one of the countries which does not provide nationality by birth. We belong to the Hazara ethnicity, and we are Shia.

My parents fled Afghanistan in 1980 following the Soviet invasion. My mother used to tell us the story of her life and how hard it was to reach Iran. They walked 20 days from Daykundi, where they are originally from, to Quetta, and after staying for a short period, they departed for Iran. She lost two babies along the way.

I finished secondary school in Iran. My parents are both illiterate, but their children’s education was always a top priority for them. My father was a simple labourer and could hardly afford our expenses. We did not have an easy life in Iran.

Following the advent of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, my family decided to repatriate. We sold our belongings and prepared for the move. In late June 2004, we returned to Afghanistan and resettled in Herat province with the hope that our country was on the path towards peace and development. The first years were quite problematic for my siblings and me. Our faces, accent, way of dressing and even behaviour and mentality were different from those in Herat. Our own country and society could not accept us as a citizen of Afghanistan. In streets, schools, and neighbourhoods we were called Hazara or *Iranigag* (literally means small Irani – the named they used for Afghans who returned from Iran). The title *Iranigag* gradually was forgotten due to the massive return of refugees from Iran in late 2004 and 2005. But Hazara was still my second name everywhere.



Afghan refugees

Historically the Hazara people have faced widespread persecution, torture, brutality, massacres and other means of genocide because they practise Shia Islam. The ethnic cleansing of the Hazara people in Afghanistan is public knowledge and is written about and reported in numerous newspaper articles and reports by human rights organisations. Hazara people in Afghanistan, as a religious and ethnic minority, are at serious risk of genocide at the hands of the Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K).

My Hazara friends were telling me that I was lucky not to have been in Afghanistan during the Taliban’s first regime. Close to our house in Herat, there was a square where the Taliban hanged hundreds of Hazara men and left their bodies to rot.

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch, ‘Afghanistan: Surge in Islamic State Attacks on Shia’, 25 October 2018 www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/25/afghanistan-surge-islamic-state-attacks-shia
⁵⁷ United States Department of State, ‘Department Press Briefing – October 15, 2021’, 15 October 2021 www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-october-15-2021/
⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch, ‘Afghanistan: Taliban Forcibly Evict Minority Shia’, 22 October 2021 www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/22/afghanistan-taliban-forcibly-evict-minority-shia
⁵⁹ Etilaatroz, ‘Armed men supporting Taliban give Hazaras five days to evacuate Qabat-ul-Islam, Balkh’ (Farsi) www.etilaatroz.com/132101/armed-men-supporting-taliban-give-hazaras-five-days-to-evacuate-qabat-ul-islam-balkh/
⁶⁰ ABC News Australia, ‘Despite promises, Taliban begin evicting Afghanistan’s ethnic Hazaras from their land’, 15 October 2021 www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-16/taliban-carrying-out-mass-eviction-shia-hazara-minority/100505874
⁶¹ France 24, ‘Taliban replace statue of Hazara leader in Bamiyan with Koran’, 11 November 2021 www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211111-taliban-replace-statue-of-hazara-leader-in-bamiyan-with-koran
⁶² CSW, ‘Suicide attack targets predominantly Shia Muslim neighbourhood’, 30 September 2022 www.csw.org.uk/2022/09/30/press/5831/article.htm
⁶³ Persecution.org, ‘Fear and Uncertainty Dominate Thoughts of Afghanistan’s Christians Living Under Taliban Rule’, 17 August 2021 www.persecution.org/2021/08/17/fear-uncertainty-dominate-thoughts-afghanistans-christians-living-taliban-rule/



An Afghan refugee

One of my friend's father was among those poor men. Under the Taliban regime in the late 1990s, Hazaras experienced at least nine massacres. In one instance, the Taliban massacred over 2,000 Hazaras in Mazar-e Sharif, according to Human Rights Watch, although, other sources record the number of victims in this single instance at over 15,000.

Herat city, where we used to live in, was a small and conservative city. Culturally it was not appropriate for ladies to work. But being Hazara we are broadminded, and my family was very open to ladies taking jobs outside of the house. Moreover, we had no other option. My father was old and could not work and my brothers were younger. My elder sisters started working, one in the UN and another in the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

I finished high school and started working too. I got my first job in Italian Cooperation and was the first Afghan lady working in this organisation. I worked there for two years. Later, I joined the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and worked there for another two years. After that, I used to work on USAID projects. Gradually we were building our lives and settling in Herat. We

started everything from scratch and were slowly building a promising future for ourselves. We were providing for our family; my parents could finally buy their first house. My sisters and I could attend university and graduate. My siblings were attending universities. The Hazara people have been continuously subjected to discrimination concerning their fundamental rights, such as access to education, healthcare and jobs. Despite all these cultural and political discriminations, we were trying hard to build our careers and lives. Life was just going as we wished, but not for long. Then everything changed over a night.

After the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021, the safety and survival of many Afghan nationals became impossible if they were to remain in Afghanistan. This was particularly true for the Hazara ethnic group. We were Hazara and ladies, who were working with international communities. When Kabul fell, we packed our clothes and fled. We travelled by road and crossed the Chaman border. We stayed in Quetta for a few months and then came to the capital city, Islamabad. We became refugees for the second time. We had to leave everything behind. Our house, car and all the furniture we had all worked hard to own. We did not have the chance to even sell them.

The return of the Taliban meant a return of terror for the Hazara people. With all those stories I heard from my friend about how brutal they were, I could not even imagine facing one of them. A huge majority of the Hazara people had to flee Afghanistan to avoid being killed by the Taliban and IS-K. Many crossed the border and came to Pakistan.

Here in Pakistan, we are living under extreme hardships in Islamabad. We do not have access to medical treatment, or the means of paying for any medical treatment. The government health facilities request proper documentation, which we lack. We do not have access to schools and universities. We cannot find jobs due to a lack of documentation and language barriers.

Our future in Pakistan remains highly uncertain. The government of Pakistan has not given us legal refugee status and the local Islamabad police continuously harass us. Our uncertain future and difficult life situation made us stage a sit-in protest in F6, Islamabad.

189 families (766 individuals including more than 300 children) were living in makeshift tents made from tarpaulin sheets for five months. During these months, we had no access to clean drinking water, or any means of acquiring food and other basic needs. We relied on local individual citizens of Islamabad for our basic needs such as clean drinking water and food. We were using public toilets or washrooms in nearby mosques. Because there was a total lack of electrical power, we had to rely

on using wood for fuel which is collected from nearby places to cook our food. In addition to these deplorable living conditions, an unsanitary and unhygienic environment prevails. Extreme weather conditions and mosquito infestation have caused many of us to suffer severe illnesses.

The miserable situation of the people in our camp and the stories I was hearing of them about their difficult lives made me forget my own sorrows and start working for them. Among us, there are people who do not even have Taskira cards (Afghan identity cards). Some came by paying \$900-\$1200 per visa, but could not get extensions here. Those who got extensions needed to travel to the Torkham border every other month to get re-entry. Some just crossed the border like us. People with severe health conditions and no money. Those who had savings ran out of them due to having no source of income.

In our camp there was a lady who was pregnant. We tried to send her for a checkup, but government hospitals did not accept her due to a lack of documentation. She later approached the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) through another Afghan lady's Proof

of Registration (POR) card. She is now registered by her name. I am still wondering what will happen to her child after birth next month.

Last month police forced us to leave the F6 area. They arrested seven of our male members. They even arrested me along with six other ladies when we went to the police station to ask the police to release them. We were in the custody of police for four hours. They put the males in Adiala jail even though they had not committed any crime. They took them hostage to force us to leave the park where we were residing.

Many kind Pakistani citizens, individuals whom I wish to name but am not sure if I am allowed to, helped us to rent collective houses. We managed to rent several houses and accommodate 6-8 families in each one. They also helped us to provide them with groceries for a month. What will happen in the future and how we can manage rents and expenses is another issue, since we are all unemployed.



Protests in London. Photo: Getty Images/Guy Smallman

UNHCR in Islamabad does not provide any support to Afghan refugees. Their resettlement programmes do not include Afghans, which is another discrimination we are facing.

We are currently stateless. We cannot return to our country. Since August 2021, genocidal attacks against Hazaras have increased significantly, with an emerging pattern of targeting Hazara youths. These systematic attacks have made it difficult for the Hazara people to exist, as they are attacked in educational centres, places of worship, hospitals, sporting facilities, public gatherings, highways, wedding halls and schools.

I am an Afghan Hazara girl trapped in the loop of displacement who is seeking safety and peace. I was born a refugee in Iran, and I am afraid that in the future, my children will have the same destiny. What we wish for is a permanent homeland where we can open our suitcases and never have to pack them again.

2. Christian refugees, Pakistan

- i. My name is **Ali Zafar**. I am from Afghanistan. I belong to the healthcare profession and worked in remote conflict-affected areas. My wife was the director of the Women's Network in Helmand Province. She worked for women's rights; she networked with several foreign institutions, along with assisting me in my medical work.

As a couple we were very well known in the southern provinces and we were popular among the people. However, with the fall of the Afghan government and the arrival of the Taliban in Afghanistan we became extremely vulnerable. The fact that we are Christians put my life and the life [of] my family in serious danger as the Taliban do not accept any religion other than Islam.



An Afghan refugee

Faced with these life-threatening circumstances, for the safety and protection of my family I was compelled to flee Afghanistan. We had to leave behind our lives and all our belongings and escape to Pakistan.

Furthermore, one of my seven children, eight-year-old son Syed Salih, has been diagnosed with leukemia. He is required to travel from Islamabad to Lahore for chemotherapy once a month, which more often than not is extremely challenging. We are in dire need of help for his treatment and care.

Unfortunately, life in Pakistan has been difficult; the radicalisation level in Pakistani society makes survival extremely precarious.

- ii. My name is **Eshaq Ali**. I was a teacher in Afghanistan and have also worked on various UN projects.

My wife, Laila Gul Hakimi, was a social worker for the Swedish Committee in Afghanistan in the Department of Disability, Rehabilitation and Advocacy for Women. She worked for the Rights of Afghan Women and continued to work until the Taliban took over.

They came to her office twice and filled out information forms about her and her work. One day the Taliban approached me and told me that my wife should leave duty. After that the Taliban sent three threatening letters to my wife's office which gave the following specific instructions:

- a) You must stop working with unbelievers like USAID and the Swedish
- b) You cannot drive [she used to drive to work]
- c) Stop working on women's rights

If she failed to comply with the above, we would be killed.

After receiving these three threats, we left our house and spent one night in the mountains.

In search of a safe place, we reached Kandahar, which is close to the border with Pakistan. We stayed there for two weeks and were informed that the border was close, but that we would not be able to cross over to Pakistan from that border.

We were then compelled to enter Pakistan through another illegal route. It was extremely difficult; we had to travel for twelve hours on foot through the mountains during the night. There was no place to stay and rest. We did not have any money, and we did not know anyone. We entered Pakistan through the mountains illegally.



Afghan refugees

I then met a person who got me and my family a house to live in temporarily. We did not know that he was a Christian; he was very kind and we got to know more about him and his religion. He prayed with us and gradually my belief in Christianity became strong. We decided to become Christians and were baptised.

Today we are very happy. We feel that we do not have any fear about tomorrow, about foods or clothes. In summary we feel all our problems will result in a positive way because of God's guidance.

However, we are refugees in Pakistan and though we face hardships and challenges every day as Pakistan is an Islamic country and the society is very hostile towards non-Muslims, [but we believe God] will take us out of this situation.

In Afghanistan my wife's father was very ill. Her brother was a student in Kabul University in the Department of Art. When the Taliban took over, they closed down the Art department. He was also under threat as he had worked with the Afghan film industry, which was also closed down. My wife's sister was a student at Rabea Balkhi University. She also could not continue her education. My wife and I worked very hard to pay their expenses too. They have travelled to Pakistan with us as well.

- iii. My name is **Mahtab**. I'm from Kabul. My family consisted of five members: my parents, two sisters and me. Many years ago my father accepted Christianity. In our house, my father conducted worship like an underground church. We were living a prosperous life. When the Taliban government came to Afghanistan, because many people knew my father was a preacher, the Taliban came to our house and threatened us. Then one day they stormed our home and shot and killed my father in front of our eyes. Despite that, their threats did not stop. They continued to harass us and used to come to our house and threaten us. Then one of the men from the Taliban threatened to abduct my sister as he wanted to marry her. We instantly fled Afghanistan and entered Pakistan without any documentation.

With the support of some Pakistani Christian organisations we have settled here and were able to save our lives. Life in Pakistan is also not easy or safe, but we feel we are safer here than in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The realisation of freedom of religion or belief for all has been a challenge under successive governments. However, the Taliban regime poses a particularly acute threat, raising credible concerns that Afghanistan’s religious, ethnic and sectarian minorities, including atheists, women and children, are facing persistent and imminent threats of violence and persecution.⁶⁴

Targeted violence by both the Taliban and IS-K against minorities on account of their religion or belief constitutes a gross and often deadly violation to their right to FoRB, displaying a wanton disregard for their human dignity and right to life, among other issues. Consequently, many members of minority religious communities have either fled, tried to limit their worship activities, and/or have hidden their religious affiliations altogether.

In countries riven by serious violence such as Afghanistan, respecting FoRB can play an important role in securing stability, promoting coexistence and assisting in creating an environment for much-needed investment and development. However, the current issues and challenges of vulnerable religious communities outlined in this report will continue to undermine efforts to ensure peace and stability in the country and the wider region. While the international community and states attempt to engage with the Taliban, they must also take care to assist those who have fled the country in fear of their lives, who still await the possibility of settling somewhere where they are not targeted on account of religion, belief or ethnicity.

In many neighbouring countries where Afghan refugees currently reside, they experience multiple levels of marginalisation, while also being unable to rebuild their lives. Thus, it is imperative that members of the international community maintain at the forefront of their interventions the plight of these vulnerable groups, both within Afghanistan and in countries where they have fled as refugees; assisting these communities to move forward with their lives in an environment that is free of persecution, discrimination and the deprivation of fundamental rights, and thereby preserving and protecting their human dignity.

64 Persecution is ‘the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity’ (Art. 7.2. g Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court).

Recommendations

To the government of Afghanistan

- Immediately end harassment, discrimination and targeted attacks on vulnerable groups, including women, and religious and belief minorities.
- Accede to international laws and universal standards pertaining to human dignity and fundamental rights and freedoms.
- Establish protection mechanisms in line with internationally agreed norms and rules pertaining to vulnerable groups, including women, children and religious and belief minorities.
- Extend invitations to UN Mandate Holders to visit Afghanistan on official fact-finding missions.
- Ensure safe passage for people who wish to leave the country.

To the United Nations and Member States

- Support the work and continuation of UNAMA and ensure it has every resource required to fulfil its mandate, including human rights monitoring and reporting.
- Support the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, ensuring the mandate has every resource required to fulfil its duties.
- Encourage the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and other UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies to include the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in their monitoring and reporting, addressing the unique vulnerabilities and violations faced by religious and belief communities and those seeking to assist them.
- In line with UNAMA’s recommendations, maintain concerted dialogue and advocacy with the de facto authorities regarding the promotion, protection, respect and fulfilment of the rights of all citizens, including religious, belief and ethnic minorities, and women and girls.
- Call on the de facto authorities to immediately reverse laws, policies and directives that negatively impact religious, belief and ethnic minorities, women and girls and other vulnerable groups, in accordance with international human rights standards to which Afghanistan is party.
- Call on the de facto authorities to guarantee in law and in practice the right of women and girls to equal participation in public life, including in education and employment.
- Condemn all attacks targeting religious or belief communities, including against members of the Baha’i, Christian, Hazara, Shia, Sikh and Sufi communities –

attacks which are becoming increasingly systematic in nature.

- Formulate effective measures to hold the Taliban to its expressed commitments to inclusivity and non-retaliation, including calling for a UN independent investigative mechanism to closely monitor the human rights situation in Afghanistan alongside the Special Rapporteur, with a focus on prevention, evidence collection and accountability.
- Ensure staff at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are trained to support asylum seekers from religious or belief minority communities, to ensure these asylum seekers are afforded their full rights and protections in accordance with international law.
- Consider easing eligibility criteria for refugees in order to facilitate asylum processes for those who lack passports or identity cards, in addition to creating safe pathways for Afghan refugees and migrants, broadening asylum and resettlement programmes and immediately halting the deportation of Afghans who seek protection.
- Continue to provide urgent humanitarian assistance, ensuring its equitable and gender-sensitive distribution.

To the government of the United Kingdom

- Establish clear criteria for diplomatic recognition of the de facto authorities, that includes demonstrable commitments to international humanitarian and human rights law, including FoRB.
- Formulate effective measures to hold the Taliban to its expressed commitments to inclusivity and non-retaliation, including calling for an independent UN investigative mechanism to closely monitor the human rights situation, with a focus on prevention, evidence collection and accountability.
- Urge the Taliban to end the violence against women and girls, and reverse policies that discriminate and exclude them from society; to respect and protect freedom of religion or belief and all religious and cultural heritage; to guarantee the safety and independence of civil society actors, including journalists, human rights defenders and educators; to uphold international humanitarian law; and to respect the right to leave one’s country.
- Create safe pathways for Afghan refugees and migrants, broaden asylum and resettlement programmes, and immediately halt the deportation of Afghans who seek protection, as recommended by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Consider easing eligibility criteria for refugees to facilitate asylum processes for those who lack passports or identity cards.

To the European Union and Member States

- Establish clear criteria for diplomatic recognition of the de facto authorities, that includes demonstrable commitments to international humanitarian and human rights law, including FoRB.
- Urge the Taliban to end the violence against women and girls, and reverse policies that discriminate and exclude them from society; to respect and protect freedom of religion or belief and all religious and cultural heritage; to guarantee the safety and independence of civil society actors, including journalists, human rights defenders and educators; to uphold international humanitarian law; and to respect the right to leave one’s country.
- Create safe pathways for Afghan refugees and migrants, broaden asylum and resettlement programmes and immediately halt the deportation of Afghans who seek protection, as recommended by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.
- Consider easing eligibility criteria for refugees in order to facilitate asylum processes for those who lack passports or identity cards.

To the government of the United States of America

- Establish clear criteria for future diplomatic recognition of the de facto authorities, that includes demonstrable commitments to international humanitarian and human rights law, including FoRB.
- Urge the Taliban to end the violence against women and girls, and reverse policies that discriminate and exclude them from society; to respect and protect freedom of religion or belief and all religious and cultural heritage; to guarantee the safety and independence of civil society actors, including journalists, human rights defenders and educators; to uphold international humanitarian law, and to respect the right to leave one’s country.
- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Afghanistan and include the country on the Special Watch List, as recommended by the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), while designating ISIS-K as an Entity of Particular Concern.
- Create safe pathways for Afghan refugees and migrants, broaden asylum and resettlement programmes and immediately halt the deportation of Afghans who seek protection, as recommended by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

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CSW is a human rights organisation advocating for freedom of religion or belief, and as Christians we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.

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