Genghis Khan's Family Reunion: A Study of Hazara Unity in Afghanistan

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Abstract

One of the larger minority groups in Afghanistan is the Hazara. The Hazaras, while being the second largest minority group, are unique in that they are the only group within Afghanistan that follows the Shi'ite sect of Islam; the majority of the population are Sunni-Muslims.[1] This religious difference coupled with the Hazaras' mongoloid background and perceived bellicose and independent nature cause conflict among the Hazara and majority groups (mainly called Pushtuns or Pashtuns), and also give rise to the marginalization of the Hazaras in Afghanistan.[2] Yet, despite centuries of oppression, the Hazaras are proving to Afghanistan's Sunni majority that they are not as fractious as many have suppose, but can and will unite to be heard as constituents of their country.

Afghanistan garnered much focus in the past few years due to 9/11 and President Bush's "War on Terrorism." The picture the United States media portrays Afghanistan in such a way that the American public knows little about the civilians of Afghanistan and much about the Taliban. The public then draws conclusions about Afghanistan, and the Middle East in general, based on the little they know about a militant government group whose religious and political ideas are foreign to the American psyche. This ignorance was the reason for the violent acts against those of Afghan descent in the United States immediately following the attack on the Twin Towers and for a continuing stereotype of the Islamic religion. However, the Middle East, and Afghanistan in particular, is quite diverse and contains many minority groups within the country.[3]

One of the larger minority groups in Afghanistan is the Hazara. The Hazaras, while being the second largest minority group, are unique in that they are the only group within Afghanistan that follows the Shi'ite sect of Islam; the majority of the population are Sunni-Muslims.[4] This religious difference coupled with the Hazaras' mongoloid background and perceived bellicose and independent nature cause conflict among the Hazara and majority

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[1] Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 89 and 110. It is also the case that a few of the very small tribes are also Shi'ite, but they are mostly tribes on the border of Pakistan and are very seldom in Afghanistan.
[2] Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 89; Alessandro Monsutti, "Cooperation, Remittances, and Kinship among the Hazaras" (*Journal of Iranian Studies*, 37(2), 2004) 218.
[3] John C. Griffiths, *Afghanistan: Key to a Continent*. (Colorado: Westview Press, 1981) 79-80.
[4] Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 89 and 110. It is also the case that a few of the very small tribes are also Shi'ite, but they are mostly tribes on the border of Pakistan and are very seldom in Afghanistan.

groups (mainly called Pushtuns or Pashtuns), and also give rise to the marginalization of the Hazaras in Afghanistan.[5] Yet, despite centuries of oppression, the Hazaras are proving to Afghanistan's Sunni majority that they are not as fractious as many have supposed but can and will unite to be heard as constituents of their country.

The precise history of the Hazaras is incomplete at best. What is known is often highly prejudicial. Many past accounts of the Hazaras are presented by the Pashtuns, who have a great dislike for the peculiar mountainous people who do not follow the laws of Afghanistan or by writers relying on Pushtun sources.[6] A popular depiction of the Hazaras is presented by Englishman Mountstuart Elphinstone in his 1815 book, *An Account of the Kingdom of Cabul*. Elphinstone takes on the laborious task of describing the various groups within Afghanistan. He seems to agree with most of the Pushtun descriptions of the pugnacious manner of the Hazaras but also defends them, claiming, "The Hazaurehs are very passionate, and exceedingly fickle and capricious. . . . Setting aside their hot tempers, they are a good people, merry, conversable, good-natured, and hospitable." Elphinstone then goes on to emphasize what he perceives as a predilection towards aggressive quarrelling and hostility among the Hazaras: "They have constant disputes among themselves, so that there is scarcely a Hazaureh tribe that is not at war with its neighbours. They have also foreign wars; and sometimes two or three Sooltauns unite to rebel against the king; but they never have any solid or useful confederacy."[7] While many writers depict the Hazaras in a negative manner, many of the other Afghan tribes have been exhibited in a similar manner, which illustrates the prejudice or ignorance of the writers toward the minority groups, something that is common in many cultures.[8]

When discussing the ancestry of the Hazaras, the most popular myth among the Hazaras is that they are direct descendants of Genghis Khan, well known conqueror from Mongolia, and his sons. While this may appear to be a piece of intriguing trivia, it is also somewhat ironic, the Hazaras of Afghanistan being one of the most victimized people in the country. That the descendants of Genghis Khan are those being mistreated, enslaved, and often murdered appears inconsistent, especially when Genghis Khan's "execute and conquer" method is considered. Many books relay this account as questionable and at least one text, in passing, claims that the anecdote is false.[9] However, recent studies conducted by geneticists claim that this legend of the Hazaras' descent may not be as implausible as some historians suggest.[10]

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[5] Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 89; Alessandro Monsutti, "Cooperation, Remittances, and Kinship among the Hazaras" (*Journal of Iranian Studies*, 37(2), 2004) 218.

[6] Robert L. Canfield, "New Trends Among the Hazaras: From 'The Amity of Wolves' to 'The Practice of Brotherhood'" (*Journal of Iranian Studies* 37(2), 2004) 242-243; Griffiths, 21.

[7] Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Cabul*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) 210 and 211.

[8] Canfield, "Trends," 243.

[9] Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 89; Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973) 60; In Angelo Rasanayagam's 2003 book, *Afghanistan: A Modern History*, I find it curious that there is no mention of the Hazaras, or any other minority group in Afghanistan. This is particularly interesting because Rasanayagam was the "first chief of mission of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees" in Iran. The only mention he makes of minority groups is in reference to "non Pushtuns," which gives no distinction among the groups.

[10] John Travis. "Genghis Khan's Legacy?" (*Science News* 163, no. 6:91. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOHost (accessed September 22, 2006) 1.

In a study done on a particular 1,000-year-old Y chromosome found predominantly in Mongolia, there is evidence that confirms many Hazaras do in fact carry this particular Y chromosome or one of its variations. But despite the fact that many Hazaras have this chromosome, proving their Mongolian descent, there is as yet no evidence that Genghis Khan himself had this particular chromosome.[11] Elphinstone, however describes an alternative to the Hazara popular legend, claiming that perhaps "the Tartar [Mongolian] army used to be divided into a certain number of Hazaurehs or regiments; and it is possible that some of those bodies, originally left to occupy part of a conquered country, may have given rise to the nation of the Hazaurehs."[12] This implies that the Hazaras are not necessarily Genghis Khan's descendants but are perhaps the remnants of his army. If enough people in Khan's army had the chromosome, then that would be an explanation of why the Mongolian chromosome is seen among the Hazaras. The Mongoloid features of the Hazaras proved to many that the Hazaras were of Mongolian descent; however, to be linked to a particular historical figure raises a certain amount of skepticism. Whether the Hazaras should be invited to Genghis Khan's family reunion may not be an important factor to the outsider; even so, it plays an important role in how the Hazaras see themselves, and in turn affects how historians depict the Hazaras.

The one characteristic that distinguishes the Hazaras from the rest of the groups (minority and majority) in Afghanistan is their religion. While the rest of the country practices the sect of Islam known as Sunni, the Hazaras are alone in practicing the sect known as Shi'ite (sometimes referred to as Shi'a), and this is the cause of the Pashtuns', as well as the other Sunni minority groups', deeply rooted hatred of the Hazaras.[13] The Sunni Muslims run the Afghani government and base the laws on their interpretation of the Qur'an; the Hazaras resent this type of government because they do not believe that the Sunni Muslims correctly interpret the Qur'an. This resentment causes the Hazaras to reject the laws, and the Sunnis see the Hazaras as uncouth and anarchistic.[14]

While the Sunni and Shi'ites agree on the more general aspects of Islam, they differ on several key points. The point of divergence occurred after the Prophet Muhammad died. There was a dispute over who should succeed the Prophet as leader of the Muslim people, a disciple of Muhammad or his son-in-law. The larger group believed the disciple should lead and a smaller group believed that the son-in-law was rightful heir. The larger group was known as the Sunnis, which means "one who follows the sunna (what the prophet said and did)."[15] The smaller sect became known as Shi'ite or Shi'a, which is derived from Shia Ali or partisans of Ali (the son-in-law).[16] This divergence then led to a split in ideologies.

The Sunni Muslims are considered to be traditionalists and base all of their principles on the Qur'an, Hadith, and the four legal schools (Hanifites, Malikites, Shafi'ites, and Hanbalites) that develop modern jurisprudence based upon interpretations of previous Hadith

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[11] Travis, "Legacy?" 1.
[12] Elphinstone, *Cabul*, 208.
[13] Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 89.
[14] *Ibid*, 89; Elphinstone, *Cabul*, 211; Lewis M. Hopfe, Religions of the World, (New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2004) 354; David Kremer, "Sunni and Shia" (BBC Religion and Ethics, www.bbc.co.uk/religion/islam/subdivisions/sunnishia accessed 9/30/2006) 1-2; Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 113.
[15] Kremer, "Sunni and Shia," 2; Hopfe, *Religions*, 352-353.
[16] Hopfe, *Religions*, 354.

scholars. The Shi'ites differ from the Sunnis in five main ways: one, the belief that the Imams "speak with the authority of God"; two, the belief in seven or twelve main Imams that followed Ali; three, the belief in a messianic figure that will return to the Earth and rule; four, the belief in the importance of Martyrdom because their leader, Husayn (Ali's son), was killed; and five, the belief that the traditional reading of the Qur'an (by the Sunnis) is false and that there is hidden meaning only accessed through allegorical interpretation.[17] Another theological difference between the Shi'ites and Sunnis is the Shi'ite belief that the interpretation of the Hadith that should be followed is that of a living scholar, while, as previously mentioned, the Sunnis follow the four legal schools.[18]

While many Muslims do not let these distinctions affect relations, the Afghanis resent the differences, and this causes many conflicts that often result in bloodshed. The Hazara-Afghan war from 1891-1893 was one such situation involving the Shi'ite Hazaras and the Sunni majority.[19] In 1891, a new leader, Abdur Rahman, decided to occupy the Hazarajat, the area in the central mountains of Afghanistan where the Hazaras live, in order to force the insubordinate and insuperable Hazaras to follow the laws.[20] The Hazaras did not resist this occupation until the governmental troops began to settle in the area, sequester Hazara land, and confiscate their women. Because of the barbarity of the Pushtun soldiers, the Hazaras revolted, and an extremely bloody war ensued.[21] What began as a political/governmental dispute eventually turned into a religious war, with The Shi'ite Hazaras fighting the Sunni Pushtuns. The rebellion was finally put down in 1893 and the truculent Hazaras were sold into slavery or forced from their land in order to sell it to the Sunni nomadic tribes.[22] However, this rebellion proved that the Hazaras were able to unite against the Sunni Pushtuns, if necessary, and fight for their rights.

Robert Canfield, in a recent article, argues that the Hazaras of Afghanistan are uniting and have been uniting since 1979 in an attempt to gain a position of authority in the Afghan government.[23] The beginning of this Hazara unity is believed to correlate directly with the Afghan-Soviet War. Canfield finds unity of Hazaras both for and against the communists in the beginning stages of the war. The anti-communist Hazara parties, who were mostly poor and ignorant, needed the financial assistance and political clout from an established organization and eventually received assistance and support from the Iranians, despite opposition from many of the members.[24] In 1982, a civil war among the Hazara groups culminated in a shift in leadership from the traditional and suppressive religious leaders to a more modern Shi'ite clergy that created solidarity among the Hazaras that was, at that time, unprecedented. By 1984, the Hazaras were beginning to form a political-consciousness,

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[17] Hopfe, *Religions*, 352-354.
[18] Kremer, "Sunni and Shia," 4; Hopfe, *Religions*, 352.
[19] Griffiths, Afghanistan, 113; Canfield, "Trends," 242; Richard Tapper (ed), *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983) 252-253.
[20] Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 113; Tapper, *Conflict of Tribe*, 252-253.
[21] Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 113; Tapper, *Conflict of Tribe*, 252-253; Canfield, "Trends," 242.
[22] Griffiths, *Afghanistan*, 113.
[23] Canfield, "Trends," 243.
[24] Canfield, "Trends," 248-249.

gaining political control of the Hazarajat, interestingly enough, despite the lack of aid and help from outside powers.[25]

When the United Nations finally acquired an agreement from the Soviet Union and the United States to abandon their efforts in Afghanistan, the Hazaras were well on their way to unity with the creation of the "Party of Unity" or Hizb-I Wahdat, which joined several of the Hazara groups into a single faction. The Hizb-I Wahdat was not looking for Hazara autonomy as most would assume, but fought for the rights of all citizens within the country. The Wahdat did not want to become a separate Hazara or Shi'ite nation, but wanted Afghanistan to become a multinational/multiethnic state that allowed all its citizens representation.[26]

In the early nineties the Wahdat was growing in number and importance. Many organizations began to join as the time for Soviet and U.S. demilitarization grew nearer. One interesting and significant aspect of the Wahdat was that when a new organization joined, the leaders were allowed to remain in a position of power within the organization. This showed an acceptance of all Hazaras, not the strictly religious or Islamist sects. This appealed to a wider number of groups that were diverse in nature but were all ethnically Hazara. This policy of acceptance was initiated by Mazari, one of the forerunners of the Wahdat.[27]

When the Soviet forces finally left at the end of 1992, the Hazaras and other groups scrambled for control of Kabul. Before any of the other political factions appeared in Kabul, the Wahdat and other affiliated organizations began to station themselves within the city. The battle of Kabul lasted from 1992-1996. During this time, the Wahdat and its Hazara members suffered greatly and in 1995 were finally defeated. However, an unexpected rival was soon to appear that none of the parties expected—the Taliban.[28] The Taliban was composed of mostly Pushtuns who had a specific hatred for the Hazaras. The Hazaras endured great losses against the Taliban in 1996, 1998, and 2000. In 2001, the Taliban hosted "a pogrom against Hazaras … that would last four days, according to the Human Rights Watch."[29]

With the fall of the Taliban in 2002, the Hazaras had a chance at the freedoms that were denied them for so long. Even during the war, the Hazaras began to control their own territory in the Hazarajat and obtain some economic freedom within the country. The Hazaras were able to use the war and the instability of the government to their advantage because there was less focus from the communists and Pushtuns on the mountainous regions and more focus in the cities, especially when the communist government withdrew from the Hazarajat, allowing the Hazaras to live in quasi-peace. The Hazaras were also able to set up successful businesses in the Hazarajat because the fighting was generally distant from their lands; they were also able to set up migratory economic networks that allow a transfer of funds from Hazara refugees in neighboring countries to their families and Hazara organizations that remain in Afghanistan.[30]

The depictions of the Hazaras through history were of a bellicose, ungovernable people who had a disposition toward violence, even among themselves. While many of these

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[25] Canfield, "Trends," 252-253.
[26] Canfield, "Trends," 254.
[27] Canfield, "Trends," 255.
[28] Canfield, "Trends," 256-258.
[29] Canfield, "Trends," 259.
[30] Canfield, "Trends," 246; Monsutti, "Cooperation," 219-220.

characteristics may appear legitimate, the Hazaras have shown that they can unite, and that they are no longer a fractious people. The Hazaras, while showing they can fight when necessary, are proving that what they desire is not war but a voice. They do not want a country of their own, but to be a part of the country in which they live and be recognized as an important component in governmental affairs. They no longer want a country at war, but a new, united nation.

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Biography

Kathryn Zawisza is a former Honors College graduate of Henderson State University and is currently pursuing the Master of Liberal Arts degree at Henderson. After completion of the MLA, she plans to go on to earn a degree in Library Science and Information Service.