Documentation

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The Lost Paradise
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I would like to warmly welcome you to today’s discussion “Afghanistan. The Lost Paradise.” We are very happy about the large audience and I am especially pleased to welcome our speakers Malek Sitez and Khadija Abbasi here in Vienna. I would like to extend a special welcome to Ms. Abbasi. She traveled all the way from Mazar-e Sharif in order to inform us about the current situation in Afghanistan. Sibylle Hamann, an independent journalist from Austria, will be the moderator today. Ms. Hamann will also briefly introduce our speakers.

Before we start I have to say thank you to the co-organizer of the conference today, the World Hazara Council and to my colleague Ali Ahmad, who helped me to develop the concept for today’s event. In addition, I welcome Ghausuddin Mir from AKIS cultural organization and Shokat Ali Walizadeh from the organization “Afghanische Jugendliche-NEUER START in Österreich,” both of whom helped me spread news of today’s event within the Afghan community. Both organizations are very active helping Afghans and refugees who have recently arrived in Austria get settled. The spectrum of their activity ranges from integrative football tournaments and cultural events to counseling and support, also for refugees who are minors. I would like to express my deepest thanks to them for this important work. I would also like to thank the Diplomatic Academy for hosting us and the Austrian Development Cooperation, the Austrian Development Agency, which financed today’s event, as well as my colleagues at VIDC, especially Irène Hochauer-Kpoda, who actively supported me with organizing the event.

Today’s event is part of VIDC’s special focus on the Middle East and unfortunately the background for the debate is quite clear: Twelve months after the withdrawal of the Western troops from Afghanistan, Afghanistan remained the second-largest source country for refugees worldwide. According to UNHCR the total number of Afghan refugee population are amounting at about 2.6 million. The neighboring countries Pakistan and Iran continued to host the majority of Afghan refugees, with 1.5 million and 951,000 persons, respectively.
In 2015 25.475 Afghans have sent an application for Asylum in Austria. Just for comparison: in the same period 24.538 Syrians requested Asylum in Austria.

But unlike the civil war in Syria, the causes for migration and escape from Afghanistan are not well known in Austria and Europe. In this context, our discussions today will in particular address the situation of minorities living in Afghanistan. Before I hand you over to our moderator Sybille Hamann, I would like to ask Tahir Shaaran from the World Hazara Council to give a few words of welcome.

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Tahir Shaaran

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am the Co-founder and President of World Hazara Council. Unfortunately, Dr. Aziza Azimi, who was meant to be speaking today, could not make it today. On the behalf of the World Hazara council, I would like to welcome you all, especially those who have traveled from other European countries to participate at this conference. Thank you for being part of this conference. I would like to thank our distinguished guests today, Dr. Malik Sitiz, Ms. Khadija Abbasi, and Ms. Sibylle Hamann, who will be moderating the panel discussion.

The World Hazara Council is very grateful to the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation for their hard-work and support in making this conference and tomorrow’s workshop possible. Last but not the least, I would like to thank all the organizations and individuals, who have contributed. The World Hazara Council (WHC) is the international organization that represents Hazara communities around the world, with the aim of promoting the cultural, social and civil rights of the Hazara people and to advocate on their behalf in media, governments and civil society organizations.

The Hazaras constitute a district ethno-religious group that lives predominantly in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. They were historically persecuted on double ethnic and
religious grounds. Today, this discrimination is still evident through target killings and kidnapping. The Hazara population is estimated to be between 8 to 10 million, although no official statistics have been gathered so far. There are approximately 100,000 Hazaras living in Europe with European citizenship or long term resident permit, while nearly 50,000 Hazaras have sought asylum in Europe since January 2015. The World Hazara Council is the umbrella body that aspires to represent the diverse Hazara communities and organizations around the world and facilitate greater cooperation between them and other Afghan organizations. The World Hazara Council was formally inaugurated in early 2013 following two years of consultation with an extensive network of Hazara activists and civil society organizations across the globe. One of our main focuses at the World Hazara Council is to help Afghan asylums and to provide assistance, orientation, and consultancy to make their integration process easier in their residence countries with the cooperation of relevant organizations and agencies. The World Hazara Council believes that it is empirical to discuss the large influx of Afghan refugees coming to Europe. In 2015, after Syria, Afghanistan has the highest number among those seeking asylum in the EU.

Since January 2015 more than 130,000 Afghans have already arrived in Europe, while thousands are in Turkey and other neighboring countries are trying to cross the borders to get in Europe. The ongoing violence in Afghanistan, targeted killings, and kidnappings of various ethnic groups are the biggest push factors for Afghans to risk their lives to reach Europe and elsewhere. However, it is important to acknowledge that a high number of Afghan asylum seekers in Europe, are from the Hazara community. This evening we are very delighted that we could bring together scholars, researchers, Human rights activists and refugees, and organizations in Austria and across Europe, to collectively address the Afghan refugee crisis in Europe. Once again, thank you all for taking part in this event. Now, I would like to welcome Sibylle Hamann to start today’s conference. Thank you very much.

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Sibylle Hamann

Thank you Michael Fanizadeh, thank you Tahir Sharan. I feel much honored to sit here with our distinguished guests tonight and I can’t wait to hear what you have to say. The first who will speak is Malek Sitez whom I am happy to introduce for you. Mr. Sitez has been a human rights expert in theory and human rights defender in practice for most of his life, for many years. He has been a government advisor on human rights issues in countries as diverse as Cambodia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Ukraine, Yemen, Libya, there might be some more. And he played a very prominent role in establishing human rights in his home country of Afghanistan. In 2003, he founded the first human rights radio called “The Voice” and he also established the civil society and human rights network, which has offices all over the country. He also founded a human rights journal in Afghanistan and authored several books about both human rights and also Afghan refugees. Now he will talk to us about the refugees of Afghanistan to Europe and the reasons why they come. Mr. Sitez! Please!

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Malek Sitez

Good evening ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I would like to thank the organizer of such an important evening (VIDC) and for inviting me to this important event. Secondly I would like to thank you for coming to such a value-based dialogue. I try to use my time as optimistically as possible, that is why I present my article to you and look forward to any questions you may have. My background is international law and international human rights principles. As for this reason my presentation will mainly focus on the issue of Afghan refugees based on these principles. Additionally I will look at the national reasons of mass refugee trends to Europe and its challenges.

In the beginning I will come across the definition of refugees/asylum seekers based on the international law standards. In line with this I will in-cooperate the definition with the
Afghan refugees situation. I divide Afghan refugees to Europe to three main groups; political asylum seekers, humanitarian refugees and economic refugees or immigrants.

First: Political asylum seekers:
Refugee/asylum seeker is referred to a person who is in conflict and disagreement, politically as well ideologically, with the state. Such a disagreement results in the prosecution of the individual by the state. This prosecution brings along fear of arrest, torture, execution and numerous other complexities by the state. The citizen leaves the country due to fear and harsh circumstances and further with the hope and intention to seek asylum from other states. International Convention on refugees in 1951 recognises this definition. That is why this group of asylum seeker are called political refugees or Conventional asylum seekers.

The Afghan political asylum/refugee tendency started in 1979, one year after the Communists came into the power in the country. During 1979 – 1992 five millions Afghans fled their country to neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan and Iran. Around 250 000 Afghans could reach US, Europe, Canada, Australia and other western states. The second round of displacement of Afghans accrued during the civil war when the Mujahedeen came into the power in the years 1992 – 1996. During this period of time, President Najibullah asked for asylum of UN and a lot of his state apparatus fled the country to reach Western societies. During this period a large group of communist regime-affiliated Afghans came to Europe, US, Canada and Australia. Today the majority diaspora of Afghans in Europe are located in Germany, United Kingdom, Netherlands, France, Scandinavian states, Belgium, Austria, and Greece. It is also important to mention that the number of Afghans, in the former Soviet republics and India was doubled during this period of time. The third round of Afghan refugees movement to Europe covers the Taliban period 1996 – 2001. During this period of time, around 70 % of native Kabul inhabitants were displaced to the remote provinces or neighbouring countries. In the big cities like Kabul, Herat, Mazar e Sahrif, Jalalabad, Bamiyan, Kandahar, Helmand and etc. people, desperately, sold their houses and properties to reach a safe destination, including Western societies as European Union. The fourth round of Afghan refugees movement to Europe happened recently during Hamid Karzai’s Presidency. It covers end of 2001 up to 2014. In the beginning of the post Taliban
period, Afghans were very optimistic for their country’s future. During 2001 to 2004, 1.5 millions Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan from neighbouring countries. However after 2006, the Taliban mobilised themselves and the war spread out the provinces. During 2006 – 2010, the south provinces became the first target of terrorist organizations and Taliban. Many people from south provinces villages fled the country to Pakistan. During 2011 – 2013 the Taliban spread their activities to some eastern provinces like Nengarhar, Kunar and Nuristan. Meanwhile Western provinces like Farah and Zabul, became more instable. Recently the Taliban with the support of international Terrorist organisations became more active in the North provinces of Afghanistan. The active role of ISIS (Daesh) in the war in Afghanistan is significant when considering the new movement of refugees in Afghanistan. ISIS’ barbaric operation, including the killing of men, women and children in the eastern and some northern provinces of Afghanistan, are the main reasons why Afghans escape their own country. Simply phrased, it is a survival strategy.

The second group of refugees are called humanitarians. This group of people leave their country based on social and cultural problems and in some cases due to natural catastrophes. Domestic wars and ethnic conflicts are the most typical issues of this group of refugees in Afghanistan.

What are the main reasons of humanitarian refugee expansion to Europe?

Lack of a national strategy on national interests and national unity:
The national unity government, in fact, is not based on the national interests. The leaders of the national unity government mainly focus on the dissemination of power structures to two main fractions rather than to representatives of the nation. The government of the national unity is based on a political agreement rather than the constitution of Afghanistan. In fact, the national unity government is lacking legitimacy. Nowhere in the constitution you can find the world National Unity government. And the constitution hasn’t been modified. So this is one of the main challenges for the Afghans as political crisis in the country. This crisis actually echoes the pessimistic approach of ordinary Afghans looking through their vision to the future of Afghanistan.
Lack of a functional civil society who can advocate for the benefits of the national interests of all Afghans:
The majority of Civil Society institutions are project based or donor driven organisations. There is also a clash of understanding between modern/Western and traditional civil society actors. The government’s relationship with civil society is not based on a constructive dialogue.

Lack of national programs amongst political parties:
The political parties are based on the ethnic interests instead of national interests. The Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks parties mainly represent their own ethnic groups’ interests rather than national interests. Unfortunately the Afghan political sector is divided in ethnic political groups. So that is why we do not have constructive alternative for the current situation. So we are lacking constructive opposition.

Lack of constructive dialogue on the national interests issues in Afghanistan:
Ethnic dominated leaders also affiliate the Afghan media. Propaganda is a key word in this case, as some Afghan medias shed light on their own interests, thus against other ethnic group policies. In fact they promote hatred against each other. People do not listen and do not believe the state media that is very affected of state propaganda. So there is freedom of speech, there is phenomenon of freedom of media, which is the biggest achievement of the past decade. A constructive dialogue on nation-building process is lacking because the Afghan media is badly affiliated with these leaders of ethnic political groups. Some of these media are supported by neighbouring countries, which of course propagate their policies in Afghanistan.

Lack of Security:
Security is a pre-condition for any kinds of development but unfortunately the security situation is too fragile. Helmand, Nengarhar, Fariab, Logar, Paktika, Farah, Zabul, Uruzgan and Kunduz are the most friable provinces of Afghanistan. The main highways between Kabul to Heart, Kandahar, Mazar e Sharif, and Kunduz, which is the infrastructure of the state, are unsafe. The Taliban, the Islamic Party and ISIS disturb and violate passengers by kidnaping,
rooting and killing. The most vulnerable group of Afghans are women. In the mentioned provinces the role of women are disappearing from societies.

Lack of Justice:
The justice sector of Afghanistan badly suffers from corruption. According to International Transparency, Afghans pay around two billions of USD as bribe to state institutions annually. Afghans do not believe state justice sector. Lack of independent and professional Justice System damages the rule of law in Afghanistan. Imagine if the rule of law is not in place, how can you be optimistic about the future.

Warlords – warlordism:
The warlords still play an important role in political, economic, and social sectors in Afghanistan. The warlordism is institutionalised. They have their representatives in the parliament, the justice sector, the army, police and intelligence service. They are militarised and rich in terms of money and resources.

Extremism/Islamic extremism:
Extremism is one the main obstacle and challenge for any changes and reforms in Afghanistan. There are around 2000 madrasas (Islamic schools) in the bordering Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan. They accept children from age 5-18. They pay for their everything – you know. For example; if a family has 5-6 children, which is typically Afghan up to 10 children, they introduce them to madrassas in order to educate them Islam. But in madrassas they educate them political Islam, extremism. The madrassas promote extremism and fundamentalism amongst children. They get education and become members of political Islamic extremist parties. The government of Afghanistan do not have a proper alternative to offer these children. The extremists misinterpret Islamic values against women. Taliban in Ghor, Kunduz, Uruzgan and Farah provinces recently stoned seven women to death based on these madrassas interpretation.

Human rights of women:
The condition of women’s human rights differs from region to region. There are some improvements in the major cities like Kabul, Mazar, Heart and Bamyan. However in the
remote provinces, Afghan women suffer from fundamental human rights principles such as the right to live, right to health care, education and civil freedoms.

The third group are economic refugees. This group of refugees leave their country due to poverty. According to international research organizations, Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. The Afghan State is entirely dependent on international support. Around 86% of the national budget is supported by international support. Around 60% of the Afghan population is under the age of 38. Approximately 40% of Afghans live under the poverty line. The Afghan state could not create jobs for millions of young Afghans. Many Afghans who graduated from universities are leaving the country to neighboring states. Many in the Afghan youth join the Taliban because of economic problems. In fact the most dynamic power of Afghans flee their country to seek better environment to work in order to provide for their families.

Recommendations

So these are the main reasons that I could talk about here. I have some conclusion and recommendations. I know we have a lot of refugees from Afghanistan in European countries, but please don’t worry about it. I believe they are dynamic, young Afghans. They could easily be integrated in the society. They are well educated but we have a lot of families who are elders, who are also members of these refugee groups. For me this is not the issue that we can tackle it as a root of the problem. We need to tackle the root of the problems. What are the roots of the problems? Until we don’t tackle the root of the problems, the refugee flow will never stop to Europe. For me the first and important issue is how to tackle extremism and terrorism. If the US strategy on ISIS is not modified, if some countries including western wing countries support ISIS, the flow of refugees will continue to Europe. You cannot bomb and don’t take any responsibility. I am not talking about European Union. My address is the US. The US receives only 10.000 of refugees during the past crisis but if you bomb, you need to tackle the issue. You need to address the issue and you have to have a proper strategy of the consequences of the war you organize.

The second issue is the issue of extremism, Islamic extremism. If you do not tackle the issue of modernization and moderation of Islamic values as a value for any kinds of changes in the
society, you can not stop war in Afghanistan. The main reason behind war in Afghanistan is political Islam unfortunately. Afghans are moderate Muslims but Islamic extremism is promoting political and ideological Islam.

The third issue that I will recommend the capacity building of Afghans in building sustainable economic structure in Afghanistan. I understand as you see in my presentation, this is a very difficult situation. Corruption is one of the big challenges of sending support to the Afghan society. But we need to find ways to tackle this issue. Give more chances for young generation. Support the alternative. Provide conditions for a proper and constructive opposition.

And lastly, I will encourage the European Union and Austrian politicians to encourage the EU to be more involved in peace-making negotiations in Afghanistan. Right now China, US, Pakistan together with Afghanistan are organizing peace negotiation of the so called roadmap of Afghanistan. But we are lacking important and constructive role of European Union in such a dialogue. I think European Union has created for itself huge respect among Afghan society because this is impartial organization. The European Union is supporting Afghanistan in the area of socio-economic and cultural security hugely. So this could be a suggestion to bring to this important dialogue.
Thank you very much.

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Sibylle Hamann

Thank you very much indeed Malek Sitez. This was a large overview on the background of the current refugee crisis. I am happy now to introduce our second speaker. Welcome Khadija Abbasi. She arrived directly from Mazar-e-Sharif, a city in northern Afghanistan where she lives as a scholar and researcher. She studied in Tehran, at the Islamic Azad University and also at the London School of Economics. She is currently a PhD candidate at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. She worked for several NGOs. She has done extensive research on refugees and minorities issues and she is
currently based in Mazar-e-Sharif doing field research on Uzbek communities. And now she will give us a presentation about the Hazara minority especially.

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Khadija Abbasi

General information on Human rights in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has suffered from chronic instability and conflict in its modern history from the Cold War to civil war between the Mujahedeen to the Taliban. It has been 14 years since the removal of the Taliban and 11 years since Afghanistan has had a democratically elected government. 2015 has been a period of uncertainty after disputed presidential elections that led to the creation of a national unity government. Human rights abuses, including the torture of detainees, violence against women and children, and attacks on journalists remain a serious problem. Security forces continue to operate largely with impunity. Indiscriminate attacks by the Taliban and other insurgent forces have led to a sharp rise in civilian deaths. The hopes that the fall of the Taliban regime would produce a secure and stable Afghanistan have been vindicated by the passage of time. Instead, a range of factors have frustrated the hopes notably the failure to build a state with appropriate capacity and legitimacy. There is little reason to be confident that the general situation in Afghanistan will take a turn for the better in the foreseeable future. Based on the Asia Foundation’s 2015 Survey of People of Afghanistan, 57.5% of Afghans believe that their country is going in wrong direction. In order of importance, they named insecurity, unemployment, corruption, bad economy and bad governments the reasons behind this pessimism. President Ashraf Ghani has made strong public commitments to protect citizens’ rights, but implementation has been slow.

Background information on Hazaras

Hazaras are one of the ethnic groups of Afghanistan, of Turkic-Mongolian origin. Majority of them practice Twelver Shia Islam but there are also Ismaili Shia and Sunni Hazaras. The Hazaras traditionally live in the central highlands of Afghanistan, called Hazarajat, but
considerable communities can be found in the major cities of Afghanistan. The persecution by the Emir of Afghanistan Abdur Rahman Khan in late 19th century (1890/1900), committed to centralise his power, is still vivid in the collective memory of Hazaras. Around 62% of the Hazara population were massacred and the rest were enslaved, sold, forced to live in the highlands of Afghanistan or escape to neighbouring countries and their lands were dispossessed. There is no way to think that the underlying factors of these discrimination and persecution (ethnic and sectarian) fuelling hostility towards Hazaras have dissipated to date.

Since the defeat of the Hazaras in late 19th century until the Communist government in 1978, the deprivation of Hazaras continued. The coup in 1978 paved the way for their relative freedom and political participation but the emergence of the Taliban was the start of a new era of suppressing Hazaras. They became the most adversely affected ethnic group in Afghanistan. In 1998, more than eight thousand Hazaras were massacred systematically by the Taliban in four days in Mazar-e-Sharif, the city I came from today. The bodies were purposely left in the streets to be eaten by stray dogs. Such killings were repeated in Bamyan and Kabul. I am sure you all remember the unforgettable and unforgivable destruction of the great Buddha’s of Bamyan by the Taliban. The remnant of the statues has turned into a symbol of this period for Hazaras.

**Contemporary situation of Hazaras in Afghanistan**

Systematic discrimination

Generally, Hazaras believe their persecution and systematic discrimination continues to date. After the fall of the Taliban, the Hazaras were amongst the first ethnic groups to surrender their weapons and support the peace process. They have been supportive of the government and foreign intervention. Hazarajat has been generally peaceful and stable. Although Afghanistan remains the largest illicit opium producer in the world and Hazaras are amongst the poorest citizens of Afghanistan, Hazarajat has been a poppy-free zone. Unfortunately, Hazarajat has received the smallest portion of development aid from the government and the international community. Hazaras have a general feeling of being punished for being peaceful and not making trouble. In 2009, only 1% of USAID budget was
allocated to Bamyan province, whereas the South and South-eastern regions received over 90% of USAID aid money.

The Hazaras are more willing to embrace democracy, because of the historical persecution and oppression they have experienced. They seek equality and social justice and are producing the most enthusiastic, educated, and forward-looking people in Afghanistan. They are aware of the unique opportunities provided by the new situation. The first female mayor, the first provincial governor and the first Olympic medal winner were Hazara. In the Afghan presidential election in 2014, 22 % of the total vote in the country were cast by Hazaras. Evidence shows that the majority of governmental bodies, including the presidential palace and universities, are not representative of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan. During the Bonn Conference, it was agreed to allocate 19% of the governmental seats to Hazaras. Now, it is believed that only 4 % of the posts are occupied by Hazaras. Let me give you an example. Out of over 50 Afghan embassies worldwide, only two ambassadors are Hazaras (in Ukraine and Azerbaijan). In countries like Sweden and Austria, evidence shows that the majority of asylum seekers and migrants from Afghanistan are from the Hazaras while the diplomats sent to these countries are not Hazara.

Security

Generally, security in Afghanistan is deteriorating and all civilians are at risk. However, Hazaras are amongst the most vulnerable communities because of their distinct ethnicity and religion. The mongoloid facial features of Hazaras betray them and make them an easy target for discrimination and persecution. Despite the fact that in the past 14 years Hazarajat has been quite safe, the roads to Hazarajat are extremely dangerous and Hazaras are not able to commute safely to other parts of Afghanistan. In other words, Hazaras are trapped in an undefined prison. From January to December 2015, more than 168 Hazaras, including women and children have been abducted by terrorist groups like the Taliban and ISIS or held for ransom on the roads across Afghanistan. Obviously, these are official reports; but many incidents go unreported by the media. Until now, 33 of the reported hostages have been brutally killed and many are still missing.

Some of you might have heard about the recent brutal beheading of seven Hazaras that had been singled-out and kidnapped by Taliban. The killing sparked an unprecedented march of
thousands of Afghans in Kabul and many major cities of Afghanistan. The movement was called Tabassum Revolution featuring a 9-year old girl named Shukrea who was among the dead.

Hazara- Nomad Kuchi dispute
During the notorious persecution of Hazaras in late 19th century, Abdur Rahman Khan, then Emir of Afghanistan, gifted lands of Hazaras to the nomad Kuchis who were of Pashtun ethnic origin. In exchange, the Emir asked the nomad Kuchis to assist him in defeating Hazaras. The dispute over land sparked and continues to date and almost every summer conflicts break out between sedentary Hazaras and nomad Kuchis. From 2008 to 2010 more than 41 people were killed in the Kuchi attacks, dozens were injured and nearly 10,000 families were forced to flee their looted villages. The conflict is now instrumentalised by the Taliban trying to exploit this opportunity to incite inter-ethnic tensions. The Shia religion of Hazaras make them an easy target for the overwhelmingly Pashtun Taliban who are seeking to rebuild support from Sunni Pashtun groups such as the Kuchis. Indeed, the Kuchis still doubt the religious correctness of Hazaras.

Post 2014
The emergence of ISIS in Afghanistan, continued insurgency by Taliban, the gradual withdrawal of international forces, and lack of effective policies from the current unity government of Afghanistan have made the security situation in the country very fragile. Vulnerable groups like perceived ethnic and religious minorities and women are more at risk. Hazaras have suffered immensely during Taliban and are going to be the immediate target if the country falls into a chaos. They have publicly supported international forces intervention and promoted progressive values and because of this support, they have repeatedly been threatened. With regard to the peace talks with Taliban, a meeting was held in Kabul few days ago with representatives from Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the United States. The meeting purpose was to develop a roadmap of the negotiations. With the terms of such reconciliation still unclear, there is a risk that one outcome of current political processes could be a sphere of influence agreement that would transfer local territory to the Taliban in some provinces. The situation for provinces with Hazara population could easily be dreadful and certainly a fear of being persecuted would not be ill-founded.
Hazaras in Pakistan

There are two groups of Hazaras in Pakistan, one group came during the persecutions by Abdur Rahman Khan to Quetta who are now citizens of Pakistan. The other groups are Hazaras who came to Pakistan during the recent conflicts and unrest in Afghanistan. In the past 10 years, Shia Pakistanis have been target killed by Sunni extremists. Hazaras are particularly in danger because again their Mongoloid facial features betray them and make them easy targets. Now, more than 30% of Quetta’s Hazara population have left the city. Over the course of the past 15 years, more than 1,500 Hazaras have been killed and over 3,500 wounded in a series of 1,881 attacks across Pakistan. These attacks have included assassinations, suicide bombings, rocket shelling, and targeting Hazara public gathering places such as hotels and sport clubs to maximise their fatalities. Indeed, Lashkari Jangavi, Ahle Sunnat Wa Jamait and Jaish ul Islam have been accepting the responsibility of these attacks on Hazaras. Yet, not a single perpetrator has been charged and brought to justice so far. In many cases, the individuals and groups responsible for massacres have enjoyed government and community protection. In two unprecedented occasions in February 2013 and January 2014 and out of desperation, Hazara women of Quetta refused to bury the bodies of their beloved and vowed that they would not bury their dead until the indifferent government of Pakistan cracked down on perpetrators of violence in the province.

Hazaras in Iran

Hazaras in Iran are also mainly in two groups. The first group came to Iran after the persecutions by Abdur Rahman Khan. They are now citizens of Iran. The second group are Hazaras who came during recent conflicts. Afghans who came to Iran are predominantly Shia Hazaras. They chose Iran because it was a Shia and Persian speaking country. Iran is signatory to the 1951 refugee convention but with several reservations. It means Afghans cannot have legal refugee status and are deprived of the right to work, the right to education, and the right to access other basic public services. Criminalisation of Afghan refugees supported by Iranians media has given a low social status to Afghans. Iranian women married to Afghans will have stateless children. In short, Afghan refugees in Iran are
deemed to remain in low paid and low skilled illegal jobs in their second and third generations. Every year thousands of Afghans are forced to return to Afghanistan, where there is no prospect for them. For instance, around 200,000 Afghans were deported in 2012 and 2013. Many of the deportees complained of torture and other abuses by their employers or the Iranian police.

Over the past three years, the Iranian government has been blackmailing Afghan refugees by offering their men fighter jobs to the proxy war in Syria in exchange for residence visas, education for their children, money, security for their families, thus avoiding them deportation. There are reports of recruiting minors as soldiers. And this makes Hazaras even more of a target for Sunni extremists in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. As the situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating, Afghan refugees in Iran have no option but to go to Europe. Therefore, Iran is also becoming one of the major sending countries of Afghan refugees to Europe. Europe should expect to receive Afghan refugees who have never seen Afghanistan and because they were born in Iran.

**Hazaras in Europe**

I hope the above mentioned issues may explain a bit why in recent years the majority of asylum seekers from Afghanistan are of the Hazara ethnic group.

How could European policy makers cooperate with Afghan institutions and community to overcome this crisis in the long term?

I would suggest to engage more with Afghans in diaspora as they have the knowledge of both sending and host countries and can play a key role in making the right dialogue and understanding upon which effective initiatives can be carried out. These communities can be a platform to disseminate information about the host countries to those Afghans wishing to migrate.

How to prevent refugees from risking their lives by irregularly crossing borders and depending on people’s smugglers?
It would be ideal to welcome refugees on the humanitarian basis. But it does not seem to work for some countries. In my opinion, Western countries should be relaxed and open their borders to economic migrants from the crisis-stricken countries. The majority of refugees are skilled and if an efficient system is in place, these refugees could be easily absorbed by the labour market.

My suggestion is to first redefine our image of asylum seekers. They have not risked their life to come and abuse the social welfare and taxpayer's money. They are potential labour force for a striving economy. I think we should not restrict ourselves to the binary of refugee/economic migrants. It is difficult to draw a border. Refugees risk their life because they cannot have a normal and peaceful life in their country. Therefore, once they are protected, they can be a potential labour force. I understand that refugee issues are not popular and have become a key factor in election and attracting votes in European politics, I think politicians needs to be brave and honest and acknowledge publicly how economic migrants are crucial for one’s country. That will have and positive impact on the general mood and public opinions of Europeans who are frightened. Refugees are economically dynamic. Perhaps, the fact that they are risk takers (by crossing those borders) means they are the most dynamic and enterprising ones.

My second suggestion is to be bolder and open visa processing centres in the crisis-stricken countries, adopting a more economic approach in issuing visas. Refugees are happy to sell everything they have to save their lives and pay smugglers, let’s say, 20,000 dollars. You can take 10,000 as visa application fee and let the refugee start his/her new life with the remaining 10,000 dollars. Canada and Australia perform economically much better than Continental Europe and it is undoubtedly thanks to more generous but also better targeted economic migration policies. We’ve seen how adherence to human rights law has prevented countries to accept more refugees. Benefits that asylum seekers supposedly receive are not well perceived by voters and therefore discourage politicians from being bold in their approach. I believe that, by having a pragmatic approach towards human rights, we can afford having more refugees with us. This means also revising refugee law and adopting a more open approach. The west cannot disengage from trying to bring peace in countries like
Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq and Syria. As attacks show, security is a global problem, and bringing peace to those countries would indeed reduce the flows of refugees.

My last suggestion is to promote job creation by supporting small and medium enterprises and industries generating employment through targeted programmes. Those programmes are more likely to succeed in more peaceful regions like Hazarajat where level of stability are still satisfactory enough to initiate such programmes. Thank you very much.

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Panel Discussion

Hamann: Thank you very much Khadija Abbasi. You brought attention to very little-known factor that the majority of Afghan refugees who actually arrived in Austria are most likely Hazaras. We start with the discussion. I would like to focus on women’s rights first. I think it is safe to say that there are severe violations of specifically women’s rights in Afghanistan, but yet we see that women are a significant minority among the refugees who come. I will be very interested in knowing how you would explain that.

Abbasi: I think we have improvements in women’s situation but like any social change, it will take a long time. Women continue to be amongst the most vulnerable population in the country. I am sure some of you may have heard about the brutal killing of Farkhunda in early 2015 who was wrongly accused of burning a Qur’an. She was brutally lynched and killed and burned. I think there was a gender perspective in it because she was a woman. They felt free to trial her on the street and kill her so brutally in front of people. So I think the women issue continue to be a serious issue in the country. I think we have a long way to go. The same with other ethnic groups that I didn’t mention here like religious minorities as well.

Hamann: But why are so few women among those who make it all the way to Europe?

Abbasi: Yeah exactly. The majority who come to Europe are young men because socially it is
more acceptable and family as well encourage young men to travel but it happens less with women because of the conservative society they live in and the patriarchal system that still exists in a very strong classic way. Women are less likely to travel and if they travel, they will be with the families. So usually if women travel, it will be with their families especially young women. It is very rare.

**Hamann:** Would you agree or do you see other reasons? Are there changes in the human rights situations that could explain these current waves of refugees?

**Sitez:** I totally agree with Ms. Abbasi. One of the main reasons of mass violations against women in Afghanistan is domestic violence, families, misinterpretation of Islamic values by Islamic leaders, extremists. According to them, women should stay at home, listen to men and should be a kind of a slave for men, especially in remote areas in Afghanistan. We have a lot of achievements in big cities like Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar, Helmand but this is not the general picture of women rights situation in Afghanistan. One of the reasons that lots of young Afghan men and not women are coming to Europe is the economic situation. A family sell their house in order to send a young guy to Europe and the young guy could work and send money back home. So it is an economic and social phenomenon. The second issue is that women especially in provinces do not have the right to travel from the families. Even if women travel alone from a village, it is almost impossible. This is the main reason.

**Hamann:** The young men that you mentioned, those young boys who are barely 15 or 16. Could you tell us a bit more about the kind of expectations that they are carrying on their shoulders. Sending money back home? Finding ways to bring their families along with them?

**Abbasi:** In my opinion it is mix of both. For young men migration is a coping strategy, it is a way to make money. But there is also pressure from the host countries; they expect them to learn the language, to study and to continue their education. But they need to absorb in the market as soon as possible to send money back home. So there is double pressure on them.
Hamann: That also means as soon as they are able to send money back home, the families might stay in Afghanistan.

Khadija: Exactly. Migration is not an easy decision. I think, everyone prefer to stay home with their lovely families and their countries.

Sitez: Afghanistan has changed. People who have immigrated are communicating with their families. Afghans who live in Europe are communicating on daily basis with their families in Afghanistan, thanks to technology and communications. This also encourages the young generation to do their best to prepare for Europe. I know many young people who struggle to study, to speak English, to speak German or French in order to prepare themselves to travel to Europe.

Hamann: But has this picture changed over the last couple of months? The situation here in Europe has deteriorated. People don’t feel so welcoming anymore. Have people in Afghanistan received this message yet? Even Afghan refugees might be sent back as the German government has announced recently?

Sitez: As I mentioned during my presentation, when you don’t have security, you never know about your future, you live in a society where the state is corrupted, you don’t trust the justice system and you don’t have work, then you will definitely seek for solutions. Even the worst situation here in Europe will be fine for you. Therefore many of the Afghan families accept the huge risks of travelling to reach Europe and this is the reality. Many of them know the situation and many of them have been informed by the international media. Some countries like Australia and Germany also presented some media spots in Afghanistan to inform the people about the dangers.

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**Audience: Q&A**

**Question:** I want to talk about an issue that you have barely mentioned: the Afghan refugees who are coming from Iran. According to international law and according to official reports, Iran is a safe country. Do refugees coming from Iran but being Afghans nevertheless fall under international protection and asylum law?

**Question:** Thank you very much for your presentations. My question is about the madrassas. Can you please tell us who is funding these Islamic extremists’ schools?

**Question:** You talked about young men being sent to Europe in order to send money back, but you have not talked about middle class or even upper class young people. I would be interested in your opinion on these people that leaving the country although they have very good jobs - over price jobs. They drive big cars, earn a lot of money but they are leaving anyhow Kabul, because the situation is getting unbearable even for the most optimistic ones.

**Question:** The international community, especially the US, has occupied Afghanistan in order to fight terrorism and Taliban. Now Mr. Obama and his administration have called off the struggle and announced that Taliban will not be enemies of the US anymore. Could you please explain this to me?

**Question:** My first question is about internal support for the Taliban. I think they have around 40.000-60.000 fighters. How strong is the public support in Afghanistan? The second question is about the external support for the Taliban, especially in regard to Pakistan. Has the Pakistani influence on the Taliban increased or decreased in the last few years?

**Abbasi:** I will start with the question in regard to Afghans who are living or were even born in Iran like myself: I mentioned in my presentation, many of these Afghans are Shi’a Muslims. That is one of the reasons why they choose Iran as destination country, the other
reason is the shared language, Persian. For them, especially if you are Hazara, going back to Afghanistan is not an option although the Iranian government has toughened the migration policies and is forcing Afghans to go back. They try to make a shortcut and instead going back to Afghanistan, they come directly from Iran to Europe. In my opinion they are perfectly eligible to be granted asylum and if the law doesn’t meet, these laws should be modified.

About the question on middle class Afghans: Yes, it is true, middle class Afghans also come especially after the withdrawal of NATO forces, as a consequence many NGOs also closed their offices. Many of these young middle class educated Afghans lost their jobs and their fancy salaries.

Sitze: I will start with the issue of the madrassas. There are two kinds of madrassas. The first one is the moderate one that teaches the religion to children and young people in the framework of mosques and supported by the families. But the second kind of madrassas is under the control of the Taliban and supported by some Islamic institutions from the Middle East, especially from Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain. These countries and the Sheikhs who are actually affiliated with the Taliban are supporting these madrassas. Ideologically they also get a lot of support throughout the Islamic movements of Pakistan. So the Islamic movements of Pakistan somehow having communication with Pakistani officials, they are also supporting these madrassas. So there is huge sum of money going into this direction.

The issue of Taliban: You are totally right. That is why I’m talking about responsibilities. When countries like the U.S. are involved in such a huge operations like in Afghanistan, they should also have a proper strategy on consequences of the war. You know the history of the Taliban appearance in Afghanistan. The Taliban have been organized by the Butto regime in Pakistan with the support of the U.S., and when Vice President Biden is saying that Taliban is not “our” enemy, he is historically totally right.

The question of occupation: I’m an international human rights and international law scholar. I don’t think Afghanistan is occupied. The international community in Afghanistan based on international law approved by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386. So Afghanistan is not an occupied state.
Support for the Taliban within and without the country: I would like to mention that in some areas, especially in remote areas, the state cannot provide human values and human rights. And human rights are not only the freedom of speech, the freedom of media and the freedom of association, but also access to economic development, access to education and access to healthcare. In the remote areas where the state cannot provide such facilities, the people support the Taliban. This is reality. I don’t know how many Afghans support Taliban, but I know that there are a lot of people who support Talibanism in Afghanistan.

External support: This is my personal opinion. In Pakistan Islam plays an important role in strengthening the ideological state formation. That is why Pakistan is doing its best to support Islamism in the region in order to strengthen their national interests. So Talibanism, extremism, all these isms, are actively supported by Pakistan, especially by the military and intelligence service, which is one of the key players in the region.

**Question:** The question is about the education level of refugees who come. Research shows that 20% or a quarter of the refugees is not even alphabetized. Is this right?

**Question:** I am asking about the civil society in Afghanistan? What is their role in the Afghanistan society today?

**Question:** The question is about modernization of Islam and why Islam is so radical today?

**Abbasi:** Regarding Islam. I have come from a Muslim family. I am here without a veil. I have a French husband who is here. We haven’t killed anybody yet as far as I remember. In answer to that I would say which Islam you are talking about? Islam is very heterogeneous religion and it has many branches in it. So if you refer to Wahabism, that is completely another story but if you are referring to mainstream, in my opinion we have also an up to date and modern interpretation. So it is a question of interpretation.

Concerning the education of the asylum seekers, yes I don’t deny that there are illiterate asylum seekers, but as I mentioned before the middle class Afghans who come because they used to work for these NGOs are very well educated, also the ones who come from countries like Iran and Pakistan. In regards to the illiterate or low skilled asylum seekers: I think potentially they could be entrepreneurs, if you are really willing to welcome them.
And regarding the civil society: Yes civil society in Afghanistan is quite new, of course, but they need support to be really independent. Again because of the withdrawal of international forces and consequently the international aid, many of these civil societies lost their funding.

**Sitez:** Concerning Islam; you know as an individual you have two kinds of relationships. One relationship you have with God and one relationship you have with the state. The God relationship will tell you about what is good and what is bad, and you can find it through different religions, not only Islam. You can’t talk about Islam as such. You can find a lot of extremists here in the Western society, which are Christians or Jews and they are also extremists and they also misinterpret their religion and their way of behaviors. The other relationship is with the state. This relationship is coordinated by the law and this is different. We should not mix these two things in order to misuse for the favor of each other. When you mix your relationship with God throughout any political party, then you are, according to my opinion, an extremist. So that is why we have to be careful when we are talking about religion. Islam is a moderate religion and as my colleague said, you can interpret it in a different way. The Wahabists you mentioned interpret Islam in a very different way.

Concerning the civil society I would say, that the main goal is advocacy, advocacy on behalf of the citizens. We have two kinds of civil societies in Afghanistan; one is the traditional, community-based civil society, we call it Jirga. This is community-based civil society that decides upon difficulties and conflict issues with the state structure. And we have a modernized, westernized civil society based on human rights values, democracy, rule of law, etc. Today we do not have a constructive dialogue between these two civil societies in Afghanistan. That is one of the biggest challenges. That is why the civil society is not very representative in Afghanistan. As a human rights defender I would definitely go for a dialogue and encourage the international community who are the main supporter of the new, modern and westernized civil society to open the door of dialogue between these two phenomenons of civil societies. The government should also listen to civil society, this is very important.

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