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Afghan Shias in the firing line: 'IS wants to wipe us out'

Tears and wails of grief fill the air around a hilltop cemetery in the outskirts of Kabul. "Why did you leave us?" one distraught mother cries out. Another lovingly caresses the photograph of her dead child.

By Secunder Kermani

BBC News (27.11.2018) - <https://bbc.in/2DJUJrX> - Families of about 50 students killed in a suicide bombing by the Islamic State group on a tuition centre in the Afghan capital in August have gathered here for a memorial service.

Many of the dead were just teenagers. All were from the Hazara community. Followers of the Shia sect of Islam who are believed to be descendants of the Mongols, Hazaras are hated by IS who view them as heretics. Armed soldiers stand guard around the graves in case of further attack.

Amongst those killed was 16-year-old Fatima. Her mother Amina tells me she used to weave carpets to pay for her schooling. One, unfinished, lies by the entrance to their small home. Fatima had been working on it the day she died.

"She was my eldest child. She was very good and very brave," Amina tells the BBC. "She used to ask me to pray she would one day become a doctor."

Fatima's father Nasrullah recalls the moment he found his daughter's body.

"I went to lots of different hospitals after the attack trying to find her. Finally someone said: 'There are six bodies here, check if your daughter is one... I uncovered their faces and saw my child.'"

The family moved to Kabul from another province around two years ago to search for work. But the Shia dominated neighbourhood they settled in, Dasht-e-Barchi, in the west of Kabul, has become a focus of IS attacks.

Fatima's father wants to go back to their village, but her mother is torn about what to do. "I'm not letting my other children go to school now because there's no security here. It's a bad situation, but if we leave Kabul, I will be leaving Fatima behind."

At the bombed tuition centre, shrapnel is stuck in the blackboard whilst handwritten notes lie among the rubble. This horrific attack was one of more than a dozen claimed by IS in Kabul this year.

IS militants first appeared in Afghanistan in 2015, and although they are outnumbered by the Taliban with whom they have at times clashed, they have established a stronghold in the east of the country. IS have been repeatedly targeted by US airstrikes, with a

number of their leaders killed, but over the past two years they carried out more attacks in the Afghan capital than any other militant group.

Hazaras are reported to make up 9-15% of the population in Afghanistan, though figures are at times disputed. They have often faced violence and discrimination both because of their ethnicity and their Shia faith, including when the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan. The hardline Islamists ruled from 1996 until they were toppled by US-led forces in 2001.

But Hazara leaders say even the Taliban have never targeted the community in the kind of deliberate sectarian suicide bombings that IS are now carrying out.

As a result, many Hazaras are deciding to leave the country. Mohammad Sadiq runs a secondhand shop in the Dasht-e-Barchi neighbourhood. He says he set it up last year to buy the possessions of the rising number of community members leaving Afghanistan to seek sanctuary in Iran, Turkey and Europe.

"People are fleeing the country because of unemployment and the lack of security," Mr Sadiq told the BBC. "Daesh [IS] are carrying out all these attacks. They want to wipe our people out."

As a sign of how desperate people in the area now are he shows me elaborately embroidered quilts stitched by mothers to hand down to their children, but sold off to pay for the cost of travel. Pointing to a set of saucepans, he says they were wedding gifts given to a newly-married couple that recently left the country.

Many in the community blame the government for not doing enough to prevent the attacks. But Interior Ministry spokesman Najib Danish told the BBC the authorities regularly thwart plots.

"We recently stopped four attacks in the west of Kabul. That shows how effective our security forces are."

Outside the mosques in Dasht-e-Barchi armed volunteers stand guard, some with weapons provided by the government. Many here say they feel afraid every time they are in a public space.

But the students of the tuition centre are back in the classroom, in a new building. The attack weighs heavy on everyone's mind but there's also a sense of defiance.

"I was so scared after the attack, it's hard to get over it," says 19-year-old Leylu Rasuli. "But if I don't study I won't achieve anything. My family don't like it but I have to keep coming here."

Fellow student Gisu Gity adds: "We won't surrender... By getting good qualifications and studying we will defeat the terrorists."

A few weeks after the attack on the students, twin suicide bombings at a nearby wrestling club killed at least 20 people. Since then there have been no further blasts in Dasht-e-Barchi, but residents remain fearful.

On 11 November, six people were killed in an IS attack on a Shia-led protest near the presidential palace in central Kabul. At the tuition centre sandbags line the windows and armed guards watch over the students as they head home. This is a community braced for further violence.

Quetta's Hazara: The community caged in its own city



Travel outside the Hazara districts in Quetta is hugely dangerous for the community

Close to 1,000 victims of militant attacks are said to be buried in the cemetery of the Mari Abad district of Quetta.

By Secunder Kermani

BBC News (12.12.2017) - <https://bbc.in/2Q2eDG8> - Some of the graves are clustered together, where family members have been buried side by side.

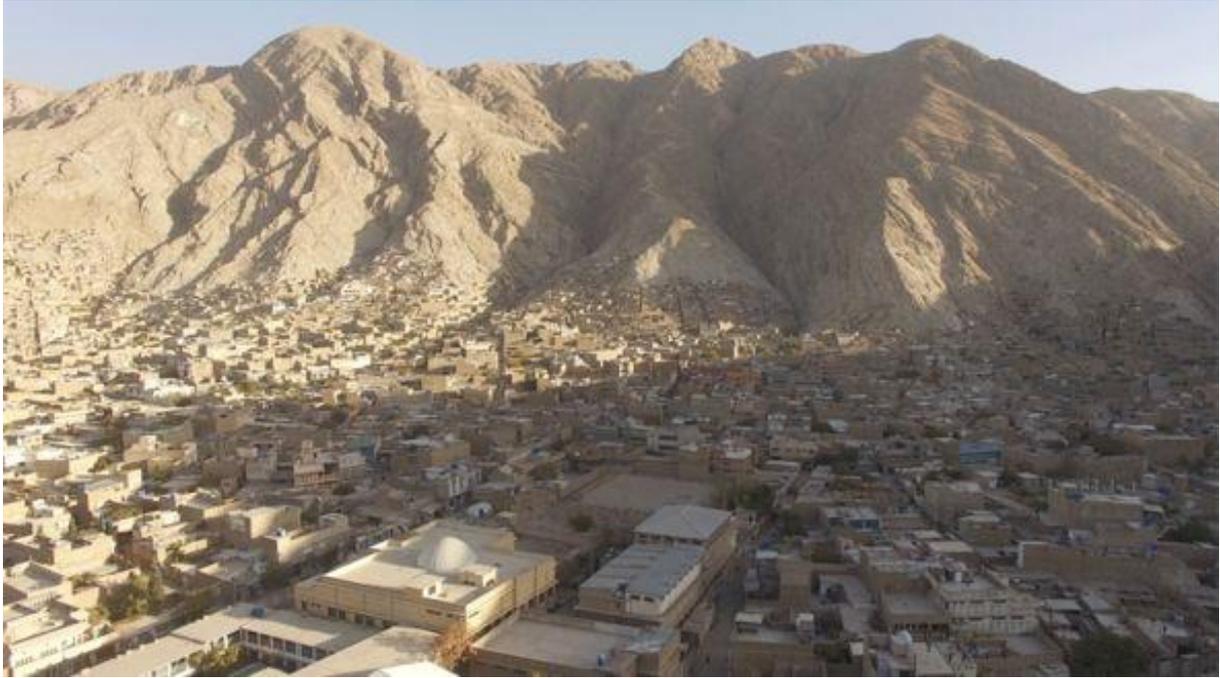
The district in south-west Pakistan is almost entirely populated by the minority Hazara community, which belongs to the Shia sect of Islam.

For decades they have been targeted by sectarian extremists using suicide bombings and targeted shootings.

Daoud Agha, president of the Balochistan Shia Conference, is defiant: "Children have been orphaned, wives have been widowed, but we will never abandon our faith."

This year more than a dozen Hazaras have been killed in and around Quetta, but in the past the annual death toll was far higher. In 2013 more than 200 were killed.

But for the Hazara community the reduction of violence has come at a cost, its members are now effectively living in ghettos that many describe as a prison.



There are two Hazara districts in Quetta, Mari Abad, shown here, and Hazara Town

The response from the Pakistani authorities to the wave of violence against the Hazara has been to build walls blocking streets leading to their districts from elsewhere in the city, or place military checkpoints along them.

There are no longer attacks inside Hazara areas, but elsewhere in the city they have continued to be targeted.

As a result the Hazara community has been confined to two parts of the city; anyone who wants to enter them is questioned by soldiers. The checkpoints may be for the safety of the residents, but they aren't popular.

'Living in a cage'

Not far from the cemetery, on the Alamdar Road, once the site of many of the attacks, one resident, Haji Mohammed Musa, railed against the measures.

"Yes, violence here has come down, but we can't go anywhere else in the city. We can't do business any more. We're living in a cage," he says.

The community once dominated the main bazaar in the city, now nearly all those with shops there have relocated into one of the two Hazara districts.



Close to 1,000 victims of militant attacks are said to be buried in the Mari Abad cemetery

Mr Musa, like many others, believes more should be done to target the militants responsible for the violence: "If a government can't deal with a handful of terrorists, how can they call themselves a government?"

Leaving Mari Abad can prove deadly. Hazaras are said to be the descendants of Mongols, and are identifiable from their distinct facial features.

Who are the Hazara?

- Of Mongolian and Central Asian descent
- Legend has it they are descendants of Genghis Khan and his soldiers, who invaded Afghanistan in the 13th Century
- Mainly practise Shia Islam, in predominantly Sunni Afghanistan and Pakistan
- At least 600,000 live in Quetta, mostly migrants from Afghanistan
- Quetta is also on a key Shia pilgrimage route to Iran

In October, vegetable seller Abdul Ghafoor set off in a pick-up truck with five others to visit a wholesale market in the centre of the city.

He says he knew it could be dangerous but went because vegetables in Mari Abad are much more expensive than those elsewhere in Quetta.

He was the only one who returned home.

"Suddenly the car stopped and gunshots rang out. I tried to get up to see what was happening. That's when I was hit. I fell unconscious."

Abdul Ghafoor was shot five times but survived. Now, though, he says he will never leave Mari Abad again, nor will he allow his family to do so.



Abdul Ghafoor was shot five times on a trip outside one of the Hazara districts

His two young sons have dropped out of school to work on his stall while he recovers.

They're part of a generation of Hazaras that community leaders fear will grow up never mixing with other ethnic groups living in the same city. The number of Hazara students in Quetta's universities, located outside Mari Abad, is said to have fallen dramatically.

Escape in parkour

One outlet for the frustration felt by many young Hazaras is sport.

Parkour, a form of urban gymnastics, is growing increasingly popular.

Ali Reza, 16, says it gives him a feeling of freedom.

"Parents are afraid of losing their children, they won't permit us to go anywhere. We are trapped in a prison. [Parkour] makes me forget all my worries, I feel like I have wings," he says.

Ali Reza lives in Quetta's only other Hazara district, Hazara Town. The community is split between these two enclaves, and many fear they will be targeted if they try to travel from one to the other.

Ali Reza and his friends do visit Mari Abad - they like taking photos of each other with the mountains surrounding the district in the background, but they don't tell their families.

Another of his friends, whose father was murdered in a targeted shooting, says wistfully: "If security was better we could invite guys from other communities to join us and learn parkour too. But at the moment it's not safe enough to even meet them."