

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit  
Working Paper

**WARTIME SUFFERING**  
**Patterns of Violations**  
**in Afghanistan**



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## About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

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AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations. AREU receives core funds from the governments of Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Specific projects in 2011 have been funded by the European Commission (EC), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Humanitarian Aid Department of the European Commission (ECHO), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and UN Women.

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# 1. Introduction

This paper accompanies the Bamiyan, Ghazni and Kabul provincial case studies from AREU's research project on "Legacies of Conflict: Justice, Reconciliation and Ways Forward."<sup>1</sup> The research aimed to explore Afghan perceptions, demands and suggestions in relation to addressing legacies of conflict and moving toward peace and reconciliation. It must be noted that the research was not designed to systematically document wartime experiences. However, a vast number of people gave up their time to tell their stories and while this was at times painful, many respondents also described the process as cathartic and healing. It was with this in mind that it was felt that the wartime stories gathered were worth both preserving and highlighting. This is a role served by this paper, which also provides a simple narrative for putting them in perspective.

Afghanistan has experienced over three decades of conflict since the Communist Revolution in 1978. In reality, the conflict has been several conflicts, each with multiple phases and actors. This paper divides the conflict into the following four phases: the communist revolution and People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government (1978-9) and the subsequent Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89); the fall of the Najibullah government and the civil war period (1989-96); the Taliban regime (1996-2001); and the post-Taliban period (2001-present). This breakdown of the different conflicts was found to be in keeping with how the people interviewed perceived the wars.

The study provinces and districts were chosen to reflect some ethnic diversity and to encompass as far as possible the different phases and intensities of conflict that the people suffered in a particular place. Security considerations as well as physical and social access were also taken into consideration. In each province, an urban and a rural site were selected, and information was gathered through a mixture of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. This created an opportunity to compare as large a range as feasible of different communities' perspectives coming from different contexts.

It should, however, be emphasised that while the research was vigorous in its approach (field and observation notes were essential ways of assessing the community environment, any possible bias of a respondent, and any information that they appeared unwilling to discuss or provide), stories couldn't always be verified through multiple sources due to their personal nature. Given the length and scale of the conflicts, respondents themselves sometimes painted a confusing picture of events. The research has intended to clarify these to ensure that the information presented is as accurate as possible.

The paper is divided into three main sections based on each province. Section 2 explores different wartime events and experiences in Kabul Province; Section 3 looks at Bamiyan Province; and Section 4 presents findings from Ghazni Province. Each section explores the different violations the research communities experienced, and is designed to compare not only the experience of the different communities interviewed in each province, but the differing patterns of violations under each regime.

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<sup>1</sup> The project began toward the end of 2009. It is funded by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kabul and was developed in cooperation with the International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ). For a more detailed explanation of the research methodology as well as detailed findings by province, see the three case studies: Emily Winterbotham, "Legacies of Conflict: Healing Complexes and Moving Forwards in Kabul Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2011); Emily Winterbotham with Fauzia Rahimi, "Legacies of Conflict: Healing Complexes and Moving Forwards in Bamiyan Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2011); and Emily Winterbotham, "Legacies of Conflict: Healing Complexes and Moving Forwards in Ghazni Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2011). All are available for download from [www.areu.org.af](http://www.areu.org.af) where there is a dedicated Legacies of Conflict project page.

## 2. Wartime Experience in Kabul Province

Kabul Province encompasses Afghanistan's capital and its surrounding districts. It is the most populated city in Afghanistan with approximately 3.7 million residents out of a total population of approximately 24.5 million.<sup>2</sup> As the capital city, Kabul has been at the centre of the wide-sweeping changes that the country has experienced over the past 30 years.

Huge numbers of people migrated during the Soviet and communist period. Many families directly experienced casualties, injuries and losses, and a considerable number of high profile figures disappeared, including writers, mullahs and military personnel. Many important people at the village level were also arrested and often never released. Many mass graves believed to date from that era are still being discovered.

After the fall of the Najibullah government, the various mujahiddin factions who had waged war against the Soviets and the communist governments took power and established a government. However, this soon fragmented amid complaints from some groups, including Hizb-i-Islami (a largely Pashtun party led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) and Hizb-i-Wahdat (founded in 1989 by Abdul Ali Mazari, leader of the Shiite Hazara) that the Jamiat party (largely Tajik; official leader was Burhanaddin Rabbani until his assassination in September 2011) had monopolised the government. This paved the way for widespread civil war across the country. Kabul City was at the centre of this violence, which included rocket attacks, killings, kidnapping and looting.<sup>3</sup>

The gross excesses and lawlessness of the civil war prompted a group of mullahs, who later became known as the "Taliban," into action. Initially limited to a small group of former fighters in the Kandahar area, the Taliban rapidly evolved into a much larger movement. The Taliban's near-complete conquest of the country had a heavy impact on Kabul Province. At the beginning, they persistently pursued and clamped down on former members of mujahiddin. New waves of migrations started; large scale human rights violations, such as arrests, harassment, massacres and forced expulsions took place. People, especially women, were deprived of their rights to education, freedom of movement and employment. Across the country, girls' schools were closed, women lost their jobs, and they could not move around without a male chaperone, known as a *mahram*.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, many Afghans were hopeful that violence would end. However, since 2006, the security situation has deteriorated and violence is now at its highest levels since 2001.<sup>4</sup> While Kabul is relatively stable, both in comparison to much of the country and in relation to previous decades, occasional explosions and suicide attacks create a pervasive sense of insecurity.

Research took place in two areas of Kabul Province—Afshar, an urban area within the city proper, and Shakardara, a district in the north of the province. Fieldwork began in late December 2009 and ended in July 2010. A final short research phase was conducted during one week in January 2011.

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2 Central Statistics Organization, "Afghanistan CSO population data 1389 (2010-11)" (Kabul: Government of Afghanistan, 2010).

3 For further information, see Antonio Giustozzi, "Afghanistan: Transition without End: An Analytical Narrative on State-Making" (London: London School of Economics Crisis States Research Centre, 2008).

4 Central Statistics Organisation, "National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2007/08" (Kabul: Government of Afghanistan, 2010).

This section explores the different violations that occurred in these two areas, comparing and contrasting any differences or similarities in types of violations or intensity. This section is broken down into sub-sections exploring different types of violations and wartime experience, including forced migration, death or injury, disappearance, destruction of property or livelihoods, and gender-based violence. It should be noted that since the current period was not identified as a period of conflict, this section only addresses violations occurring during the first three conflicts.

## 2.1 Migration

Millions of Afghans experienced periods of migration and displacement during all phases of the conflict. Forced migration was internal and external, largely to Iran and Pakistan. Distinct patterns of migration can be observed in Kabul Province between the various phases of conflict.

Significant population movements in and out of Shakardara occurred during the communist period as people fled to escape being caught in the cross-fire between the mujahiddin and the government. In contrast, Afshar was largely untouched by communist violence. Population movements at this time from Shakardara were largely to areas close by and were short-lived. In fact, the experience is perhaps better described as displacement rather than migration. Although a small minority of people had migrated to other parts of Afghanistan and, in particular, to Kabul City, generally the people of Shakardara appear to have been temporarily displaced by an escalation in violence. This quote from a middle-aged Tajik respondent, Nooria, represents this situation:

*When Russian conveyed were approaching the area, the mujahiddin were communicating with each other and informing people in the village. So, people were then leaving villages and going toward Kabul on foot.*

As a source of recruitment for the mujahiddin, the male inhabitants of Shakardara were less likely to migrate and instead stayed behind to fight. Many respondents discussed how they or their male relatives had joined the resistance. Abdul Wodod, an older man, described this situation: “There wasn’t anyone who wasn’t mujahiddin. My sons, brothers, all of us were mujahiddin during the time the Russians were here.”

In Afshar, the collapse of Wahdat party during the civil war and the ensuing devastation that mujahiddin forces unleashed on the area prompted nearly all the inhabitants to flee. Once they had escaped the area, many respondents described moving around within Kabul City to avoid the worst excesses of violence as the fighting fronts changed. A female Hazara focus group respondent described this:

*Until Sayyaf’s men captured the area we stayed here, but once they captured the area we stayed for 11 days and then went to Karte Parwan...From Karte Parwan we went to Wazir Abaad. We stayed there for three months. From there we moved to Karte Se. We lived there for a while and then the fighting started between Mazari and Massoud.*

A number of Hazara and Qizilbash (a minority ethnic group of Shia Muslims) Afsharis subsequently migrated to Mazar-i-Sharif. In contrast to the previous era, no one in Shakardara described migrating from the area during the civil war.

During the Taliban era there was evidence of increased migration abroad. This was especially the case in Shakardara, which suffered Taliban repression. Some people continued to migrate to neighbouring villages to escape Taliban forces largely because

they could not afford to go further afield. Some information was also heard about men who remained to fight against the Taliban. However, there was less evidence of this and the conclusion formed was that once Kabul fell in October 1996, resistance to the Taliban regime largely disappeared in Shakardara. At this point, significant numbers of people from the area explained how they chose to migrate abroad due to fear of repression by the Taliban.

The majority of Afshar's inhabitants who had fled during the civil war did not return until the start of the Karzai regime. Stories of migration from respondents in Afshar during the Taliban period therefore occurred in other parts of Kabul or Afghanistan. A number who had escaped from Afshar to Mazar described being forced to flee once more as the Taliban fought to wrest control of the area from forces headed by General Rashid Dostum. Some of these people then chose to migrate abroad. One such person was a younger Tajik man, Wali Ahmad, who explained, "We went to Pakistan because we faced a lot of problems at that time in Mazar. The Taliban arrested my brother but let him go after a few days."

## 2.2 Death or injury

During the first three phases of Afghanistan's conflicts people from both communities were killed or injured in rocket attacks, direct fighting, deliberate acts of torture and imprisonment. During the first phase of the conflict many people were killed or injured in Shakardara in incessant, reciprocal rocket attacks launched from the mountains by the mujahiddin and from the ground by communist forces. Nearly all men and women interviewed who were living in the area during this time described losing at least one family member. A few reports of deaths during this time were heard in Afshar, but these concerned people who were living in other parts of Afghanistan.

Acts of torture under the communist regimes were also described, largely directed at the mujahiddin or those who were believed to be their supporters. Some of these were reported to have occurred in the infamous Pul-i-Charkhi prison. The prison was the scene of torture and summary executions by the Soviet-backed regime and is believed to house the mass graves of thousands of political activists and mujahiddin.<sup>5</sup> This knowledge was fairly common in both communities and some respondents knew people who had been imprisoned in Pul-i-Charkhi.

Most people interviewed in Afshar discussed violations committed during the civil war or the "mujahiddin period," as it is largely known. The community identified two major phases in the civil war conflict that caused the most damage in the area: the incessant rocket attacks launched at the beginning of the conflict and the Afshar massacre. Many innocent people were killed in the rocket attacks launched across Kabul by the mujahiddin factions. The story of Rahima, a middle-aged Hazara female respondent, is one of many heard from the residents of Afshar:

*My brother was martyred—when he was crossing the road a rocket landed and he was killed. My cousin and his wife were also killed at this time. One of my cousins lost his leg. So, in total we lost seven people from our family. My brother, my cousins and other relatives...It was not clear where the rockets were coming from, they were coming from four sides...We hid in an orphanage underground for a month. At two in the morning, two or three people went*

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<sup>5</sup> Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, "A Call for Justice: A National Consultation on past Human Rights Violations in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AIHRC, 2005), 4.

**Box 1: Deaths of family members under the communist regime**

*Here there was fighting, it seemed as if the area was burning in the fire. So many rockets were falling here. There was fighting between the mujahiddin and the government. The mujahiddin were in the mountains and the government was in this area, whenever they both threw rockets all of them landed in this area. People were killed and injured; my sons were killed during [former communist-era president (1979-86)] Karmal's time as well.*

Murwarid, older Tajik female respondent, Shakardara

*Soviet Union forces also bombarded the village. In one of these bombardments my brother, his wife, a daughter and son, all of them were martyred.*

Commander Masshor, older Tajik focus group participant, Shakardara

*He was imprisoned during the Russian time. He told us that there were many people in Pul-i-Charkhi prison. The government punished them and gave them electric shocks saying, "you are all mujahiddin."*

Shiringul, older Tajik female respondent, Shakardara

*The Russians martyred my grandfather and my maternal uncle. At that time my uncle was a school teacher. They killed him because he was sending money to the mujahiddin.*

Jamal, a middle-aged Tajik man, Afshar, whose grandfather and uncle were killed in Kapisa

*and prepared food for the rest of us and then we had to go back underground before morning...if someone was killed during the day, people had to bury that person at night when it was dark.*

However, it was perhaps the events of the night of 10-11 February 1993 that linger most in Afsharis' minds. Militant forces belonging to Ittihad-i-Islami (a largely Pashtun party formed by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf) and Jamiat-i-Islami captured the area and razed it to the ground. Returnees to the area interviewed described scenes of devastation: streams of blood flowing, people clambering over dead bodies in their desperation to escape or wheeling away their dead in wheelbarrows as they fled. Numerous stories of inhabitants being killed, wounded or taken prisoner during this attack were also documented. The existence of a mass grave in the area, believed to contain the bodies of 60-70 people, remains a testament to the scale of the atrocities suffered by the people of Afshar.

Until the area was captured, Afshar had been under the control of Hizb-i-Wahdat, a predominantly Shia and Hazara party and military force. Wahdat's strategic position atop Afshar Mountain, its record of violence against non-Hazaras,<sup>6</sup> and its unwillingness to cooperate with the Sunni-dominated interim government made Afshar the target of this violent attack during which predominantly Pashtun and Tajik troops singled out Hazara residents for atrocities.

Respondents in both areas discussed cases of murder and bodily harm under the Taliban regime. As before, stories from respondents in Afshar took place in other parts of Afghanistan, since Afshar was largely deserted during the Taliban regime. In contrast, the inhabitants of Shakardara experienced the conflict as a community and the area was caught in direct fighting between the Taliban and resistance fighters. Respondents from all groups in both areas recalled how the Taliban applied physical force to punish people. Women in particular were singled out, especially if they behaved or dressed inappropriately.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Dorransoro, "Kabul at War (1992-1996): State, Ethnicity and Social Classes," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* (2007), <http://samaj.revues.org/index212.html> (accessed 20 September 2011), 33.

### Box 2: Specific targeting of the Hazara population

*My four brothers along with my father were captured during this time. They were imprisoned for about nine months by Sayyaf. One of my brothers was captured twice but he managed to escape. We were in Kabul up till late 1373 [1994] and we were completely looted in this area...There was war every day.*

Zafar, younger Hazara male respondent from Afshar

*I am afraid of them because I know they killed Hazara people. I said to myself, "if they think we are Hazara maybe they will kill us also," but they didn't think we were Hazara because our faces didn't look Hazara. I then thought about how Hazara people were Muslim and I was sad because of them.*

Mahmooda, older Qizilbash female respondent, Afshar

In many stories Taliban violence appeared largely targeted at former mujahiddin, people they believed possessed weapons or people they believed (wrongly or rightly) had links to the resistance. Anifa, a Tajik woman from Shakardara, described this approach:

*They only checked mujahiddin houses and they set fire to some of them. Like they set fire to Malik Isaq's house and didn't take anything from other people because they said that is un-Islamic and the things belong to the people. They set fire to houses but they didn't take anything with them.*

A younger male Tajik respondent from Afshar, Ihsan, described a similar situation in a northern district of Kabul City:

*During the Taliban, they beat my father. Someone had told the Taliban that my father had weapons so they told him to bring the weapons. They also arrested my eldest brother and beat him. People had told the Taliban that he was a commander...I faced no loss. They only had problems with the opposition; the Taliban did not bother poor people.*

However, this view was not shared by all respondents. One middle-aged Hazara woman from Afshar, Fauzia, described indiscriminate murders carried out by the Taliban in Bamiyan Province:

*I was in Bamiyan at the time of the Taliban and they gathered all the people in one place and put barbed wire around them and then attacked them on all sides with bullets. They were not armed men, all of them were common villagers; there were children of about 13 or 12 years old. What was their sin? They killed hundreds of people in one day...They burnt people's farms, they killed knowledgeable people, whoever was an engineer or a doctor, they didn't only kill mujahiddin.*

In fact, a number of respondents from different ethnicities in Afshar also suggested that Taliban behaviour was also influenced by which ethnicity an individual belonged to. They described how Hazaras faced particular abuse and repression at this time. As Mahmooda, a middle-aged Qizilbash female respondent from Afshar, said:

*The Taliban didn't have anything to do with us, they only arrested the Hazaras whose noses were flat, so they didn't do anything to us. They killed those people they arrested but they didn't do anything to us.*

Patterns of Taliban behaviour in other parts of Afghanistan will be more clearly illustrated in the synthesis paper for this project, which ties together data from all three provinces.

**Box 3: Cases of death and bodily harm under the Taliban**

*I went crazy because my father was killed here. My brother became a martyr here. My young daughter was also martyred here. One of my nine-year-old boys was killed here. In total, I lost six people. If you lost six people at once would your mind be ok? They were all killed and were martyred during the Taliban time.*

Aman, older male Tajik respondent, Shakardara

*Even in harsh winters they threw people in the water and then got them out of the water and beat them. There is a person now in our neighbourhood whom the Taliban beat so severely that even now after so many years he still does not feel well and suffers some pain in his body. Once the Taliban even took me and beat me and after this we fled to Iran. The Taliban took an uncle of mine and took out his nails with clippers.*

Shakir, younger male Tajik respondent, Shakardara

*They beat women who were a little bit fashionable with cables. I knew someone who was with her husband and the Taliban pulled her from the car saying, "she is not your wife," and then they beat them. Her husband said "she is my wife" but they didn't accept this and beat her husband and said, "don't take your wife out again with these clothes and that fashion. You must remember that all women wear burqas."*

Shaima, middle-aged Tajik woman, Afshar

## 2.3 Disappearance

Many cases of disappearance occurred under the communist regime in Shakardara and in other areas of Afghanistan. Men disappeared participating in fighting for either the mujahiddin or communist government, either snatched from their homes by communist or Russian forces and accused of fighting for the mujahiddin, or taken by the mujahiddin in retaliation for working with the communist government. A number of respondents in Shakardara described the disappearance of a family member or someone from the community. Several people in Afshar also lost relatives who were living in other parts of Afghanistan during this time. The stories in Box 4 present two different cases of disappearance. Both stories were told by female respondents, reflecting that it was generally men who disappeared at this time.

Many people disappeared during the civil war chaos in Afshar as they fled to escape the violence. Hazara men were most frequently taken prisoner by Ittihad-i-Islami and Jamiat-i-Islami. Some of them never returned. In one case, an older Hazara man, Eid Mohammad, described how he was informed that his brothers had been captured by Sayyaf's forces and killed, but that he had never seen their bodies:

*My four brothers were martyred at that time. One of them was found. This is his grave, but three of them were not found. People say that they were shot and killed in a hole while their hands were fastened behind their back.*

Very little information was collected about the disappearance of men from both areas under the Taliban; instead, a number of stories were heard about the disappearance of women. Respondents discussed how they believed that the Taliban captured women and subsequently sold them or married them by force. This is discussed further in the section on gender-based violations.

**Box 4: Disappearance during the communist regime**

*My husband was an army officer during the government of that time. The mujahiddin came to our house and took my husband. That was the last time I saw my husband and he disappeared. This was under the communists and [President] Najib.*

Anifa, an older Tajik female respondent, Shakardara

*My cousin and uncle's brother-in-law disappeared. One of them was 18 years old. My uncle had two brothers in laws, one of them disappeared and the other was martyred. The one who disappeared, there is no information about him and we haven't seen him or his dead body. His mother is always looking for him...Many people disappeared during the time of Presidents Amin and Najib. My mother says that the government took them because they are mujahiddin.*

Salima, younger Tajik female respondent, Afshar,  
whose family members disappeared when they were living in Parwan Province

## 2.4 Destruction of property and livelihoods

In all of the first three phases of the conflict, peoples faced damage and destruction to their livelihoods and property as a result of the war. In Shakardara, almost all the respondents discussed widespread damage to their homes and properties in rocket attacks between the mujahiddin and the communists. Having rebuilt their houses, inhabitants faced a similar experience during the Taliban era as the mujahiddin and Taliban exchanged rocket fire. Afshar was also physically devastated by rocket attacks during the civil war while militant attacks on the area in February 1993 left barely a house standing.

Respondents also complained bitterly about the widespread looting of their properties that happened as people hid to protect themselves from rocket attacks or fled to avoid fighting. In contrast to evidence of systematic looting by armed militants during the civil war in Afshar, inhabitants of Shakardara largely absolved the Russians and the Taliban from any responsibility for looting and instead blamed local people.

**Box 5: Destruction of property during the conflicts**

*During the Russian time we had many losses. At that time men were in the mountains, they were not able to come home. Houses were destroyed by bombs; all the gardens and plants were destroyed at that time.*

Hadisa, older female Tajik focus group participant, Shakardara

*Our economic situation was reduced to nothing. We left the area just with the clothes we had on...Nothing remained for people. Whatever people left behind was quickly looted.*

Zafar, younger Hazara man, Afshar

*Our houses were destroyed because of the mujahiddin, they were in the mountains and the Taliban were here. And they were firing on each other and because of these fights our houses were destroyed.*

Aman, older male Tajik respondent, Shakardara

**Box 6: The difference in looting in Afshar and Shakardara**

*People from the area robbed. The Russians didn't need to, they didn't rob. They just killed and arrested people. They didn't steal people's property. Now people say that the Russians stole people's household items, but this is not right, bad people from this area did.*

Maryam, middle-aged female respondent, Shakardara

*Our house was robbed during the war. The Taliban didn't rob, it was the people of the area that did that.*

Tamana, younger female Tajik respondent, Shakardara

*I have nothing left to inherit from my father because it was all looted; I couldn't take out a nail from my properties at that time. The only thing I could take from my property in Afshar was an earring from my wife and it was hidden in the roof of my house.*

Kazim, a middle-aged Qizilbash man, Afshar

## 2.5 Gender-based violence

This section presents information collected on violations and suffering that were experienced as a result of an individual's gender. This includes discussion of sexual violence, forced marriage, discrimination against women and men being forced to fight. The difficulties of conducting research on sexual violations should be acknowledged. While AREU's project included questions on this subject, the information presented here does not claim to be comprehensive.

Most data collected about rape and sexual violations came from female respondents in Afshar in relation to the civil war period. In all discussions, the mujahiddin were accused as responsible. The Afshar massacre was primarily identified as an occasion when rapes took place in the area. Najia, an older Qizilbash woman, talked openly about her neighbour who was raped during the mujahiddin period:

*The woman was raped in the mujahiddin time. She had many children and they were quite young. We heard this in Mazar when we became neighbours again. She came into our home and asked my father in law because he was a mullah. She said that the militants raped her by force and asked whether she was halal or haram [acceptable or forbidden] for her husband. My father told her she was halal because she was raped by force...She was a very good woman but she was raped. Believe me, when I saw her I became so sad because she was very ashamed. She couldn't look anyone in the eye. Her house was in this alley but she isn't here now, I don't know where she has gone.*

While female respondents more frequently discussed these violations, a number of men also testified that significant instances of rape occurred when the area was invaded. It is significant to note that there was no discussion of male rape occurring during any period of the conflict, though this does not mean it did not happen.

Older respondents in Shakardara reported that fears of rape by Russian soldiers existed during the communist era. However, no respondent actually had knowledge of any sexual violations committed by the Russians and a few people actually stated the Russians were not guilty of such acts. In fact, Shiringul, an older woman, said that when rape did happen it was committed by Afghans, not the Russians:

*Rape didn't happen here. In other places it happened. Afghan communists raped, not the Russian communists. Just look now, America doesn't do anything to any woman, they have their own beautiful women. It is our own Afghans who give reports and commit crimes.*

Another violation suffered specifically by women was forced marriage.<sup>7</sup> The majority of cases of forced marriage reported occurred during the Taliban period, although there were some stories dating back to the civil war as well. Forced marriage was also described as taking place in different parts of Afghanistan, suggesting this was a common practice and not specific to one area. Jamil, an older Tajik respondent from Afshar, described how when the Taliban came to his home province of Kapisa, they “even came with marriage certificates and wedding clothes to marry a woman or girl in the village. So, people were scared.”

Forced marriage was widely discussed by women in Shakardara, but in contrast to women in Afshar, no one openly admitted to knowing someone who had been married by force. The response from Salma, an older woman from the area, was fairly common:

*No it didn't happen in our village but in other villages we heard that they married girls by force...Beautiful girls had to keep themselves dirty and put some black things on their faces because of the Taliban...The Taliban in Ghazni and Logar did this.*

In contrast, men in Shakardara more openly discussed knowing women who had been kidnapped by the Taliban and were presumed to have been forcibly married off. At a male focus group and in a couple of interviews, participants identified several women who had been taken. It is not clear why women in Shakardara were not able to name anyone. A possible reason is the conservative nature of Shakardara, where women might have been more reluctant to disclose names for fear of shaming the families of the women. A further issue to consider is that while some cases of forced marriage are known to have occurred, AREU researchers were uncertain whether it was as widespread or as frequent as was claimed.

Women faced particular restrictions and discrimination under the Taliban, including being banned from working outside the house, leaving the house unaccompanied by a *mahram* and attending school. Complaints about these restrictions were raised by female respondents in both areas. Many younger female respondents in both Shakardara and Afshar especially resented losing the right to be educated and reported that they were now illiterate. A younger woman from Shakardara, Tamana, voiced this feeling: “When the Taliban came we were at an age where we should study and go to school, but the Taliban closed the girls’ school and many girls like me are illiterate because of that.” It should be noted that both women and men were denied access to education at various points of the conflict due to fighting and resulting migration. This was keenly felt by many respondents in both areas. One consequence is the existence of widespread illiteracy across Afghanistan.

One particular experience of war unique to men in both areas was being forced to fight. Under the communist government, there was the choice between conscription into the government military or joining the mujahiddin resistance. While men in Afshar more frequently took part in official military service, men in Shakardara joined the resistance. It should be recognised that in some instances, respondents explained

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Article 77 of the Civil Law allows marriage to be contracted without woman’s consent. See *Civil Law of the Republic of Afghanistan* (Official Gazette no. 353), 1977 (SY 1355), <http://www.asianlii.org/af/legis/laws/clotroacogn353p1977010513551015a650/> (accessed 20 September 2011).

that the decision to join the mujahiddin and fight had been largely forced on them by community expectations. Murawid, an older woman, explained that this was the reason her son fought. She said, “We didn’t agree that he should go, but it was forced on people to pick up weapons and fight—if someone didn’t go then his father had to go. From each family, a man had to go for jihad.”

Under the Taliban, men and women in Shakardara widely discussed how men were sent to the frontline by the Taliban if they could not pay enough money to avoid this. Two men interviewed were forced to fight since they were unable to pay their way out of it. One man was Abdul Wodod, an older Tajik, who explained this process:

*As matter of fact, during the Taliban government I went two times to the front to fight; once to Bagram and another time to Qargha. If we did not go then we had to pay one million Afs, so everyone was going to the front in turn.*

It is clear that the conflicts affected Kabul Province in a variety of ways and each community and the individuals within it have their own unique stories and experiences to tell. The different regimes clearly applied different tactics in different communities. This is important to remember as the discussion turns to experiences of conflict in Bamiyan Province.

### 3. Wartime Experience in Bamiyan Province

Bamiyan has a population of almost 360,000<sup>8</sup> and is located in Afghanistan's central highlands (often referred to as Hazarajat because of the majority Hazara population in the region). Bamiyan City, the provincial capital, has a population of about 70,000 and is the largest town in the region. Bamiyan remains one of most undeveloped provinces of Afghanistan, with the majority of the people earning their incomes through agriculture, including wheat, potatoes and livestock. There is a main road under construction connecting the province to Kabul, which is designed to eventually extend as far as Herat and link the provinces in between. Bamiyan is rich in sites of archaeological and cultural significance, including the now-destroyed Buddha statues, Band-i-Amir, Gholghola and Zohak cities. Many of these sites were damaged and looted during the different phases of the conflicts. At present, the province is widely considered to be one of the most stable in the country.

The people of Bamiyan, like most other areas of the country, have faced different aspects of suffering and casualties during each period of conflict. During the communist period, Bamiyan was a centre of resistance to the regime. This period witnessed numerous attacks on the civilian population by Soviet forces and resultant migration from the area, especially in Bamiyan City; many families experienced casualties and a number of mullahs, elders and educated people disappeared.

The province experienced relative stability during the Najibullah government (which was still receiving financial aid from the Soviet Union) after the Soviet departure in 1989. Najibullah followed a policy of decentralisation of power to the regions in order to maintain stability. However, small-scale factional conflicts between the various Shiite and largely Hazara mujahiddin factions—such as the Shura-i-Ittefaq, Sazman-i-Naser, Sepah-i-Pasdar and Harakat—started to occur. This prompted intellectuals and elders from Bamiyan Province to negotiate with the commanders involved to unify and form the single Hizb-i-Wahdat out of these disparate groups. At this time, Wahdat was headed by Abdul Ali Mazari, and its political arm is currently led by Mohammad Karim Khalili.

However, there was some dissent among the commanders. Akbari, a Qizilbash Shia and a leading member of Pasdaran-i-Jehad (Islamic National Unity Party of Afghanistan) and Anwari, an important commander in Harakat, were against this unification of parties. Wahdat and Harakat (followed largely by Sayeds, a solidarity group or *qawm* claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad) thus became the two largest Shiite parties in control in Bamiyan.

After the collapse of Najibullah's communist government the different mujahiddin factions who had fought against the Russian and communist governments took power and established a government in Kabul. The civil conflict that broke out in Kabul soon spread to Bamiyan as the Shura-i-Nazar/Jamiat, which was controlling the government at this time, advanced toward the province to destroy opposition there in the form of Wahdat. However, Bamiyan did not suffer the same level of devastation as Kabul, and conflict was largely limited to power struggles between different commanders.

The Taliban managed to enter the province in 1998 despite opposition from these different mujahiddin factions, resulting in massacres, property destruction and mass migration. While most Hazara commanders resisted the Taliban, Akbari publically proclaimed loyalty to them, supposedly to save the province from further devastation.

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8 "Afghanistan Country Stability Picture—Edition 20, December 2009," DVD (Kabul: NATO/ISAF, 2009).

Research was conducted in two areas in Bamiyan Province: in Sayed Abad, an urban area in Bamiyan City, and in a village in the valley of Dara-i-Ali in Yakowlang District in the northwestern part of the province. Research began in June 2010 and ended November of the same year. All interviews conducted were with Hazara respondents, reflecting the composition of the two research sites and the overwhelming majority of Hazaras in Bamiyan Province. This section explores the different violations that occurred in these two areas, comparing and contrasting any differences or similarities in the types or intensity of violations. As in the previous section, this is broken down into sub-sections detailing the violations that happened. As in Kabul, the current period was identified as one of peace and so is not addressed in this section.

### **3.1 Death or injury**

Over the past 30 years of conflict in Bamiyan Province, many people have died and been injured. In both Dara-i-Ali (rural site) and Sayed Abad (urban site), people lost their lives in direct fighting, bomb and rocket attacks, massacres or died as a result of fleeing into the inhospitable mountains surrounding their communities.

During the Russian and communist era, the urban community of Sayed Abad became a base for the mujahiddin to launch attacks against the Soviet forces garrisoned around Bamiyan airstrip. In response, the Soviets attacked the area with rockets and aerial bombardments, killing many residents. Residents of Sayed Abad also reported the arrest, torture, imprisonment and killing of groups of men from the area that the government or Soviet forces suspected of being mujahiddin. Older respondents widely reported how on several occasions men from Sayed Abad were rounded up, taken to the airstrip and then shot dead or run over by bulldozers. Men were also reportedly imprisoned for anything between a few days and several years, and people were brutally interrogated and regularly tortured. A number of mass graves in the area are known to date from this era.

One of the most significant periods was the uprising in Bamiyan on 17 May 1979 against the Russians, in which around 300 people from different parts of the Hazarajat lost their lives as communist troops fired on protesters. A mass grave around the airport is believed to date from that event. A majority of older respondents in the urban area also gave accounts of several more demonstrations that happened during this time and the resultant deaths that occurred. Fida, an older male respondent from the area, described one such event: “When the Russians came to Bamiyan people got angry and rushed towards them or demonstrated and then they fired and in these attacks many people were killed.”

Some local residents were killed or injured as they escaped to mountains, especially during the harsh winter. Older community inhabitants described how their relatives, particularly children and the elderly, were killed in the extreme cold due to hunger, fatigue or falls in their desperation to flee.

While the emphasis was on the abuses people suffered at the hands of both the Soviet and Afghan forces, there were also reports from a few elderly men in the urban community of abuse and kidnappings by the mujahiddin against those who worked for the Soviet-backed government.

In contrast, Soviet and Afghan government forces never entered the rural community in Dara-i-Ali. While aerial bombardments did target mujahiddin in surrounding mountains, these were generally rare. Respondents explained that this was because the area was too remote for Soviet ground forces to reach. Only one significant event was reported

in the early of years of this era: Soviet forces attacked the district centre at Nayak and forced the mujahiddin to retreat through Dara-i-Ali into the surrounding mountains. In response, the Soviets bombed the area and the research site itself was hit by bombs, causing several injuries and a few deaths. This prompted community members to flee to the mountains for several months. Zahra, an older female respondent from the area, clearly described this time:

*That time was very bad. The Russian airplanes and helicopters came and bombed this area, and many people were killed, but they didn't come to this area by road. Because the Russian airplanes came and bombed us, we left the area for one or two months and stayed in the mountains, and then came back.*

Despite the suffering caused, this was thus viewed as an isolated incident. However, a number of older respondents from this community reported relatives disappearing or dying while fighting for the mujahiddin or completing their compulsory military service.

As during the communist time, the rural area largely escaped the violence of the civil war, and no cases of death or disappearances were reported in Dara-i-Ali during this period. However, in Bamiyan City, harsh conflicts broke out between Shura-i-Nazar—mainly composed of Jamiat and Ittihad members—and Wahdat militants as the former tried to expand their control over the area. To meet this goal they first targeted Bamiyan City. Nevertheless, while Sayed Abad was more directly affected by the violence, it was largely perceived as a fight that was limited to members of the warring parties. Only a few people were reported killed in this fighting at this time, and these instances were largely accidental. Moreover, people in Bamiyan City had heard about the massacres in Afshar; fearing a similar experience, they vacated the area as soon as the Wahdat militants warned them to leave. Fakhria, an elderly female respondent from the urban site, summed up the general situation:

*During the time of Rabbani's government the relationship between the mujahiddin parties was not good. The mujahiddin were fighting between each other, but they did not have any issues with the village people they mainly fought in the mountain together. Different parties fought and killed each other and occasionally in the middle of this fighting innocent people were killed as well.*

Respondents in Sayed Abad and Dara-i-Ali unanimously described how abuses and violations resulted in many cases of death and injury during the Taliban time. Taliban militants attacked both areas several times and killed many people individually or in groups. Several mass graves in both communities date back to that time. Initially, those targeted were believed to be those suspected of belonging to Wahdat. However, it subsequently became clear that the Taliban had moved from fighting an armed enemy to more random targeting of the population. A key difference between the two research sites can be drawn here. In Bamiyan City, respondents widely reported that when the Taliban arrived, the first thing they did was shoot a number of men in the community as well as rounding up another group of around 25 men and executing them near the current site of Bamiyan's airport.

In contrast, in Dara-i-Ali, when the Taliban first entered the village they arrested men suspecting them of belonging to Wahdat, only to release them later. One respondent suggested that community elders were able to persuade these Taliban of the men's innocence and promise that they would not cooperate with the mujahiddin. As he explained:

**Box 7: Taliban using tricks to capture people**

*The Taliban sent a letter saying that they would not harass people anymore and so people came back and believed them. They then arrested people and tied their hands and took them to the airport in Bamiyan. The Taliban killed them all and cut off their heads. After a week, we went and brought back all the dead bodies. All of them were buried in the mass graves here in our area. Some of the dead bodies who were killed by the Taliban remained scattered for a month or more. Women were mostly responsible for bringing dead bodies back to the area.*

Halima, younger female respondent, Sayed Abad

*The Taliban killed one person in this area, but they killed many other people in other communities in this valley. They killed people from Jamak, an area below here, which is a village with a bigger community. From that area people ran away to the mountains and then the Taliban made fools of them and announced by loudspeakers to come down from mountain and said they wouldn't kill them. The people thought that the Taliban were being honest. Then they came down and the Taliban collected all the men and they tied their hands and took them to Nayak [district centre of Yakowlang] then killed them.*

Zarmina, older female respondent, Dara-i-Ali

*The Taliban arrested 100 people from around this area. They wanted to shoot everyone; they even prepared weapons to kill us all but at this time a Taliban mullah came and told us that we were free to go if we did not cooperate with mujahiddin from now on. He said, "If you cooperate with the mujahiddin, next time we come to the area, we will kill you all."*

In urban Sayed Abad those mostly affected were elderly residents who were unable to flee the area and a number were subsequently killed by the Taliban. Another event that was widely reported was the way the Taliban tricked people and invited them back to the community, promising they would be left alone. However, on the community's return they implemented door-to-door inspections and gathered a number of male residents and killed them. While this tactic did not directly affect the rural community, inhabitants discussed this occurring in neighbouring areas. The quotations in Box 7 sum up these experiences.

In the rural site, the actual number of people interviewed who reported deaths within the community itself was very small. This was largely because they heard stories of massacres elsewhere in Dara-i-Ali valley and in Bamiyan City, and were consequently more prepared. Inhabitants of the area described receiving warnings from Khalili's followers of approaching Taliban forces and largely escaped by fleeing to the mountains before the Taliban entered the area.

Consequently, stories of death and injury collected from the rural site largely concerned events in other areas of Yakowlang. In particular, people described how communities near to the district centre at Nayak and those at the entrance to the valley of Dara-i-Ali faced more frequent raids by the Taliban. Many villagers were reportedly shot dead while they were busy working on their farms. The overall impression of the inhabitants of the rural site was that the Taliban had unleashed indiscriminate killing in this area, shooting anyone they encountered. This was reportedly in retaliation to Wahdat's resistance to them. Two grave sites<sup>9</sup> dating from that time exist in the valley. It should be noted that

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the respondents drew a distinction between mass graves containing bodies of victims of mass murders buried in a proper way, and what Stefan Schmitt calls "criminal mass graves." These are identified as sites linked to war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity that are often clandestine, implying secrecy and lack of knowledge. See Stefan Schmitt, "Mass Graves and the Collection of Forensic Evidence: Genocide, War Crimes, and Crimes against Humanity," in *Forensic Taphonomy: The*

**Box 8: Taliban massacres in Dara-i-Ali**

*The Taliban killed more than 40 or 50 people from this valley. They took all of them to Nayak and stood them beside each other. Then they tied their hands behind their backs, and shot them. They were all poor people, none of them was involved in fighting; they even took 15-year-old boys and old men. All of them were labourers and farmers. They took them from their farms and houses and killed them.*

Roqiya, middle-aged female respondent, Dara-i-Ali

*From the villages below us they took a number of people to Nayak and none came back; they had killed them all. Their martyrs were buried in mass graves. There is one mass grave at the entrance of Sarequl and one on your way when you come to our village. I think there are 30 people in that mass grave.*

Shaban, middle-aged male respondent, Dara-i-Ali

the numbers buried in these sites cannot be verified, but they were widely reported by the community, who built and maintain the sites.

In both areas, dead bodies remained unburied until some of the older women and men in these communities negotiated with the Taliban to collect them for burial. Karima, a middle-aged woman, described the elders of Sayed Abad writing a letter to the Taliban to find out where people had been killed and to gain permission to retrieve their bodies. In her words:

*From our village, the elders came together and wrote a letter to the Taliban government and wrote that they wanted to know about what had happened with them. Then the Taliban showed them the location of the dead bodies; so ten to 15 women and two or three old men went and collected the bodies. My mother-in-law said there were more than 30 people martyred. They searched for all the bodies to find their own family member's body and took all the bodies and brought them here then buried them all in one place.*

The identification of the Taliban as largely Pashtun and Sunni led to a widespread perception in both research sites that the Hazara community was targeted as a result of their ethnicity and Shiite faith. In contrast to the Soviet period, this identification was believed to be a major reason for the random killings and atrocities the Taliban committed in the province. In fact, a number of elderly men and women respondents in both communities believed the Taliban's overall aim was to eliminate the Hazara population and drive them from Afghanistan.

This belief that the Taliban were targeting Hazara communities encouraged the Sayed residents of Nayak to welcome the Taliban by raising white flags. However, many of this community were subsequently killed. It was commonly reported by respondents in Dara-i-Ali that about 500 Sayeds were killed and are buried in mass graves in Nayak. Many people also argued that the Taliban did not consider Shiites to be Muslims. Given that Sayeds in Bamiyan are also Shiites, this would add weight to their argument. Hamed, a younger male respondent from the rural site, summed up this frequently-voiced opinion:

*The Taliban believed that Shiite people were not Muslims; they thought Shiite Muslims were infidels. I know a person who was captured by the Taliban but was released because he knew one of them. He said that after Taliban killed*

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*Postmortem Fate of Human Remains*, eds. W. D. Haglund and M. H. Sorg Raton, 277-292 (London: CRC Press, 1996).

**Box 9: The Taliban’s specific targeting of Hazara communities:**

*When the Taliban captured a place they killed people no matter if they were old or young, sane or crazy. They took a mad person in an upper neighbouring village, cut off his arms and hung him in a tree upside down. Properties were also looted and people were forced to leave their homelands.*

Sakhi, older aged male respondent, Sayed Abad

*It is clear that they have this enmity because when they came to a Hazara area, they killed many people like here in Yakowlang. When they come to our area, they were very cruel to our people. They burnt peoples’ houses and our crops.*

Zarmina, older female respondent, Dara-i-Ali

*people from the valley, they raised their hands and faces to the sky and said, “Oh God, accept this jihad from me.”*

Several middle-aged and older men from Sayed Abad even believed that the Taliban thought the Hazara (and by association Sayeds) were Buddhist—allegedly as a result of the presence of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan City—thinking that their *mohr* (holy soil used by Shiites in prayers) was made of soil from the Buddha statues. Ultimately, it was generally felt that the Taliban saw Hazaras and Sayeds as infidels and believed they were waging jihad by killing them.

As in the communist period, both communities experienced fatalities while fleeing from the Taliban into the surrounding mountains; some staying for weeks, others for months. Countless stories were told of old and young people dying of cold and hunger in the mountains or people being killed or seriously injured in falls. Murtaza, a middle-aged male respondent from Sayed Abad painted this general picture:

*Many people died while passing through the rough mountains full of snow. Many, mostly old people and small children, died because of hunger, cold and excessive tiredness; some even died because of fear.*

In the urban site, Tajik households historically formed a minority of the population. When the Taliban arrived, a number of Tajiks reportedly sided with them.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the urban community widely blamed the Tajik community for some of the murders that occurred, arguing that they identified leaders and people who possessed weapons to the Taliban, revealed people’s hiding places and, in a few cases, committed physical violations themselves. Many—especially older respondents—felt that the Tajik community had used the Taliban period to profit from the conflict or to take revenge for violations they had suffered at the hands of the Hazara community, especially Wahdat, during the civil war. Qaiyum, a middle-aged male respondent from the area, argued this view: “When the Taliban appeared, the Tajik population was unified with them, and as they came toward Bamiyan to attack, the Tajiks directed them and showed them where to go.”

### 3.2 Migration

People have experienced different migration patterns over the past three decades. Almost all residents from both research sites experienced several rounds of displacement, largely during the Taliban and communist regimes.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting again that the research team did not interview any Tajik households in Sayed Abad.

At the time of the communist era, displacement from both urban and rural communities was largely short-lived and localised, as people moved to different areas in Bamiyan Province but also fled into the mountains. As a community, Sayed Abad experienced more frequent and prolonged migrations as a result of the intensity of fighting in the area when compared to the rural community. Older respondents in Sayed Abad described how they were often warned of the need to flee by the mujahiddin operating in the area in order to minimise civilian casualties in the battles between the resistance and the Soviet-backed forces. Qaiyum, a middle-aged male respondent, depicted this general migration pattern:

*During the communist regime, a commander from Hizb-i-Harakat came to our area and told people to evacuate to avoid being killed. He was a mujahiddin commander and wanted to fight against the local communists and take power from them. Consequently, all the residents of this area left and migrated to Dokani valley. They took the control of the province from the communist forces and after three months people returned to the area.*

According to the respondents in Dara-i-Ali, Russian troops did not enter the community and the residents were only forced to flee the area on a few occasions as Soviet and communist forces launched aerial bombardments at the mujahiddin in the surrounding mountains.

During the civil war, only minor conflicts between local commanders happened in Dara-i-Ali. These did not affect the general population, and no respondent discussed being forced to migrate or flee at this time. In contrast, the factional fighting during the civil war period caused some people from Sayed Abad to temporarily migrate to escape being caught in the cross-fire largely between Hizb-i-Wahdat and Shura-i-Nazar.

Sometimes, migration patterns took on an ethnic dimension due to the divisions that were triggered by this factional conflict. In Bamiyan City, where Hazaras largely supported Wahdat while Tajiks and Pashtuns aligned with Shura-i-Nazar/Jamiat, power exchanges between the two prompted either the Tajik or Hazara communities to flee the area at different points. Ultimately, when Shura-i-Nazar was defeated, the minority Tajik community largely left Bamiyan Province and migrated to Kabul and Mazar, returning once the situation had grown calmer.

The highest and most prolonged levels of migration took place during the Taliban era, reflecting the severity of the situation at this time. Two different patterns were recorded: on the one hand, around one third of respondents from the urban site reported migrating more permanently to other parts of Afghanistan and a few people moved abroad. On the other, more people in both research communities migrated temporarily to the mountains to escape Taliban violence, often on multiple occasions and for varying periods. This was particularly true of the rural site, where the majority of respondents explained that they took temporary refuge in the mountains, returning when Taliban forces retreated. This reflects the fact that Taliban troops were not permanently based in this specific community and also that the relative poverty of its inhabitants restricted their ability to leave behind their land and migrate elsewhere. Instead, many respondents described hiding near their properties so that men could return to irrigate land and attend to their livestock where possible.

In one case that cannot be substantiated since no other respondent described it, a younger female focus group participant from Sayed Abad described how the Taliban had ordered people to leave by bus: "Then they told us to leave Bamiyan. They put us a bus and we all left here in that and went to Tala Barfak [in Baghlan Province]. Then they

**Box 10: Migration patterns during the Taliban**

*About 15 to 20 families from this village fled when the Taliban came and went to Behsud. We were there for three months and then went to Kabul because we needed work and food, and neither were available there. We were there for two years but left because we didn't have a house and came back to here. But some families are still there and they didn't come back with us, because they have better life there.*

Karima, middle-aged female respondent, Sayed Abad

*When the Taliban came to this area we left and ran away. When the Taliban left and it was calm we came back to the area. Sometimes, men returned during the night to attend to the crops.*

Safora, younger female respondent, Dara-i-Ali

imprisoned all the men and killed all the young ones.” While this was described by only one person, it was widely accepted by respondents in both communities that Taliban policies were all aimed at forcing Hazaras out of their communities.

### 3.3 Destruction of property and livelihoods

Afghanistan’s conflicts caused extensive physical and material damage to the country due to aerial bombardments, deliberate destruction of property and sites of historical heritage and the looting of people’s properties. This caused considerable economic suffering to many people in both research sites.

Elderly respondents from Sayed Abad described extensive damage to people’s homes and businesses that occurred during the communist period as Soviet and communist air units bombed the community. In contrast, older respondents in Dara-i-Ali explained that only limited damage had occurred to their community.

However, mujahiddin demands that communities provide them with food, finance and other amenities in return for their waging jihad against the communist government were also an occasional cause of resentment in both communities. While many people were happy to provide material and financial support to the mujahiddin, a small number of older male and female respondents complained about the burden this placed on them. Women from both communities in particular described how the mujahiddin forced people in the villages to slaughter animals and cook and clean their clothes. Kobra, an older female respondent from Sayed Abad, summed up the complaints of this small group:

*They were also cruel to people. In the evening, they came to people’s houses and said to them, “we are doing jihad for you so you should make dinner every night for us.” People had to make food for them and ten to 15 people came and stayed for the night. Some people didn’t have food for them to eat because they were poor. So they beat them and forced them to borrow food from others. They slaughtered sheep and people of the area couldn’t say anything.*

During the civil war period, Dara-i-Ali once again faced little in the way of economic suffering. In contrast, some limited damage to property and houses was experienced in Sayed Abad due to fighting between different factions in the area. However, of greater concern to respondents interviewed in this community were the reciprocal cycles of property damage and looting that were the result of ethnic tensions in the community

at this time. People who were living in the community widely reported how Hazaras took revenge against the Tajik community in both Sayed Abad and Bamiyan City more generally by looting or burning their properties. When Shura-i-Nazar took control of Sayed Abad, respondents reported similar behaviour from Tajik residents in response.

In contrast to the previous two periods, both communities perceived far greater indiscriminate destruction during the Taliban era. The destruction of cultural and religious heritage by the Taliban was particularly resented. This was most clearly reflected in the destruction of the ancient Buddha statues in Bamiyan City, but also in the setting fire to places of worship such as mosques and *menbars*<sup>11</sup> in both research communities.

In both communities, almost every respondent mentioned that the Taliban had destroyed or burned their houses and properties at various phases. In rural Dara-i-Ali this meant people were unable to irrigate or harvest their crops. Zara, an elderly female respondent, summed up people's general descriptions of this: "They came to our area and they burned our houses. When we came back from the mountain, we saw our houses completely destroyed by the Taliban." Given Dara-i-Ali's reliance on agricultural production, the destruction of their land and crops was particularly resented by people there. In urban Sayed Abad, this meant people's businesses and sources of income were destroyed. In other cases, people talked of the Taliban stealing their property, for example their horses or jewellery, before burning their houses. In both communities, the destruction of property and livelihoods was largely perceived to be the result of the Taliban's attempt to force Hazara communities to leave Bamiyan Province or preventing them from returning.

Moreover, in Sayed Abad it was widely reported that the local Tajik community, who had fled after the defeat of Shura-i-Nazar during the civil war, returned under the Taliban and allied with them, taking advantage of the situation to loot people's houses and destroy their livestock and livelihoods. Several respondents described how they had directly witnessed Tajik neighbours looting their livestock and other properties. Female respondents also often discussed how local Tajiks searched them for money or jewellery. These events have left a long-lasting impact on the Hazara community in Sayed Abad, especially among women.

However, it should be recognised that respondents acknowledged that not all Tajiks inflicted economic damage on their Hazara neighbours. A few, largely male, respondents, explained that just as a few Hazaras had protected Tajik assets during the civil war, at various points during the Taliban era, their Tajik neighbours helped to protect their properties and businesses. As one male respondent, Delawar, illustrates, politicisation of ethnic divides could not always defeat existing communal loyalty:

*There was a Tajik woman who called my mother her sister. She kindly fed our sheep and goats when we fled from our homes. When I had left I thought nothing would be left alive by Taliban. When we returned home it was not destroyed and burnt.*

Respondents in both research communities also discussed the economic conditions under the Taliban, complaining about the high cost and scarcity of many goods and the lack of employment. A couple of male respondents in Sayed Abad also singled out the Taliban's system of taxation for particular criticism. As one man in Sayed Abad recalled, "If you had a truck of potatoes they took so much tax from you by force that by the end you were hardly left with anything useful."

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11 *Menbar* is often used by Shiites to refer to a religious place, used for prayers, education and gathering.

The decades of conflict have inflicted massive damage on both communities' economic situations. It was widely reported in both sites how people had to start from scratch and rebuild everything after each conflict had ended. The perceived lack of development and financial support provided to Bamiyan by the government and international community was therefore a constant source of complaint. Addressing these prevailing economic problems was consequently a key demand among the vast majority of people interviewed.

### 3.4 Gender-based violence

Sexual violations were only mentioned as occurring during the Taliban time. However, due to sensitivity of this topic clear information was not obtained. In fact, this issue was mostly discussed by women in the urban site and only one female respondent mentioned it in the rural community. Generally, even those female respondents in Sayed Abad that spoke about sexual violations said they only had heard about this happening in other areas and not to themselves personally or to anyone they knew.

Only one female respondent from Sayed Abad said that she had actually witnessed women being abducted and heard about their subsequent abuse and all other stories related to the research team were based on hearsay. Kobra, an elderly respondent, blamed this type of violation on Tajik communities, saying:

*As Tajiks looted people's houses they also took women and girls. After a month, they came to the bazaar and informed their families to come and take their daughter. Then, they left the girls in the area. The girls were pregnant because the Tajik people raped and abused them.*

However, later she mentioned that it did not happen in her own area and so the validity of her information can be questioned. Men in the urban site actually rejected the validity of any claims of sexual violations at any time. For example, Qambar, an older male respondent from the urban area, dismissed such reports as fabrications:

*It is said that rape also happened in Bamiyan, but it is a complete lie, it did not happen either for Hazara or Tajiks. People who say this want to create disunity and divisions among people and ethnicities.*

In fact, perhaps the conclusion of Sakina, a younger female respondent from rural Dara-i-Ali, is perhaps closest to the truth: "No ordinary person saw with their own eyes that the Taliban had taken women or abused them. Only armed people who were fighting against Taliban said that it is true. I don't know whether they were right, maybe they had to make us frightened." Regardless of the actual validity of these claims, it is apparent that a significant proportion of women in both communities feared sexual abuse by the Taliban more than they did from Soviet or communist forces.

Even less information was collected about sexual violations of men during any conflict. Only one woman from the urban area mentioned practices such as the selling of young boys during the Taliban era. Nafisa, an elderly respondent, described how the Taliban once captured a young teenage boy from his family. She explained that he was good-looking boy, and believed that they wanted to sell him to the Taliban in Kandahar:

*The Taliban took 12 people from our family, my brother-in-law's son was here and they took him as well. He was very handsome, a Talib wanted to sell him to the Kandahri Taliban, but the Ghorbandi Taliban didn't let him do that. They took that boy and went to Ghorband, he was a prisoner with them for one year.*

Although the respondent did not go into detail about what might have happened to the boy, it is possible that some Taliban fighters stole young boys to use them as their sex slaves.

It is important to highlight that in comparison to other provinces there were fewer complaints in Bamiyan Province regarding discrimination against women, particularly in terms of access to jobs and education. This was largely because the high levels of fighting meant that normal life ceased to exist and there was no opportunity for women and even men to work or attend school. As a result, many younger people in both communities claimed that they were now illiterate. Summing up this general situation, a middle-aged man from Dara-i-Ali said, “The war had bad effect on women and children, they don’t understand anything now, and they remain uneducated.”

As in Kabul, men often faced the choice of being conscripted into the government military or joining the resistance. While the majority of elderly male inhabitants of both communities were proud to have joined the resistance and stated that they had escaped compulsory military service, there was some evidence that a few individuals had been forced into government conscription. Ahmad, an older male respondent from Dara-i-Ali, explained how his father was one such individual:

*At that time I was eight years old and the government was taking people by force to work for the military and so my father was forced to be a soldier during the communist time. When he had nearly finished his duty in the army he was martyred.*

The Taliban’s policy of forcing people to pay money to avoid being sent to fight on the frontlines was particularly resented. Respondents in both research sites claimed that the Taliban forced people of all ethnic groups to fight for them against Hizb-i-Islami and Hizb-i-Wahdat in Shomali and Panjshir (to the north and east of Kabul), and sometimes against Hazaras in Bamiyan. If a family didn’t have a man to offer or could not afford the five to eight million Afs waiver (around US\$1,000-1,700 in the late 1990s), the Taliban would force them to leave the area. This had a major impact on women who were left behind, either because their male relatives had escaped or were killed fighting for the Taliban. This policy was more concentrated on the city site since it was directly controlled by the Taliban. Salim, a younger male respondent, shared his experience: “The Taliban took people by force to fight against Massoud; if we did not accept, they threatened to kill us.”

### **3.5 Disappearance**

During the various conflicts, vast numbers of people have disappeared in Afghanistan. Research in Bamiyan Province revealed several cases of disappearances reported in both urban and rural sites, largely during the communist and Taliban periods. Overwhelmingly, it was reported that men were the ones who disappeared.

In urban Sayed Abad, a few respondents reported the disappearance of a relative or member of their community during the communist regime. The communist government arrested several village elders, influential people and people suspected of being part of the resistance who subsequently disappeared. In other cases, people had joined the mujahiddin and had never returned. In the rural area, family members and relatives or villagers who disappeared from both areas were those who had joined the army to complete compulsory military service or been taken away by the military forces of the communist government.

No cases of disappearance occurred during the civil war. However, during the Taliban regime, some people disappeared across Bamiyan. Some of these were people who had joined mujahiddin parties to fight against the Taliban. Others were those who had been taken captive by the Taliban. Most cases of disappearance came from the urban site and around a third of people interviewed talked about losing their loved ones during this time.

Overall, the widespread loss of life during the Taliban era, the perceptions of being singled out due to ethnicity or religion and the collaboration of fellow community members with the Taliban has left a long-lasting impact on both communities in Bamiyan Province. People interviewed widely expressed fear that the Taliban would be allowed to return to their area to commit massacres. In this they stand in direct opposition to many members of the rural community interviewed in Ghazni Province, where the analysis turns next, who desire the return of the Taliban.

**Box 11: Disappearance during the communist era**

*During the Khalqi time, my uncle Qader, my maternal uncle Haji Baqir, and my grandfathers Haji Rosol and Haji Mahdi disappeared. We still don't know what happened to them.*

Safar, older male respondent, Sayed Abad

*My grandfather disappeared and my own father-in-law disappeared. He disappeared during the Khalqi time, they took him to be a soldier, and his duty was in Kabul and Jalalabad. My grandfather-in-law looked everywhere for him but he couldn't find him. We are sure he was killed and he is not alive, but his mother was always looking for him until she died.*

Raziya, middle-aged female respondent, Dara-i-Ali

**Box 12: Disappearance during the Taliban time**

*After being imprisoned and tortured by Taliban he managed to escape and join the mujahiddin party in Bamiyan to fight against the Taliban and then after that disappeared.*

Aqela, younger female respondent, Sayed Abad

*My cousin disappeared during the Taliban time; he was about 13 years old when he disappeared. We just heard that he was imprisoned and was crying in prison. Then we do not know what happened to him, it is not clear whether he is alive or dead.*

Fakhria, older female respondent, Sayed Abad

## 4. Wartime Experience in Ghazni Province

Ghazni has experienced a precarious security situation throughout the successive phases of Afghanistan's conflicts and is still facing ongoing and escalating violence in the current period. During the communist government's rule, the people of Ghazni were caught up in the heavy fighting between the government and mujahiddin forces. At the same time, Ghazni was also affected by factional fighting between different mujahiddin parties such as Hizb-i-Islami, Mahaz-i-Milli, Jamiat-i-Islami, Harakat-i-Islami, and Harakat Inqilab. Before the formation of Hizb-i-Wahdat, the sub-groups of Hizb-i-Naser, Hizb-i-Pasdaran-i-Jihad and few others also represented the Hazara and Shiite community there during jihad against the Russians.

After the fall of the communist government, the mujahiddin took control of the province and the security situation improved somewhat, although ongoing power struggles continued between the different parties. However, this violence did not affect the people in Ghazni Province as greatly as in other areas, such as Kabul City, and this was largely a period of relative calm. During the Taliban regime, the populations of this province suffered from some of the worst excesses of Taliban rule. Large-scale human rights violations, such as arrests, torture, disappearance and massacres took place, along with the deprivation of women's rights and the specific targeting of former communists, mujahiddin and Hazaras.

Ghazni Province is currently facing increasing conflict and insecurity, particularly in the rural areas, stemming from fighting between the Taliban insurgency and American and government forces. Though some areas of the province remain under control of the government, rural districts, particularly those further away from Ghazni City, are largely controlled—directly or indirectly—through fear and intimidation by the Taliban.

Research was conducted in one urban community in Ghazni City and one rural community in Qarabagh District between March 2010 and October 2011. In line with Chapters 2 and 3, this chapter compares and contrasts violations in the two areas under different regimes and is organised according to the type of violence experienced.

### 4.1 Death or injury

A majority of all respondents reported that they had lost a family member during the communist period and others widely reported people suffering injuries. Both communities were heavily involved in the resistance to the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. Many men actively joined the mujahiddin and other community members supported them by providing food and shelter when needed. While both communities provided similar support to the resistance and expressed similar opposition to Soviet rule, the two research sites had slightly different experiences of this conflict. The rural area in Qarabagh District witnessed much more intense and regular direct fighting and aerial bombardments due to its use as a base by mujahiddin to launch attacks against Soviet forces.

Older respondents most frequently discussed aerial attacks by Soviet backed-government forces that killed huge numbers of people. People especially resented the death of women, children and elderly people in these indiscriminate attacks, perceived to be innocent civilian casualties. While the urban area might have experienced fewer aerial bombardments than Qarabagh, the majority of elderly respondents there reported these occurring either in their area or when they were living elsewhere in the country or province.

**Box 13: Death of innocent civilians in aerial attacks**

*I lost a lot of my darlings, my beautiful sisters, who I loved. One day, my sister wanted to go somewhere in our village with my grandmother and there were a lot of people with them in the car. All of them were innocent but on the way the Russian forces bombed them, maybe because they thought this was a car carrying mujahiddin, and murdered them.*

Sayeeda, middle-aged Tajik female respondent, Ghazni City

*One day the helicopters of the communist government bombarded our village and murdered nearly 27 men and women, including children...Also my father lost his hearing because of the loud sound of bombs and even now he is deaf.*

Mohammad Musa, middle-aged Hazara male respondent, Qarabagh

*In our area some young people went to outside to play and there was one Russian plane, and an explosion happened and all of them were martyred, one of whom was my aunt's son. The explosion was very strong and just their flesh remained. We couldn't identify their bodies and so we collected their flesh. This caused great pain for their mothers.*

Khalija, middle-aged female Hazara focus group participant, Ghazni City

Disturbing stories emerged of people trying to collect their relatives and friends' dead people's body parts together. A few individuals also discussed how relatives were injured in these attacks resulting in permanent disablement.

Elderly residents from both communities also widely reported the arrest, torture, imprisonment, murder and disappearance of groups of men from the area suspected of being mujahiddin by both Afghan Government and Soviet forces. At least half the female respondents interviewed in both sites described how they had lost a father, brother, son or other male relative due to this association with the mujahiddin. In addition, members of the religious community were reportedly targeted. Elderly respondents in both sites, but most frequently in Qarabagh, also described how Russian and communist forces entered their community and harassed, beat and injured people to find out information about the mujahiddin. Moreover, high numbers of male casualties were reported in battles against government forces. In one story, an elderly male Hazara respondent from Ghazni City described how some Hizb-i-Islami mujahiddin escaped into a hiding place, but that the government forces followed them, trapped them and used gas to kill them. He said nearly 20 people died in that attack and were buried there. Another elderly female Pashtun respondent from Qarabagh, Naghma, described how her son was martyred while waging jihad:

*My elder son was young when he was martyred, just three months after he was married. My son was with the mujahiddin and he was waging holy war in the mountains but unfortunately one day the other mujahiddin brought his corpse and they told us, "Your son was martyred while fighting with Russian forces." At that time I didn't cry, I just kissed his face but his wife cried a lot at that time. She suffered a lot.*

While the emphasis was on the abuses people suffered at the hands of both the Soviet and Afghan forces, there were also a few reports of abuse and murder committed by the mujahiddin toward those who worked for the Soviet-backed government. Several middle-aged and older respondents from Ghazni City explained how the mujahiddin threatened people, in some cases forcing them to resign from their positions, and how people were murdered or taken from their homes in retaliation for working for the government. For example, Sayeeda, a middle-aged female respondent from the city, described how her father was murdered:

*My father thought that we must live with our tribes together in our village because he became hopeless when my sisters were murdered and he hoped that people in our village would treat us well and he could work on his land freely. But the mujahiddin had power in our village and they were against my father's existence because he had been an employee of Doctor Najibullah. So they killed him and we had to leave the area.*

Moreover, a couple of older people in both research sites discussed how clashes between mujahiddin leaders during this period also resulted in the death of innocent people. Abdullah, an elderly Hazara man, provided the clearest example of this. He told the research team how when he was living in Jaghatu District in the northeast of the province, there were two main commanders who controlled the area and people were divided in their support for each. These power struggles soon turned violent and people, including his brother, were killed.

Hardly any stories of death or injury in Ghazni Province during the civil period were collected from either research site. In one sense, this reflects the respect that was awarded to the mujahiddin due to their successful waging of jihad against Soviet invaders, but more particularly the fact that this was a period of relative calm in Ghazni. A couple of individuals did discuss violent clashes that occurred between Hizb-i-Islami and Hizb-i-Wahdat or Harakat Inqilab in which a small number of innocent civilians were killed. However, these stories were not widespread and people emphasised that ordinary civilians were largely unaffected by this conflict or temporarily migrated to escape outbursts of violence.

Instead, the Taliban period was singled out as a time when many people died in the urban community. At least half of all male and female respondents interviewed stated that they had relatives or friends who had died due to the Taliban violence. Respondents widely described the Taliban arresting people and subsequently murdering or torturing them. Certain groups felt more threatened during this period: members of the Hazara community, women, and people who had worked for the communist government or actively participated in a mujahiddin party. In contrast, hardly any respondent from the rural site in Qarabagh reported the death of a relative during this time. Although respondents did not regularly discuss this, it was clear that a proportion of male inhabitants of the Qarabagh village actually joined with the Taliban, while the rest of the community was largely supportive of this regime.

One particularly harsh dimension of the Taliban's rule was their implementation of justice according to extreme interpretations of Islamic and Sharia law. It is clear from the data that regular public executions, lashings and stonings took place at Ghazni stadium or in specific parks. The majority of younger male and female respondents

**Box 14: The Taliban's strict implementation of justice**

*Innocent people were killed in public and no-one dared ask them why; they imposed their own law on people, which they had made up.*

Rahima, younger female Hazara respondent, Ghazni City

*One day I remember that the Taliban announced on the radio that the government would execute a criminal the following day at the Ghazni stadium at eight o'clock. The next day we went to that man's execution. He was from Kabul and had murdered a man. I don't know anything else about his background. It happened in 2000. This is one of my memories from the Taliban time, that they executed a lot of people.*

Hamida, older female Hazara respondent, Ghazni City

interviewed in the urban site expressed particular horror and shock at some of the punishments the Taliban administered.

As outlined, certain groups were more at risk of death than others during this time. It was widely perceived that the Taliban killed more Hazaras than other ethnic groups. Najibullah, a middle-aged male Pashtun respondent from Ghazni City, explained this general perception in the urban area, saying, “A lot of people were killed by the Taliban; their funerals were held in the streets of the bazaar and most of them were Hazaras.” People who had worked for the communist government or actively participated in a mujahiddin party were also more frequently killed by the Taliban. In one example provided, Khatima, an elderly female respondent, described how her husband was murdered:

*My husband was a guard with the Ghazni municipality and he was murdered by the Taliban when they came to the city. It was their first day in power and when my husband was going to go his office he was murdered by the Taliban in the city. This happened in 1995.*

Ten years after the overthrow of the Taliban regime, respondents widely argued that the government and its international partners had failed to bring peace to Afghanistan and violence is now at its highest level since 2001. The majority of respondents in both research communities reported the death of a family member or friend during the current period in the bombardments launched by Afghan and international forces, in insurgent suicide attacks, through fighting for the Taliban or for the Afghan National Army (ANA), or in retaliation for working for the government. This threat was highest in Qarabagh, where there is a strong Taliban presence and the overwhelming majority of inhabitants of the community stressed they felt as if they were under attacked by all sides of the conflict. Urban respondents reported they were less directly affected and the general perception was that while the government had maintained control over Ghazni City, they had largely lost control over the districts and rural areas in the province.

This violence and the level of actual or threat of death was perhaps higher during the research period because of the parliamentary elections. Respondents in both areas widely reported the Taliban targeting election offices with bomb attacks or described fear that the Taliban would cut off their fingers in retaliation for voting. Consequently, not a single person interviewed in the community in Qarabagh District said they were willing to participate in the election.

Certain groups were also identified to be more at risk in the current period. First, the Taliban target anyone who is perceived to be working for the current government in any position. Many respondents in Ghazni City were identified to have government-related positions in a variety of roles—in the police, as government staff and even as teachers.

#### **Box 15: Attacks from all sides**

*The government doesn't have control over enough of the country and everyone does what they want. The government murders people they accuse of being Talibs, while the Taliban murders people they accuse of being with the government.*

Raz Mohammad, older Pashtun focus group participant, Ghazni City

*In the present period one person was riding on a bicycle and his bicycle ran over a bomb and he was killed. That bomb was put there by the Taliban opposition of the present government for ISAF forces but our villager was killed by that bomb. This was in 2009.*

Nasrat, younger Pashtun male focus group participant, Qarabagh

**Box 16: Death or fear of death during elections**

*We know that the Taliban has power in our area and so people are afraid and they can't participate in elections because people are not crazy enough to accept the risk just for an election. If someone votes on election day the Taliban will kill him the next day or if someone has colour on his finger [from voting], the Taliban will cut off his finger.*

Zarlashta, middle-aged female respondent, Qarabagh

*Our house is beside the election office and several months ago and the Taliban laid bombs there to target people voting and to target police cars. One bomb exploded and two policemen were martyred in that explosion.*

Fauzia, younger female Pashtun respondent, Ghazni City

Several stories were collected from a range of respondents about their relatives and friends being killed by the Taliban. Jamal, a younger Pashtun man from Ghazni City, provided one example:

*The Taliban seized my two cousins because they said they were government staff and they imprisoned my cousins for one month and beat them. Later, one of my cousin's was recaptured and was found killed in his house.*

In the rural area, no one would dare work for the government and anyone who had wanted to continue this employment had migrated to Ghazni City. However, people were still at risk of death if they were perceived as being spies for the government or international troops. One example was described by a younger woman from Qarabagh, Zarmina:

*Two years ago, the Taliban killed a man and they brought that man to his father and announced that no one must bury him and no one can give him a funeral because he was a spy and he gave reports about Muslims to infidels.*

Second, anyone who was identified as supporting or part of the Taliban faced being raided, interrogated or killed by the government and coalition forces. Particularly resented were the air raids launched by government and coalition forces. These most often affected Qarabagh District; nearly half of male and female respondents from the area mentioned their distress about such attacks, and several respondents described losing relatives in them. There was also a general perception that when international forces killed innocent people, the government failed to launch proper investigations into the attacks. The current government was also blamed for allowing the international forces to commit these attacks. There was the general perception, particularly in the rural area, that international troops in fact killed more innocent civilians than insurgents.

**Box 17: Death because of coalition troop tactics**

*International forces are always bombing innocent civilians. For example, three years ago, coalition troops martyred my brother's son who was innocent. His wife became a widow and his three children all became orphans.*

Qari Abdulmanan, older male Pashtun respondent, Ghazni City

*In the present period one of my cousins was killed by the American forces, he was 16 years old. One night he went out to collect grapes from the garden and the American forces besieged an area nearby and he was martyred and this was a very bad event for me and for his family.*

Samad, younger male focus group participant, Qarabagh

## 4.2 Migration

The devastation the communist period caused is reflected in the high levels of migration that occurred from both research sites. This was particularly acute in the rural community, where about half the community migrated compared to about a quarter of people from the urban site. Significantly, most of these undertook long-term, permanent migration largely to Pakistan, but also to other parts of Afghanistan and in a few cases to Iran. Many only returned after the Russians had left, or in fewer cases, once the Karzai government was established. Those who did not migrate were largely people who were part of the mujahiddin, since both communities provided strong support to the resistance. Others who chose not to migrate explained this was because of a lack of financial resources.

People migrated to escape the violence of the Soviet-backed communist government and the clashes that occurred between the government and the mujahiddin resistance. People described leaving their area to escape the aerial bombardments, rocket attacks and the murder of civilians. Additionally, the presence of Russian forces in their country left many people feeling “hopeless,” causing them to leave Afghanistan.

### **Box 18: Migration to escape the overt violence and presence of Russian troops**

*When the Russian forces attacked our country we migrated to Pakistan because when they came to our country and the mujahiddin started the holy war against them, all of our land and gardens were burned. They were infidels and they lacked human kindness because they placed mines everywhere and they fired lots of rockets on cities and innocent people, and didn't think about people and their houses.*

Torpekay, middle-aged female Pashtun respondent, Qarabagh

*I became hopeless during the communist time because during that time bad actions occurred such as Muslims murdering other Muslims and so I decided to migrate Pakistan and then Iran.*

Abdul Wakil, middle-aged male Pashtun respondent, Ghazni City

Both research sites were strong supporters of the resistance and many older men described actively participating. However, especially in the war's early days, a tiny number of male respondents described migrating to escape being forced to join the mujahiddin or undertake compulsory military service in the communist government. Moreover, a couple of elderly respondents from Ghazni City described how they were forced to migrate to Kabul or abroad because they were being threatened by the mujahiddin for working with the communist government.

All stories of migration during the civil war period occurred when respondents were living in other parts of Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul City. Less migration occurred during the Taliban period than during the communist era, which is surprising given the high casualties and risks people from Ghazni City faced during this time. Only a few male and female respondents migrated abroad from the urban site, all Hazaras. Only one elderly man, Karimullah, left the rural community because he was unhappy with some Taliban policies. The fact no one else migrated from this area is not surprising given the relative stability people felt the regime provided. A couple of people described actually migrating to Ghazni City during this time from other areas, which were perceived as more dangerous. For example, Abdul Basir, a middle-aged Tajik focus group participant, described how his family moved from the Ghorband valley to Ghazni City when the Taliban came to power:

*When the Taliban took power in Afghanistan and the war started between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance in the Ghorband valley, the Taliban prevented food from reaching our area. At that time the cost of food was very high and no one was able to buy anything, so we decided to migrate to Ghazni City with our family.*

One explanation for the low levels of migration was provided by several respondents, who described great difficulties in trying to migrate out of Afghanistan. While the Hazara community described experiencing particular abuse and suffering during this time, they also explained that the Taliban often made it difficult for them to leave the country and frequently blocked their way out. Hazara respondents described the Taliban searching cars and taking people out of cars, who subsequently disappeared, or even the disappearance of entire cars. Khatima, an older female Hazara respondent from Ghazni City, described this situation:

*When my husband was murdered our situation was really bad, we made the decision to migrate to Pakistan in 1995. We went there by car. When we arrived in Kandahar the Taliban stopped us and said, “You are Hazara.” I said, “Yes, I accept that my nationality is Hazara but I am Muslim and I believe in one God and his prophet.” After that they told me I could go... However, there were a lot of cars which carried Hazara people and the Taliban didn’t allow them to pass and most of those cars disappeared.*

Several male and female respondents interviewed in the Ghazni City community, all Pashtun, had migrated from rural areas to the city during the current era, largely due to escape insecurity in their areas and because of threats and intimidation. Migration that happened during this period from in both research sites was largely internal. People indicated that their ability to migrate abroad had been curtailed by more restricted access to Pakistan and Iran.

The primary reason for internal migration was due to the fear and intimidation employed by the Taliban in rural areas. Several Pashtun men and women interviewed in Ghazni City described migrating from villages in Qarabagh District, including the research community there, or not returning to their original homes in the current period because of fear. This was due in part to the overt violence in their areas, but also to their previous wartime alliances—for example, having worked for the communist government—or to their current employment in the government, for which the Taliban imposes heavy penalties. A few respondents in the rural community also described how their relatives had been forced to move to Kabul because they wanted to continue their work with the government or work for NGOs.

### **4.3 Disappearance**

The vast majority of respondents interviewed in both research communities stated they knew a family member or a friend who had disappeared during the communist period. The majority of those interviewed said that people largely disappeared after being taken by the government. Typically, older people explained that after Russian and communist forces entered a community and arrested someone—largely men they believed were linked with the mujahiddin—they disappeared. A couple of older respondents mentioned that they believed these men were sometimes imprisoned in the infamous Pul-i-Charkhi prison. Another group that respondents reported had disappeared after being taken by Russian and communist forces were mullahs, religious figures or community elders.

**Box 19: Internal migration due to fear in the current period**

*The reason for our migration here is this that the security situation was so bad in our other area and the Taliban rules there. When we don't accept what they say, they kill us. On the other hand, our government conducted operations in that area and they harmed innocent people without any reason.*

Badorkhan, older Pashtun male respondent, Ghazni City

*In the current government my brothers have experienced a lot of problems because of the Taliban and now two of them are in Kabul because they worked with the government and the Taliban doesn't let anyone do that.*

Zarmina, younger female respondent, Qarabagh

Fewer respondents, all from Ghazni City, described how a small number of their relatives were snatched by the mujahiddin in retaliation for working for the communist government. It should be recognised that these were only isolated cases given the strong support both communities provided to the resistance. One case was described by Fauzia, a younger female Pashtun respondent:

*My cousin, who was a civil officer during the government of Doctor Najebullah, wanted to go to Paktika Province from Kabul City. But he disappeared on the way and when my family searched for him no one knew where he was.*

Only one younger female Hazara respondent, Rahima, described an incident of disappearance during the civil war, explaining that her brother was fighting with Hizb-i-Harakat in Bamiyan Province but had never returned.

A proportion of respondents, all from Ghazni City and mostly Hazara, reported the disappearance of a relative during the Taliban era. People disappeared either because they had participated in the mujahiddin resistance, or simply because they were members of the Hazara community. As described, some Hazara people disappeared as they attempted to leave Afghanistan. In a few other cases, women

**Box 20: Men disappearing after arrest by Soviet-backed government forces**

*When the government of Doctor Najibullah failed, some people said that the people who disappeared were in Pul-i-Charkhi jail and the others are in Moscow and the mujahiddin government will liberate those people who were in Pul-i-Charkhi. But my brother never came back.*

—Jawad, middle-aged Tajik male respondent, Ghazni City

*My father's brother disappeared during the Khalqi period and some people said that the Russians took them to Russia and so my grandfather wanted to go to Russia to look but my father and other uncle wouldn't let him. So he searched all the jails in Afghanistan but he couldn't find him. After that he tried to find them in mass graves; when a person told him that mass graves were found in Mazar he went to Mazar and he said, "When I find the grave I will make a shrine on it." However, he never found them and my grandfather died some years ago without ever knowing what happened.*

Gullali, younger female Pashtun respondent, Qarabagh

*A person called Mullah Abdullah disappeared from his mosque and until now his family doesn't know whether he is alive or not.*

Jawad, middle-aged Tajik male respondent, Ghazni City

described how their husbands were innocent, but were arrested by the Taliban and subsequently disappeared. However, it should be recognised that the majority of these experiences largely took place in different parts of Afghanistan, such as Mazar, which was an area of resistance to the Taliban. For example, Rokshana, a middle-aged female Hazara respondent from Ghazni City, explained how her husband disappeared: “The Taliban arrested my husband when we were in Mazar and he disappeared. The Taliban had declared a pogrom and they killed many Hazaras and Uzbeks.” It should be acknowledged that more cases of disappearance took place during the communist era than the Taliban.

During the current period, some cases of disappearance were reported, largely by respondents in the rural community. People were said to have either been taken by the Taliban because they worked with the government, been imprisoned by foreign troops suspected of being Taliban or perhaps were Talibs who had disappeared while they were fighting against coalition forces. These were, however, isolated cases.

#### Box 21: Disappearance during the current period

*My aunt’s son disappeared in the present period in 2008 and he worked with the present government. The Taliban decides that when someone person eats the bread of this government he will be killed, but we don’t know if he is alive or dead.*

Abdullah, younger male Pashtun respondent, Qarabagh

*Lots of our young people are imprisoned by the foreigners and they haven’t returned. Also, two people who were Talibs from our village disappeared during the fight in Mazar [around the time of the collapse of the Taliban government] and until now they haven’t come back. One of them had children and a wife and their friends say that they were martyred and they were buried in a desert grave, but their families say that both of them are alive and the American forces imprisoned them.*

Torpekay, middle-aged female respondent, Qarabagh

## 4.4 Destruction of property and livelihoods

Given the aerial bombardments employed by the communist government, respondents in both communities widely described wide-scale destruction of property, land and businesses. People discussed the economic impact this had—it was expensive to reconstruct houses and the destruction of land meant that people were unable to harvest their crops and consequently suffered from food shortages. Moreover, given the high levels of migration from both communities, people were frequently forced to leave behind their properties and material goods, which they never regained. Hamida, an older Hazara woman from Ghazni City, described some of these economic impacts:

*We saw a lot of economic damage during the communist time because our house was near to a battleground between the government and the mujahiddin. So we left our area without caring about our property and we lost all of our belongings and our house was destroyed by communist planes.*

Communist government policies also impacted negatively on people’s financial status. The government clamped down strongly on the practice of bride prices (where the groom must make a substantial payment to the bride’s family before the wedding). Under the communist government the penalty for this was three years in jail. The implementation of a land reform policy in 1979 by Mohammad Gul Taraki (the first communist president of Afghanistan and leader of the Khalqi faction of the PDPA) also proved to be highly unpopular, and older respondents complained of the way land was appropriated by force.

In fact, these reforms led to a popular backlash, which initiated the Afghan resistance movement. Abdullah, an older Hazara man from Ghazni City, described these policies:

*The Khalqis warned people that no one can take money from bridegrooms during wedding parties or before that. They announced that the agricultural lands don't have specific owners and that everyone owns the land they work on. They told people who had more land and gardens that they would share their land with their farmers. These abuses caused several commanders to go the mountains and announce jihad against the government and the conflicts started in our area between the government and the mujahiddin.*

As in other areas, the mujahiddin placed economic demands on the communities demanding money, food and other amenities. While many people were happy to provide material and financial support to the mujahiddin, a small number of older male and female respondents complained about the burden this placed on them. It should be noted that this was largely only mentioned in the urban site and respondents in the rural area were more reluctant to criticise mujahiddin activity. In the urban community, respondents complained that they barely had enough money and food to fund their own family needs during this time and that the mujahiddin forced them to give up resources. In some cases, these respondents argued that the mujahiddin threatened people with punishments ranging from imprisonment and death. In fact, one middle-aged Hazara man described how people in his village tried to resist the mujahiddin taking money from them, and were imprisoned for a few hours as a consequence. Muhammad Musa, middle-aged Hazara man, provided another example:

*There was a woman who sold eggs in our village to provide for the expenses of her home and children. She was the sole supporter of her house. One day, the mujahiddin wanted to take their expenses from that woman by force. We begged them not to and told them it was clear how bad her economic situation was. This made the mujahiddin very angry and they told us that if we opposed the mujahiddin, they would punish us.*

The civil war period was generally not felt to impact greatly on respondents' economic statuses. In fact, people generally argued that when the mujahiddin first came to power the situation was vastly improved and the price of commodities dropped. However, once the conflict started between the different factions, a tiny minority of people in both communities described how certain individuals took advantage of their affiliation to a particular mujahiddin faction to steal land or possessions.

Respondents in Ghazni City also complained about the mujahiddin taking money from them—either through theft or, specifically in relation to Hazara people, through a policy known as *khoms*. This involved paying or giving a proportion of their land production to the mujahiddin; if people refused, it was taken by force. Given that paying *khoms* is a specific Shia practice, it is likely that only Hazaras were forced to pay it to the mujahiddin. This was a clear manipulation of the practice, which according to tradition must be split between poor Shias and Sayed families.

The Taliban regime affected people economically and also came under attack for failing to govern Afghanistan efficiently. This criticism came from the majority of men in both areas. They blamed the high cost and scarcity of many goods, along with the lack of employment, on ineffective government. One younger Pashtun male respondent from Ghazni City remembered that they were unable to buy food for nearly a month because of its high cost. “We just ate bread and tea,” he explained. “Sometimes we took food from our neighbours.”

**Box 22: Economic impacts during the civil war**

*Although most of our people were poor, the mujahiddin who belonged to Harakat-i-Islami collected khoms. The mujahiddin entered people's homes and forced people to pay money to them. They even they took the khoms from our flour box.*

Muhammad Musa, middle-aged Hazara male respondent, Ghazni City

*In the mujahiddin period, I fought with a person who was with Hizb-i Harakat who said, "This land is mine." Then the commander of Hizb-i-Harakat told me, "This land does not belong to you." When I told him that I had the documents of ownership of this land, he beat me.*

Karim, middle-aged male respondent, Qarabagh

Men and women in the rural area also complained that even though security was restored, little development and progress in the country occurred during this time. The lack of jobs was particularly singled out for criticism. Zarlashtha, a middle-aged Pashtun respondent, reflected this frequent complaint saying, "At that time all people were unemployed; government officials had no jobs and teachers had to stay at home." Moreover, Tajiks and Hazaras felt they had even less access to jobs and widely complained that the Taliban employed only Pashtuns in government positions. A couple of Tajik and Hazara men also criticised the Taliban's system of taxation. For example, Mohammad Musa, a middle-aged Hazara male respondent, said:

*I have another bad memory from that time: I needed money to pay for my wedding party. I decided to sell my trees. We already paid the khoms on that according to our religious law but Taliban also took ushr from us.*

A few individuals also claimed that they suffered greater economic suffering as people took advantage of their affiliation with the Taliban to inflict economic burdens on them. Two middle-aged Tajik women explained how people took their land from them with at least tacit Taliban support. In one case, Sayeeda described how her father's cousins destroyed their garden, which provided her family's income. Apparently this stemmed from a family dispute over the distribution of land after the death of their grandfather. However, the cousins used the fact that they had joined the Taliban and eventually ended up taking the entire garden by force. She explained that they had not even been able to reclaim their property the current period because their cousins remained powerful; as a result, the family is poor. Zia Jan had a similar experience and explained how her family had been forced to leave their area because the same commanders kept taking their land:

*After the mujahiddin government collapsed, the situation was better for a while and we could live happily. Then those commanders who had power during the mujahiddin joined with the Taliban, and again started to behave cruelly to the people. When the Taliban regime collapsed we took back all our land and property and we returned to the village. However, once again, this good situation ended and the same commanders became powerful and found their way to parliament or positions of power in the community.*

The Hazara community was reported to have suffered particular economic hardship during this time. Men of all ethnicities frequently discussed the Taliban preventing them from carrying food and other essential materials to Hazara areas and revealed that if people were caught in this act they faced torture or imprisonment. This caused considerable suffering in Hazara communities in Ghazni City. Abdullah, an elder Hazara male respondent, explained this situation:

*People felt hopeless after a while because the Taliban supported only one ethnicity—the Pashtuns. Also, the Taliban blocked food supplies for Hazara people and if the Taliban arrested someone who was carrying food to the Hazara area the Taliban imprisoned them and tortured them badly.*

Several people in the rural community highlighted that they suffered material loss because of the attacks inflicted on the area during the current period. Abdul Wali, an older man, described this:

*During the present time, the border police fired four rockets at my house. No one died, but it caused a lot of economic damage—three sheep were killed, one motorcycle was damaged and some rooms of my house were also damaged.*

Economic concerns and the general lack of development in the current period were widely discussed by people in both communities. It was also widely acknowledged that it was difficult for the government to deliver people's economic, social and justice-based demands as long as its attention was focused on combating the insurgency instead of delivering people's rights. They also argued that poverty and unemployment were factors fuelling the conflict. Consequently, respondents in both communities argued that if people had jobs they would be less likely to take up arms and fight against each other. Fauzia, a younger female Pashtun respondent, summed up this general feeling: "Some of people are from our area, especially young people, are unemployed and their economic situations are not good. Because of this, they joined the Taliban."

Moreover, a number of respondents, largely from the rural area, felt that their economic situations had not improved despite the development assistance Afghanistan was receiving from the international community. One middle-aged Pashtun man, Mohammad Salim, described a project that was meant to be implemented in Qarabagh but never materialised. In his words:

*They haven't done anything in our area to help people. They still haven't built schools or dams in our area...There are all these foreigners to do work for us. For example, there is a road between Mushki and Qarabagh that foreigners started working on to asphalt it, but after some time they stopped and there is still no one to work on that.*

Moreover, there was a widespread perception among men in both communities that development aid was frequently diverted or indeed "stolen" from people who most needed it. Corruption was often identified by men as crippling the legitimacy of the Afghan government. There was a perception among such respondents that while the government was failing to meet the needs of ordinary Afghans, those in positions of power were continuing to profit from the current situation in terms of finances, materials and power. Ahmad Farid, a middle-aged male Tajik focus group participant, reflected some of these concerns:

*After the transitional government, when Karzai was selected as president of Afghanistan, that was a golden time. If they had worked for the people, all the problems would have been solved, people would have found work and we could have built our country. If the government had used the money which the international community gave to us at that time correctly, there would be no problem in Afghanistan, but unfortunately those people who had power took all the money and used it for their own benefits.*

A final cause of economic suffering in the current period was mentioned by one middle-aged female respondent from the rural area who complained about the economic burden placed on the rural community by the Taliban. This was not perceived to affect Ghazni City since it was not controlled by the Taliban. Zarlashtha explained:

*Every night ten or 20 Talibs come to the area and make people bring them dinner, but the people are so poor and sometimes they have to give their children's dinner. When people say they don't have any food, the Taliban accuse of them of belonging to foreigners and might harm them.*

#### 4.5 Gender-based violence

Only two people mentioned rape happening at any time during the conflicts. Aside from these two individuals not a single respondent in either area discussed the issue of sexual abuse, even when questioned further. This does not mean that rape did not happen and may rather reflect the reluctance of respondents to discuss this issue. The one younger woman who did discuss rape occurring was Fatima, who explained that she was married young in order to protect her from rape by the mujahiddin. However, she was living in Kabul during this time and no other woman discussed the mujahiddin raping women in Ghazni City. Moreover, Fatima admitted that she did not know anyone who had personally experienced this, just that she had heard stories. The second reported case of rape was discussed by a younger man, Abdul Wodod, who described how a woman, known to be a doctor, was kidnapped and then raped by the Taliban. He explained:

*One night the Talibs went to a house of a woman who was doctor and they told her they had a patient and then they kidnapped her for three days. After three days they brought her back and she arrived with serious injuries. After that her family brought her to hospital for treatment and it seemed that she had been raped. Many people in the area said that they had raped her, and after that she left the area with her family.*

However, although he says that people discussed this in the area, no other respondent mentioned this and it is impossible to verify the story.

Another violation that affected women during the Taliban era was being forced to marry Talibs. Once again, this was not generally reported. A couple of people in the urban site mentioned that this practice occurred, but only one younger Pashtun female respondent admitted that she herself was a victim of this and had been forced to marry a foreign Talib. She said that she did not know anyone else that had experienced this, but that people said foreign Talibs had often married young girls. Mina told her story:

*I am sad about my destiny because I had to marry that man and I still don't know who he was. Some people said that he was Arab but others believe that he was from Sudan. He married me by force and he was very old, maybe 50 years old, and at that time I was 16. I became pregnant and gave birth to a son and later a daughter and now I always pray to Allah that he never comes back and I never come face to face with him because he was a very bad person.*

In fact, the Taliban time was the period most frequently identified as causing particular suffering to women, particularly in terms of discrimination. The prevention of their access to education and employment and limits on their freedom of movement were strongly criticised by the majority of women in Ghazni City. Although slightly fewer men in the area focused on this, a significant proportion of all ages still complained about this aspect of the regime, in comparison to the rural area where no man mentioned it. Moreover, despite being generally content with the Taliban era, all middle-aged female respondents in the rural site did object to this. In one case, Ramia described how she and her sister were physically attacked by the Taliban for going to the bazaar without a *mahram*:

*The worst time for me over the past 30 years of war was the Taliban time. One day, my sister and I went to bazaar to shop. Suddenly, I felt someone hit*

*me with a piece of wood and immediately I saw a Talib wearing a black turban whose face was terrifying; completely like a wild animal. He had wood in his hand and he also hit my sister and she shouted and cried and we escaped without saying anything. After that day we lost our nerve and we couldn't go to the bazaar even with our father or brother.*

However, fewer women in the rural site complained about this discrimination in contrast to the urban area. One explanation for this may be that the rural community is conservative and so was less concerned with these policies. According to Shayeesta, a middle-aged Pashtun female respondent from the community:

*There was no war during the Taliban time and they were good for the people in rural areas because girls' schools were closed willingly and women willingly observed the veil. But in the city the situation was different and the Taliban forced people to implement their laws and they closed girls' schools by force.*

It is also important to emphasise that men also felt deprived of education during the Taliban period and that both sexes blamed this era for the high illiteracy in Ghazni Province. Men from Ghazni City most frequently described the Taliban's restriction of certain topics at school and the general feeling that they were opposed to literacy. It was widely reported in the urban community that the Taliban attacked schools with bombs or put pressure on teachers to teach certain subjects only, in particular religious studies. Abdul Wahed, a younger Tajik man, reflected this general view:

*All students were under pressure at that time because the Taliban had implemented very strict education laws. For example, they didn't allow students to enter school without hats and students couldn't play sport. Also, teachers largely only taught religious subjects and if the students complained they tortured them.*

In the current period, women were also felt to risk threats, death or injury merely by attending school. The Taliban targets schools with bomb attacks, and acid attacks on female pupils were commonly discussed by younger female respondents in Ghazni City.

However, in contrast to the objections raised above to the discrimination women faced during the Taliban era and in the current period, many respondents, largely from the rural community and including women, criticised the fact that women had stopped observing the veil during the communist time and that they were doing the same in the current period. Moreover, the majority of men in Qarabagh argued that the presence of foreigners and their focus on promoting human rights, democracy and specifically women's rights was against Afghan custom. These men felt that women should not be allowed to go to the bazaar unaccompanied and were concerned about the impact this would have on men's control over their families. Mohammad Salim, a middle-aged respondent, represented the viewpoint of these men:

*The work that happens in our country must be according to Islamic law, not against it, and while foreigners say they are maintaining democracy in Afghanistan and they are providing things for women, Islam doesn't want this law. Their deeds are against our religion. Women now go to the bazaar and also a lot of bad things are done by them. Islam wants women to observe the veil when they are going to the bazaar and those women who are married, they must have their husband when they are going to the bazaar. But the foreigners don't want that and they say that these activities are women's rights and no one has the right to prevent them from doing things, while Afghan people never want that. If they stay in our country for a long time I am sure that all the men will lose control of their families.*

**Box 23: Cases of death or injury for attending school**

*In 2006 I was attending an English course. After a few days, one of our classmates did not come to the course. Her family found her body after several days and when we went to her funeral they said that the Taliban had kidnapped her, beaten her and killed her. After that, my mother didn't let me to go to the course and when we went to school my mother was very worried about us.*

Wagma, younger female Pashtun focus group participant, Ghazni City

*In 2005 when my sisters and my brother's wife went to school an unknown person sprayed acid at them and they were afraid but luckily their veils prevented the acid from destroying their skin.*

Tahmina, younger female Hazara focus group participant, Ghazni City

*Yesterday, forty schoolgirls were poisoned in Jahan Malika high school for just attending school.*

Khatima, older Hazara female respondent, Ghazni City

As in Bamiyan and Kabul, men in both study districts reported being forced to fight, either for the mujahiddin or the communist government. Older respondents from both research sites reported proudly how they had participated in the resistance and both communities widely supported or joined the mujahiddin. However, a tiny number of male respondents described migrating to escape being forced to join the mujahiddin. A couple of people, largely from the urban site, argued they felt pressured to join the resistance due to threats from the mujahiddin. Other male respondents reported that they felt pressurised to undertake compulsory military service in the communist government. Ahmad Shah, a middle-aged man from Qarabagh, was one man who migrated to escape military service:

*I migrated in the Russian period in 1981 because they were cruel to people and also my age was perfect for compulsory military service and I did not want to join with them.*

In these cases, older male respondents appeared to feel that they were unable to stay out the conflict and were forced to join either side, which some were not prepared to do. Qambar, an older male Hazara respondent from Ghazni City, reflected this view: "I took the decision to migrate alone because there was no solution. Only two ways existed and both of them were full of risk: one was joining with mujahiddin and the other was joining with the government and both sides had problems."

After the departure of the Russian forces, the vast majority of male respondents said that they had lain down their arms and faced no pressure to join a particular faction. For example, Shir Ahmad, an elderly male Pashtun respondent from Qarabagh, said, "During the Russian time I fought with Hizb-i-Islami. One year after the Russians left, I resigned." Moreover, in comparison to Kabul and Bamiyan Provinces, no respondent discussed the Taliban forcing people to fight during their regime. One reason for this lies in the fact that many men in the rural community clearly joined the Taliban at this time and some continue to fight for them in the current period. However, a second reason is possibly that, in comparison to Kabul and Bamiyan, Ghazni Province was controlled by the Taliban and no resistance to their rule occurred.

## 5. Conclusion

During over 30 years of conflict, the people of Afghanistan have witnessed disappearances, torture, mass executions, civil conflict, sexual violations, economic loss, internal displacement or forced emigration, and sexual, ethnic and religious discrimination. Almost every Afghan has a story of struggle, suffering and loss to tell. Simultaneously, many men interviewed have been directly involved in the conflicts and took up arms, sometimes compelled by force to do so. These experiences have left the majority of people AREU interviewed not only emotionally, mentally or physically scarred, but financially and intellectually impoverished.

While there are commonalities in the types of violations each part of the country suffered and in the different tactics each regime employed, it is also clear that the conflicts have affected and are continuing to affect different parts of the country in a variety of ways and each community and the individuals within it have their own unique stories and experiences to tell.

The author has tried to do justice to the time so many Afghans in Ghazni, Kabul and Bamiyan provinces gave in order to tell their war stories. At times, this experience was extremely distressing for both the people interviewed and the researchers, who share similar experiences to some of those interviewed. While some negative reactions to the research were observed and a small number of people refused to take part, the vast majority of people AREU spoke to in all three provinces were grateful for the opportunity to tell their personal story of suffering and loss and express their demands and hopes for the future. In many cases, this was described to be a cathartic, healing process.

It is the voices and stories of Afghans like these that need to be brought back into the discussion at the policy level, and their needs acknowledged. More understanding is required about what Afghans have suffered, are continuing to experience, and what they really need and want. AREU's research, and this paper, hopes to contribute toward this goal. Identifying ways to move forward requires ongoing consultation with the wider Afghan population and not just with Afghan and international actors who hold positions of power.

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