

The Hazara Minority in Afghanistan: A People Group Case Study

Kerri Bennet, Kimberly Dvorak, Lane Kipp, Jenny McGill, Ramón Tavárez

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Abstract

The land of Afghanistan has seen much turmoil in its history, from foreign invasions to the fall of empires and, in the last two hundred years, the fall of a monarchy, two superpower invasions and withdrawals, and the rise of the Taliban. Despite vast international humanitarian, peacekeeping, and military efforts, Afghanistan and its people remain in many ways challenged—economically, infrastructurally, and spiritually. Of the 14 recognized ethnic groups in the country, the following case study provides an overview of one of these groups, a minority Muslim population called the Hazaras.

The Hazara people are widely disfavored among Afghanistan’s Sunni majority for its Shi’ite identity. This article provides an overview of this minority group, largely mountainous village dwellers. Current challenges are discussed for expatriates considering working in the country, including safety and cultural concerns. The most appropriate platform for presence and forms of communication are offered.

Key Words: Afghanistan, Hazara, mission studies, missionary, people group, unreached

Introduction

The Hazaras comprise one of the 14 recognized ethnic groups of Afghanistan, according to the 2004 constitution (“CIA World FactBook: Afghanistan” 2021). In a country besieged by conflict for decades, this particular group has experienced additional persecution. This article provides an overview of this people group based on the International Mission Board (IMB) template (“Hazara of Afghanistan 2021”). Some of the historical attempts, failures, and successes in ministry efforts to reach the Hazaras with the gospel are also described. Geographical and cultural considerations, the most appropriate platform for expatriates to live in Afghanistan and work among the Hazara, and associated logistical and cost-of-living issues are also covered. Lastly, the author’s recommendation for the most appropriate communication strategy among the Hazara people is offered. These resources will equip church leaders, humanitarian aid workers, and missionaries to better serve the Hazara minority in Afghanistan.

Group Profile

The Hazara people have resided in the central mountains of Afghanistan for so long that this region is referred to as the “Hazarajat” (Farr 2016, 156). Historically, the Hazaras were the majority people of Afghanistan until 1893, when over half of the people in this group were massacred (“Hazara in Afghanistan” 2021). After the massacre, many of the remaining Hazaras fled for refuge to surrounding countries, such as Pakistan and Iran. Over the past few decades, many Hazaras have returned to their homeland in the mountains, but many remain in refugee camps in nearby regions. The ethnic persecution of the Hazara minority continues to this day (Gossman 2020; Kerr 2016).

The population of Afghanistan is (as of 2021) estimated to be 39 million, of which the Hazaras comprise approximately 9% or 3.9 million (“Afghanistan Population” 2021). The primary language of the Hazara people is Hazaragi, a dialect of Dari (Farsi dialect). The literacy rate for Afghanistan is very low; however, the literacy rate for the Hazaras may be significantly higher, considering their focus on childhood education, including girls (Saikal 2012, 85). Nearly all Hazaras follow Shi’a Islam, which contributes largely to their persecution; the majority of Afghans are Sunni Muslim (99.7%), and the Sunni Taliban have labeled the Hazaras heretics (Saikal 2012, 82). Many readers will have learned of the Hazara and their circumstances through the 2003 novel *The Kite Runner* (Hosseini 2003).

The Hazara people mainly reside in isolated villages in the “Hazarajat.” Due to their remote location from the rest of Afghan society, the Hazaras face particular challenges. They are an agrarian people who heavily rely on the success of their crops. Floods and droughts in this region are detrimental. Malnutrition and starvation are not uncommon among these villages (“Hazara” 2021; Saikal 2012). Some of the main crops produced in this region are wheat, beans, peas, and fruits such as apples, apricots, and mulberries (Farr 2016, 157). Tea and rice are typically acquired through barter with outside groups (“Hazara” 2021). Farming and herding are the main occupations and sources of income for the Hazara people in the mountains; however, more recently the Hazara people are becoming more involved in business in the cities as well as international trade (Saikal 2012, 86). The isolation of the Hazaras also means lack of access to healthcare. This leaves the population vulnerable to serious medical conditions such as tuberculosis, leprosy, dysentery, and eye diseases (“Hazara” 2021). Access to clean water is also a challenge for many of these villages.

In recent times, technology has reached even these remote mountain villages of the Hazara. Faray, a Hazaragi refugee living in Dallas (Texas, USA), notes that in the village in which she was raised, as well as in almost all the surrounding villages, they had electricity, televisions in their homes, and cell phones (Faray 2020). Communication flows freely through television and the internet, although access to the internet is often limited.

Hazara cultural practices are similar to those in the rest of Afghanistan, albeit with some distinctions. The women wear burkas, for example, but are known for their bright floral dresses, often red and green. They are also known for their excessive gold jewelry, especially at weddings. Weddings are a central icon of Hazara culture, typically lasting three days and involving most, if not all, of the community. Other than weddings, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, and the New Year observance are collective means of celebration (Faray 2020).

The family unit is the main societal structure in Hazara villages. Extended families live close to each other but typically in separate homes on the same compound. It is common for couples to move in with the husband’s family after marriage. The men are the leaders of the household and therefore the leaders of the community. The Hazaras have historically not had much influence in Afghan society as a whole, yet in recent years Hazara individuals have made their way into public office and are becoming a stronger voice in the country (Saikal 2012, 84). The Hazaras are known to be hard-working and honest, refusing to be crushed under the weight of ethnic persecution. They have consistently risen up and fought the systems that try to oppress them and seek to build a better future for their people. Education is of high value for the Hazara people, and women are generally regarded much higher among this people group than in the surrounding

Afghan people groups. The Hazaras' bent towards progress and equality is one of the factors that makes them a target for persecution.

While the recent political climate led to a better situation for these people temporarily, the Hazaras remain the avowed targets of terrorist activity by Islamic extremist groups. Since 2015, attacks have targeted the Hazara districts in western Kabul and have killed at least 1500 Hazaras, injuring 2300 more. Recent attacks in Dasht-e Barchi, a Hazara neighborhood, included four minibus bombings over a two-day period, a mass shooting at a maternity hospital, and multiple school bombings, one at which 100 were killed, most of whom were girls (Gannon 2021; Gossman 2020).

The Hazara people are 99.97% Shi'ite Muslims (Saikal 2012, 85). The remaining 0.03% are evangelical Christians. According to the Joshua Project, only portions of the Bible have been translated into the Hazaragi languages. Currently, no known evangelistic efforts among the Hazara people in Afghanistan exist. The Joshua Project estimates that almost eighty pioneer workers are needed to reach these Hazara people with the gospel ("Hazara" 2021).

Historical Attempts to Reach the Hazaras with the Gospel

As with any unreached people group, the question can be asked, "Why is this people group still unreached?" Have they been hostile to outsiders? Are there cultural reasons why this people group has not understood the way the gospel has been presented? With how many Christians have they interacted? Studying the history of evangelistic outreaches to a particular people group is necessary. Unfortunately, when considering the Hazara, one must accept that tracing their history involves a measure of speculation, with few written records until recently (Zeidan 2021). Hazara oral tradition indicates that the Hazara people are descendants of the Mongolian invaders and Turks, but other researchers insist that their heritage includes indigenous inhabitants of Bamyan, an area of Afghanistan known for its Buddhist past (Gier 2014, 5; Kerr Chioyenda 2016, 270; Sarabi 2006, 17).

That the Mongols affiliated with both Nestorian Christianity and ethnic religions (Gier 2014, 5) is important for understanding the history of Christianity among these people, while the Bamyan converted to Buddhism before the Mongolian invasion (Kerr Chioyenda 2016, 105). Against these religious backgrounds, the Hazara military converted to Shi'a Islam in 1295 CE when Ghazan Kahn converted to Islam for diplomatic reasons and persecuted anyone refusing to convert (Gier 2014, 4; Sarabi 2006, 41). Given their persecution by Sunni Muslims until the present, the Hazaras have shared an abiding religious commitment to Shi'a Islam among the surrounding Sunni people groups. The ongoing persecution of the Hazara minority has only strengthened their resolve to maintain their Shi'ite identity, which for some has become synonymous with being Hazara. The geo-political conflict within Afghanistan has scattered the Hazara people to places where the gospel is readily presented, but it has also kept many from being able to visit and reside in the Hazara homeland.

While the Hazaras are noted in historical records dating from the sixteenth century (Zeidan 2021), no records have been found of modern Christian missionary efforts to reach the Hazaras before the mid-twentieth century. The first Western Christian missionaries to Afghanistan arrived after the English government's invasion of the country in 1837, and they appear to have focused primarily on the general population near Peshawar (Wherry 1918, 131). It took many more decades for missionaries to venture into the remote mountainous areas. Little is known

about what missionary strategies had previously been tried with the Hazara. Significant barriers to the gospel in this area are well known, namely, the lack of technological access, Sunni terrorism, and the Afghan government's persecution of Christians.

The differing accounts of various organizations further obfuscate understanding about the Hazaras' conditions. For example, some sources claim that the Hazaras, whose women are primarily uneducated, are given an illiteracy rate of 80-90% ("Hazara: A Hospitable People"; Nichols 2006). However, another source states that "education is a priority" for the Hazara, including the education of women (Zabriskie 2008, 3). Secondly, one source states that Hazaras have Christian radio programs and no Bible in their language (Garrison 1986), while the International Mission Board (IMB) states the Hazaras have a Bible translation, the Jesus film, and gospel recordings, but no Christian radio broadcasts in their language ("Hazara" 2021). Garrison also states that the Hazaras are "one of the least evangelized peoples of this size in the world," but *Operation World* states that the Hazaras have recently shown "greater openness to the Gospel" ("Afghanistan" 2010). While it appears that basic facts about the Hazaras are disputed, it is more likely that these disagreements indicate a high rate of change in the success of access to and evangelization of the Hazara people. It also indicates a reluctance on the part of missionaries to publish, at least until long after their mission work has ended, the reasons for which will be explored in the next section.

Geographical and Cultural Constraints

Afghanistan ranks second on a list of countries "where it's most difficult to follow Jesus" ("The World Watch List" 2021). Muslims who convert to Christianity there can be arrested and sentenced to death. Those accused of distributing New Testaments or publications questioning Islam have also been known to face similar penalties (Rivera 2011). Additionally, given both the Hazaras' remote mountainous location and their own hostility to the gospel, prospective missionaries question the risk of attempting to go there.

Safety Concerns

A missionary recounts his first opportunity to visit a Hazara village and illustrates the many physical barriers and safety concerns in traveling to their homeland:

During the spring of 1990, God led a new Hazara acquaintance to invite me to his mountain village. The journey would mean traveling through Islamic militant regions in order to avoid the hostile communist-controlled cities. Adding to the danger was the fact that I would travel with Hazaras, who were hated and massacred by the majority Pashtun peoples, in enemy Pashtun territory for at least four days going and four days returning to Pakistan. After a final night of prayer concerning the opportunity, my wife and I agreed that I would go, knowing that the decision could result in my death. The trip lasted for over 3 weeks, including, among many other things, a narrow escape from a hostile Hazara warlord who saw me as a potential hostage-for-ransom opportunity (Morris 2012, 53).

By 2020, some of these dangers had passed. For example, as of 2011 no one had been executed by the Afghan government for religious crimes since the Taliban government fell in 2001 (Rivera 2011). Conversion from Islam and proselytizing, however, are illegal. Also, no public Christian churches exist in the country. That the small house churches that do meet

change their locations and meeting times frequently to avoid suspicion indicates that the threat of persecution by extremists remains a sobering reality (“2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Afghanistan” 2021, 1, 6, 16-17).

Regarding the status of Christianity in Afghanistan, a paucity of current data is available. The U.S. Department of State reported in 2007 that approximately 500 to 8,000 hidden Christians exist in the country (Bureau of Democracy 2007). Most articles are published years after the events they discuss, and many prefer to list general statistics rather than give specific information which might endanger indigenous believers. Mission efforts will require creative access methods for workers staying long-term. The most effective strategy would likely be to enter the country as a business person or relief worker with as few ties to religious organizations as possible. Those with legal or political backgrounds may best serve by advocating for greater religious freedom in the country, a political and cultural change that would greatly improve evangelism efforts.

Cultural Concerns

Recent research has been done on Hazara cultural traits since their persecution gained interest from outside groups. This research, however, has sampled displaced and often traumatized persons, whose view of their culture is affected by their experiences. Notable barriers to evangelization of this people group include gender segregation, animosity among other local people groups, and their deeply held ethnoreligious identity (“Hazara in Afghanistan” 2002, 14; Punjani 2002). Gender segregation is commonly practiced in Hazara villages, although it is less prevalent in metropolitan areas. Among those who most strictly adhere to gender segregation, unrelated men and women should not talk to each other. In many family groups, women and men would traditionally celebrate and dance with only their own gender, to the extent that men and women have different dancing styles (Ellahi 2017; “Hazara” 2002). Missionaries seeking to work with this group should understand that they will be limited to evangelizing and befriending only members of their same biological sex.

Ethnic animosity exists primarily between the Hazara minority and the Pashtun majority. For the Hazara, a deep-seated distrust of anyone who looks Pashtun or speaks Pashto characterizes this animosity rather than a display of revenge or unforgiveness. Those pursuing to share the gospel should consider the negative impact of using local interpreters regarded as “other,” since the distrusted interpreter could impede the conversation (Punjani 2002). In this instance, Western or other expatriate missionaries would likely have an advantage over local, non-Hazara assistants.

The deeply rooted ethnoreligious identity of the Hazara people is crucial to consider. For example, Hazaras who convert to Sunnism are spoken of as “having ‘become Tajik’” (“Hazara,” 14). Their self-understanding is so connected to Shi’a Islam that a willingness to abandon it, in order to solely follow Jesus Christ, is rare. Religious change among the Hazaras within the country is exceptional. The best strategies involve secrecy and conceal what change may be occurring. Ministry efforts on Afghanistan’s borders and to the Hazara diaspora have grown and are likely the simplest means of reaching the Hazaras with the gospel.

Most Appropriate Platform for Presence in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is predominantly a Muslim country, and the presence of foreign Christians is unwelcome. Currently, no missionaries or public church buildings among the Hazara people are

known to exist (“Hazara” 2021). Since Afghanistan is a poverty-stricken, war-torn country, however, outsiders can provide much needed assistance to its residents. Most of the foreign work, then, among the Hazaras in Afghanistan is medical and humanitarian. Types of assistance include healthcare, education, poverty reduction, and gender equality. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are the main means of entry for foreigners wishing to enter Afghanistan for an extended period of time.

NGOs are defined as “independent, nonprofit organizations engaged in humanitarian, development, human rights, or advocacy work” (Mitchell 2017, 5). By this broad definition of both local and international groups, at least 891 NGOs operated in Afghanistan from 2000-2014. When Afghanistan was under Soviet control, NGOs were prohibited, but as of 1990 they are permitted to function within Afghanistan (Mitchell 2017). These NGOs have developed life-saving programs and infrastructure for the country, although they have been met with intermittent resistance from Islamic terrorist groups (such as the Taliban) due to their view that NGOs, some of which are faith-based, propagate Christianity. Many of the aid organizations are located in the capital of Kabul because it is one of the safer places in Afghanistan for foreigners (“CIA” 2021).

Regarding healthcare reform and areas of assistance in Afghanistan, childbirth is a major need. The maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan is the eleventh highest in the world at 638 deaths per 100,000 live births. The infant mortality rate is the highest infant mortality rate in the world at 104.3 per 1,000 live births (“CIA” 2021). Infants have a greater than one in ten chance of dying before their first birthday. Most of these deaths are due to the lack of education and resources. Infant healthcare is a desperately felt need in the community, and groups providing resources to provide safer birthing environments, despite their foreign status, would be welcome. At least one birthing educational program under the International Assistance Mission (IAM) exists and has seen great success. In 2019, the IAM reported 2,336 people who benefited from life-saving birthing and nutrition education (“Development” 2021). While birthing education specifically is needed in these remote parts of Afghanistan, healthcare generally is a large need. Access to healthcare is extremely limited for those who are impoverished and located in less accessible areas, including Hazara villages.

Education is another major area of need in Afghanistan, especially for girls. The literacy rate for all of Afghanistan is 43% (55.5% for males; 29.8% for females) (“CIA” 2021). NGO literacy programs offer entry into communities that may otherwise be closed to foreigners. The Hazara people highly value education, so education and literacy reform (especially for girls) would likely be welcomed in these villages, which will less likely be the case in other areas of Afghanistan where girls are not permitted to be educated.

Poverty reduction is a third area for NGOs to offer assistance. According to the World Bank, one in three Afghans in 2012 did not have the means to cover their basic needs, and four out of five of the poor in the country lived in rural areas (“Poverty Reduction in Afghanistan” 2015). NGOs can provide aid by meeting basic needs on a short-term basis, while working with the community to find long-term solutions. Small business start-ups and agricultural reform programs can be helpful to villagers in these areas of extreme poverty.

Gender equality is another need that many NGOs address; however, doing so is notably difficult and receives much opposition. This work can build a bridge between foreigners and the women of a community but may not be the best sustainable platform for those seeking to build

long-term relationships. Islamic extremist groups, such as the Taliban, monitor NGO activity and have taken action if the work of the NGO begins to steer the community in a political direction that might threaten their power. Pursuing projects that are objectively good for saving lives is safer, since even the Taliban may recognize those as legitimate needs in their communities.

Reaching the Hazara people will require creativity, since traditional models of missions are inadequate. Business as mission will prove challenging with the economic infrastructure of Afghanistan not readily supporting foreign business. Reaching the people groups inside Afghanistan will require discovering the felt needs of their communities and providing the resources to meet those needs. Relief work, such as through childbirth and health education, literacy programs, poverty reduction, or fostering gender equality, provides excellent entry points and provides a legitimate reason to work and live within these communities of Afghanistan. With a bent towards progress and equality, the Hazara people may be specifically accepting of these types of foreign aid, which may open doors for building relationships within their communities.

Appropriate Strategic Communication

Several cultural, theological, and social barriers must be addressed in order effectively to communicate the gospel among a people group where Christianity is considered to be foreign. An effective strategy communicates a clear and understandable message that is relevant to the local people. This communication, however, also must convey the appropriate behavior and lifestyle that honor the Scriptures and exemplify what it means to follow the way of Jesus. The Hazara people exhibit a few advantages assisting any communication of the gospel. Considering the literacy rate in Afghanistan aforementioned, these numbers might be higher among the Hazaras. This is because, for them, “literacy and education has been [sic] a point of pride. Hazara women are given much more liberty to act, and as such are now achieving greater advances than their compatriots in other parts of the country” (Saikal 2012, 85). The Hazaras also are one of the few people groups that seem more open to change, perhaps a result of their high view of education. Their openness makes it easier for foreigners to form relationships.

The Priority of Relationship

Fostering good relationships among the Hazara people will enable effective communication with them. In Hazara villages, a strong sense of community and closeness among neighbors exists (Faray 2020). Relationships will serve as the foundation for effectively showing the love of Christ; relationships and trust must be built before the gospel message is communicated. Three ways to build close relationships are by: 1) learning the mores and living in culturally appropriate ways, employing the concept of critical contextualization (Hiebert 1987), 2) sharing in reciprocal hospitality, and 3) Hazaragi language learning.

One strategy to reach certain people groups is the nonresidential missionary (NRM) (Patterson, Aw, and Aw 2009). That is, an NRM researches “the needs of a people, devise[s] a strategy for reaching that people, implement[s] a strategy of ministry, evangelism, and church planting among that people without ever personally residing among the targeted population” (Garrison 1992, 68). While this may build a healthy reliance on local believers and lower operational costs, a caution is raised, namely that the incarnational aspect in building relationships is lost.

Bridges of Understanding

Building a strong base of trust in forming relationships is essential for facilitating communication. An essential component of such a trusting relationship involves the missionary learning and adapting to certain key Hazara values, concepts, and modes of communication. The reshaped missionary can then help the Hazaras understand the message of salvation in Christ through several important communication bridges. The first bridge is the notion of shame and honor. The Hazara people practice a shame and honor culture similar to the Scriptures, so highlighting how Jesus restores honor to us in order to be in a right relationship with God is a bridge. A second bridge is the use of storytelling. The Hazara people enjoy stories and take pleasure in “poetry, often memorizing it and using it to teach children, as well as storytelling and music that are distinct to their culture” (“Hazara” 2021). Many Muslims are familiar with the stories of the Bible, and these serve as building blocks to share.

The third communication bridge is the use of analogies to better explain God, sin, and redemption in Christ. For example, Afghans often use a common phrase, *Mosufar Astim*, meaning “we are travelers” with the connotation of being a people that are passing through this world and never truly at home. This pilgrimage analogy connects to how the New Testament describes believers in Jesus as sojourners far from an eternal home, longing to be with God. Afghans understand this longing for a sense of home and belonging (Monsutti 2005, xiv). The final bridge is using the Qur’an. Although the Qur’an denies many biblical teachings, it discusses Jesus, and it can be used discerningly to help Muslims understand the truth of the gospel. For example, the Qur’an acknowledges “people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)” (Sura 29:46). The Qur’an also affirms such teachings about Jesus as his virgin birth (Suras 3:37-47; 19:16-21) and many of the miracles recorded in the New Testament. R. Daniel Shaw, Senior Professor of Anthropology and Translation, at Fuller Theological Seminary, suggests three questions to consider while preparing to work among the Hazara: What do the Hazaras deem important? What does the Bible say about these things? And how can I effectively communicate to connection the two? (Shaw 2020).

Strategies of Communication

Above all, foreigners must take a learner’s approach with the Hazaras, by seeking to understand their perspective first and asking non-confrontational questions. These questions can range from personal life to questions about faith. For example: What is it about being a Muslim that is helpful? Secondly, the use of prayer in conversation is strategic. According to Dr. John Bitar, adjunct professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and Director of Good News for the Crescent World, “Muslims have a great deal of respect for prayer and for people of prayer. Pray for blessing on their family, work and home. Invite God’s Spirit to come and touch them. Pray right then, out and loud” (Bitar 2020). Thirdly, since most homes in Afghanistan have access to television, phones, and radio, using these forms of technology already available in the strategy to communicate the gospel is wise. Portions of the Bible have been translated into Hazaragi (e.g., the book of Proverbs and Luke). Movies, such as *The Jesus Film* and *The Prophet’s Story*, are also available in Hazaragi.

Conclusion

Tools exist for field workers who desire to effectively enter, live among, reach, and disciple the Hazara people group of central Afghanistan. The foundation for effective communication, in word and deed, is established on both building genuine relationships and living in a way that brings glory to God. If both of these are present, the strategies used can bear fruit. The Hazaras

still do not have an indigenous, multiplying church community within their people group with consistent access to the message of Jesus. Pray that the Lord would send laborers and messengers of this good news to the Hazaras (Matt 9:37–38) and prepare the Hazaras to call on Jesus and be saved (Rom 10:14–17).

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