

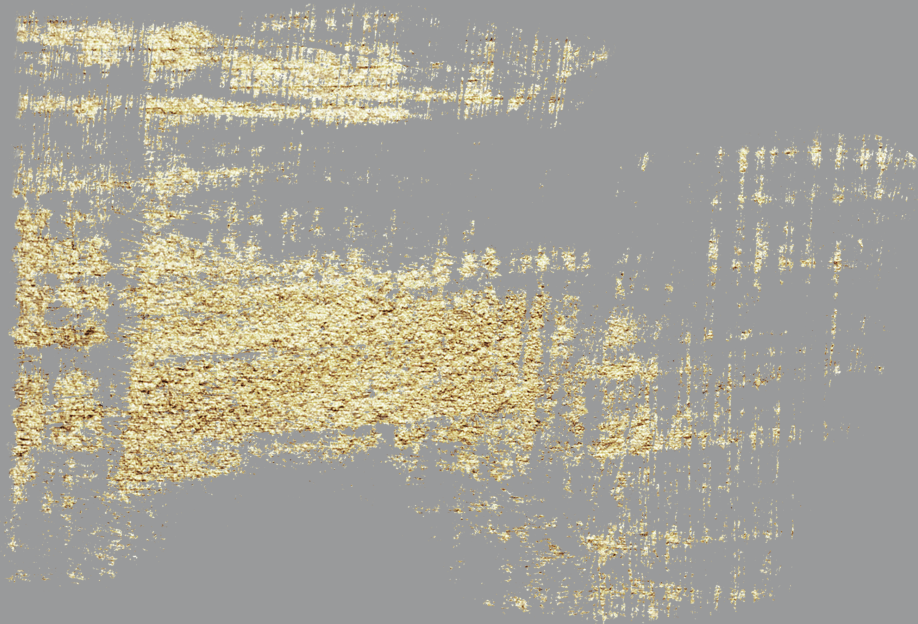


**Policy Brief**

April, 2021

# **One Year On; The Plight of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs Continues**

**Ali Amani**



*“The attackers arrived on the stairs and started killing the women. My nephew shouted and said to me ‘Uncle, please go downstairs’, and when I tried to go downstairs, they shot my nephew in the head. My dearest daughter was wounded, and she was repeatedly calling me ‘Dad’ before she died... Earlier I used to feel Afghanistan is my home, but not anymore. I used to tell my fellow Sikhs and Hindus not to leave but now I tell everyone, even the Muslims, to leave Afghanistan. There is no humanity left here.”*

**Harinder Singh**, survivor of an Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) attack in 2020 on Shor Bazar Gurdurwara, Kabul.

## **Introduction:**

Sikh and Hindu communities have lived in Afghanistan for centuries, but presently they constitute only a tiny fraction of the country’s population. As of the time of writing, approximately 300 Sikhs and Hindus remain in Afghanistan, with most concentrated in Kabul and Jalalabad.

Prior to the collapse of the pro-Soviet backed government in 1992, an estimated 200,000 members of the Sikh and Hindu community<sup>1</sup> were living in some of the major urban centers of the country. Sadly, the takeover of Kabul by Islamist Mujahidin in 1992 and the arrival of the Taliban in 1996 was a turning point for the community. Strict restrictions on the practice of minority faiths was introduced during this time, and Taliban forced Sikh and Hindu men to wear yellow badges in the public and women to wear burqas as part of the group’s plan to segregate ‘un-Islamic’ communities from Afghan Muslims.<sup>2</sup>

In 2001, the US-led intervention in Afghanistan ousted the Taliban and replaced it with a newly promised democratic government, bringing hope and improved religious tolerance for the Afghan Sikh and Hindu community. However, fear and hostility persisted and prevailed to an uneven extent. Unfortunately, the dwindling Sikh and Hindu communities that greatly contributed to the intellectual and economic advancements of the country during the 1980s now generally worked as medicinal herb shopkeepers due to the prevalent discrimination and insecurity. According to ‘The Survey of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus’,<sup>3</sup> the social and economic conditions of the Sikhs and Hindus did not improve even after the formation of the new Afghan government. On the contrary, targeted attacks and other forms of discrimination further exacerbated the plight of the mentioned communities.

The targeted attacks against the community reached unprecedented levels in 2018 and 2020 with the emergence ISKP in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> The attacks by ISKP and its affiliates in 2018 and 2020 took the lives of nearly 45 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus within the span of just 18 months.<sup>5</sup> In early July 2018, at the peak of the Afghan presidential elections, a suicide bomber targeted a vehicle carrying Sikh and Hindu minority who were traveling to meet the Afghan President in the eastern city of Jalalabad. The blast killed 19 Sikhs and Hindus including Awtar Singh Khalsa, who was the community’s sole candidate for the October 2018 parliamentary elections.<sup>6</sup> ISKP claimed responsibility for the attack and explicitly stated that their mission was to target “polytheists”, referring to Sikhs and Hindus.<sup>7</sup> This was one of the biggest attacks on the community since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and it once again

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<sup>1</sup> Often Sikhs and Hindus are referred to as a single community due to their religious and cultural similarities.

<sup>2</sup> [www.web.archive.org/web/20070221021043/http://archives.cnn.com/2001/fyi/news/05/22/taleban.hindus/index.html](http://www.web.archive.org/web/20070221021043/http://archives.cnn.com/2001/fyi/news/05/22/taleban.hindus/index.html)

<sup>3</sup> [www.porseshresearch.org/porseshv2/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Survey-of-the-Afghan-Hindus-Sikhs-English.pdf](http://www.porseshresearch.org/porseshv2/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Survey-of-the-Afghan-Hindus-Sikhs-English.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52029571](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52029571)

<sup>5</sup> [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44677823](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44677823)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> [www.wionews.com/south-asia/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-for-attack-on-sikhs-hindus-in-jalalabad-148598](http://www.wionews.com/south-asia/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-for-attack-on-sikhs-hindus-in-jalalabad-148598)

signalled the precarious state of minorities in Afghanistan. In spite of the heightened violence aimed at the community, they showed resilience and did not undertake serious collective attempts to leave Afghanistan at the time.

However, the March 25, 2020 Kabul Gurudwara<sup>8</sup> attack was a breaking point and the final nail in the coffin for this dwindling communities. This attack saw ISKP terrorists<sup>9</sup> stormed a crowded Sikh Gurudwara and housing complex in Shor Bazar, Kabul, and killed at least 25 Sikh male and female civilians, injuring another 8 people, while holding more than 100 community members hostages, including women and children. Afghan security forces ended the siege after 6 hours and rescued all the hostages. The following day on March 26, 2020, the community was further traumatized by a bomb explosion near the cremation site of the deceased victims. Three more bombs were found and detonated by security forces in the vicinity of the cremation site. ISKP later claimed responsibility for bombing the cremation site as well.<sup>10</sup>

In the aftermath of the aforementioned incidents, on March 28, 2020, a Sikh news agency reported that ISKP threatened Sikhs and Hindus with forced conversion to Islam or expulsion from Afghanistan within ten days, after which time the community would be further targeted.<sup>11</sup>

Repeated attacks, endemic societal discriminations, abductions, and frequent violence by ISKP have pushed Afghan Sikhs and Hindus into a very precarious and fragile state after the March 2020 Gurudwara attack. In turn, this paper highlights the prevalence of violence and marginalization of these communities in Afghanistan and its impact in relation to the exodus of these communities from the country. It further examines the Afghan government's response to such catastrophes. The paper concludes with recommendations for the government and other relevant key actors, especially the need to practically abide by their commitments to protecting ethno-religious minority groups in Afghanistan, at such a highly significant turning point in the country's history.

### **ISKP Attacks and an Escalation in Violence:**

In the early hours of March 25, 2020, Sikhs and Hindus had gathered at the Shor Bazar Gurdwara to commemorate a Sikh religious festival and to offer a *mannat* (a religious wish or prayer) to alleviate the Covid crisis. As the festival began, gunmen associated with ISKP stormed the Gurdwara and started firing and lobbing grenades at worshipper, killing 26 people, including women, children, and the Muslim guard. During the attack, 8 members of the Sikh community were injured and over 100 were held hostage for several hours until the gunmen were disarmed by security forces.

The following day on 26 March, 2020, during the funeral of the deceased, Afghans Sikhs were again targeted as a bomb exploded beside their cremation site, injuring several mourners. Furthermore, on the same day, three more bombs were found and detonated by security forces near the vicinity of the cremation site. While on March 28, 2020 community elders confirmed that ISKP issued another threat against Sikh and Hindu communities giving them a 10 day ultimatum to leave the country or face more attacks.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A Gurudwara is also referred to as 'Dharamsal' locally.

<sup>9</sup> [ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/iskp-claims-bombing-near-cremation-site-for-sikhs-killed-in-prior-suicide-attack.html](http://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/iskp-claims-bombing-near-cremation-site-for-sikhs-killed-in-prior-suicide-attack.html)

<sup>10</sup> [www.khaama.com/abu-khalid-al-hindi-carried-out-the-attack-on-sikh-temple-in-kabul-isis-k-04568/](http://www.khaama.com/abu-khalid-al-hindi-carried-out-the-attack-on-sikh-temple-in-kabul-isis-k-04568/)

<sup>11</sup> [www.sikh24.com/2020/03/28/afghan-sikhs-asked-to-quit-afghanistan-within-10-days-or-get-ready-to-be-killed/](http://www.sikh24.com/2020/03/28/afghan-sikhs-asked-to-quit-afghanistan-within-10-days-or-get-ready-to-be-killed/)  
(The author could not locate this specific ISKP threat on the internet or ISKP social media pages. Furthermore, Sikh community members did not disclose it to the author despite multiple requests.)

<sup>12</sup> [www.sikh24.com/2020/03/28/afghan-sikhs-asked-to-quit-afghanistan-within-10-days-or-get-ready-to-be-killed/](http://www.sikh24.com/2020/03/28/afghan-sikhs-asked-to-quit-afghanistan-within-10-days-or-get-ready-to-be-killed/)

Fearing a similar attack, on April 7, 2020, The Karte Parwan Gurudwara located in north western Kabul was secured with T-walls as well, whereas cleaning and small renovations began at Shor Bazar Gurudwara that was damaged in the attack. Some of the deceased families were shifted to Karte Parwan Gurudwara so their bodies would be left unharmed. Nearly a month after the 26 March, 2020 attack, on April 18, 2020, Harjit Singh, the Canadian Minister of National Defence, called upon the Afghan National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib to increase security for Afghan Sikhs, Hindus, and other minorities in the country.<sup>13</sup>

On May 6, 2020, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) issued a statement that 5 ISKP members had been killed and 8 more arrested. As per that statement, those arrested and killed were responsible for and orchestrated several attacks in Kabul, including on the Sikh Gurdwara in Shor Bazar on March 25, 2020.<sup>14</sup> While on June 22, 2020, Nidan Singh Sachdeva, an Afghan Sikh community leader, was abducted by unidentified persons from a Gurdwara in Paktia province in south-eastern Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> Taliban denied having a role in the abduction and Nidan Singh was eventually released from captivity unharmed, due to efforts made by the Afghan government and local tribal elders.

In a similar case, on July 20, 2020 Salmeet Kaur, a 13-year-old Sikh girl was allegedly lured into marriage by a Muslim man and was rescued after a local cleric refused to solemnize their marriage, finding the girl as a minor. She was handed over to her family after the local cleric informed the police.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, a week after his release from captivity, Nidan Singh and 10 other Afghan Sikhs arrived in Delhi as part of the first batch of Sikhs and Hindus granted short-term visa by the Indian Embassy in Kabul.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, on September 23, 2020 local media in Afghanistan reported that the 20 remaining Sikh and Hindu families of Ghazni province had left for India, given the fear of persecution and threats to their lives.<sup>18</sup> Until recently, Ghazni had a vibrant trading community of several hundred Sikh and Hindu families that sold spices, herbal medicines, and textiles in the province and beyond. Only one community member, Raja Ram, decided to stay back to look after the local temple. However, he too had already sent his wife and four children to India, in the hope of a better future.

On December 8, 2020, Vice President Amrullah Saleh in his daily 6:30 am security meeting reported that an Afghan Sikh citizen named Kartar Singh was released from the jail of a local MP. Kartar Singh was illegally held captive by an MP for 8 days after failing to fulfil the terms of business contract with the said MP. However, Vice President Saleh did not disclose the name of the MP, as Kartar Singh did not agree to resolve the issue through legal or judicial means.<sup>19</sup>

In February 2021, almost one year after the Doha peace agreement<sup>20</sup>, tensions were running high in Kabul amid a string of target killings and bomb explosions. On February 6, 2021, one such explosion hit a store in the Shor Bazar area of Kabul, killing Sunny Singh and injuring two other members of the

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*The author could not locate the ISKP threat on the internet or ISKP's social media pages. Community members also did not disclose this to the author despite multiple requests.*

<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/harjitsajjan/status/1251281993058394113?lang=en>

<sup>14</sup> [www.asianewsaf.com/46262/](http://www.asianewsaf.com/46262/)

<sup>15</sup> [www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/sikh-community-leader-nidan-singh-sachdevareleased-from-captivity-in-afghanistan/story-Bi54Y6yDzPTRngp2SbC3eJ.html](http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/sikh-community-leader-nidan-singh-sachdevareleased-from-captivity-in-afghanistan/story-Bi54Y6yDzPTRngp2SbC3eJ.html)

<sup>16</sup> [www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/afghan-cleric-saved-minor-sikh-girl-abducted-by-a-muslim-boy/articleshow/77070211.cms](http://www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/afghan-cleric-saved-minor-sikh-girl-abducted-by-a-muslim-boy/articleshow/77070211.cms)

<sup>17</sup> [www.swarajyamag.com/insta/first-batch-of-11-afghan-sikhs-including-one-abducted-from-gurdwara-last-month-arrive-in-india](http://www.swarajyamag.com/insta/first-batch-of-11-afghan-sikhs-including-one-abducted-from-gurdwara-last-month-arrive-in-india)

<sup>18</sup> [gandhara.rferl.org/a/ghazni-residents-mourn-the-loss-of-hindu-sikh-neighbors-/30854326.html](http://gandhara.rferl.org/a/ghazni-residents-mourn-the-loss-of-hindu-sikh-neighbors-/30854326.html)

<sup>19</sup> [www.facebook.com/AmrullahSaleh.Afg/posts/3466796030095278](https://www.facebook.com/AmrullahSaleh.Afg/posts/3466796030095278)

<sup>20</sup> [www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf](http://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf)

Sikh community. Sunny's wife and their newly born son, who were waiting for his return to India watched his last rites being performed via a video call in Ludhiana, India.<sup>21</sup>

### **Mass Migration from Afghanistan:**

The brutal 25 March, 2020 Gurudwara attack further terrorized the already dwindling Afghan Hindu and Sikh communities and triggered another exodus of Sikhs and Hindus from the country. Following the attack, the community, diaspora, and the Indian government hastened their efforts to facilitate and evacuate the remaining Afghan Sikhs and Hindus out of the country. The frequent targeted attacks and threats continuation led community activists in the diaspora to take up the cause of Afghanistan's persecuted Sikhs and Hindus. On March 28, 2020, UNITED SIKHS, a U.S. based relief organization issued an official statement condemning the violence against Sikhs living in Afghanistan and pledged aid (around 150,000 USD) to help Sikhs leave Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> On another occasion, April 8, 2020, the organization called upon Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Filippo Grandi, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to protect and immediately relocate Afghan Sikhs and Hindus.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, on April 2, 2020, The Afghan Council of Hindu and Sikh Believers (Karte Parwan Gurudwara) wrote official letters to the Indian Embassy, the Indian Interior Minister and External Ministry of India to seek the immediate evacuation of around 650 Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan within next 2-3 days.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, several Indian-based organizations, including the World Punjabi Organization, Hindu-Sikh Welfare Society, Khalsa Diwan Society, and managements of Gurdwaras, also appealed to the Indian government to offer asylum to Afghan Sikhs and Hindus.<sup>25</sup> Likely on April 9 2020, the US-based Hindu American Foundation also urged Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to grant asylum to persecuted Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup>

The international community also sped up efforts to offer asylum to the remaining Afghan Sikh and Hindu community amid the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 3, 2020, the Conservative Party of Canada proposed a special program to allow direct private sponsorship of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus.<sup>27</sup> While on May 18, 2020, the Democratic Party presidential candidate Joe Biden urged the US State Department to grant Afghan Sikhs and Hindus emergency refugee protection. Mr. Joe Biden also pledged to safeguard these minority communities if elected President in the November 2020 elections.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, on June 27, 2020, 20 U.S. senators urged the Trump administration to grant emergency refugee protection to Sikh and Hindu communities of Afghanistan, given the persecution they were facing as a religious minorities.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> [www.indianexpress.com/article/india/sikh-man-killed-in-kabul-blastl-wife-watches-last-rites-on-video-call-in-her-arms-infant-son-who-never-saw-his-father-7178897/](http://www.indianexpress.com/article/india/sikh-man-killed-in-kabul-blastl-wife-watches-last-rites-on-video-call-in-her-arms-infant-son-who-never-saw-his-father-7178897/)

<sup>22</sup> [www.unitedsikhs.org/save-afghan-sikhs-a-global-response/](http://www.unitedsikhs.org/save-afghan-sikhs-a-global-response/)

<sup>23</sup> [www.unitedsikhs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Letter-to-UNHCR-re-Sikhs-and-Hindus-in-Afghanistan.pdf](http://www.unitedsikhs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Letter-to-UNHCR-re-Sikhs-and-Hindus-in-Afghanistan.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> [www.sikh24.com/2020/04/06/saveafghansikhs-we-need-to-leave-afghanistan-in-next-2-3-days-otherwise-our-lives-are-in-danger/](http://www.sikh24.com/2020/04/06/saveafghansikhs-we-need-to-leave-afghanistan-in-next-2-3-days-otherwise-our-lives-are-in-danger/)

<sup>25</sup> [www.hindustantimes.com/cities/facing-threat-sikhs-hindus-in-afghanistan-awaiting-india-s-response-on-asylum-pleas/story-2yn4See00zIjllUknbp6O.html](http://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/facing-threat-sikhs-hindus-in-afghanistan-awaiting-india-s-response-on-asylum-pleas/story-2yn4See00zIjllUknbp6O.html)

<sup>26</sup> [www.hinduamerican.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/HAF-Letter-Modi-Afghan-Religious-Minorities\\_04.09.20.pdf](http://www.hinduamerican.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/HAF-Letter-Modi-Afghan-Religious-Minorities_04.09.20.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> [www.twitter.com/GarnettGenius/status/1245832378754437122](https://twitter.com/GarnettGenius/status/1245832378754437122)

<sup>28</sup> [www.americanbazaaronline.com/2020/05/18/democratic-presidential-candidate-joe-biden-supports-asylum-for-persecuted-sikhs-hindus-in-afghanistan-441166/](http://www.americanbazaaronline.com/2020/05/18/democratic-presidential-candidate-joe-biden-supports-asylum-for-persecuted-sikhs-hindus-in-afghanistan-441166/)

<sup>29</sup> [www.thehindu.com/news/international/20-us-senators-seek-emergency-refugee-protection-for-afghan-sikhs-hindus/article31930373.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/20-us-senators-seek-emergency-refugee-protection-for-afghan-sikhs-hindus/article31930373.ece)

After the release of community leader Nidan Singh, on July 18, 2020 the Indian government finally approved giving shelter to over 600 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus who had applied for long-term visas. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a statement saying that "In a recent decision, India has decided to facilitate the migration of Afghan Hindu and Sikh community members facing security threats in Afghanistan to India".<sup>30</sup> With the ease of lockdowns and resumption of special flights, initially 11 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus, including Nidan Singh Sachdeva, reached New Delhi on July 26, 2020. They were received by Sikh organizations and relatives in Delhi.<sup>31</sup>

On August 7, 2020, The World Punjabi Organisation confirmed that it was organizing charter flights to evacuate over 400 remaining Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan in coordination with the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) and the Indian Embassy in Kabul.<sup>32</sup> On August 20, 2020, another 128 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus along with the Holy Scriptures of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji Maharaj reached India. They were received by the President and members of the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee and other organizations.<sup>33</sup>

While on September 3, 2020, 182 more Afghan Sikhs and Hindus along with 7 Holy Scriptures of Sri Guru Granth Sahib landed at New Delhi in a special flight facilitated by the DSGMC and World Punjabi Organization. This was the third group of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus brought to India due to ISKP attacks.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, in another major development, by the end of September 2020, all of the remaining 20 Sikh and Hindu families of Ghazni left for Kabul and India.

On November 27, 2020, Narendra Singh Khalsa<sup>35</sup>, during a meeting at his residence, confirmed to Porsesh Research & Studies Organization (PRSO)'s staff working with the community that nearly 400 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus have left Afghanistan. Though, he added that around 20-30 male members of the community keep commuting between Delhi and Kabul to earn livelihoods and look after their businesses in Afghanistan. Sunny Singh was one of these men who had returned to Kabul for work. As noted earlier, he was tragically killed when a bomb explosion hit his shop on February 6, 2021.

### **The Afghan Government's Response:**

Although Afghanistan is a signatory and a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>36</sup>, the government has clearly fallen short of its human rights commitments, particularly concerning Article 6 (the right to life), Article 18 (freedom of religion), and article 27 (minority rights) of the treaty. Under international law, the responsibility to provide security for citizens and to promote and protect human rights lies with the state. Hence, the Afghan government's passivity and absolute silence on the targeted violence and mass migration of over 400 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus is a clear violation of its human rights obligations.

Despite enjoying the immense economic, political and military support from the International community since 2001, the Afghan government has failed to fulfil its obligations of providing security and protection to its religious and ethnic minorities especially, the Sikh and Hindu community.

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<sup>30</sup> [www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/kidnapped-sikh-community-leader-in-afghanistan-released-mea/1898082](http://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/kidnapped-sikh-community-leader-in-afghanistan-released-mea/1898082)

<sup>31</sup> [www.swarajyamag.com/insta/first-batch-of-11-afghan-sikhs-including-one-abducted-from-gurdwara-last-month-arrive-in-india](http://www.swarajyamag.com/insta/first-batch-of-11-afghan-sikhs-including-one-abducted-from-gurdwara-last-month-arrive-in-india)

<sup>32</sup> [www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/arranging-evacuation-of-400-sikhs-hindus-from-afghanistan-punjabi-body-120080701672\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/arranging-evacuation-of-400-sikhs-hindus-from-afghanistan-punjabi-body-120080701672_1.html)

<sup>33</sup> [www.facebook.com/watch/?v=302006740872713](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=302006740872713)

<sup>34</sup> [www.sikh24.com/2020/09/05/7-holy-saroops-182-afghan-sikhs-and-hindus-reach-india/](http://www.sikh24.com/2020/09/05/7-holy-saroops-182-afghan-sikhs-and-hindus-reach-india/)

<sup>35</sup> Afghan Sikh MP and community representative

<sup>36</sup> [treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20999/volume-999-i-14668-english.pdf](http://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20999/volume-999-i-14668-english.pdf)

Admitting the fact that the Afghan government itself has been a target of terrorism, militant attacks and assaults for years, but its response to the increasing levels of violence and targeted attacks against Sikhs and Hindus have remained unacceptably elusive and problematic. The government has been criticized for failing to protect the aforementioned communities and at times has even been accused of colluding with the perpetrators of these attacks.<sup>37</sup>

The inadequate response and accusations of the Afghan government is illustrated by the case of the July 2018 bombing in Jalalabad that killed 19 Sikhs and Hindus. On 1 July, 2018, the day of the attack, Sikhs and Hindus from Jalalabad and Kabul were invited by the government to take part in Ashraf Ghani's election campaign but the government failed to provide them with adequate protection. Afghan senators Baz Muhammad Zurmati and Gulalai Akbar had raised questions about the attack and accused the local security agencies of being involved in the attack.<sup>38</sup> Following the attack, President Ashraf Ghani had established a fact-finding commission, but their findings were never made public.

Similarly, in the case of the 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2020, incident, community elders also criticized the local security agencies and their response to the attack. Harinder Singh, who was inside the Gurudwara during the attack, accused the PD1<sup>39</sup> police and intelligence chief of negligence, as they reached the site of the attack after 90 minutes.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, local security agencies were criticized for failing to provide security at the cremation site in the following day.

Nonetheless, the Afghan authorities did show some signs of action in response to pressure from the public after the ISKP attack. On April 4, 2020, the NDS announced that it had arrested Islamic State's regional leader Aslam Farooqi (alias Abdullah Barakzai), along with 19 key operatives of the terrorist group. According to NDS sources, Farooqi was the mastermind of the March 25, 2020 Gurudwara attack.<sup>41</sup>

On April 12, 2020, the NDS arrested two more accomplices of ISKP chief Aslam Farooqi. The two people arrested were identified as Mohammad Tanveer and Ali Mohammad, who came from Bangladesh and Pakistan.<sup>42</sup> On May 6, 2020, the NDS issued another statement claiming to have killed 3 ISKP operatives and arrested another 8 in the Shakardara District and PD15 district of Kabul. As per their statement, those arrested and killed were responsible for planning and executing the attacks on the Sikh Dharamsal in Shor Bazar (as well as at the annual Mazari commemoration in west Kabul).<sup>43</sup>

In May 2020, Dawa Khan Menapal, a spokesman for the Afghan president, told the Voice of America (VoA) that "The Afghan Security Council has started some measures and they will take serious actions for their security," Menapal, further added that in "the past few years the government has made significant progress to address the issues these communities face. Hindus and Sikhs have two members in the Afghan parliament "who raise the voices and concerns of their constituencies".<sup>44</sup> Additionally, since February 2020, Afghanistan's Ministry of Finance has allocated 70 million AFN (910,000 USD) to renovate Hindu and Sikh temples across the country. A committee to register and renovate the Sikh and Hindu Gurdurwara and Temples, respectively. The committee is established and

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<sup>37</sup> [da.azadiradio.com/a/29336192.html](http://da.azadiradio.com/a/29336192.html)

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> PD1 is a Police district in the centre of Kabul.

<sup>40</sup> [www.facebook.com/TheAfghanDutchSikh/videos/818911595261199/](https://www.facebook.com/TheAfghanDutchSikh/videos/818911595261199/)

<sup>41</sup> [afghanistan.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_st/features/2020/04/06/feature-03](http://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2020/04/06/feature-03)

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.sikh24.com/2020/04/12/afghan-forces-nab-two-more-aides-of-iskp-chief-aslam-farooqi-who-plotted-massacre-of-25-afghan-sikhs/>

<sup>43</sup> [www.asianewsaf.com/46262/](http://www.asianewsaf.com/46262/)

<sup>44</sup> [www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/sikhs-and-hindus-afghanistan-limbo-after-march-deadly-attack](http://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/sikhs-and-hindus-afghanistan-limbo-after-march-deadly-attack)

functions under the supervision of the Ministry of Hajj and religious affairs. So far it has identified 18 temples and holy sites for renovation in different parts of the country.<sup>45</sup>

This is all occurring when the government is preparing for the pivotal Afghan Peace Process negotiations to be held in Istanbul at the end of May 2021<sup>46</sup>, in a bid to end the ongoing war in Afghanistan. The Istanbul talks come at a significant time given that President Joe Biden has announced the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in September 2021.<sup>47</sup> However, the exclusion of minorities, especially the Sikhs and Hindus, from the peace talks remains an unfortunate norm, as with previous talks held in Doha and Moscow.

Considering the current fragile security situation in the country, ethno-religious minorities such as the Sikh and Hindu community fear continued persecution, as they are constantly side-lined in major negotiations, like the peace talks with the Taliban. A big concern for this vulnerable community is that all the rights they have gained since the downfall of the Taliban regime in 2001—especially constitutionally guaranteed freedoms—will be sacrificed in favour of a rushed and non-representative peace deal with extremists groups like Taliban.

For too long, Afghanistan's minority Sikh and Hindu community have been facing violent attacks, societal discrimination and intimidation because of their religious beliefs and ethnicity. In the absence of tangible protections for minority groups, especially after the ISKP attack in 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the barriers faced by Afghan Sikhs and Hindus are likely to persist and will likely encourage the remaining 300 community members to permanently leave the country. This is not only due to the highly prevalent rate of violence but also due to fears of an uncertain future and discriminatory practices, such as multiple exclusions from the Afghan peace negotiations. This current trajectory of Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus parallels that of the country's Jewish population, as only Afghan Jew living in Kabul is now also planning to permanently leave Afghanistan, due to fear of persecution by the Taliban.<sup>48</sup>

### **Urgent Issues to be Addressed:**

The Afghan government as an authoritative actor has many opportunities and serious obligations to fulfil in order to protect the country's minorities, such as Sikhs and Hindus. First and foremost the government needs to take practical steps to ensure the safety and security of Afghanistan's religious minorities and abide by its international and constitutional commitment to protect its religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Sikhs and Hindu community. This should not merely be a special protection, but should further inclusivity within the legal system and government policies towards minorities, and requires the government to be decisive in the prosecution of the perpetrators of attacks against Afghan Sikhs and Hindus.

As the peace talks gain momentum and the new US administration is finalizing its strategy on Afghanistan, there is now a monumental responsibility for the Afghan government to ensure the protection of ethno-religious minorities in the country, also guaranteeing their representation at any potential outcome that the peace deal would yield. This is feasible through genuine representation of these minorities in the peace deal and their active participation in negotiations.

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<sup>45</sup> [www.facebook.com/sandpalsinghkhalsa1/posts/4143072349060998](https://www.facebook.com/sandpalsinghkhalsa1/posts/4143072349060998)

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/21/turkey-postpones-afghanistan-peace-summit-over-taliban-no-show>

<sup>47</sup> [www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/)

<sup>48</sup> [www.timesofisrael.com/afghanistans-last-known-jew-is-leaving-for-israel/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/afghanistans-last-known-jew-is-leaving-for-israel/)



However, in the longer term, the government should take systematic steps to deter the society from forgetting Afghan Sikhs and Hindus contribution to the social fabric of the country and preserve their memory within the country's collective consciousness. This is a serious concern, considering the past incidents of sanitizing history in relation to other ethnic and religious minorities and given the current fragile state of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan. This in turn necessitates a greater co-operation and the brainstorming of initiatives by the Ministry of Information and Culture of Afghanistan (MoIC), the National Archives of Afghanistan, the National Museum of Afghanistan and other relevant institutions in order to memorialize these communities and their heritage.

On the other hand, the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR)<sup>49</sup> as a semi-governmental entity and leading body in the peace negotiations has to revisit its superficial and traditional approach to these issues; for i.e. the Afghan peace delegation headed by HCNR, only included one women in the Moscow peace talks.<sup>50</sup> As civil observers of the peace process, we are concerned about the future of representation and protection of minority rights when presented with the outdated stance of the HCNR regarding inclusivity and representation in a new Afghanistan.

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<sup>49</sup> [www.hcnr.af/en](http://www.hcnr.af/en)

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/18/afghan-activists-warn-over-absence-of-women-in-peace-process>

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