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## THE DISSIPATION OF POLITICAL CAPITAL AMONG AFGHANISTAN'S HAZARAS : 2001-2009

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## Crisis States Research Centre

# The Dissipation of Political Capital among Afghanistan's Hazaras: 2001-2009

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### Introduction

Since its establishment in 1989 *Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan* (The Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan) has been an important political and military player in Afghanistan. Like most contemporary major political parties in Afghanistan, *Hizb-e Wahdat* is rooted in the turbulent period of the anti-Soviet resistance movements in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It was formed to bring together nine separate and mostly inimical military and ideological groups into a single entity. During the period of the civil war in the early 1990s, it emerged as one of the major actors in Kabul and some other parts of the country. Political Islamism was the ideology of most of its key leaders but it gradually tilted towards its Hazara ethnic support base and became the key vehicle of the community's political demands and aspirations. Its ideological background and ethnic support base has continuously shaped its character and political agenda. Through the *jihad* and the civil war, *Wahdat* accumulated significant political capital among Afghanistan's Hazaras, which arguably could have been spent in the establishment of long-lasting political institutions in Afghanistan.

By 2009, however, *Wahdat* was so fragmented and divided that the political weight it carried in the country bore little resemblance to what it had once been. It had fragmented into at least four competing organisations, each claiming ownership of the name and legacy of *Wahdat*.

This paper aims to explain the historical background and processes in which the party was formed and then lays out its political agendas and strategies, as well as its eventual disintegration. It will also look at how its character, political agenda and strategies have evolved throughout the years of civil war, Taliban rule and the post-2001 political process.

### Background

Following the collapse of the pro-Soviet Kabul government in the Hazarajat in 1979, the region fell under the control of *Shuray-e Ittefaq*, a hastily assembled region-wide organisation (Ibrahimi 2006; Farr 1988). Soon it was challenged and overthrown by several new radical Islamist groups that engaged in endless power and ideological struggles that engulfed the region for most of the 1980s. The wars and conflicts were launched and fought with strong ideological fervour. However, none of the organisations were able to determine the outcome of the war in their favour (Dawlatabadi 1992). Towards the second half of the 1980s a complete stalemate was emerging in the region, with each organisation confined to specific pockets of territory. The devastation and atrocities perpetrated during the war were eroding the credibility of their ideologies and leaderships. As a result, there was an overwhelming desire for change felt both by the villagers and senior leaders of the organisations (Ibrahimi 2009a; Samangani 2001).

Several attempts to make peace and ensure stability had failed. Alliances and coalitions were being crafted and dismantled. The most important and effective of them were the *Shuray-e*

*Eatelaq*, an alliance of eight major organisations formed in Tehran in 1985. It was the most effective attempt to achieve unity of action by the leaderships of the organisations and was to become an important precedent for the formation of *Wahdat*. However, while the alliance provided the Hazara *mujahedin* with a common political voice in negotiations and bargaining with the Sunni organisations based in Peshawar, it failed to tackle the incessant infighting on the ground. To stabilise the region a more radical move was required (Dawlatabadi 1999; Erfani 1993).

With the announcement of the Soviet withdrawal in January 1988, the collapse of the Kabul government was believed to be imminent and a dramatic reconfiguration of political alignments was in the making. This was happening at a time when the Kabul government and the ruling *Hizb-e Demokratik-e Khalq* (People's Democratic Party, PDPA) were experiencing intensive factional and ethnic rivalries. A declining faith in the future of the government facilitated the emergence of new political alignments largely between members of the same ethnic groups, cutting across the ideological divide between the *mujahedin* and the PDPA officials. In the meantime, negotiations on the formation of an interim government led by the Sunni organisations based in Peshawar excluded the Hazara alliance based in Tehran. The combined effect of these developments among the Hazara organisations was greater awareness of the need for a more collective and assertive bargaining with their Sunni counterparts if they were to be taken seriously.

It was against this background that a more radical demand of unification and merger of all existing politico-military organisations into a single party dominated the politics of the region. Several meetings were held throughout the region in which the nature and composition of the new party and the role of existing organisations in it were extensively debated. In August 1988, the provincial centre of Bamyan fell into the hand of Hazara *mujahedin*. This further facilitated and encouraged the formation of a regional organisation. The operation that resulted in the collapse of government in the town was jointly coordinated by different *mujahedin* forces in the region. *Sazman-e Nasr* (Victory Organisation) played a central and coordinating role in the attack. This development marked the elimination of any presence of the Kabul government within the entire Hazarajat region (Qurban Ali Erfani, interview, 2007).

Henceforth Bamyan was the centre of important political developments. It injected a new stimulus into the ongoing unification process among the *mujahedin* organisations in the region. The town hosted the final meeting that resulted in the declaration of the *misqaq-e wahdat*, or the unity treaty in July 1989 less than a year after its liberation. It became a centre of political leadership and power for the new party beyond and away from the local factional and personal rivalries of local commanders.

What contrasted the negotiation process for the formation of *Wahdat* with similar previous efforts was that it was essentially a process initiated from within the Hazarajat region. The process was informed and shaped by the realities of war, factionalism and loss of control of the political leaderships over military commanders within the region. Conversely, the previous coalition-building efforts were centred in Iran and were often under the direct influence of the Iranian authorities. Once it was formed, its leaders faced the challenge of convincing their representatives at the *Shuray-e Eatelaq* and officials of the Iranian government, who were more at ease with dealing with a coalition of separate parties in Tehran. The fragmentation of the Hazara *mujahedin* had given the Iranians effective leverage to control small organisations, often tied to various religious authorities and government

agencies in Iran. The Iranians feared that a single party based inside Afghanistan could mean they would lose control over the movement. Furthermore, the increasingly evident ethnic discourse within the party was seen unfavourably by the Iranian authorities who had for years tried to promote a more pan-Shiite political Islamism during the period of  *Jihad* . Husain Ibrahim, the representative of the Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei in Afghan affairs at that time, is alleged to have tried to prevent the formation of  *Hizb-e Wahdat*  in order to maintain his influence (Former senior Wahdat official, interview, 2008). Eventually, once the party was formed, the Iranians decided to work with it and supported it in the early days of its existence. However, as the subsequent course of political developments discussed below shows, the party was to pursue a rather independent political strategy, often in conflict with Iranian policies and interests in the country.

### ***Hizb-e Wahdat, a Party of Unity***

As the name  *Wahdat*  indicates, the main objective of the party was to unify all Shiite  *mujahedin*  organisations under a single political leadership. It was created in response to a strong urge for unity among the Hazara leaders as well as commoners (Canfield 2004; Harpviken 1998).

In its organisational hierarchy, the party included the following key structures:

- *Shuray-e Aali Nezarat* , or the Supreme Supervisory Council, was meant to include high ranking religious figures and experts. In its supervisory role, the council was tasked to monitor all levels of the party and serve as the highest leadership and control mechanism over all activities and policies of the party.
- The next and most important body within the party was its Central Council. This organ was the most powerful deliberative and decision-making authority within the party. Because of the importance attached to it, its membership expanded in a most dramatic manner. Originally, it was planned to include 36 members, but the growing need for expansion and inclusion of other figures and groups into the party resulted in a constant increase in size. The first congress of the party in September 1991 urged the party leadership to facilitate integration of other Shiite groups and figures into the party. As such it was also resolved that the central and supervisory councils could be expanded as needed (Erfani 1993: 271). At its peak, the Central Council included more than 80 members representing nearly all religious and political groups and influential figures in the region, as well as Hazara figures from the cities. It was through membership and division of power within this council that the party managed to hold the previously fragmented and hostile Hazara political groupings together.
- The Wahdat Manifesto also provided for the formation of provincial- and district-level councils that would report to their relevant committees at the headquarters in Bamyan.

The search for change and unity was instigated and led in particular by the senior leaders of the two main organisations,  *Pasdaran*  and  *Nasr* , which were the most exposed to the threat of deligitimisation as a result of their loss of control over their military commanders (Ibrahim 2009a: 30-1). The path to unity had been a painstakingly long and complex process, which experienced repeated setbacks and obstacles, because each party sought to maximise their role in the process. This turned out to be a major contentious issue throughout several rounds of negotiations in the run up to formation of the party. Smaller parties pressed for equal

representation of all groups while the more powerful ones demanded greater power and a share of the positions in the unified party. Eventually the latter argument prevailed; *Nasr* and *Pasdaran* persuaded other organisations to concede to proportional representation.

Smaller parties were pressured and even intimidated into joining the process. Many groups had no other choice than joining it: the cost of standing outside would have been unbearable. The following two examples provide insight into the complexity of the process. *Harakat-e Islami*, led by Shaikh Asif Mohsini, was the main Shiite party that refused to join *Wahdat*. The party was dominated by non-Hazara Shiites. Initially, the party was represented in a series of negotiations, but Mohsini later declined to sign, having presented a number of conditions to be met. His conditions were interpreted as an unwillingness to join a party in which historical Hazara grievances and political aspirations predominated. Nonetheless, sections of his party joined *Hizb-e Wahdat* either because the new party was more promising for the political future of the Hazaras or because the pressure to join was so strong that it could not be resisted. The party's core could resist the pressure to join mainly because it was located outside the region. However, it did lose a substantial section of its Hazara following to *Hizb-e Wahdat*, a fact underlining the growing importance of ethnic identities in the aftermath of  *jihad* in the country (Harpviken 1998: 103).

The military class that had flourished during the civil war posed one of the main obstacles to unification. *Nahzat-e Islami* is a good example of military commanders refusing to unite in spite of the agreement of their leaders. Its senior leaders participated in the unification process and hosted one of the meetings in their stronghold in the Jaghouri district of Ghazni. However, Wasiq, *Nehzat's* main military commander in the district, refused to dismantle his military structure and continued to operate under the name of *Nahzat*. This resulted in a military confrontation with the formerly *Nasr* commanders who were fighting on behalf of *Hizb-e Wahdat*. The conflict resulted in the total defeat of *Nahzat* and other smaller organisations in this district in 1993. As a result, *Wahdat* in Jaghouri and most other parts of Ghazni established itself through the military victory of the former *Nasr* forces (Former *Hizb-e Wahdat* official, personal communication, December 2007).

One after the other the smaller parties were pressured or coaxed to join the process. In November 1989, the remnant of Behishi's *Shuray-e Ittefaq* also joined. His decision to participate in the unification process was a turning point in the development of clerical leadership in the Hazarajat, as it symbolised the recognition of Khomeinist hegemony by important non-Khomeinist elements of the clergy. Behishi's *Shura* was different from other organisations. He represented the conservative and non-revolutionary component of the *ulema*. He was a follower of the Khoi school of thought, a moderate, non-political and conservative line of thinking opposed to Khomeini's revolutionary Islamism and dominant among Afghan Shiites until the early 1980s. By the time *Hizb-e Wahdat* was in the making, Beheshti was reduced to leading a small fraction of the *Shura* in Nawur district of Ghazni (Ibrahimi 2006).

The ambition to integrate previously hostile organisations into a single party had achieved a great degree of success. Officially, all the previous organisations except *Harakat* were dissolved and their military structures were dismantled. A relatively stable political order was restored in the areas under its control. However, the party suffered from serious structural problems and ideological differences.

## Balancing Ideology and Ethnicity

Ideologically, most *Hizb-e Wahdat* leaders were political Islamists. In a way the formation of the party was the culmination of a process of Islamisation of the Hazara anti-Soviet resistance groups in Afghanistan. The process was accompanied by the gradual rise to dominance of the clergy in the political leadership of the region, and in fact it marked the final victory of the clerical Islamists. By unifying under the new name they further consolidated their political dominance. The Wahdat manifesto emphasised the continuation and intensification of efforts for the creation of an Islamic government based on the Quran and Sunnah.<sup>1</sup> It called for further efforts to incorporate all other genuine Shiite groups into the party and to act in solidarity with all Islamic organisations of the Sunnis. The language of the manifesto clearly indicates that *Wahdat* was to be, at least predominately, a Shiite organisation, despite references to solidarity and cooperation with the Sunni organisations. It demanded an equal status for Shiite jurisprudence alongside the Hanafi school, dominant among Sunnis in the country. As a religious party, *Hizb-e Wahdat* can be credited with an openness and inclusiveness exceptional in a conservative society like Afghanistan. In an exceptional move among the Afghan *mujahedin*, the party included ten women members in its central council and had devoted an entire committee for women's affairs that was headed by a university-educated Hazara woman (hazara.net 2009).

The main point, however, is that the movement gradually tilted towards its ethnic support base. Subsequent political developments in Kabul exposed the difficulties of establishing an Islamic government in the country. With the fall of the communist regime in Kabul and the failure to form an Islamic government, the warring factions turned to their ethnic and regional support bases. While Islamism remained the officially proclaimed ideology of most groups, ethnic demands and power struggles surfaced as major sources of political mobilisation. *Wahdat's* leaders were endeavouring to strike a balance between ethnicity and religion. The result was an Islamic ideology used to express and further the rights of a historically disadvantaged community; a strong desire for unity of the Hazaras was its main driving force. In fact, ideologically, *Nasr's* trademark combination of ethnic nationalism and radical Islamism increasingly became the ideology of *Wahdat*, an ethnic discourse dominated by, and expressed through, an Islamic language.

Abdul Ali Mazari, a former member of *Nasr* and first secretary general of *Wahdat*, was the main agent of the explicit transformation of the party into a platform for the rights and political demands of the Hazaras. When he arrived in Kabul in 1992, he further opened the door of the party to Hazaras of all social and ideological backgrounds. A group of former leftists and government bureaucrats joined the inner circle of the party leadership, generating further rifts. This was a real test of political tolerance of the more conservative section of the clergy. While the party was created to unify the predominantly Islamist and clerical organisations, in Kabul it confronted groups of educated Hazaras much larger than had been the case in the provinces; these were also mostly leftist and relatively well organised. The question of whether the party should accept these individuals divided the party leadership. The *ulema* needed the knowledge and experiences of these educated Hazaras to help the party adjust to an urban political setting. The party suffered from a chronic shortage of members who had benefited from a modern education. Furthermore, most of the clerics had little familiarity with the politics of Kabul. Most of them were educated in religious centres in Iran

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<sup>1</sup> Sunnah is the second most important source of Islamic law and guidance after the Holy Quran. It is an Arabic word that is used to refer to the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad. In Shiite Islam it also includes the words and deeds of the Twelve Imam.

and Iraq and had mainly engaged in politics in rural Hazarajat. Finally, *Wahdat* fighters lacked military skills suitable to an urban environment. Despite that, many key figures in the central council opposed the inclusion of the educated Kabulis in the party, viewing them as godless communists. While none of the former leftists were given any position of authority within the party leadership, their strengthening relationship with, and perceived influence on, Mazari angered the more conservative sections of the party. Most notable in this regard was Muhammad Akbari, who consistently opposed *Wahdat's* alliance with non-jihadi groups such as General Dostum's *Junbesh-i Milli* and the Hazara leftists. On the other hand, the leftists did not seek any official positions within the party ranks. They were mostly concerned with ensuring their personal security and avoiding persecution by the *mujahedin* (Former *Wahdat* officials, interviews and personal communications, 2005 & 2007).

### **A Changing Political Strategy**

The idea of building an Islamic government and promoting religious fraternity rapidly ran into difficulties. *Hizb-e Wahdat's* stance as the representative of the Hazara *mujahedin* was not welcomed by its Sunni counterparts in Peshawar. Instead, it was effectively excluded from the negotiations around the formation of a *mujahedin* government in Kabul, which were dominated by the Sunnis. A *Hizb-e Wahdat* delegation to Peshawar, sent to negotiate a possible inclusion in the process, returned to Bamyan badly disappointed. In a central council meeting in Bamyan, the delegation headed by Abdul Ali Mazari raised the issue of deliberating a new political strategy. Some of the Sunni fundamentalist parties had basically ignored the Shiite claims of any form of effective representation in a future government. In opposition to *Hizb-e Wahdat's* demand of a quarter share in future power-sharing arrangements, some of the Sunni parties stated that the Shiites did not count as a significant community, deserving to be included in the negotiation process (Harpviken 1995).

Three days of deliberations in the party's central council in Bamyan produced a new strategy: working out an alliance of the country's historically deprived ethnic communities. This new strategy was to be pursued with the military commanders of various communities in the provinces rather than with the leaders in Peshawar. Government officials of various ethnic communities were also contacted to join or support the new alliance. The new strategy was communicated with various political and military players in the country through delegations and representatives. Fifty delegations were dispatched to several parts of the country, including the Panjshir valley and the northern province of Balkh. Members of the delegations were tasked with exploring a common political strategy for collectively bargaining over the rights of minorities in future political arrangements (Ustad Baba, personal communication, 2005; Former *Hizb-e Wahdat* officials, interviews, 2007; Dawlatabadi 1992: 246). The delegations to Panjshir and the north of the country reached important agreements with Massoud and the future leaders of the emergent *Junbish-e Milli Islami*, which underpinned a new political agreement that became known as *Paiman-e Jabalu-Seraj*, or the *Jabalu-seraj* agreement named after the area in Parwan province where one of the final negotiations took place in April 1992. Massoud was chosen as head of the new council, Muhammad Mohaqiq from *Hizb-e Wahdat* as his deputy and General Dostum as commander of its military affairs (Waezi 1999).

### **Failure in Political Strategy Splits the Party**

The alliance of *Wahdat*, *Junbesh* and Massoud's *Shuray-e Nezar*, or Supervisory Council, collapsed as they attempted to take control of Kabul. Similarly, the political arrangements among the Sunni *mujahedin* organisations also fell apart, turning the city into a battleground

for the most devastating and atrocious conflicts. *Wahdat* became an important part of the conflict for nearly three years. This provoked intense internal debates within the party. The questions of external alignments further inflamed the internal tensions. Muhammad Akbari rose as leader of a pro-Massoud camp within the party, challenging the wisdom of Mazari's refusal to join Rabbani's and Massoud's government and his participation in an alliance with Hekmatyar, the leader of *Hizb-i Islami*, who had emerged as the main opposition (Former Wahdat official, interview, 2005).

The differences between Mazari and Akbari resulted into the first major split within the party. After the split, both leaders maintained separate political and military organisations under the name of *Wahdat*, with Mazari maintaining the main body of the party. The growing rivalries and tensions between the two leaders surfaced strongly in the preparations for the party's leadership election in September 1994. The election was held amid a heightened competition between the two contending figures for leadership of the party. The party was experiencing its most difficult internal power struggle since it had been formed. New political fault lines were emerging as the party leaders tried to define and articulate their political agendas in Kabul. Both sides were determined to win in order to dominate leadership positions and consequently change the political direction of the party. The venue for the forthcoming elections also proved to be contentious. Akbari was pressing for the elections to be held in Bamyan where he felt stronger. By contrast, Mazari and his supporters pushed for elections in Kabul where he had cultivated a larger support base among urbanised Hazaras. Given the political differences and personal rivalries between the two leaders, the first election of the secretary general of the party was hotly contested. It was also particularly sensitive given the context of the civil war in Kabul, with regards to which both figures were proposing different political directions for the party. Akbari hoped he could alter the role of the party in the war and in the conflict in Kabul in favour of Rabbani's government through his election as secretary general of the party. Consequently, the election of secretary general gained a paramount importance for both sides in the civil war to maintain or change the political alignments of the party in their favour (Sarwar Jawadi, interview, 2005).

The elections were held amid a climate of distrust and violence. By gaining 43 votes (out of 82 members of the central council present), Mazari was re-elected as leader. Akbari with 33 votes was elected as his first deputy. Similarly, agreements were reached on 20 other key appointments. Akbari's faction won the positions of heads of cultural and military committees, which they had strongly pressed for. He and his supporters believed that by dominating the cultural and military committees they could manipulate the war and propaganda machine of the party in favour of the Rabbani government, their external ally. Karim Khalili, who would later become the leader of the party, was elected as chief of its political affairs committee. The voting patterns during the elections offer important insights into the internal politics of the party. Members of *Nasr* and *Pasdaran*, the two largest and most powerful numerically and politically, dominated the process as well as the two emergent factions. While *Nasr* maintained its cohesiveness, most other smaller organisations were divided. All former members of *Nasr* in the council voted for Mazari, testifying to the lasting cohesiveness of *Nasr* as a political block within *Wahdat*. By contrast, while most former members of *Pasdaran* supported Akbari, some of them cast their votes for Mazari. For instance, Ali Jan Zahidi, Ghulam Hussain Shafaq, Hayatullah Balaghi and Abdul Ahmed Fayaz, previously important local leaders of *Pasdaran*, threw their support behind Mazari. Similarly, most former members of *Harakat* and *Nahzat* followed *Pasdaran*, while most of



*Sazman-e Daawat* and *Mostazafin* supported Mazari. Other organisations such as *Shuray-e Ittefaq* and *Jabh-e Motahid* were bitterly divided.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, distrust and suspicions continued to undermine the new appointments. The role of external players, particularly that of Rabbani's government, was crucial. It is believed that the Rabbani government had been working through their contacts with Akbari to undermine Mazari and turn *Hizb-e Wahdat* into an ally. Mazari strongly suspected Akbari of trying to undermine him. A few weeks after the party elections, in response to an alleged coup plan by Akbari and sections of *Harakat* against him, Mazari ordered his troops to attack and expel all his opponents from the western part of the capital. Consequently, Akbari, his supporters and his allies in *Harakat* were forced to flee into areas controlled by Massoud in the north of the capital. While the exact details of the alleged plot remain unknown, Mazari later claimed that Qasim Fahim, then Rabbani's head of the intelligence department, was working with Akbari to militarily force him out of leadership. According to the allegations, Massoud was funding and arming as many as 20,000 troops to allow Akbari to take over *Wahdat's* leadership in Kabul and establish its control in Hazarajat as well.<sup>3</sup>

The split opened a deep and long standing political division among the Hazaras of Afghanistan. While Mazari and his successor Khalili commanded the support of most of the Hazaras, Akbari mostly operated in opposition to them. Following the death of Mazari at the hands of the Taliban in March 1995, Khalili was elected as the new party leader. He reorganised the party, re-established control over the Hazarajat region and joined Massoud and Junbesh against the newly emerged Taliban threat in a new alliance called the Supreme Council for Defence of the Motherland, which was later known as the 'northern alliance'. In contrast, Akbari joined the Taliban when they took control of Bamyán in September 1998.

### **Post-Taliban Reconstruction of Hizb-e Wahdat**

In its history, the party suffered three major defeats. The first defeat was marked by its downfall in Kabul and the death of Mazari at the hands of the Taliban in March 1995. Secondly, in August 1998 the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif was overrun by the Taliban; the city was the second important centre of the northern alliance after the fall of Kabul and also held a major concentration of *Wahdat's* troops and civilian Hazaras. *Hizb-e Wahdat* had played the key role in repelling a Taliban offensive on the city in 1997 and was to bear the brunt of Taliban anger this time. Thousands of Hazaras were massacred or imprisoned. Thirdly, in a few weeks the Taliban captured Bamyán, the new headquarters of the party, in another dramatic move. This marked the end of *Hizb-e Wahdat's* political life as a cohesive political organisation. The fall of these two cities proved to be much more than military defeats. Nearly all of the territories under its control were captured by the Taliban. Its political and military cadres fled into neighbouring countries. Khalili went to Iran. From amongst the senior leaders, only Muhaqiq after a brief period in Iran returned quickly to Afghanistan and organised a resistance front in the Balkhab district of Saripul. *Wahdat* never managed to recover after the fall of Mazar and Bamyán into the hands of the Taliban, because of the high losses in its rank and file and at the leadership levels (Ibrahimi 2009b).

Thus *Hizb-e Wahdat* participated in the post-Taliban political process with little of its past political and military weight. *Wahdat* still claimed to represent the Hazaras and the Hazarajat region fell under its control as the Taliban regime was overthrown. In the Interim

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<sup>2</sup> Information obtained by the author from various sources, during 2006-7 in Kabul.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

Administration (2001-2002), *Wahdat* had a modest weight; Muhammad Mohaqiq represented the party as one of the deputy chairmen and Minister of Planning. Members of *Harakat* and Akbari's *Wahdat* mostly represented the Shiites in the Interim Administration as well as the Transitional Administration in 2002-2003. Moreover, in the new political circumstances, the party needed to adapt to the new political realities in the country. The new political order established under the auspices of the international community required the military-political organisations to transform into civilian political parties. This entailed disbanding their military wings, disarming under the UN-led Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programme and operating under the new legal and political environment. As mentioned earlier, *Hizb-e Wahdat*'s military structure disintegrated under the Taliban, and as a result in late 2001 the organisation was in no way comparable to other anti-Taliban organisations in terms of military structure and hardware. Its leaders lacked the political and military resources to reorganise their fighters on any significant scale. In June 2005 the only major military structure controlled by the party, the Ninth Corps, was disbanded, ending financial support from the centre to *Wahdat*'s military wing.<sup>4</sup> Lacking resources and with a weak organisation, the party saw its military activities almost come to a halt; only in northern Afghanistan did some elements of it survive. *Wahdat*'s weakness vis-à-vis other, better resourced military-political organisations was compounded. On the positive side, its leaders can claim credit for effectively having given up their military wing.

The second and most pressing demand for reform came from within the Hazara political community. Reforming and reviving the party as the largest and most influential Hazara organisation was a central priority for most of the Hazara intellectual and clerical elites. Many educated Hazaras of various ideological backgrounds rushed to Kabul in 2002 and volunteered to play a role in the party. Ideas for reform and restructuring the party were presented to Karim Khalili and Muhammad Mohaqiq, who were seen as the key leaders. While the need to change and broaden the party leadership has frequently been acknowledged by both Mohaqiq and Khalili, most reformists (including clerics) have been frustrated by lack of practical will and determination of the senior leaders.<sup>5</sup> With the disintegration of its military structures and the necessity to transform into a full political party, *Hizb-e Wahdat* faced an extremely difficult challenge that required radical changes.

The transition from a military to political organisation has been similarly difficult for other Afghan organisations created during the years of war (Giustozzi 2009). But *Hizb-e Wahdat* faced a unique predicament of its own, deriving from the emergence of a much larger educated class among the Hazaras. *Wahdat*'s political cadres were mostly clerics educated in religious schools in Afghanistan or in Iran and Iraq. In their rise to political leadership they fiercely competed with university-educated challengers and remained sceptical and fearful of modern educated politicians. They suddenly found themselves forced to engage with western notions of democracy, human rights etcetera. As in 1992, opening the doors of the party to more educated Hazara cadres was a precondition for meeting reformist expectations, but the return to the country of many young Hazaras educated in Iran and Pakistan was out of all proportion with the threat that had been represented by the limited number of leftists and government officials welcomed into *Wahdat* in 1992. After 2001, the party nominally maintained its old structure in which seven of the eleven commissions within the Jaghouri of the party were chaired by *ulema*.<sup>6</sup> Only technical and insignificant positions such as health

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<sup>4</sup> <http://mosharekat.wahdat.net/index.php?num=116&id=867>.

<sup>5</sup> This is based on author's conversation and interviews with a significant number of former *Wahdat* officials and intellectuals that were involved in the debates and proposals for reforming *Wahdat* during 2005-8.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that after the fall of Bamyan into the hands of the Taliban these structures, including the

and archaeological committees were headed by non-clerical figures. Furthermore, the non-clerical figures were mostly acting on behalf of their senior clerical leaders (hazara.net 2009). But an opening of the party to the growing secular intelligentsia meant that their monopoly over the political leadership of Hazara society risked being undermined (Ibrahimi 2006).

While a few of *Wahdat*'s founders continued to exercise leadership and political power, most others were not as lucky. The failure to revive party structures left many of them politically marginalised. Second rank officials of *Hizb-e Wahdat*, such as most members of the central council, have mostly been unable to find a state job. Many of them opted to reside in their home areas in the Hazarajat, far away from leaderships in Kabul (Mr. Natiqi, interview, 2007).

### **Personalist Leadership and Political Fragmentation**

The situation of *Hizb-e Wahdat* in early 2009 and its political fragmentation can best be explained by the leadership style of its leaders. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban, Khalili was widely recognised as leader of the party. In April 2002 he flew to Kabul from Bamyan, in a move that shifted the party headquarters to Kabul. He was warmly received by Mohaqiq, who was deputy chair and Planning Minister of the Interim Administration, and other senior figures of the organisation. In the Transitional Administration, Khalili replaced Mohaqiq as a vice-president, becoming the highest Hazara official in the government. Until before the presidential election of 2005, Mohaqiq was at least officially heading the political affairs committee of *Hizb-e Wahdat* in Kabul. Their relationship, however, soon started unravelling. Apparently, Mohaqiq had adopted a more confrontational approach within the government on the issues of development and reconstruction plans in Hazara areas. It is alleged that his powers as the Minister of Planning were being transferred to the more powerful and assertive finance ministry, under the leadership of the western educated technocrat Ashraf Ghani. Mohaqiq left the cabinet in controversy in 2004 (BBC Persian Service, March 13, 2004). Khalili and Mohaqiq have since engaged in personal rivalry and competition for power within the government as well as for leadership among the Hazaras. Their rivalry came to the fore when Mohaqiq decided to stand as a candidate for presidential elections in 2005 and Khalili ran as the second vice-president with Karzai. Subsequently, Mohaqiq joined the main opposition alliance, the Understanding Front, led by Yonus Qanuni. By standing in opposition to the government, he championed the rights of Hazaras and continued to undermine Karim Khalili.<sup>7</sup> The personalisation of leadership was not limited to Mohaqiq and Khalili and resulted in the fragmentation of the party into the following four splinter organisations:

#### ***Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan***

Its leader Karim Khalili is a native of the Behsud district of Wardak province. Like most of Hazara *mujahedin* leaders he was educated at religious *madrassahs*. After a brief period of involvement in military activities in the early 1980s, he was mostly representing *Sazman-e Nasr* and later *Hizb-e Wahdat* in Iran and Pakistan. For a brief period in the late 1980s he led a section of *Nasr*, called *Nasr-e Nawin* (New Nasr), a grouping of mostly young members opposed to the formation of *Hizb-e Wahdat*. However, as the party was formed he joined it as its representative in Peshawar. During his years of experience as the party's foreign representative he has acquired out of the ordinary diplomatic skills, standing out among his

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central council, were never convened in reality. But previous officials claimed to retain their old titles in the party.

<sup>7</sup> This is based on author's own observation of political debates amongst the Hazaras in Kabul, 2004-5.

peers and rivals in the party (Close aide to Khalili, interview; Afghanistan Islamic Unity Party 2004).

Khalili claims credit for having served as immediate successor to Mazari and having revived the party after its virtual collapse in Kabul. For a period of three years, Khalili presided over a renewed Hazara political mobilisation and military and political power of the party in Bamyan. He established his control over nearly the entire Hazarajat region. Under his leadership the party regained its political and military relevance as one of the major anti-Taliban organisations.

In September 2004, Khalili's *Wahdat-e Islami* organised its Constituent Assembly in Kabul in which five hundred people participated. The assembly approved a new constitution for the party, and reconfirmed Khalili as its leader (he was the only candidate) by a unanimous vote. Sarwar Danish, then Minister of Justice, and Habibah Wahaj, a female lecturer at Kabul University, were elected as first and second deputies respectively. A central council of 99 members was also elected (Musharekat Weekly, September 13, 2004). The new constitution of the party also provides for establishment of provincial, district and village structures for the party. But in reality, after the presidential elections of 2004, the enthusiasm for institutionalising the party evaporated. Even in Kabul, there were little signs of party activities. A participant of the Constituents Assembly claimed that the council never convened and functioned as an entity within the party after it was formed (Participant of the Constituent Assembly, personal communication, 2009).

In contrast to Muhaqiq, Khalili consistently worked with the Karzai government. In his role as the second vice-president, he was the highest ranking Hazara official. In such a position he has been able to support a network of allies, influence government appointments in the Hazarajat and distribute limited economic and political patronage. On the other hand, he never had access to sufficient resources to address the demands of the wider strata of the Hazara population, who remained sceptical of the governments in Kabul. Although the overall situation had significantly improved for the Hazaras following the collapse of the Taliban regime, widespread dissatisfaction among the community over the distribution of aid and economic development projects was easy to detect and Khalili was blamed for that. Under such circumstances, Mohaqiq's populism appealed to the Hazaras' sense of unfair treatment, gaining him the image of the only leader speaking out on behalf of his community.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami Mardum-e Afghanistan***

The party is the vehicle of the chief challenger to Khalili's claim to political leadership among the Hazaras, Muhammad Mohaqiq. Mohaqiq rose to prominence during the years of *jihad* in his native Balkh province. He became the provincial leader of *Nasr*, the most powerful Hazara organisation there. After the dominant figure of *Nasr* in the north, Mazari, moved to Bamyan and later Kabul and engaged in politics at the higher level, Mohaqiq succeeded him in the leadership of the northern region. It was under him that the party briefly dominated the

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<sup>8</sup> The sense of exclusion from large scale development policies is increasingly widespread and evident among the Hazaras. Many feel that despite historical deprivation and economic underdevelopment, the Hazarajat region has not been receiving its fair share of the foreign aid and development assistance since 2001. In a symbolic protest, in April 2009, residents of Bamyan plastered parts of the narrow four kilometre road with clay and straws to protest and attract the attention of the Kabul government and international community as to reconstruction and development of the region (BBC Persian Service, April 11, 2009).

politics of the region, including by playing a central role in the defence of Mazar-e Sharif against Taliban incursions in the late 1990s.

By declaring his candidacy in the presidential elections, Muhaqiq challenged Khalili's leadership of *Hizb-e Wahdat* as well as of the Hazaras. As the only Hazara presidential contender, Muhaqiq mobilised a large section of the Hazara populace behind his candidacy. Hazara support for his candidacy was more an attempt to send a strong message to the government and assert the ethnic group's role at the national level than the result of direct support for him as an individual candidate or for his party platform. As a result, Muhaqiq claimed a strong majority of Hazara votes in the election and ranked third among the candidates in terms of the percentage of all votes. However, Muhaqiq's erratic political alignments prevented him from consolidating his leadership. In 2001-4 he managed to be part of the cabinet, and was close to Karzai until 2004 before joining the opposition National Understanding Front, the coalition of opposition groups spearheaded by Yonus Qanuni. During the election of the parliamentary speaker in 2005 he switched back to the government camp. Although he failed to obtain the post of deputy speaker of the parliament, through his alliance with the pro-Karzai camp he managed to secure sufficient support for his candidate for the position of Minister of Transport (Hazara member of Parliament, interview, 2009).

Muhaqiq reached the top of his popularity among Hazaras during his presidential election campaign. During this brief period, his faction of *Hizb-e Wahdat* attracted a dramatic level of support among Hazara intellectuals as well as commoners. A large number of educated Hazaras were mobilised to run his campaign programmes and publications. The spontaneous mobilisation was achieved through Muhaqiq's strong appeal among Hazaras on important issues. Firstly, he repeatedly raised the issue of the lack of important development projects in the Hazarajat. By stressing the need for balanced development strategy in the country, he called for construction of a highway connecting Kabul and Herat through Hazarajat. Secondly, he called for restructuring the administrative division of the region by creating five new Hazara provinces. Thirdly, he appealed to the Hazaras' ethnic identity. He spoke of large mobilisation during the elections to demonstrate the numerical strength of the community. In a way, like most Hazaras he aimed to use the electoral platform as a way of asserting the Hazaras as the third largest ethnic group and an important political force in the country. Crucially for this analysis, Muhaqiq repeatedly said that he would invest on the momentum built by his candidacy to create a truly institutionalised political party (Mosharekat Weekly, October 2005).

However, once the elections were over, Muhaqiq's interest in institutionalising a political party also declined. He even stopped supporting *Entekhab*, the weekly published during his campaign. The educated cadre left his office with a bad taste in their mouth. He switched back to his own personal style of leadership, largely centred on his maverick style and political opportunism. By shedding whatever organised following had gathered around him, he gained the ability to take political decisions and form alliances according to the needs of the moment, without the hindrance of a political party to be carried with him. He was only consulting with a limited number of aides and friends (Aide of Muhaqiq, personal communication, 2007).

Whatever the short-term gains of this style of leadership, it impacted negatively on his long-term standing among his supporters. In a surprising move, he entered into an alliance with Abdur Rasul Sayaf to secure his support for the post of deputy speaker of the parliament, in exchange for his support for Sayyaf's candidacy to the post of speaker of the parliament.

Because of the bloody conflicts between *Hizb-e Wahdat* and Sayaf's forces during the civil war in Kabul (1993-95), this move strongly compromised his credibility. Typically, the decision was taken within a small circle of aides. To justify his decision he alleged that he and his allies were under tremendous pressures by the government. For instance, he asserted that his Hazara supporters were being ousted from government positions and pressured in various forms in his native stronghold in Balkh province by Governor Atta Muhammad, one of Mohaqiq's long-standing rivals. He justified the move as a step to reduce this mounting pressure. It was not lost on the many Hazaras, however, that he had contested the top political post in the country and rallied most Hazara voters in order to gain leverage for his own political manoeuvres (Aide of Mohaqiq, personal communication, 2007; Salsal Weekly, October 3, 2006).

### ***Hizb-e Wahdat Milli Islami Afghanistan***

As discussed earlier, Muhammad Akbari had mostly been at odds with leaders of the main body of *Hizb-e Wahdat* and was encouraged by the Khalili-Mohaqiq split to organise his own separate political faction. As an ethnic Qizilbash he has always stressed Shiite Islamism against the growing Hazara nationalism in the party and consistently sought external alliances to bolster his relatively weak base of support within *Wahdat*. He established his first contact with Massoud as head of *Hizb-e Wahdat* delegation visiting Panjshir immediately after the party was formed, becoming a consistent ally of Massoud within the party. This was one of the major contentious issues between him and Mazari, who was fighting with Massoud's forces for control of Kabul. Then, when Khalili joined the National United Front in the battles against the Taliban, Akbari established contacts with the Taliban leadership. He was the main Shiite figure to surrender to the Taliban and cooperate with them in maintaining control of the region. The alignment with the Taliban placed him in a disadvantageous position after the regime collapsed in late 2001. Not surprisingly, the government in Kabul was dominated by the anti-Taliban resistance organisations that worked with the US-led coalition to overthrow the Taliban and capture Kabul. As a result he and his organisation were left outside the government.

However, his alignment with the Taliban and the role he played in at least reducing and preventing large scale atrocities in his native Bamyān improved his standing in the province. This helped him secure a seat in the National Assembly in the 2005 parliamentary elections. But his party also suffered another split. Mustafa Kazimi, a key figure who was his minister of commerce in the interim and transitional administration, formed his own party, *Eqtedar-e Milli*. As a result, subsequently Akbari has only been playing a marginal role in the politics (Akbari 2007).

### ***Hizb-e Wahdat Islami Millat-e Afghanistan***

Led by Qurban Ali Erfani, an instrumental figure in the establishment of the party and first deputy leader under Karim Khalili, this party was the fourth split emerging from *Hizb-e Wahdat*. A native of Yakawlang district of Bamyān and one of the founders of *Nasr* and *Hizb-e Wahdat*, Erfani has always been at the centre of Hazara politics. His party was registered at the Ministry of Justice in March 2005. However, despite being regarded as a key founder and veteran of *Hizb-e Wahdat*, he has demonstrated little political weight as an autonomous political player.

## Reproduction of Clerical Networks

Since expectations of reviving the party did not materialise, the political and military cadres of the organisation transformed into a loose and fluid network of allies and friends. Neither Mohaqiq nor Khalili managed to build a cohesive political organisation that could command the loyalty of its followers. Instead, they allowed local leaders at district and provincial levels to fluctuate politically, following what their local interests and aspirations demanded. This situation is an interesting translation of Shiite clerical networks into a political organisation. Traditionally, Shiite clerics have been operating and relating to one another through a vertical network of friends and followers across national boundaries. At the top the network was centred on the highest echelon of religious clerics, usually called *mujtahed*. The *mujtahed* is the highest religious authority qualified to release religious decrees, and collect and redistribute religious donations from his members. He maintains the exclusive authority to promote or demote members of his network and appoint representatives in areas beyond his personal reach. Today's *Hizb-e Wahdat* under Khalili and Mohaqiq explicitly resembles a Shiite clerical network. Of course, none of the current *Hizb-e Wahdat* leaders qualified as *mujtaheds*. But their political behaviour and the relationship with their supporters resembled that of the *mujtahed* and *moqallid* relationship, or leader-follower, in Shiite religious networks. Clearly, clerics have created a political network corresponding to their experiences and *madrasa* world view. Both Mohaqiq and Khalili were distributing favours and resources and were rarely accountable to their constituencies in their political alignments and decision making. They activate their networks to orchestrate mass mobilisation at times of need. Based in Kabul, they command a wide network of loyalists and supporters in different provinces. In the words of one of the former member of the party's central council, the two leaders would act together only if their political interests permitted. He stressed that their interests at that time lay in the pursuit of separate political strategies (Former member of *Hizb-e Wahdat*'s central council, personal communication, 2008).

This kind of patrimonial leadership has also meant exclusively personal and in some cases familial control of the party's resources. The control of resources offered to the leaders an enormous leverage in their relationship with junior figures of the *Wahdat* 'galaxy', by enabling them to distribute favour and money to maintain support and loyalty. The post-Taliban leadership of *Hizb-e Wahdat* in its various off-shoots achieved an unprecedented level of wealth and property ownership. Most notably Karim Khalili is widely accused of accumulating wealth and properties through his position as party leader. In the words of one of the former high ranking officials of *Hizb-e Wahdat*, many of the top level of *Hizb-e Wahdat* officials have become transformed from politicians into big businessmen and entrepreneurs. This has contributed to further widen the gap between the leaders and their constituencies both politically and economically (Former *Hizb-e Wahdat* official, interview, 2008).

What further exacerbated the situation was the concentration of the *Hizb-e Wahdat* leadership in Kabul. Mohaqiq, Khalili and Akbari moved to Kabul where they engaged in endless personal rivalries and power politics. In the absence of a political structure in the territory, all the resources usually controlled by the leaders also shifted to the capital. This has resulted in a near total vacuum of political leadership in previously important centres of *Hizb-e Wahdat* activities such as Mazar and Bamyan. This author had a difficult time trying to interview *Hizb-e Wahdat* officials in Bamyan during a visit in summer 2006. Their nominal party offices outside Kabul were either staffed by a single individual or closed most of the times. The gap between the party leaders and their constituencies could only widen as a result.

With the exception of Akbari's faction, which promoted fundamentally different political strategies compared to the main body of *Wahdat* under Mazari and Khalili and also stressed religion at the expense of ethnicity, there is little in ideological terms that can distinguish the various off-shoots of *Hizb-e Wahdat* from one another. Among those who claimed Mazari's political heritage, the fault lines were not articulated along any important political or ideological lines. Competition for power within the government in Kabul and personal rivalries inside the party has been at the heart of politics between Mohaqiq and Khalili. In the absence of internal deliberative structures, enabling the reaching of a consensus, power struggles within the party took the shape of extreme forms of personalised tensions and rivalries. Khalili's tight grip on the party leadership enabled him to resist attempts by other contenders to rise, despite his weak health and lack of personal charisma. As Mohaqiq was emerging as the party's number two figure by virtue of his military role in fighting the Taliban and of his participation in the Karzai administrations, he attempted to raise his profile in a way that directly challenged Khalili's leadership.

The competition between the two focused on claiming the heritage of the original *Hizb-e Wahdat*, rather than on competitive projects of institution building. Mazari's role in formation of *Wahdat* and his death at the hands of the Taliban has earned him an iconic status among the Hazaras. He is widely recognised as Baba Mazari, or father Mazari. With the exception for Akbari's, each of the present factions is struggling to claim to be the genuine heir of Mazari and *Hizb-e Wahdat*'s role in defence and promotion of Hazara rights during the civil war and Taliban regime. This is most intense on the occasion of the commemoration of the anniversary of Mazari's death: every year both Mohaqiq and Khalili have invested significant efforts and resources to outshine one another. It is also worth pointing out that apart from Kazimi, none of the factional leaders was willing to sacrifice the *Wahdat* label and all the offshoots maintained *Wahdat* as part of their name.

At the same time, *Wahdat*'s factional leaders collaborated in an oligopolistic way to prevent any serious newcomer from entering the Hazara political scene. In this sense, their reluctance or refusal to accommodate demands for change and the establishment of functional, institutionalised political organisations can be seen as the attempt to prevent the rise of new leaders through a consensus mechanism for the selection of the elites (Former *Hizb-e Wahdat* official, personal communication, 2007). This type of attitude is one of the underlying causes of the growing political fragmentation and frustrations within the ranks of Hazara social elites and intelligentsia, as well as of the fragmentation of *Hizb-e Wahdat* itself. Personalised politics and resistance to change and participation had little to offer to these constituencies, which gradually distanced themselves from the *Wahdat* 'galaxy'. Increasingly, the parties derived from *Wahdat* were reduced to single leaders surrounded by their friends, confidants and cronies.

The weakness of *Hizb-e Wahdat* was nowhere more evident than in the Afghan parliament. Both Mohaqiq and Khalili competed to draw Hazara parliamentarians to their sides, but to no avail. Mohaqiq, who had been the most proactive in reaching out to mass support after 2001, could at best claim the support of half a dozen of the around forty Hazara parliamentarians already in the first year of the assembly. By 2007, support for the two leaders among MPs had shrunk further and the two leaders could only count on the loyalty and support of two MPs each (Hazara member of the Parliament, personal communication, January 2006).



## Conclusion

The formation of *Hizb-e Wahdat* represented an important step in the political development of Afghanistan's Hazaras. Firstly, it unified all the political groups of a community that has historically been notoriously fragmented and divided, and it marked the end of a devastating civil war and (temporarily) of factionalism in the Hazarajat region. Secondly, it symbolised the consolidation of the supremacy and political leadership of the Hazara clergy who had, in the previous years, totally defeated other social and political groups in the region. Thirdly, the fact that the party was established and headquartered inside the country and outside the direct influence of the Iranians, who had been sponsoring the Shiite clerics during the years of Jihad, symbolised the growing autonomy of the Hazara clergy. Bamyan, as headquarters of the party, was to become an important national political and military centre for more than a decade. The city gained its importance as a centre of the Hazaras' political leadership where large numbers of clerics and militants were concentrated during the following years.

The dramatic changes in the political circumstances of the country since its formation shaped the nature and political leadership of the party. During the civil wars of Kabul in the early 1990s, wittingly or unwittingly the party was involved in one of the bloodiest and most devastating conflicts in the country. Despite the Islamist background of the party leaders, the course of political developments in the post-Soviet era drove the party towards an ethnic platform, which promoted ethnic equality and social justice for the Hazaras. However, the transition from Islamist ideology to an ethnic agenda created an internal tension that split the party and dramatically polarised the Hazara community.

Despite its patchy background and composition, the formation of the party was an important step forward in the evolution of political process among the Hazaras, in terms of its relatively high degree of inclusiveness and of the lobbying power that it granted to the community. For this reason, for some time it appeared that the party had accumulated sufficient political capital to bring stability and political leadership to the region. The failure to deliver on these promises and the subsequent dissipation of the political capital can be put down to the lack of real mechanisms for accountability, selection of the political leadership and collegial decision making. The fact that the leaders were chosen for life and with absolute authority also made it more difficult for *Wahdat* to adjust to change. Gradually, the party lost the inclusiveness, cohesiveness and legitimacy it had enjoyed in early days following its establishment. As of 2009 it could be strongly argued that it was no longer a functioning political entity. In the words of a Hazara commentator, 'each rival party under the name of *Wahdat* is a cloak sewn to fit the size of the main contenders of the political leadership of the Hazaras' (Amiri 2004).

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## **Glossary**

|            |  |
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| Eatelaf:   | alliance   |
| Etefaq:    | unity  |
| Hazaras:   | the third largest of Afghanistan's ethnic groups who are mostly Shiite in terms of religion.                                     |
| Hazarajat: | the predominantly Hazara central highlands of Afghanistan, including districts in nine central and northern provinces.           |
| Hizb:      | party, association   |
| Madrasah:  | Islamic high school.   |
| Misaq:     | treaty or convention   |
| Mujahedin: | plural of mujahed, holy fighters, the militants that fought the jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. |
| Nahzat:    | movement   |
| Nasr:      | victory  |
| Pasdaran:  | guardians  |
| Shura:     | council, assembly  |
| Taliban:   | plural of Taleb meaning knowledge seeker   |
| Wahdat:    | unity, oneness   |

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The Crisis States Research Centre aims to examine and provide an understanding of processes of war, state collapse and reconstruction in fragile states and to assess the long-term impact of international interventions in these processes. Through rigorous comparative analysis of a carefully selected set of states and of cities, and sustained analysis of global and regional axes of conflict, we aim to understand why some fragile states collapse while others do not, and the ways in which war affects future possibilities of state building. The lessons learned from past experiences of state reconstruction will be distilled to inform current policy thinking and planning.

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## **Research Components**

Development as State-Making

Cities and Fragile States

Regional and Global Axes of Conflict

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