

Seeking Safety, Jobs, and More: Afghanistan's Mixed Flows Test Migration Policies

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Afghan men board buses to Pakistan and Iran in search of work. (Photo: R. Arnold/UNHCR)

Long the world's largest origin of refugees, and only recently eclipsed by Syria, Afghanistan now finds itself increasingly experiencing mixed migration, with emigration of refugees and asylum seekers, seasonal and permanent outflows of economic migrants, internal movements, and the return of Afghans who had previously sought safety abroad. The scale of these mixed flows has important consequences for the country's development and governance.

There are a number of causes for this growing diversity of migration flows. While conflict-induced migration continues as the Taliban intensifies its ground offensives, many Afghans are moving within the country or abroad in search of greater economic opportunity and better living conditions. Others routinely cross the porous borders with Iran and Pakistan, seeking seasonal work there and farther abroad. At the same time millions of Afghans who had sought refuge in Pakistan and Iran have returned to Afghanistan over the last decade as the security situation

improved somewhat.

The Afghan diaspora is estimated between 4 million and 6 million people. The vast majority resides in Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan is host to more than 2.9 million Afghan refugees and irregular migrants (slightly more than half of them registered refugees), while there are nearly 2 million Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran (an estimated 1 million of them undocumented). In 2015 alone, approximately 200,000 Afghans arrived in Europe, with the majority filing asylum claims in Hungary, Sweden, and Germany. There were already 125,000 Afghans living in Germany and other continental European states in 2014 prior to the recent influx.

Definitions

Mixed migration flows: Complex population movements driven by a combination of factors, including (but not limited to) displacement induced by conflict and/or environmental changes, movement to improve livelihoods and living standards, and

displacement induced by a well-founded fear of persecution as outlined by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs): Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.

Refugee Returnees: Afghan registered refugees who have returned to Afghanistan from Iran or Pakistan. Such returns are largely facilitated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) through its Voluntary Repatriation (VolRep) program, but registered refugees who return spontaneously by their own means are also considered refugee returnees.

Undocumented Returnees: Afghan returnees who were never registered as refugees and were living irregularly in Iran and Pakistan. This category of returnee includes both spontaneous returnees and deportees.

Spontaneous Returnees: Afghan returnees whose return is not part of an organized deportation or facilitated refugee repatriation program. This includes both registered refugees and undocumented migrants who return voluntarily, as well as those who may feel coerced into return by community threats or pressures.

In addition, it is estimated there are some 300,000 Afghans settled in the United States and at least 150,000 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). There are a further estimated 10,000 Afghan refugees in India, mostly settled in Delhi, including many Hindus and Sikhs. Furthermore, more than 1.1 million Afghans are estimated to be internally displaced.

Afghanistan's mixed migration flows are complex. The high volume of returns, both voluntary and forced, has placed a heavy burden on government services, leading to chronic vulnerabilities among the population. This is particularly the case alongside rapid urbanization and extensive internal displacement, which are also placing significant demands on government services. While the Afghan government has worked with the international community to create migration and development policies over the last decade, little has been done to provide either regular emigration pathways for Afghans, such as labor migration corridors, or to support the sustainable return and reintegration of returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

This article reviews key current migration trends in Afghanistan with a focus on returnees, the challenges of defining migrant categories, and the faltering reintegration framework. It then examines the convergence of forced migration and urbanization before turning to recent policy proposals.

Afghanistan's Migration Spectrum

Afghan mobility is fluid and complex, with intersecting channels of emigration, regular and irregular immigration, circular movements, refugee movements, and internal displacement. Among others, the spectrum of motivations varies between "voluntary" and "forced" movement due to conflict or natural disaster. There is no single trigger for internal displacement or migration—research has shown that for decades Afghans have moved for a variety of reasons including security, livelihoods, and natural hazards or events.

There have been seven major periods of population movement and displacement in Afghanistan since the 1970s—all directly relating to periods of armed conflict and political instability: the Soviet invasion and subsequent conflict (1978-88); the Soviet withdrawal and subsequent internal armed conflict (1989-96); Taliban rule (1996-2001); the post-9/11 U.S.-led invasion (2001-02); the defeat of the Taliban and establishment of the interim government (2002-04); the neo-Taliban insurgency (2004-present); and increased irregular returns, internal displacement, and asylum flows to Europe (2015-present).

Throughout these periods, the vast majority of Afghan migrants, both regular and irregular, moved to the neighboring states of Pakistan and Iran. Such movements were to be expected as the borders between these three countries have historically been porous, with people moving

between the countries seasonally and longer term for both livelihood and security reasons. While the 2015 arrival of 200,000 Afghans in Europe is significant and worthy of note, it pales in comparison to the estimated 5 million Afghans living in Pakistan and Iran.

The fall of the communist regime in the early 1990s also prompted Afghans to move to the West. Generally characterized as middle class, highly skilled, politically persecuted, or seeking family reunification visas or special immigrant visas, such individuals easily acquired refugee status and later citizenship in Europe. Since the early 2000s, the profile of Afghans in the West, particularly those arriving in Europe, has turned to the less-educated or low-skilled, refugees and asylum seekers, and visa overstayers.

Recent and Current Flows

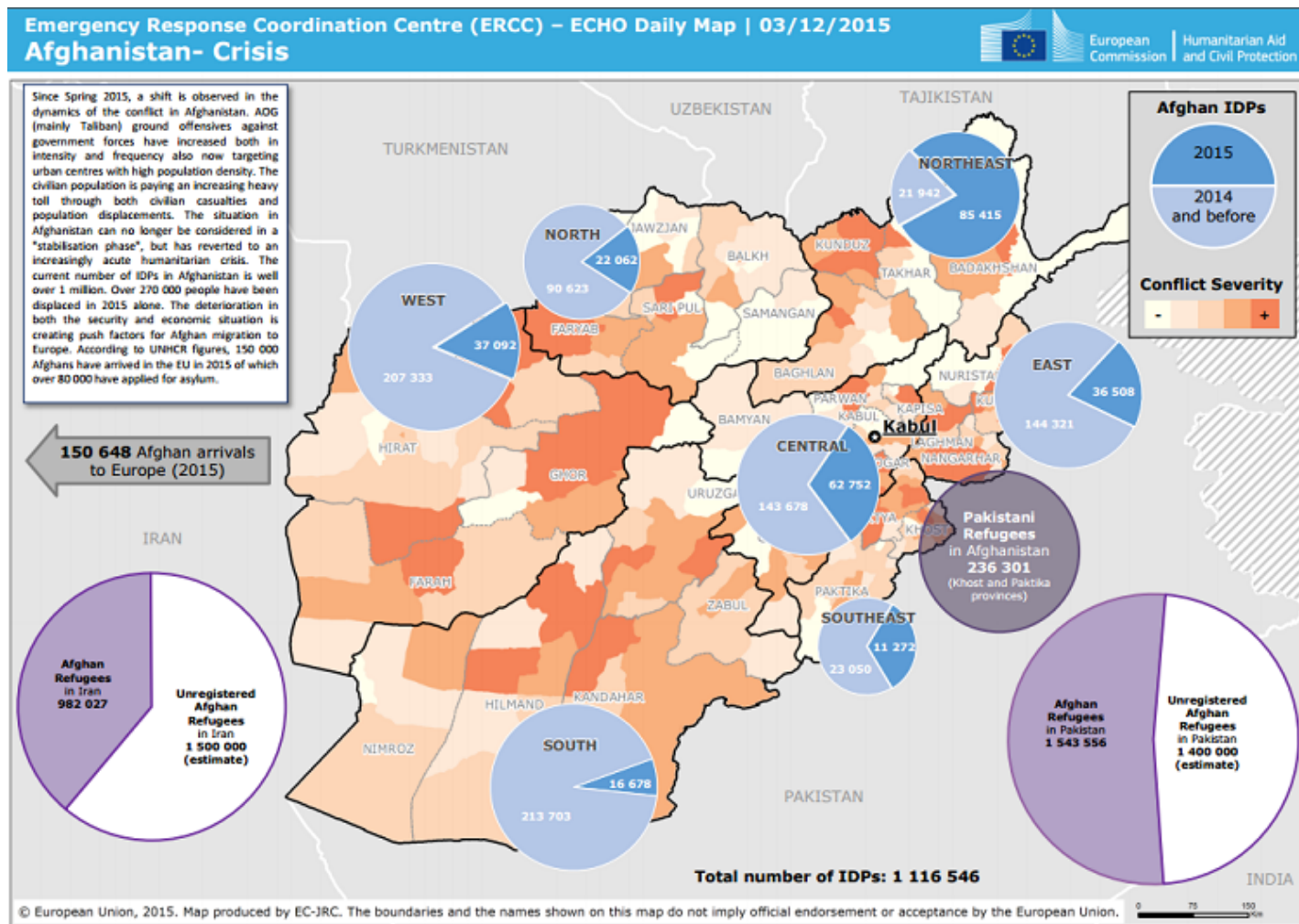
The borders between Afghanistan and Iran and Pakistan form the first step for almost all migration from Afghanistan, regardless of the country of final destination. In mid-2009, 40,000 people on average transited official border points with Pakistan each day in either direction for a host of reasons, including job search, medical care, or family visits, as well as to seek protection. At the same time, more than 4,000 Afghans were estimated to cross daily into Iran, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Afghans have long relied on such regional migration for their survival.

Labor migration has been a key feature of this regional crossborder movement and an important livelihood strategy for many poor Afghans. More than three-quarters of seasonal labor migrants reported going to Iran (77 percent), while 12 percent cited Pakistan and 8 percent reported going to the Arabian peninsula, according to data from the 2011-12 National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) survey. The Arabian peninsula was particularly significant for urban residents seeking seasonal work abroad, with 19 percent of urban respondents reporting it as their destination.

In addition to labor migration, the period between 2004 and 2015 was largely characterized by the rise of spontaneous returns and deportations from Pakistan and Iran, and what commentators refer to as a renewed “Afghan exodus” to Europe. Over the first ten months of 2015 returns from Pakistan and Iran spiked, with more than 400,000 returnees, some voluntary, others deported or otherwise forced to leave, according to a recent United States Institute of Peace report.

At the same time, the past couple of years have also seen significant emigration to Europe amid the greater migration and asylum-seeker flows resulting from the Syrian war and other political and economic turbulence. In 2015, 190,013 Afghans applied for asylum in EU Member States, Norway, and Switzerland, according to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO).

Figure 1. Number and Location of Afghans Who Are Refugees or Internally Displaced Persons, 2015



Source: European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO), "ECHO Daily Map 03/12/2015," available online.

Displacement is extremely widespread in Afghanistan. Although census data are lacking, in 2009, 76 percent of Afghan survey respondents reported having been impacted by internal displacement and forced to leave their homes. In November 2015, UNHCR reported that approximately 20 percent of Afghanistan's population of 32 million was composed of returnees, indicating the pervasive nature of forced migration across the country. As the Taliban has ratcheted up its offensives—capturing the city of Kunduz in September 2015—and the security situation worsened in parts of the country, more than 335,000 people were estimated to be newly displaced due to conflict in 2015. Overall, more than 1.1 million people were internally displaced at year's end.

Natural disaster-induced displacement is also high on the agenda, particularly following devastating earthquakes in October and December 2015 that affected approximately 150,650 people across the country. The United Nations estimates 250,000 people are displaced every year by natural disasters such as flooding, landslides, drought, and earthquakes in Afghanistan.

Conflict, however, remains the most salient feature of forced displacement in Afghanistan today.

Furthermore, Afghanistan is also host to more than 236,000 Pakistani refugees, most of whom fled the advance of full-scale military operations in 2014 in Pakistan's North Waziristan region.

Defining Policy Categories

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the new Afghan government worked with the international community to develop a policy framework to mainstream migration into government planning. Policy actors in Afghanistan have focused on refugees, registered refugee returnees, and

IDPs. More recently—and only cautiously—economic migrants and undocumented Afghan returnees have gained attention. Each is treated as an autonomous and unrelated group between which there cannot be crossover.

Migration, however, is inherently mixed in nature, with multifaceted drivers behind decisions of whether and where to migrate or return. Modern-day Afghan migrants do not fit discreetly into the traditional policy categories. This raises a number of questions crucial for policy implementation and service delivery: When is displacement considered to end? When do refugee returnees become regular Afghan citizens? Are the internally displaced different in needs from the urban poor?

Return Migration

Refugee Returns

In 2002, 1.5 million Afghans voluntarily returned from Pakistan, marking the world's largest single-year refugee return since 1972. UNHCR estimates that since 2002 more than 5.8 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran through facilitated programs. Voluntary repatriations, however, have dwindled in recent years due to an increase in insecurity and economic instability in Afghanistan. A household survey undertaken in 2011 in five Afghan provinces found that the number of people voluntarily returning decreased significantly from 2001 to 2011. From 2007, however, there has been a rise in the number forced removals from Iran, reflecting Iran's tightening asylum space and crackdown on Afghan irregular migrant workers, and in some cases, undocumented families.

Return migration to Afghanistan, as with emigration from the country, is characterized by mixed motivations, and returnees do not fit a standard profile. Returns can be voluntary or forced, for humanitarian reasons, job prospects, or a combination of factors. Returnees face many challenges to reintegration, including multiple displacements after return in a continued context of conflict.

Narrowing Distinctions among Returnees

The majority of returns have been of registered refugees facilitated through UNHCR's repatriation program. Undocumented Afghans living in Pakistan and Iran also comprise a significant portion of returnees. Both registered refugees and undocumented Afghans may return spontaneously by their own means, be deported, or be subjected to government and community threats and pressure to leave their host communities and return to Afghanistan.

The distinction between returning refugees and undocumented voluntary returnees is narrowing, however. Vulnerable undocumented spontaneous returnees often arrive on the Afghan side of the border in genuinely refugee-like situations, and are no better equipped to cope and reintegrate than returning refugees registered with UNHCR. Yet registered refugee returnees are treated very differently from undocumented spontaneous returnees and those who have been deported, even though their immediate postarrival circumstances and needs are almost identical.

The difference in treatment illustrates the siloization in migrant categorization in Afghanistan and the lack of comprehensive reintegration initiatives. While returning registered refugees, by dint of international refugee conventions, generally have access to reintegration assistance from UNHCR within Afghanistan, the most a spontaneous returnee can hope for is one-time, immediate humanitarian assistance from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or another international organization. Given the unanticipated spike in spontaneous arrivals in 2015, there were not enough resources available to provide such assistance to all vulnerable returnees.

Assisted Voluntary Return and Deportation from Europe

On a smaller scale than regional returns, the deportation and return of unsuccessful Afghan asylum seekers from European states—mainly of young males—has also become a concern. Although few in number, their reintegration is thought highly likely to fail because the conditions that pushed them to leave in the first place are still present, and reinforced by a lack of social and family networks, disconnect between their skills and limited economic opportunities in their communities of return, and a general lack of education and retraining opportunities, often

leading to a financial obligation to seek remigration to justify investments made and debts incurred. As such, the likelihood of further displacement or remigration remains high.

Distinct reintegration support initiatives for returnees from higher-income, more developed host countries, however, do exist in some cases. Former host countries such as Austria, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Australia often fund such initiatives in order to facilitate sustainable return. Because the Afghan government lacks a comprehensive reintegration strategy to incorporate these initiatives, they tend to be individually tailored to fit the returning country's budget, priorities, policy frameworks, and resources. As such, the focus tends to be on short-term deliverables, such as cash grants, housing allowance, and small business or vocational training, rather than longer-term activities.

Faltering Reintegration Framework

Despite some concerted efforts from the Afghan government to devise and establish a coherent reintegration policy, the existing return and reintegration framework remains ad hoc and driven largely by the wishes of donor governments. This model is reaching the end of its effectiveness.

Increasingly both the Afghan government and the international humanitarian community present in-country are considering comprehensive reintegration strategies, largely in the context of potential forced mass return of undocumented Afghan migrants and refugees from Pakistan or Iran. These conversations are hampered by a lack of long-term planning about how best to reintegrate returnees into communities and the economy in such a way that former migrants can contribute and fulfill their potential without remigrating or being further displaced. This lack of long-term forethought can largely be explained by a singular focus on addressing immediate, life-saving humanitarian needs of returnees by the Afghan government, humanitarian actors, and international donors.

Development Challenges at the Intersection of Returns, Internal Displacement, and Urbanization

Afghanistan's urban areas are home to half of the country's displaced households, as IDPs, returnees, and migrants from rural areas prefer to resettle to urban locations for safety and jobs. Amid the greater migration flows, cities such as Kabul have experienced threefold growth in the last decade. The urban challenge is thus twofold: managing public protection and employment expectations, and a pressing policy concern that requires greater attention to how migration, urbanization, and security interact. The lack of coordination among line ministries to address the growing migration to cities constitutes a key challenge for Afghanistan over the next decades.

Intersecting development challenges exacerbated in the urban sphere include food insecurity, livelihoods, and social exclusion. These are complicated by decreasing funds, growing insecurity, and the siloed nature of humanitarian activities.

Such vulnerabilities become chronic as cities become places of entrenched poverty, within which the displaced fare worst. Evidence shows a mismatch between the demand for skilled labor and the existing skillsets of returnee populations in the labor market. Literacy remains low and language barriers hinder labor-market integration. Recruitment practices often focus on personal connections and candidates' places of origin, showcasing constraints in re-establishing livelihoods for returnees and the displaced.

As a result of discriminatory labor-market practices, social-integration processes have stalled. Displaced youth in particular suffer from a triple layer of vulnerability: illiteracy and lack of skills, un/underemployment, and social isolation, as per a forthcoming Samuel Hall study.

Despite research acknowledging these systemic vulnerabilities, urban development has largely been left out of the humanitarian toolkit. Reintegration efforts have instead focused on protection, housing, land, water, and sanitation. Additionally, locations most in need of development assistance—those challenged by a layering of displacement patterns and susceptible to the most recent changes in Afghan migration—have not been the focus of aid.

Development actors, however, will be key players in the future of policymaking on Afghan migration. Beyond the traditional migration sector, the development sector's involvement in programs and policies designed to benefit the millions of Afghans who depend on mobility as a safety

valve and coping mechanism offers the promise of change. A comprehensive database is needed to ensure migration analysis includes economic and development perspectives to move beyond the classic assistance and package-based modalities that have prevailed since 2002.

Recent Policy Proposals

On paper, Afghanistan's refugee policy is guided by the five priority areas of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR): voluntary repatriations, access to shelter and essential services, livelihoods and food security, social and environmental protection, and capacity development. In August 2015, however, the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) found that implementation of a long-term refugee strategy has been prevented by corruption and a lack of capacity.

Moreover, Afghan government and international actors continue to propose policy responses largely detached from the reality of the country's mixed migration. There often seems to be a lack of coordination between relevant departments and agencies when it comes to crafting coherent migration policy. This is compounded by a limited capacity to prioritize these issues as essential to the future development and prosperity of the country. The most promising policies are still awaiting approval or are pending implementation:

- The **National IDP Policy** was endorsed formally in February 2014, highlighting the rights of the displaced as citizens of Afghanistan and protected by the Constitution. It recognizes the need for local, emergency, and development responses to chronic problems (food and land-tenure insecurity, for example). Implementation has stalled as the 2015 Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations (MoRR) strategy does not address the IDP policy or include the realization of IDPs' basic rights as citizens of Afghanistan, complicating protection for this population.
- A draft **National Labor Migration Strategy** (NLMS), pending endorsement by the Cabinet, recognizes the crucial role of labor migration as a safety valve for local employment problems and its potential to promote local economic development through remittances and diaspora engagement. The three core NLMS pillars are: 1) protection of the rights of migrant workers and support services; 2) increasing the development benefits of labor migration; and 3) improved overseas labor administration. The major pathway to labor emigration remains irregular, seasonal, and cyclical in nature. For the strategy to be effective, labor-migration corridors need to be opened through bilateral agreements with receiving countries. While the government has signed a memorandum with Qatar, it has not resulted in regulated outflows of Afghan migrant workers, and at this stage the government is not actively pursuing further agreements.

The Future of Afghan Migration

There is a growing recognition in Afghanistan that while some recent initiatives have been effective within their thematic subareas, the proliferation of siloed policy discussions leaves significant gaps into which fall the most vulnerable migrants. The humanitarian lens on Afghan migration has reached its limit, and an understanding of migration as a strength for the country and the region is on the agenda, with initiatives being heralded by the Afghan government and in need of support from the international community. The continued legalistic categorization of migrant groups, uncoordinated approaches from donor agencies, and lack of communication among relevant government departments and with humanitarian partners has complicated until now the design of a holistic, all-encompassing policy that recognizes the centrality of mobility as not only a coping, but a survival mechanism for Afghans.

Splitting responsibilities across humanitarian or development programs is naturally a consequence of funding, which is steadily decreasing. In 2009, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), for example, received 126 percent of requested funds, but by 2014 received just 38 percent of its request. This is cause for humanitarian actors, donors, and the Afghan government to reexamine their approach towards policy interventions.

Ongoing efforts include the willingness to bridge the humanitarian-development divide, and to think beyond emergency needs to the chronic and systemic factors that push Afghans to migrate across borders. Afghanistan and its stakeholders have enough experience in migration and displacement response that solutions that are context-relevant and not politically driven can be put forward. What they are missing is comprehensive and nationally representative data on migration to build policies and programs that fit current mobility patterns. Afghans will continue to vote with their feet, so policymakers and aid organizations should listen.

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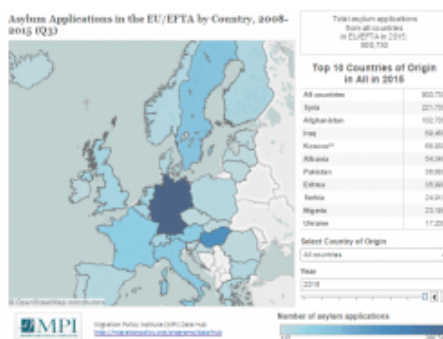
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