

Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.)

Escaping the Escape

Toward Solutions for the Humanitarian Migration Crisis



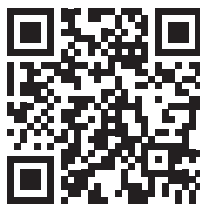
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Afghanistan: Current Migration Patterns and Policy Challenges

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<http://www.bti-project.org/afg>

Afghanistan: Current Migration Patterns and Policy Challenges

Basic facts	Afghanistan
Capital	Kabul
Demographics	
Population	32.53 million
Annual population growth rate	2.8 %
Net migration rate (2016 est.)	-1.2 migrant(s)/1,000 population
Top destination countries (2013)	Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, Australia, Sweden
Top source countries (2013)	Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan
Ethnic groups	Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, other (includes smaller numbers of Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, Pashai and Kyrgyz)
Languages	Afghan Persian or Dari (official) 50 %, Pashto (official) 35 %, Turkic languages 11 %, 30 minor languages 4 %, much bilingualism, but Dari functions as the lingua franca
Religions and beliefs	Muslim 99.7 % (Sunni 84.7-89.7 %, Shiite 10-15 %), other 0.3 % (2009 est.)
Median age (2016 est.)	18.6 years
Economy and employment	
GDP, PPP / GDP per capita, PPP	\$62.913 billion / \$1,934.2
GDP growth rate	1.5 %
GNI, PPP / GNI per capita, PPP	\$64.834 billion / \$1,990
Inflation rate (consumer prices)	-1.5 %
Unemployment (%) (2014)	9.1 %
Youth (15-24 years) unemployment (2014)	20.8 %
FDI inflows	\$58 million
Imports of goods and services	\$8.568 billion
Exports of goods and services	\$1.319 billion
Remittances inward flow	\$272 million
Political transformation (BTI 2016)	3.02 (rank 117 out of 129 countries)
Economic transformation (BTI 2016)	2.89 (rank 119 out of 129 countries)

Note: All figures for 2015 unless otherwise specified. Sources (in alphabetical order): Bertelsmann Transformation Index BTI, CIA World Factbook, Eurostat, UNCTAD, UN Data, World Bank (for details, see "A Note from the Editors").

Mobility has been an essential part of contemporary Afghan history. However, migration trends and the dynamics driving Afghan migrants have changed considerably over the years. In present-day Afghanistan, for example, refugee movements are no longer the primary source of Afghan migration; instead, the country is experiencing what many have termed "mixed migration" patterns (Majidi, van der Vorst and Foulkes 2016). Afghans are now the second-largest group after Syrians entering the European Union, with total EU arrivals in 2015 estimated at 200,000. The reality of this figure may be even higher, as many migrants have reportedly not sought asylum (ibid.). Labor migration is a growing driver of Afghan mobility, with these migrants described as individuals or families in search of better livelihoods. In

2008, the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) estimated that 14 percent of all Afghan households had at least one member engaged in seasonal work either within the country or abroad (ibid.; IOM 2015: 70). Additionally, while refugee movements have diminished in volume since 2001, millions of documented and undocumented Afghans still reside in Iran and Pakistan (Majidi, van der Vorst and Foulkes 2016). The scale of these mixed-migration flows and the multifaceted drivers underlying individuals' migration decisions make it difficult to slot them into traditional policy categories. This will have important consequences for Afghanistan's future development and governance, and also raises a number of questions crucial for policy design and implementation that the Afghan government has to date failed to address.

Afghanistan as a source of immigration

Afghanistan has long been a highly decentralized country, with a history of staunch resistance to foreign invasions and occupations that has earned it the moniker of "graveyard of empires." Its geopolitical position – with Iran to its west, Pakistan to its east and the Central Asian republics to its north – has made it a repeated target for regional powers. However, Afghanistan's tribal groups and networks have in every instance proven resistant to pacification by would-be occupying forces. The country has a largely arid, continental climate with three distinct regional variants: the central mountains, the steppe-like terrain on the periphery of these mountains, and the extreme desert in the southwest. No population census has been possible since 1979; however, the country's Central Statistics Organization estimates the current population at 28.6 million, with 14.7 million men and 13.9 million women (CSO 2016). Of this population, 20.4 million persons (75.3%) live in rural areas, and 6.7 million persons (24.7%) in urban areas (ibid.).

The country's population comprises numerous ethnicities, each with its specific dialect, traditions and cultures, although data on the precise composition and role of each ethnicity continues to be disputed. In rough terms, the Pashtun are the country's largest ethnic group, followed by the Tajiks, the Hazaras and, to a smaller degree, the Uzbeks, Aimaq, Turkmen and Baluch (Lamer and Foster 2011). While the country's rough terrain has historically separated these groups, internal movements facilitated by war, natural disasters and internal displacement have increased interaction in recent years. Close to 99 percent of Afghans are Muslim, with 85 percent belonging to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, and most of the remaining population being Shiite, joined by a smaller number of Ismailis (GlobalSecurity 2016).

Modern Afghanistan was founded as a political entity in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani, an ethnic Pashtun who successfully united the country under a monarchy that lasted until 1973, when Mohammed Daud seized power in a coup and declared Afghanistan a republic. Since that time, Afghanistan has endured invasion, civil unrest, the rise of the Taliban and the subsequent establishment of a democratic

state following the international community's toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001.

Historical migration patterns in Afghanistan

Migration has long been a part of Afghan history, from the natural-disaster-driven migration of thousands of Hazara households in the 1850s to the labor migration sparked by the oil boom of 1973 (ibid.; IOM 2015: 29). In 2013, before the recent upsurge in violence in Syria and Iraq, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that Afghanistan had been the world's top source of refugees for 32 years in a row (WIIRPA 2015). The recent past has seen three major waves of out-migration from Afghanistan. The first wave was caused by the Soviet invasion in 1979, which triggered the mujahedeen resistance movement. The ten years of conflict that followed were punctuated by mass violence and human rights atrocities, producing large-scale emigration to regional neighbors Pakistan and Iran. Between 1979 and 1980 alone, approximately 1.5 million Afghans fled to Pakistan (ibid.; IOM 2015: 30). The second wave of mass migration occurred after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989, when fighting between the mujahedeen groups themselves produced an unprecedented spike in out-migration and internal displacement. Between 1989 and 1996, as many as 6 million Afghans were displaced by intense fighting in rural areas (ibid.). During this period, Afghans made up the biggest group of displaced persons in the world, accounting for half the world's total population of concern as defined by the UNHCR. Another wave of migration took place from 1994 to 2000, as 300,000 Afghans fled to Iran to escape the oppressive rule of the Taliban (ibid.: 32). The fourth major wave of migration took place during the U.S.-led coalition's war to topple the Taliban regime. Following this period, Afghanistan began to witness a mass wave of repatriation. Between 2002 and 2005, some 2.7 million refugees returned from Pakistan and more than 800,000 returned from Iran (ibid.: 33). While this was in part due to the post-2001 reconstruction of the Afghan state, worsening economic conditions in Iran and Pakistan as well as a parallel change in attitude toward Afghan refugees also played a part. But whatever the reasons, the post-2001 period in Afghanistan represented the largest refugee-return movement in the UNHCR's history.

Present migration patterns

Afghanistan's migration flows have become more complex in the last 16 years. In 2015, more than 400,000 Afghans returned or were expelled from neighboring countries (Pakistan and Iran), while 190,013 Afghans sought asylum in the European Union, according to the European Asylum Support Office (Majidi, van der Vorst and Foulkes 2016). Cross-border labor migration has also become a promi-

nent trend, facilitated by family, businesses and other networks established in neighboring countries over years of refugee movements. In 2009, an average of as many as 40,000 people crossed the Afghanistan-Pakistan border on a daily basis for various reasons, including labor opportunities (ibid.). Similarly, approximately 4,000 Afghans crossed daily into Iran (ibid.). The volume of rural-urban migration has also increased over the years due to the lack of jobs in rural areas. Migration for seasonal work is reported to be most common among individuals with no more than a primary-level education. However, seasonal work among the highly educated is far more frequent in urban areas. The key difference between rural and urban seasonal laborers has been that the former tend to migrate either internally or regionally, while the latter tend to migrate abroad, particularly to the Arabian peninsula (ibid.).

Corresponding to these shifts in migration trends, the characteristics and socio-economic backgrounds of Afghan migrants have also seen significant changes. For instance, many of the Afghans who were ultimately naturalized in Western countries left after the fall of the communist regime in the early 1990s. These Afghans were generally middle class, highly skilled, politically persecuted, or seeking family-reunification or special immigrant visas, and thus easily acquired refugee status and later citizenship in Europe. However, since the early 2000s, Afghans migrating to the West, particularly those arriving in Europe, have tended to have lower education and skill levels, and to have been refugees, asylum-seekers or visa overstayers. This reflects the Afghan exodus following the mass repatriation from Pakistan and Iran in recent years. Moreover, the immediate post-2001 period primarily saw young men in their 20s or 30s leave the country, while the post-2006 years saw an increase in departures by unaccompanied minors, and the post-2008 era featured an increase in women migrating for the purposes of marriage.

Push and pull factors

In October of 2001, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under the leadership of the Taliban regime was toppled by U.S.-led military operations, setting the stage for a state-building and counter-terrorism strategy aimed at creating a “new Afghan nation” (UN 2001). The pillars of this strategy included the institutionalization of good-governance practices, the development of a liberal economy, the enshrinement of the rule of law and human rights, and guarantees of security and an end to conflict. A decade later, despite the erstwhile presence of as many as 140,000 international troops, contributions made by 50 nations, and the expenditure of trillions of dollars for military and aid purposes, the majority of Afghans continue to remain gravely uncertain as to the sustainability of these pillars. This has generated intense criticism of the international intervention, and cast doubt on the central government’s ability to sustain the young democracy and meet its citizens’ socioeconomic and security needs.

While conflict-driven migration continues, many Afghans now moving abroad are doing so in search of greater economic opportunity and better living conditions. The spectrum of motivations varies considerably, however. Key push factors driving the recent emigration of Afghans to the West have included the lack of domestic employment opportunities, natural disasters, the deteriorating security situation, the fragile composition of the National Unity Government, and a withdrawal of U.S.-led NATO forces, which many believe has contributed materially to Afghanistan's current economic, security and political crises. However, this list does not adequately capture the multidimensional localized factors pushing Afghans to migrate. A more nuanced perspective on push factors was provided by a roundtable expert seminar held in Kabul on 23 May 2016, convened by the Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS), a local think tank. Participants here described contemporary migrants as largely "lower-middle-class or middle-class" households or male members of these households who had both the economic means to effect a move and access to family networks already in the West. Seminar participants noted that these new lower-middle and middle classes had emerged over the past decade as a result of the international community's intervention and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Members of this category of locals are typically employed when making the decision to leave, but are uncertain about the future of their employment, the education of their children, and the general prospects for improving their livelihoods and sustaining their newly won lifestyles.

Participants in the Kabul roundtable additionally suggested that individuals from economically less-privileged households make up a comparatively smaller share of the current migration flows. However, this lower-income sector, particularly people from rural areas, does account for the bulk of migration to nearby countries in the region. Seminar participants indicated that migrants in this category are typically driven to leave by the level of violence in their communities. Rural areas have borne and continue to bear the brunt of the ongoing conflict, and with the transfer of security responsibilities from the international community to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), both civilian casualties and overall levels of violence have increased. Seminar participants pointed out that migration from Afghanistan has thus become inherently mixed in nature. For example, an internally displaced person (IDP) could become a labor migrant who transitions into an asylum-seeker, later returns to Afghanistan, and then still later decides to re-emigrate. According to one expert at the DROPS roundtable, human traffickers are actively targeting male youth with inexpensive offers to leave Afghanistan. One participant said that traffickers in Kabul have even been known to approach homes at random, informing residents that if they were interested in going to Germany, they should meet at a certain point for a group departure.

According to the UNHCR, economic problems, harassment, intimidation, eviction notices, restrictions on movement, and the fear of arrest and deportation were cited by returnees interviewed in 2015 as leading push factors motivating the decision to leave foreign countries (UNHCR 2015: 4). Conversely, the perception of im-

provements in the security situation in some parts of Afghanistan, the availability of UNHCR assistance packages, the perception of improved employment opportunities, and a declining fear of persecution were mentioned as primary pull factors encouraging emigrants to return to Afghanistan.

The DROPS roundtable experts concluded that since migration is becoming inherently mixed, with multifaceted drivers influencing migration decisions, modern-day Afghan migrants no longer fit into traditional policy categories. This should raise a number of questions crucial for policy design, implementation and service delivery, they said.

Existing policies

Migration and refugee matters have been frequently discussed topics at international conferences on Afghanistan.

The Bonn Conference of 2001 produced a roadmap for Afghanistan's democratization. Though it did not include a specific program on migration and refugees, it did call for the involvement of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere, as well as Afghans from the diaspora more generally, in the emergency Loya Jirga (Grand Council of Elders) that elected Hamid Karzai as head of the Transitional Authority. The London conference in 2006 saw the Afghan government and the international community agree on an Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy consistent with the goals of the Afghanistan Millennium Development Goals. In 2008, a successor Afghanistan National Development Strategy was created around the three pillars of security, governance and socioeconomic development, and covered 17 sectors that included issues related to refugees, returnees and IDPs. The 2011 London Conference placed labor migration and the return and reintegration of refugees on the agenda of both the Afghan government and international community for the first time. With regard to labor migration, the Afghan government made attempts to regulate the flow of labor exports and imports, while regional countries were urged to be more receptive to Afghan workers. The second Bonn Conference, in 2011, reaffirmed the international community's commitments in the areas of governance, security, the peace process, economic and social development, and regional cooperation. However, while this conference focused primarily on the issues of security and economic integration in the region, it also touched on the provision of support to neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran, which had provided temporary refuge to millions of Afghans in difficult times. It was not until 2011 that the Afghan government developed its own refugee policy for the first time.

Also in 2011, quadripartite consultations between Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and the UNHCR looked specifically at the situation of Afghan refugees in neighboring countries. This was followed by an international conference discussing the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries (SSAR) in May 2012. At the confer-

ence, the international community endorsed the Regional Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, the main regional framework for joint interventions in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. This strategy was aimed at identifying and implementing solutions and providing support to host countries. The new strategy was structured around five priorities, including voluntary repatriations, access to shelter and essential services, livelihood development and food security, social and environmental protection, and capacity development. Since 2012, the governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan as well as the UNHCR have made concerted efforts to operationalize the strategy, in part by developing country-specific portfolios of projects. More than 50 government agencies as well as humanitarian and development actors – including U.N. agencies, international organizations and NGOs – are today engaged in the formulation of these country-specific portfolios, which have been designed around the interlinked sectors of education, health and livelihood development. However, the implementation of the SSAR has been hindered by corruption and regional actors' lack of capacity.

In 2012, Afghanistan's Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled developed the National Labor Migration Strategy (NLMS) (GoIRA 2012). The NLMS officially recognizes the crucial role of labor migration as a safety valve for local employment shortages, as well as its potential to promote local economic development through remittances and diaspora engagement. The NLMS has three core pillars, including protection of the rights of migrant workers and the provision of support services, efforts to increase the development benefits of labor migration, and improved administration of expatriate labor. As of February 2016, this policy had not yet been endorsed by the government's cabinet. However, even if it is ultimately endorsed, the strategy will be difficult to implement if labor-migration corridors are not opened through bilateral agreements with receiving countries (*ibid.*; Majidi, van der Vorst and Foulkes 2016). As of the time of writing, although the Afghan government had signed a memorandum with Qatar, it has not resulted in regulated outflows of Afghan migrant workers; moreover, the government did not seem to be pursuing additional agreements (Majidi, van der Vorst and Foulkes 2016).

Afghanistan does not currently have a migration policy, but plans are in place to establish an Afghan Migration Board comprised of high-level representatives of ministries and other government authorities working in the area of migration. This board will be chaired by the national vice president and will act as an advisory body tasked with strengthening interministerial cooperation. However, as of the time of writing, there had been little progress on the development of this board, and the project still appeared to be in the very early stages.

Challenges presented by existing policies and strategies

Key gaps in the existing policies and strategies developed by the Afghan government to address the issue of refugees and migration include a lack of clarity regarding the

distinction between refugees and migrants, disjointed reintegration frameworks, insufficient links between reintegration assistance and development goals, and the lack of a comprehensive migration policy. These issues are discussed in more detail below.

First, government policy in Afghanistan has shown a lack of clear understanding regarding distinctions between refugees and migrants. This means that policy discussions within these two areas often fail to take into account the range of types of migrants, from IDPs to refugees to returnees. The discussion and debate in Afghanistan needs to move beyond a narrow focus on refugee issues to encompass the wider spectrum of migration. This will be a crucial step in developing more holistic policies as well as in improving implementation strategies and creating the capacity-building programs needed to train specialists in migration issues (Kuschminder et al. 2013). Clarifying this discourse and improving the quality of experts in the issue will help reduce the “overall confusion and lack of buy-in from the government itself on the importance of migration and development” (ibid.). Due to the weight given to refugee-specific issues, reintegration programs in Afghanistan have to date primarily addressed the needs of registered and returning refugees. Yet even these programs do no more than meet returnees’ immediate needs using one-time humanitarian assistance from organizations such as the International Organization for Migration or UNHCR. In the current climate, the spike in spontaneous returns by unregistered refugees and asylum-seekers deported from western countries has called the effectiveness of these models into question, and highlighted the need for more comprehensive repatriation programs.

Currently, migrants of all categories are funneled into reintegration programs that are simply unable to meet the varying needs of different kinds of migrants. These programs fail as a result, as they are unable to address the still-extant conditions that pushed Afghan residents to leave in the first place. This problem has been further exacerbated by the failure to draw connections between reintegration assistance and development goals; reintegration assistance allows for fast-track integration, but does not work toward longer-term development. Though some reintegration programs sponsored by nations such as Australia, Austria, Norway or the United Kingdom try to meet the needs of returnees from Western countries, they often fail to facilitate repatriation in a sustainable manner. This is “because the Afghan government lacks a comprehensive reintegration strategy to incorporate these initiatives,” meaning that “they tend to be individually tailored to fit the returning country’s budget, priorities, policy frameworks and resources” (Majidi, van der Vorst and Foulkes 2016). Despite some concerted efforts from the Afghan government to devise and establish a coherent reintegration policy, the existing return and reintegration framework remains unsustainably ad hoc. This is the result of capacity and coordination gaps in and between relevant ministries as well as between the Afghan government and its international donors. Nevertheless, the increase in migration rates within the Afghan population has led to a growing recognition among Afghanistan’s policymakers and civil society actors that “siloed policy discussions leave significant gaps” (ibid.).

Recommendations

The following recommendations would help policy initiatives pursued by the Afghan government and the international community come to reflect the complexities of migration in Afghanistan today:

First, the policy discourse should be shifted from a focus solely on refugees to encompass all forms of migration. For this to be successful, the various categories of refugees and migrants need to be clearly defined and understood. Emigration patterns and motivations have changed, with migration spurred by economic motives becoming more predominant, particularly among those leaving for Europe. While refugees and returning refugees are protected under various international conventions (including the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as the 1969 Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention), the same protections should be extended to migrants.

Second, there is a critical need to further develop the capacities of the ministries involved in addressing refugee and migration concerns. Specialists in the field of migration need to be trained, and mechanisms to improve interministerial coordination should be created.

Third, the Afghan government must ensure that the Afghan Migration Board begins its efforts as soon as possible. In parallel, the government should develop a comprehensive national policy on migration that provides the board with the tools required to manage migration. Existing efforts, such as the SSAR and the NLMS, are important steps illustrating the Afghan government's willingness to address refugee and migration issues holistically; however, further action is needed to remove barriers to their implementation.

Fourth, reintegration programs need to be designed so as to account for the inherently mixed nature of migration and return patterns. Reintegration is today a poorly understood concept that needs to be assessed along multiple dimensions. For this to happen, programs must be developed on the basis of an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted drivers of migration decisions. Such programs must avoid the one-size-fits-all approach; instead, they should take a more holistic approach that addresses returnees' long-term needs.

Fifth, the international community can play a critical capacity-building role for the Afghan government on migration issues, while tailoring budgets, priorities and policy frameworks to reflect the mixed nature of current migration patterns. This would help create a more sustainable focus on the push factors driving today's migration, while also assisting the Afghan government in creating more comprehensive reintegration programs able to address returnees' long-term development needs. Two specific sub-recommendations are important here:

- The European Union should refrain from developing reintegration programs that do no more than offer returnees one-time stipends or financial assistance. Moreover, it should ensure that investments in job-development initiatives con-

- sider existing labor market needs and gaps, and when supporting housing projects for returnees, it should ensure that local labor market opportunities are robust enough to support the incoming population.
- The European Union should pursue initiatives that address the root causes pushing Afghans to migrate. First, a focus should be placed on providing education scholarships enabling Afghan youth to attain bachelor's and post-graduate degrees, particularly within countries where education costs are reasonably low. This would allow a greater number of scholarships and education opportunities to be offered. Second, the European Union should invest in developing skilled labor within Afghanistan by creating vocational-training programs that take migrants' varying qualification levels into consideration, and by building on returnees' existing skills and educational experiences. Third, the EU should consider providing financial and technical support that helps returnees re-establish their jobs or careers in Afghanistan, with the broader aim of serving the country's reconstruction and rehabilitation needs. Finally, the EU should provide the Afghan government with both technical and financial support in developing comprehensive reintegration and awareness programs.

Sixth, the European Union and its member states, in partnership with Afghanistan, should create a cooperative strategy ensuring that Afghans resident in the EU are provided with objective and accurate information regarding return to and reintegration in Afghanistan, thus enabling return decisions to be made with full knowledge of the facts. If necessary, this activity could include non- and inter-governmental organizations. Practical implementation of the strategy would include an information campaign targeting Afghan communities across the European Union.

Seventh, with the support of the European Union, the Afghan government should seek to prevent irregular migration out of Afghanistan by creating conditions conducive to the sustainable reintegration of Afghan returnees. This should include information and awareness-raising campaigns informing the population of the dangers of irregular migration.

Eighth, the EU should expand its support of the Afghan government in tackling human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Such assistance should include capacity-building programs for law enforcement agencies, as well as specific support in drafting and enacting effective legislation on migrant smuggling.

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