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IOM helps in relocating Afghan refugees from Tajikistan in coordination with the Canadian government.

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About MMC

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in DRC regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector.

For more information visit: www.mixedmigration.org and follow us at [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

About Danish Refugee Council Diaspora Programme

DRC has been working with diaspora groups as transnational civil society actors since 2010. Engagement with diaspora is based on a recognition of the significant role they play for people and communities in countries of origin (or heritage), for refugees and migrants in transit, and for newly arrived refugees and migrants in countries of residence, and, consequently, their potential for improving the situation for many of those affected by conflict and displacement. For more information on DRC's website: <https://www.drc.ngo/our-work/what-we-do/civil-society-engagement-cse/diaspora/>

About the Afghan Safe Migration Project

The Afghan Safe Migration Project, implemented by DRC and MMC Asia and the Pacific was funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs from June 2019 until August 2022. The project aimed for Afghans on the move and Afghans considering migrating to have a realistic and credible picture of the journey and understanding of both the protection risks and their rights. The project supported five Afghan diaspora partners in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Germany to leverage their networks and knowledge to help Afghans make safer decisions around migration. Afghan diaspora organisations engaged in providing protection information, increased their communications capacity, and established networks to ensure targeted messaging on protection assistance was delivered in English, Farsi/Dari, and Pashto, with the aim of creating safer migration environments for Afghans on the move.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

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Acronyms

ACC	Afghan Citizen Card
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IS-K	The Islamic State of Khorasan Province
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontiers
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OAR	Asylum and Refugee Office
PDMM	Provincial Directorate of Migration Management
PoR	Proof of Registration
RRP	Refugee Response Plan
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFP	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States of America
USD	United States Dollar
WFP	World Food Program
WHO	World Health Organisation

Executive Summary

The months leading up to 15 August 2021, marked the beginning of a period of transition for Afghanistan and its people as the United States Armed Forces gradually withdrew from the country, and the Taliban took control of Kabul. By the end of 2021, 682,031 Afghans were internally displaced by the conflict, and 112,520 newly arrived Afghans were identified in need of international protection in neighbouring countries. This is in addition to the existing 3.4 million internally displaced people, and 2.2 million refugees and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan – a country ravaged by years of conflict and climate induced forced migration. Over 2022, an increasing number of Afghans continued to leave the country opting for all viable means, often forced to make journeys on land that are rife with safety risks. To better understand the evolving situation, MMC Asia and the Pacific and the DRC Diaspora Programme undertook a substantive exploration of the dynamics of Afghan migration following the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

Conflict, military intervention, economic hardship, and natural disasters have driven Afghans across borders for many years. Challenges grew between 2021 and 2022, as the Taliban regained control of the country. During this period, Afghans were compelled to leave faced with an acute shortage of humanitarian assistance, rising food insecurity and destitution, targeted attacks on minorities and individuals who had previously engaged with Western military forces and governments, and increasing restrictions imposed on the mobility of Afghan women and girls.

Simultaneously, avenues for mobility were severely restricted, with delays in issuing national identity documents considerable, the withdrawal of foreign consulates, and increasing costs and scrutiny for those on the move. Afghans have therefore been pushed further towards irregular pathways to neighbouring states, which have in turn increased deportations.

Relying on information received through contacts abroad and social media platforms, including from Afghans in diaspora, an increasing number of Afghans have fled into Pakistan and Iran, many eventually arriving in Türkiye. At particular risk in Afghanistan have been women, ethnic minorities such as the Hazara, people with disabilities, those of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, those associated with international development programs, media, civil society, and other organisations promoting human rights, and those affiliated with coalition forces, judges, prosecutors, and civil servants.

Since August 2021, Afghans on the move have had to confront additional or amplified physical and psychosocial protection risks during arduous journeys. These include:

- increasing cross-border smuggling costs,
- rising visa and intermediary fees for those able to legally access Pakistan and Iran,
- detention,
- kidnapping,
- torture,
- targeted violence,
- pushbacks and forced returns and ultimately,
- livelihood struggles in destination countries.

An increasing number of Afghans en route to Türkiye have also reported being exposed to trafficking and exploitation, detention, injury and ill-health, kidnapping and robbery in the period following the Taliban takeover.

Protection options in Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan – all of which are part of UNHCR's Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan - are limited. Afghans do, in theory, have access to limited forms of protection in some of these countries. In Iran, until 2002, Afghans could apply for the 'Amayesh Card'.¹ In Pakistan, Afghans can seek temporary and limited protection with a 'Proof of Registration Card' or an 'Afghan Citizen Card'.² Without these, they face the risk of living without legal documentation, as Afghans without valid documentation do in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

1 The Amayesh card is a temporary residence card serving as a refugee identification document, allowing the cardholder to stay in Iran and access education, health services, health insurance, and employment within predefined fields, if a work permit is obtained.

2 The Proof of Registration (PoR) card grant Afghans in Pakistan temporary legal stay and freedom of movement within Pakistan. Between 2017-2018, Afghans without documentation in Pakistan were eligible to register for an Afghan Citizen Card (ACC). While ACC holders are protected from arbitrary arrest and deportation under the Foreigner's Act of 1946, they are not granted refugee status in Pakistan.

A number of Afghans journey onwards, beyond neighbouring states, crossing from Iran into Türkiye. Neither state provides effective protection to Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, and both have stepped up deportations, pushbacks and arrests. However, Türkiye does allow Afghans to register with UNHCR and receive limited temporary protection until a durable solution is found.³ For Afghans evacuated from Afghanistan by European Union Member States in the period between August 2021 and August 2022, the likelihood of receiving international protection assistance, however temporarily, has been relatively high. Afghan evacuees taken in by Germany (21,399), Italy (5,770), France (4,200), the Netherlands (4000), Belgium (1,426), Sweden (1,100), Greece (819) and Switzerland (218), among other Member States, continue to progress through formal mechanisms for receiving protection.

This report presents crucial findings which inform recommendations for international humanitarian organisations continuing to maintain operational presence in Afghanistan, such as the provision of accurate pre-departure information on safe pathways for migration to Afghans considering leaving. Recommendations include providing increased technical support to local NGOs and CSOs engaged in programming at key transit points along routes out of Afghanistan and in provinces of Pakistan and Iran bordering Afghanistan. It is recommended that international humanitarian organisations develop resilience-focused interventions which reduce vulnerability to ensure long-term safety and security of Afghan people. Importantly, the reach of programmatic interventions targeting female-headed households in Afghanistan should be increased. Simultaneously, advocacy efforts should remain focused on ensuring that Afghans are not forcibly returned to Afghanistan, including through pushbacks at the Iran-Afghanistan, Iran-Türkiye and Türkiye-Greece borders.

³ Lewis, T. & Nguyen, H. (2022) [Unwelcome Refugees: Afghans Continue to Face Pushback and Deportation](#) Mixed Migration Centre; Human Rights Watch (2022) [Turkey Pushes Afghans Back at Iran Border](#)

Introduction

The months leading up to 15 August 2021 marked the beginning of a period of dramatic transition for Afghanistan and its people, as foreign forces withdrew from the country and the Taliban closed in on Kabul. By the end of 2021, 682,031 Afghans were internally displaced by the conflict, and 112,520 Afghans were identified in need of international protection in neighbouring countries, having newly arrived. These numbers added to the existing 3.4 million internally displaced people and 2.2 million Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers.⁴ Over the course of 2022, an increasing number of Afghans left the country to escape a variety of overlapping and intersectional risks: widespread hunger and increasing food insecurity, destitution, targeted violence, armed conflict, and ethnic, religious, and sex and gender-based segregation. Those seeking to leave have opted for any viable means, including overland journeys rife with safety and protection risks.

MMC Asia and the Pacific and the DRC Diaspora Programme commissioned this research under three specific objectives:

1. to provide a substantive understanding of Afghan migration post August 2021 (in contrast to previous periods),
2. to identify demographics, risks, gaps in knowledge, regional responses, and concerns voiced by affected communities regarding Afghan migration.
3. to provide concrete and targeted recommendations for policy and program responses for key actors in the region, as well as future research areas.

It aims to answer a number of key research questions, including:

- What are the emerging key characteristics of Afghan migration post-August 2021, and who are the primary groups able (and unable) to migrate?
- What are the key challenges and risks facing Afghans?
- What current viable routes exist for Afghans to exit Afghanistan and find protection abroad?
- What are the current gaps in information and knowledge experienced by Afghans?
- How does Afghan migration look different in the context of the post-August 2021 Taliban takeover in Afghanistan?
- What legal or other protective frameworks exist for Afghans? What are the gaps, including in implementation?
- What current routes (and alternative pathways) exist for Afghans at risk?
- What are the key recommendations for policy and program responses to Afghan migration towards Europe?
- What are the recommended future areas of focus for research?

In the sections that follow, this report outlines factors that have shaped motivations of Afghans to chart journeys out of Afghanistan, with particular focus on the timeframe following the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The report also highlights risks that Afghans continue to face as they seek international protection or greater security – including increasing costs associated with being smuggled across borders, targeted violence towards specific marginalised groups, detention, kidnapping, torture, pushbacks, forced returns, and social, psychosocial, and livelihood-based risks in hosting countries.

As the report examines viable means afforded to Afghans to seek immediate protection, its focus is on those in neighbouring countries of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – all of which are a part of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan. Recognising that a number of Afghans continue to journey onwards – crossing over from Iran into Türkiye and further often with the intention of reaching Europe – the report also offers a brief overview of regular and safe pathways available to Afghans in Türkiye and in Germany, France, Austria, Greece, Sweden, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium. It should be noted that circumstances in Afghanistan and surrounding countries are rapidly developing, and policy shifts that have come about after mid-2022 - such as the Taliban's restriction on women's education and engagement in significant sectors of the labour market - may further affect migration. Reciprocally, these shifts may also trigger new responses from neighbouring states and renewed efforts for legal pathways by other actors.

⁴ UNHCR (2021) [Afghanistan Situation External Update](#)

Methodology and Limitations

To understand the changing dynamics around outward migration from Afghanistan since August 2021, the research adopted a qualitative approach. Prior to conducting Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), the research team mapped grey literature to capture emerging and long-standing trends in Afghan migration. Insights from which formed the basis for the identification of 22 potential key informants (KIs) and the drafting of a semi-structured interview guide for the KI interviews (KIIs).

The research team sought to include participants from the Afghan diaspora in host and transit countries, those working in organisations that provide protection information to Afghans seeking to leave, lawyers working in initiatives that help Afghans find legal pathways to European countries, researchers from South Asia focusing on Afghan migration and mobility, as well as those employed in embassies of Afghanistan in neighbouring countries. The primary data for this study was collected between May and July 2022. Given that the 22 KIs were spread across multiple countries, all interviews were conducted online. The KIIs were conducted in English, anonymised and transcribed before being analysed using a deductive coding scheme developed based on the research objectives set out at the start of the process.

The authors of this report found that gathering data related to Afghan migration to European Union Member States was challenging in terms of the expansive ground that needed to be covered. The few insights presented in this research that refer to the European context have been gleaned through interviews with KIs working in European Union Member States and are only specific of Afghan evacuees arriving in Europe.

1. Migration out of Afghanistan

Outward migration is an important component of Afghan history, often considered to be a rite of passage for young Afghan men, who often travel to neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan.⁵ Afghans have also long been migrating internally between rural and urban areas as pastoralists, seasonal workers, or as labour migrants. In the last 40 years, war and conflict related insecurity have routinely driven Afghans to migrate to neighbouring regions of Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and beyond. A high incidence of natural disasters and newly emerging livelihood risks attributed to the humanitarian crisis that has engulfed the country since the Taliban takeover in August 2021 are substantively adding to forced displacement.⁶

Drivers of Afghan Migration

Security Context

The security context in Afghanistan is complex and dynamic. Outward migration and refugee movements tied to insecurity and conflict are not a new phenomenon. Prior to the takeover by the Taliban in 2021, three major political events⁷ contributed to large-scale contemporary out migration from Afghanistan: the Soviet invasion in 1979, the victory of Mujahedeen in 1992, and the end of Taliban governance following the US-led military coalition invasion in 2001. Intensified conflicts and insecurity following these events have significantly increased out migration of Afghans, especially to Iran and Pakistan.

After the United States announced the withdrawal of its military forces in April 2021, Taliban forces began a major offensive in Helmand province, progressing gradually to other parts of the country. On 15 August 2021, as the Taliban took control of Kabul, several influential non-state armed actors re-established their presence in Afghanistan, notably the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-K), al-Qaeda, and the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan. This posed, and continues to pose, a threat to the security of the country and added to a state of vulnerability that at-risk Afghans inhabit. These groups include, but are not limited to women, former government affiliates, ethnic minorities, people

5 Monsutti, A. (2007) [Migration as a Rite of Passage: Young Afghans Building Masculinity and Adulthood in Iran](#) Iranian Studies.

6 Sayed, N & Sadat, S. (2022) [Climate Change Compounds Longstanding Displacement in Afghanistan](#) Migration Policy Institute.

7 Note that the drivers of out migration are not limited to these historical events. This report only covers brief highlights of the recent three major events as in IOM (2014) [Afghanistan: Migration Profile](#)

with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, advocates of human rights, as well as those who have engaged or affiliated with Western allies.

Dwindling Livelihood Options

Afghanistan's economy is largely agrarian. Agriculture contributes to job creation, poverty reduction and ensures food security in the country.⁸ In 2019, Afghanistan's real Gross Domestic Product growth remained at less than three percent. The growth of the Afghan economy was primarily driven by foreign assistance and aid instead of productive and sustainable investment in agriculture.⁹ Investments have been key to improving agricultural productivity in Afghanistan, increasing resilience to climate-related shocks, developing infrastructure, and building irrigation networks. To nurture investments made towards the agricultural sector, in September 2019 the Afghan government launched a National Financial Inclusion Strategy 2019-2024.¹⁰ With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Afghanistan's national economy contracted by an additional -2.4 percent and the unemployment rate stood at 11.7 percent, further accelerating an economic decline in the country.¹¹

Political instability following the 2021 Taliban takeover has caused the collapse of the country's financial sector as financial strategies and plans of the Afghan government for the upcoming years fell through. In the absence of investments, the agricultural sector, which contributed to the livelihoods of half of total Afghan households, has been severely impacted. The sudden withdrawal of foreign aid from Afghanistan affected the government's primary revenue source, increasing livelihood risks for Afghans.¹² Compounding the humanitarian crisis, agriculture in Afghanistan has also been negatively impacted by climate change, in the form of considerable drought and a drop in wheat yield. This has caused Afghan farmers to migrate internally from rural to urban centres or abroad in search of alternative livelihoods, to remit money and support household members who stay behind or are unable to leave.¹³

Following the Taliban takeover, rural-urban migration tied to livelihoods has seen a trend reversal. Between September and December 2021, higher unemployment rates were recorded in urban areas while the rates dropped in rural areas, possibly due to improved security in rural areas and stagnation of urban economies in the early stages of the Taliban takeover.¹⁴

Natural Disasters

Natural disasters such as flash floods, droughts, earthquakes, and other calamities have proved to be one of the biggest humanitarian challenges of the 21st century. Amplified by climate change, according to UNHCR, these disasters have resulted in the forced displacement of an average of 20 million people each year, globally.¹⁵

Afghanistan is prone to disaster displacement. Given its geographic landscape, extreme weather conditions and natural disasters have led to food insecurity and poverty, and have forcibly displaced many Afghans, particularly from rural areas. In 2018, more Afghans were internally displaced due to disasters than conflict, as 435,000 new internal displacements associated with disasters were recorded as compared to 372,000 new internal displacements associated with conflict.¹⁶

Despite the significant risks and impacts of adverse environmental changes on the livelihoods of Afghans, the Afghan National Unity Government had been prioritising security challenges over building resilience and reducing vulnerabilities towards disasters.¹⁷ In the first half of 2022, flash floods affected over 16,000 Afghans.¹⁸ At the same time, the country struggled under drought conditions - some of the worst in decades - which continued into 2022.¹⁹ Following the Taliban-takeover, existent climate change mitigation programmes targeted at drought prevention and water management were suspended, which is likely to exacerbate forced displacement of the population due to natural disasters.²⁰

8 World Bank (2014) [Revitalising Agriculture for Growth, Jobs, and Food Security in Afghanistan](#)

9 World Bank (2022) [Adjusting to the New Realities](#)

10 International Monetary Fund (2019) [Country Report: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan](#)

11 World Bank (2020) [Hit Hard by COVID-19, Afghanistan Needs Continued International Support](#); Asian Development Bank (2022) [Poverty data: Afghanistan](#)

12 Bizhan, N. (2018) [Building Legitimacy and State Capacity in Protracted Fragility: The Case of Afghanistan](#) International Growth Center; Human Rights Watch (2022) [Economic Causes of Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis](#); KII: Academic, Afghanistan, [remote], June 2022.

13 Migration Data Portal (2022) [Remittances to Afghanistan are Lifelines: They are needed more than ever in a time of crisis](#)

14 World Bank (2022) [Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey](#)

15 UNHCR (2022) [Climate change and disaster displacement](#)

16 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2019) [Global Report on Internal Displacement](#)

17 Sayet, N. & Sadat, S. Op Cit.

18 UNICEF (2022) [Afghanistan: Humanitarian Situation Report](#)

19 Chernov, M. (2021) [Afghanistan Shrivels in Worst Drought in Decades](#) The Diplomat.

20 Mayar, A. (2022) [The Climate Change Crisis in Afghanistan: The Catastrophe Worsens - What Hope for Action?](#) Afghanistan Analysts Network; KII: Academic, Afghanistan, [remote], June 2022.

Limited Access to Humanitarian Assistance

Since August 2021, the international community has strived to increase humanitarian aid flows to Afghanistan. As of August 2022, funding allocated to Afghanistan's humanitarian response plan was USD 1.8 billion, aimed at expanding humanitarian operations across all 34 provinces in the country.²¹ Despite resources being channelled into the country, the current amount of aid constitutes only 45.5 percent of total need. An additional 24 million people remain in need of some form of humanitarian assistance.²² Moreover, following the Taliban takeover, the international community has had to reconsider existing policies around aid flows to Afghanistan, in light of international sanctions. This created the challenge of ensuring that humanitarian aid flowing into the country in a moment of crisis does not support or entrench totalitarian structures.

Furthermore, aid agencies have faced constraints in registering women-led households for unconditional cash transfers due to restrictions imposed by the Taliban at the district level.²³ A near-total ban on women's participation in the aid sector as professionals or in other areas of the public sphere has negatively impacted female representation in humanitarian organisations at the local level. This has challenged Afghan women's access to humanitarian support.²⁴ Faced with an inability to access humanitarian assistance in a moment of crisis, women confront realities that lead to out migration under considerable duress and at great risk.

Interruption of Regular Pathways of Migration

Under the coalition-supported Ashraf Ghani government, document processing facilities responsible for the issuance of passports and Afghan identity cards (Tazkira) were functional. Every national of Afghanistan with a valid Tazkira was eligible to apply for an Afghan passport, renewable every five to ten years. However, post-August 2021, the abrupt change in government threw the delivery of immigration services offtrack. No new passports were issued between August and October 2021, and services resumed in limited capacity by December 2021.²⁵ Many Afghans, including those unwilling to be identified by the Taliban government, were forced to flee across international borders without legal documentation.

Legal pathways out of the country remain limited. Processes for Afghans to apply for visas to neighbouring countries have been hampered due to political and practical challenges. Afghan students seeking safe pathways have faced difficulties meeting basic visa requirements for host countries – being unable to renew their passports under the current administration. When Afghan women have attempted to travel with complete documentation, scholarship programs for instance, they have been barred from boarding flights by Taliban authorities at airports.²⁶ A failing international migration system and uncertainties surrounding legal pathways have contributed to an increasing number of Afghans opting for irregular means of leaving the country.

Breakdown and Emergence of Information Systems

In the period following the Taliban takeover, Afghans reported receiving confusing information from both the United States government and the European Union authorities. Many Afghans were unsure about asylum cases being processed by the UNHCR and foreign embassies in third countries.²⁷ Furthermore, as NGOs in Afghanistan suspended operations, including legal aid services, a crucial source of information on safe migration was cut-off.²⁸ Decrees imposing restrictions on women's movement in the public sphere severely impacted their ability to access services and information from humanitarian organisations.²⁹

In the absence of reliable and accessible local sources of information, Afghans turned to diaspora networks for information, including around asylum processes and family reunification.³⁰ However, diaspora members are often unable to provide up-to-date information related to changing migration and smuggling routes, including on risks and safety measures that can be taken, as well as accurate information regarding expenses associated with the journey.³¹

21 UN News (2022) [Humanitarian Funding Still Needed for 'Pure Catastrophe' Situation in Afghanistan](#)

22 ECHO (2022) [Afghanistan Factsheet. European Commission: European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations](#)

23 OCHA (2022) [Afghanistan: ICCT Real-Time Response Overview](#)

24 KII: INGO, Asia [remote], June 2022.

25 Alarabiya News (2021) [Taliban Authorities Begin Issuing Passports in Kabul](#)

26 Parvaz, D. (2022) [Since the Taliban Takeover, Afghans Hoping to Leave Afghanistan Have Few Ways Out](#) NPR.

27 KII: Consultant, Pakistan, [remote], June 2022.

28 KII: INGO, Asia [remote], June 2022.

29 UN Women (2021) [Women's Rights in Afghanistan: Where are we Now?](#)

30 KII: INGO professional and Hazara community member, Europe, [remote], June 2022.

31 KII: INGO professional and Hazara community member, Europe, [remote], June 2022.

Information disseminated over the internet, social media, and news outlets also shaped decision-making processes among Afghans seeking to flee. After 15 August 2021, Facebook was a popular platform for exchanging information related to immigration to specific third countries, securing visas and ongoing evacuations.³² However, with the onset of economic pressure, crumbling internet infrastructure, and the gradual return of media censorship under the Taliban, the access to information for Afghans has shrunk.³³ In addition, a combination of low literacy rates and pressures relating to increasing risk resulted in a number of potential Afghans falling victim to exploitation.³⁴

Groups at Greater Risk

Many Afghans remain at direct risk due to their gender or ethnic identity and/or having engaged with anti-Taliban actors in the past. Human rights organisations have continued to flag serious implications of the Taliban taking control of sensitive biometric data left behind by the United States government. The Afghan Personnel and Pay System, a US-funded database, contains records about all members of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, including information on when they were enlisted. Having access to biometric databases may allow the Taliban to target opponents, particularly if they worked with the US military or the former Afghan government in the past or are considered supportive of opponents.³⁵

Women and girls, those belonging to ethnic minority groups such as the Hazara, as well as people with disabilities or those of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics face increasing marginalisation and risk under the Taliban. After returning to power, the Taliban began restricting domestic and international travel for women unless accompanied by a male guardian.³⁶ A decree prohibiting Afghan women's unaccompanied presence in public also extends to the labour market. The Taliban has banned women from working alongside male colleagues, with the exception of those working in primary education or healthcare. In December 2022, the Taliban administration declared that women and girls would be barred from tertiary education.³⁷ As a result of the restrictions, female headed households across the country have been profoundly impacted with their access to livelihoods, aid assistance and education cut off. The circumstances increase the likelihood of women fleeing the country through irregular pathways and, as a consequence, being exposed to increased risks of trafficking or sex and gender-based violence while crossing borders.³⁸

The Hazara ethnic minority are discriminated against by the Taliban.³⁹ Systematic violence, forced evictions, and land appropriation by the Taliban administration have put Hazaras at increased risk.⁴⁰ In the period between July-September 2021, reports of targeted Taliban torture and execution of Hazaras in Ghor, Ghazni, and Daikundi provinces emerged.⁴¹ In November 2022, the Taliban killed nine Hazara civilians, including three children, in a raid conducted to capture 'armed rebels' in Daikundi.⁴² More than 700 from the Hazara community were killed in 13 attacks in the period immediately following the Taliban takeover.⁴³

At-risk groups such as the Hazara are left with few options. If they remain in Afghanistan, they risk access to work and access to other support under the Taliban administration. This is in addition to facing targeted attacks, arbitrary detention, or persecution at the hands of the Taliban or other agents. Religious minorities risk being targeted not only by the Taliban administration, but also non-state or other actors, such as the IS-K.⁴⁴ Simultaneously, at-risk groups struggle to leave the country using regular means. They fear discovery by the Taliban if they apply for visas or identity documents. At-risk groups have thus been pushed into circumstances of risk through any method of flight.

32 KII: INGO professional and Hazara community member, Europe, [remote], June 2022.

33 Prinsloo, L. (2021) [Afghanistan's Lack of Dollars Threatens Internet Infrastructure](#) Bloomberg News.

34 The Economist. (2021) [Scammers are Preying on Afghans Desperate to Leave their Country](#)

35 Human Rights Watch (2022) [New Evidence that Biometric Data Systems Imperil Afghans](#); Limaye, Y. (2022) [Afghan Contractors: 'I wish I'd never worked for the UK government'](#) BBC; BBC (2021) [Afghanistan: Taliban Carrying Out Door-To-Door Manhunt](#)

36 Calder, R. (2022) [Taliban Blocked Unaccompanied Women from Afghanistan Flights](#) New York Post; KII: INGO, Asia [remote], June 2022.

37 Al Jazeera (2022) [Female Students Turned Away from Afghan Universities](#)

38 Pal, A. (2021) [Afghan Women Should Not Work Alongside Men, Senior Taliban Figure Says](#) Reuters; Human Rights Watch (2022) [Afghanistan: Taliban Deprive Women of Livelihoods, Identity - Severe Restrictions, Harassment, Fear in Ghazni Province](#); KII: INGO, Advocacy, Afghanistan, [remote], June 2022.

39 Hasrat, M.H. (2019) [Over a Century of Persecution: Massive Human Rights Violations Against Hazaras in Afghanistan](#). OCHCR.

40 Siddique, A. and Sharifi, G. (2021) [Afghan Hazaras Fear the Worst After Forced Taliban Evictions](#) RFE/RL.

41 Amnesty International (2022) [Afghanistan: Taliban Torture and Execute Hazaras in Targeted Attack – New Investigation](#)

42 RFE/RL (2022) [Survivors of Deadly Taliban Raid On Hazara Village In Afghanistan Demand Justice](#)

43 Human Rights Watch (2022) [Afghanistan: ISIS Group Targets Religious Minorities - Taliban Need to Protect, Assist Hazara, Other At-Risk Communities](#)

44 The Islamic State – Khorasan Province is an affiliate of the Islamic State militant group active in South Asia and Central Asia.

Protection Risks Facing Afghans on the Move

Rising Smuggling and Visa Costs

Afghans who cannot access regular migration pathways rely on irregular and dangerous pathways. With an increase in the number of Afghans fleeing the country, a spike in demand for smuggling services was observed, followed by a sudden increase in the costs of smuggling services.⁴⁵ These costs include transportation across national borders as well as accommodation during the journey.

Once in Pakistan, transportation costs for Afghans from Quetta - a border city - to Islamabad had been approximately USD 19 (PKR 4,000). Following the Taliban takeover, Afghans reported being charged up to USD 718 (PKR 150,000), 37 times higher than before for the same segment. Similarly, average nightly rates for accommodation along the route jumped from USD 2-7 (500-1,500 PKR) to USD 24-57 (PKR 6,000-12,000), a 12-fold increase.⁴⁶

Afghans have also had to pay higher bribe and extortion fees along the route. Afghans crossing via Chaman in Pakistan reported paying bribes of up to USD 1,685 (150,000 Afghani).⁴⁷ For those able to pursue regular pathways, obtaining documentation for border crossings has become increasingly difficult. While Iran and Pakistan are some of the few countries maintaining consular services in Afghanistan, visa fees (including application costs and bribes), have increased exponentially.⁴⁸ A visa for Pakistan, which traditionally costs up to USD 120, cost approximately USD 1,500 in June 2022.⁴⁹

Prejudice and Violence against Hazaras

Decisions on travel routes are often tied to ethnic identities. In Pakistan, for example, Hazara populations have historically suffered harassment and discrimination in Baluchistan and elsewhere.⁵⁰ After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, Hazaras have increasingly had to avoid the Mashkil and Raja routes through Pakistan, as the likelihood of being targeted along those routes is high.⁵¹ Similarly, reports of anti-Hazara discrimination in Quetta (Pakistan) were on the rise in an environment of anti-Shia violence.⁵² Protection risks to Hazara populations on the move post-Taliban takeover increased considerably.

Detention

The ability of Afghans to navigate border controls successfully in the absence of valid documentation depends on the protections offered – and their implementation - under legal frameworks existing in host countries. Among Afghanistan's neighbours, Iran, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have obliged themselves, to some extent, to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention), which guarantees specific protections including the right of 'non-penalisation' for entering without documentation. Pakistan and Uzbekistan have no similar obligations, putting Afghans at risk of detention and deportation if found without valid documentation.

4Mi data⁵³ collected between August 2021 to October 2022 shows that 53 percent of Afghans surveyed in Türkiye reported being at risk of detention, in addition to being exposed to physical violence, death, robbery, kidnapping and torture. The reported risk of detention was the highest in the Iranian city of Urmia, at the Iran-Türkiye border, and in the Turkish city of Van. A majority of 4Mi respondents (95.2%) who travelled across borders using land transport reported a higher risk of detention. According to the respondents, the main perpetrators of detention were border guards or immigration officials, military or police personnel, and to a lesser extent, smugglers.⁵⁴

45 Batha, E. & Joya, B. (2022) [Afghan Smugglers Hike Prices, Expand Networks After Taliban Takeover](#) Context.

46 KII: Governance, Pakistan, [remote], June 2022.

47 KII: Governance, Pakistan, [remote], June 2022.

48 KII: NGO, Türkiye, [remote], June 2022.

49 KII: Governance, Pakistan, [remote], June 2022.

50 The New Humanitarian (2012) [Quetta's Hazara Community Living in Fear](#)

51 Mohammadi, H. Nguyen, H. & Valentine, J. (2021) [The Impact of the Afghanistan Crisis on Migration: Increasingly Securitised Borders Will Only Make Migration Riskier and More Dangerous](#) Mixed Migration Centre.

52 KII: Consultant, Pakistan, [remote], June 2022.

53 4Mi is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system. It is a regular, standardised, quantitative and globalised system, with a network of more than 120 field enumerators who conduct survey interviews with refugees and migrants on the move in more than 15 countries. For more information: <https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/>

54 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [4Mi Snapshot: Detention as a Protection Risk En Route for Türkiye](#)

Afghans are increasingly exposed to arbitrary detention in Pakistan. In November 2022, around 1,500 Afghans were detained for not possessing proper documentation in violation of the country's Foreigner's Act and imprisoned in Karachi and Sindh. Among those detained were Afghan women and children, and Afghan refugees in possession of the Proof of Registration (PoR) card that legalises their stay in Pakistan.⁵⁵

Pushbacks, Deportations and Forced Returns

In several instances, Afghans have faced violent pushbacks at Iran's border with Afghanistan and at Türkiye's border with Iran. As of May 2022, local officials at Zaranj and Islam Qala, the two key crossing points from Afghanistan to Iran, reported that nearly 100 Afghans entering Iran had been shot dead, and over 460 had been wounded by Iranian.⁵⁶ Similarly, pushbacks against Afghans by Greek authorities in the Aegean Sea are also rampant. In 2022, Greek authorities were found using other migrants as proxies to systematically assault Afghan asylum seekers and forcibly push them back across the River Evros into Türkiye, whilst Frontex, the EU border monitoring organisation, failed to enforce effective oversight mechanisms.⁵⁷

On 17 August 2021, two days after the Taliban takeover, UNHCR issued a non-return advisory for Afghans, calling for countries to abstain from forcibly returning Afghans to Afghanistan, including in cases where applications for asylum had been rejected.⁵⁸ Despite the advisory, both Iran and Pakistan stepped-up deportations, claiming that incoming Afghans posed a threat to the national security of the countries. UNHCR reported that 3,000 Afghans were deported from Iran to Afghanistan daily between August and November 2021. The situation in Pakistan was similar - between the months of September and October 2021, approximately 1,800 Afghans were deported from Pakistan.⁵⁹ Between January and May 2022, deportations from Iran and Pakistan continued to demonstrate a rising trend.⁶⁰ In Türkiye, according to Human Rights Watch, 44,768 Afghans were deported in the first eight months of 2022 - representing a 150 percent increase over the number of Afghans deported in the first eight months of 2021. This was despite Afghans repeatedly stressing their need to seek asylum and the dangers they would face should they return to a country controlled by the Taliban.⁶¹

Housing

Afghans arriving in Iran and Uzbekistan after August 2021 were housed in camps established in provinces bordering Afghanistan. In Iran, long-term shelter solutions were being explored by the government in concert with humanitarian actors.⁶² Afghans arriving in Türkiye and Pakistan, however, are left without support or assistance. In Türkiye, Afghans reported living in squalid conditions in remote municipalities or in safe houses hidden by smugglers, with few belongings, in the absence of access to civil society organisations who can support families to meet basic needs of food or shelter.⁶³ In Pakistan, in the absence of housing support, Afghans have had to bear the costs of housing themselves in guesthouses, hotels, or apartment buildings and rely on informal networks to meet basic needs on an everyday basis.⁶⁴

Education

In Iran, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, where Afghans are recognised as refugees, a lack of documentation creates barriers to the younger generation accessing education. In 2015, the Iranian government announced that all Afghans, regardless of legal status, can receive education up to high school level. Access has been problematic, however. Blue cards, offered by the government to ensure Afghans can access education services, were initially easily accessible but are increasingly hard to secure, and are often only issued to those registered prior to 2021.⁶⁵

55 Siddique, A. (2022) ['Everyone Is Anxious': Pakistan's Mass Arrests Of Afghan Refugees Fuel Fear Of New Crackdown](#) Gandhara.

56 Macgregor, M. (2022) [Reports of Abuse of Afghan Refugees as Iran Continues Deportations](#) Info Migrants; Amnesty International (2022) [Afghanistan: "They don't treat us like humans": Unlawful Returns of Afghans from Turkey and Iran](#)

57 Human Rights Watch (2022) ["Their Faces Were Covered" - Greece's Use of Migrants as Police Auxiliaries in Pushbacks](#)

58 UNHCR (2021) [UNHCR Issues a Non-Return Advisory for Afghanistan](#)

59 Ratwatte, I. (2021) [Afghans Struggle to Seek Safety as Borders Remain Shut to Most](#) UNHCR.

60 UNHCR (2021) [External Update Afghanistan Situation No. 17](#)

61 Human Rights Watch (2022) ["No One Asked Me Why I Left Afghanistan"](#); Dawi, A. (2022) [Türkiye Deports Thousands to Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan](#) VOA News.

62 Iran International (2021) [Iran Sets Up Camps Along Afghan Border to Receive Refugees](#); Eurasianet (2021) [Uzbekistan Bracing for Possible Afghan Refugee Crisis](#)

63 Murdock, H. (2021) [Families Fleeing Afghanistan Struggle to Survive in Turkey](#) VOA News.

64 Gul, A. (2022) [Pakistan Rules Out Refugee Status for Afghan Asylum-Seekers](#) VOA News; Joles, B. (2021) [Afghan Refugees Get Cold Welcome in Pakistan](#) Foreign Policy.

65 KII: Refugee Rights Activist, Iran, [remote], June 2022.

Livelihoods

A lack of livelihood options remains a significant challenge for Afghans crossing borders to neighbouring countries, and one that has increased post August 2021.

In Iran, economic conditions exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic have curtailed livelihood options available to both Afghans and Iranians. Facing a lack of labour market opportunities and a restricted right to employment, Afghans also contend with a 50 percent increase in the price of basic staples like bread and rice. This has eroded the purchasing power of Afghan households and further restricted their ability to afford basic goods and services, including food and rent in Iran.⁶⁶ Furthermore, in Iran and Pakistan expectations around the role of women in the private and public sphere leave female headed Afghan households particularly vulnerable economically as Afghan women struggle to find work.

In Tajikistan, asylum seekers are entitled to access employment under Tajik law, even though livelihood opportunities are limited. However, Afghans in the country remain stuck in bureaucratic stasis, as asylum registration processes move forward at a slow pace, leaving many unable to access any legal entitlements.⁶⁷

In Türkiye, Afghans are quickly absorbed into informal economies, regardless of their legal status, collecting trash, working in the construction sector, or in the textile industry. Even though this allows Afghans an entry into the job market, conditions include 10-hour shifts, daily wages of less than USD 10, and no access to social security and health care.⁶⁸

66 Motamedi, M. (2022) [What Does the Future Hold for Afghan Refugees in Iran?](#) Al Jazeera.

67 UNHCR (2021) [Afghanistan Regional Response Plan](#)

68 Gall, C. (2021) [Afghans Fleeing Homes are Filling the Lowliest Jobs in Istanbul](#) The New York Times; Sanderson, S. (2021) [Afghan Migrants in Turkey Left to Digging through Trash to Make Money](#) Info Migrants.

The Changing Dynamics of Afghan Migration Post-August 2021

Ever since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Afghan refugees and other migrants have migrated regionally and onward towards Europe.⁶⁹ However, the August 2021 reclamation of government control by the Taliban significantly shifted the context in which this migration is happening, the demographics and volume of migrants, and the protection space available to refugees.

Between 2001-2021, many Afghans migrated internally as seasonal agricultural workers, or abroad as laborers. This migration was predominantly driven by economic instability and insecurity arising out of the longstanding war in Afghanistan. Following the Taliban takeover in 2021, the number of Afghans forced to flee rose due to several factors, including:

- The targeting of specific groups and minorities for arbitrary detention, extra judicial killings, and mass arrests;
- The closing of regular pathways as changes in processes associated with the issuance of passports and visas (including the halting of these processes) were implemented by the Taliban administration;
- The targeting of people who had engagement with Western military forces and governments, working social issues, or appearing to support issues pertaining to human rights;
- The increase in restrictions imposed on Afghan women and girls in the public sphere, the labour market, and in education;
- The deterioration of existing political and economic systems that facilitated the functioning of the country - resulting in job losses, increased levels of poverty, food insecurity, and destitution.

Protection risks that Afghans on the move are exposed to are similarly considerable and long standing, however amplified after August 2021. Afghans suffered arrests, arbitrary detention, deportation, and pushbacks in Iran, Pakistan, Türkiye, and Greece prior to August 2021.⁷⁰ Similarly, living conditions for Afghan refugees and migrants in neighbouring countries were already poor prior to August 2021.⁷¹ However, since August 2021, many Afghans experience aggravated protection risks. Since August 2021:

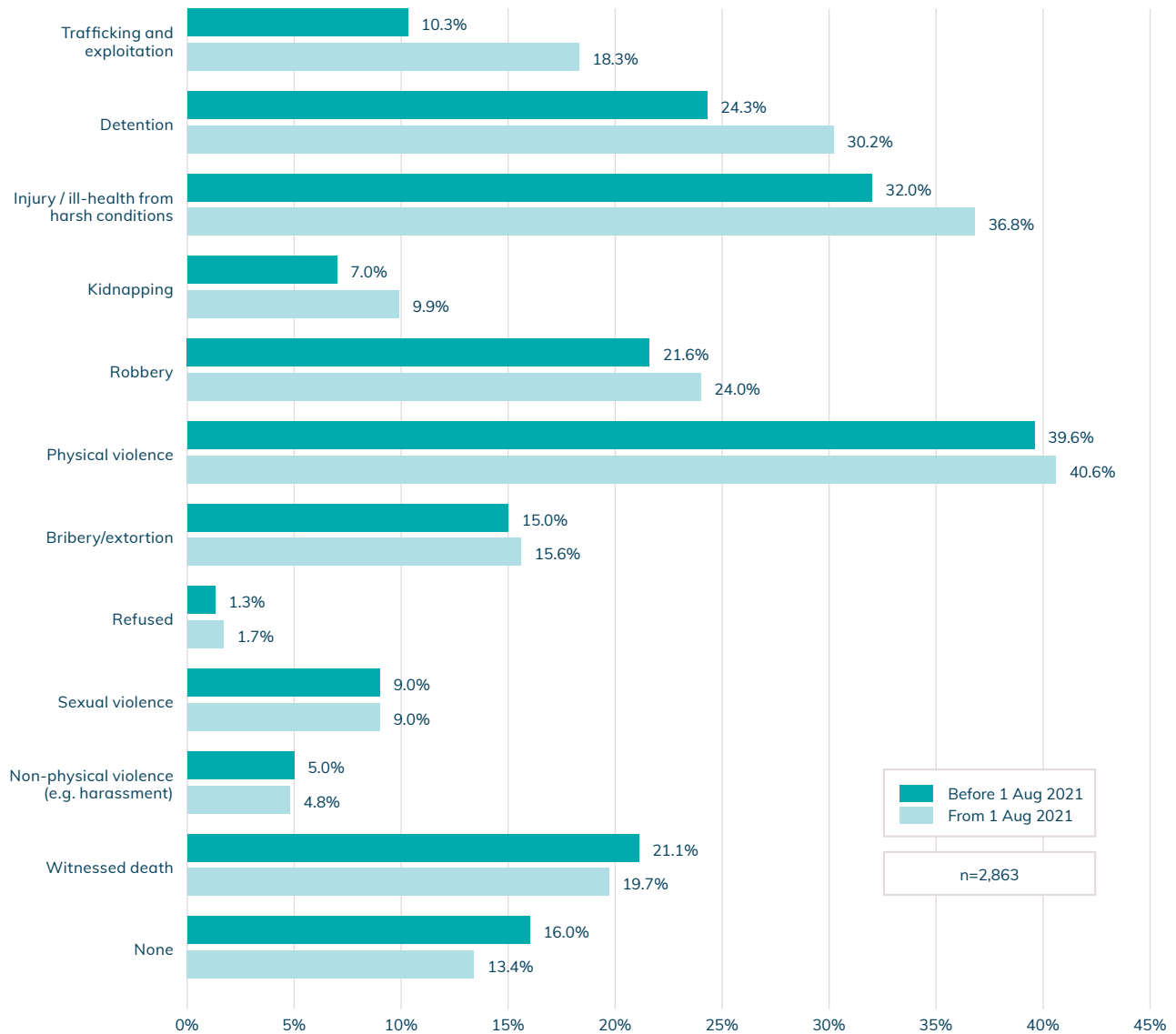
- Afghans have been forced to pay higher fees to be smuggled across borders, including higher bribes and visa fees;
- Afghans are undertaking more dangerous migration routes as neighbouring countries close borders, and scale up deportations and pushbacks at border points to decrease arrivals;
- According to 4Mi data, number of Afghan respondents exposed to trafficking and exploitation, detention, injury and ill-health, kidnapping and robbery en route to Türkiye has increased as compared to before August 2021.
- Afghans must endure inhumane living conditions and sub-par wages when successful in crossing borders and settling in host countries.

69 Amnesty International (2019) [Afghanistan's Refugees: Forty Years of Dispossession](#)

70 AHRDO (2019) [Deportation to Afghanistan: A Challenge to State Legitimacy and Stability?](#); Human Rights Watch (2018) [Greece: Violent Pushbacks at Turkey Border](#)

71 Human Rights Watch (2013) [Unwelcome Guests Iran's Violation of Afghan Refugee and Migrant Rights](#); The Economist (2016) [Thousands of Afghan Migrants Have Hit a Dead End in Türkiye](#)

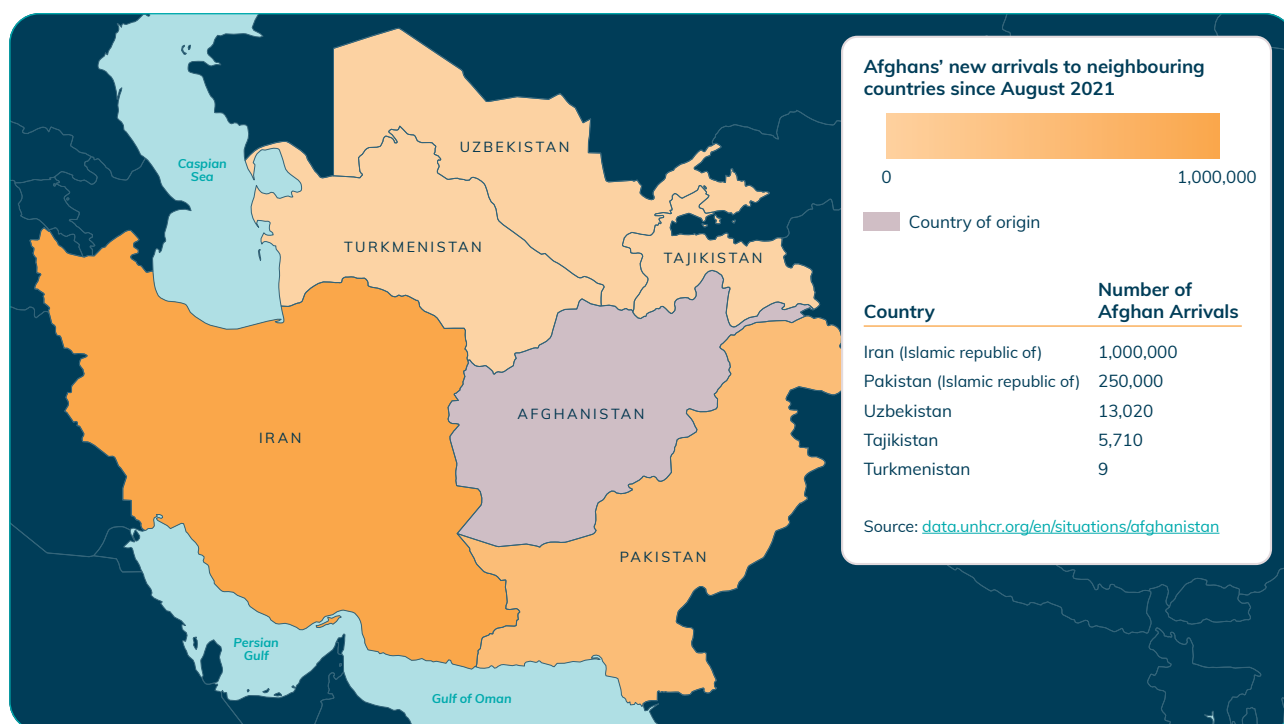
Figure 1. Types of incidents experienced by Afghans en route to Türkiye before and after August 2021



2. Crossing-Borders: Viable Means to Immediate Protection?

Responses to the crisis in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover were primarily guided by UNHCR's Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRP) for Afghanistan. The 2021 plan listed the cooperation of 11 agencies; Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the Relief International, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Population Fund (UNFP), World Food Program (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), working in close partnership with Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.⁷² The sections that follow examine options for immediate protection that Afghans have access to, should they arrive in any of the RRP countries, followed by an overview of shifts in protection responses that came about post August 2021.

Figure 2. Afghan new arrivals to Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan since August 2021



Iran

As of 2022, Iran hosted about 4 million Afghans. This number includes 780,000 Amayesh card holders, almost 600,000 Afghans holding Afghan passports with temporary residency, and some 2.1 million undocumented Afghans.⁷³ In the period leading up to the Taliban takeover, a large number of Afghans attempted to enter Iran irregularly, with numbers reaching up to 5,000 per day in July 2021.⁷⁴ Following the takeover, between October 2021 and January 2022, more than a million Afghans travelled to Iran, primarily through the Zabol route across the Nimruz province's border with Iran.⁷⁵ A majority of the new Afghan arrivals were registered as coming from the eastern border provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan, South Khorasan, and Khorasan Razavi.⁷⁶

⁷² UNHCR (2021) [Afghanistan Regional Response Plan](#)

⁷³ UNHCR (2021) [Afghanistan Regional Response Plan](#)

⁷⁴ Mohammadi, H. Nguyen, H. & Vallentine, J. (2021) [The Impact of the Afghanistan Crisis on Migration: Increasingly Securitised Borders Will Only Make Migration Riskier and More Dangerous](#) Mixed Migration Centre.

⁷⁵ Mixed Migration Centre (2021) [Afghans en route to Turkey: Routes, Protection Risks, and Access to Assistance](#)

⁷⁶ UNHCR (2021) [Afghanistan Regional Response Plan](#)

As most countries withdrew their diplomatic missions from Kabul, some Afghans sought to cross into Iran to access the consular services of prospective host countries like the United Kingdom and Germany, to apply for protection outside of the region.⁷⁷ However, those who continue to stay in Iran are faced with increased patrols by Iranian authorities which aim to identify, arrest, and deport undocumented Afghans.⁷⁸ According to estimates provided by the Iranian Ministry of Interior in April 2022, there were approximately 2.2 million Afghans in Iran who received a headcount laissez-passer (described below) valid until October 2022. The validity of the headcount laissez-passer is extended periodically by Iran.⁷⁹

Iran is a signatory to the 1951 Convention and recognises Afghans in Iran needing international protection as refugees. Afghans residing in Iran fall within three different legal categories that ultimately decide the types of protection assistance they can access. The distinctions are elaborated below.

Figure 3. Three types of identity documents Afghans have access to in Iran



Amayesh Card Holders

The 'Amayesh Card' is a temporary residence card that serves as a refugee identification document, allowing the cardholder to stay in the country and access certain benefits. The benefits include access to education, health services, health insurance, and employment within predefined fields if a work permit is obtained. According to UNHCR, Afghans who have recently arrived in Iran do not receive the Amayesh Card. They were issued only to Afghans who arrived prior to 2002. Amayesh card holders must renew their cards annually, in line with requirements which are subject to change. The latest renewal process, held in September 2021, was the 16th round of re-registration since the programme began in 2003. UNHCR can advocate for only a "handful" of Afghans to receive the Amayesh cards each year.⁸⁰ According to the Afghan Embassy in Iran, less than 50 percent of Afghans living in Iran currently hold the Amayesh Card.⁸¹

The actual benefit of the Amayesh Card for Afghan refugees in Iran is contested. Not only are Amayesh cardholders restricted to conditional work permits limited to 87 different types of employment such as construction and agriculture which are often seasonal and particularly vulnerable to economic sanctions applied to Iran. Afghan refugees also face difficulties navigating the complex and costly renewal procedures, and registration centres are often located in difficult to access locations.⁸²

Passport and Visa Holders

Afghans who enter Iran with a valid passport and a pre-issued visa find it easier to access higher education and travel domestically as compared to those holding Amayesh cards. They also have greater access to job opportunities and may obtain a driving license in Iran.⁸³ However, procedures around renewing a visa and passport are expensive, and

77 KII: Lawyer, US, [remote], June 2022.

78 KII: Governance, Iran, [remote], June 2022.

79 UNHCR (2022) [Afghanistan Situation Response in Iran - As of 31 August 2022](#)

80 UNHCR (2021) [Afghan Population Movement Snapshot June 2021](#)

81 KII: Governance, Iran, [remote], June 2022.

82 ACAPS (2022) [Afghan Refugees - Iran](#)

83 UNHCR Iran (2022) [Are you a person that UNHCR can support?](#)

one might risk losing one's status as a visa holder in the process. Once the passport and/or visa expires, Afghans must travel back to Afghanistan to reapply, which carries significant risk for vulnerable groups, particularly Hazaras and those unable to demonstrate allegiance to the Taliban authorities. Afghans who fall under this category are presented with two choices once their documents expire: either return to Afghanistan to renew documents or overstay their visa in Iran and become undocumented.⁸⁴

Afghans without Documentation

In the period immediately following the Taliban takeover, the Government of Iran offered Afghans without documentation the option of registering for temporary legal residency for a small fee. In April 2022, Iran undertook a headcount exercise of Afghans without documentation (those holding Amayesh cards were excluded). All Afghans registered in the headcount received laissez-passers, allowing them to be present in Iran and be protected against forced returns to Afghanistan until Oct 2022.⁸⁵ The validity of the headcount laissez-passers was extended by three months in October 2022, to 20 January 2023.⁸⁶ However, Afghans have to pay a fee of USD 7 – 8 (IRR 270,000 – 310,000) per individual to participate in the headcount exercise.⁸⁷

Since 2015, children of Afghans who lack adequate documentation receive an educational support slip, also known as a 'blue card', granting them access to primary and secondary schools. In terms of healthcare, Afghans without documentation are not eligible for health insurance in Iran. However, they can access primary healthcare free of charge. Hospital care is only available upon paying a fee, which is at a higher rate than for nationals.⁸⁸ However, beyond this and the support offered by UNHCR and local NGOs, Afghans falling under this category are particularly vulnerable as this group is also ineligible for Temporary Work Permits, limiting livelihood opportunities.

Pakistan

Pakistan has hosted large Afghan refugee populations for over four decades, since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. According to UNHCR, there were approximately 1.3 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan as of June 2022 – nearly 62 percent of the total Afghan refugee population in the immediate region. Like Iran, since August 2021 Pakistan remains an option for many Afghans seeking to access foreign consular services to qualify for visas further afield.

Of the several crossings into Pakistan from Afghanistan, the Chaman crossing is the busiest, and has seen greater numbers post-Taliban takeover. In August 2021, 13,000 Afghans used the Chaman border crossing, approximately twice the traffic the border crossing had witnessed up until that point.⁸⁹ Afghan Tazkira holders from the Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces could apply for a visa on arrival at the Chaman border crossing, in case of medical emergencies.⁹⁰ The Raja/Mashkil route is notable for Afghans intending to travel further west through Pakistan to Iran and Türkiye. However, several other crossing points in Pakistan remain intermittently restricted for Afghans.⁹¹ As of April 2022, Afghans with valid visas and passports could enter Pakistan only at the Torkham border crossing – a crossing heavily guarded by the Taliban and Pakistan's military personnel.

Unlike Iran, Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention. In the absence of specific legislation for those seeking protection, UNHCR conducts refugee status determination on behalf of the Government of Pakistan in accordance with a 1993 Cooperation Agreement between the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR. The Government of Pakistan generally accepts UNHCR decisions to grant refugee status and allows asylum seekers undergoing the procedure and subsequently recognised refugees to remain in Pakistan until a durable solution is identified. In July 2021, the Government of Pakistan declared it was unwilling to accept more Afghan refugees.⁹² However, as the crisis unfolded in August 2021, the Government of Pakistan eased border restrictions and started e-visa application processes for Afghans.⁹³

84 KII: INGO, UK and Hazara community member, [remote], June 2022.

85 UNHCR Iran [Headcount Exercise](#) accessed on 25 December 2022.

86 UNHCR Iran (2022) [Headcount LPs Extended for an Additional 3 Months](#)

87 UNHCR Iran (2022) [Frequently Asked Questions on Headcount Exercise](#)

88 UNHCR Iran (2021) [Announcement on Services Available for the Undocumented](#)

89 Akhtar, S. (2021) [Thousands of Afghans Enter Pakistan via Chaman Border Crossing](#) Al Jazeera.

90 KII: Consultant, Pakistan, [remote], June 2022.

91 Loft, P. (2021) [Research Briefing Afghanistan: Refugees and Displaced People in 2021](#) House of Commons, UK Parliament.

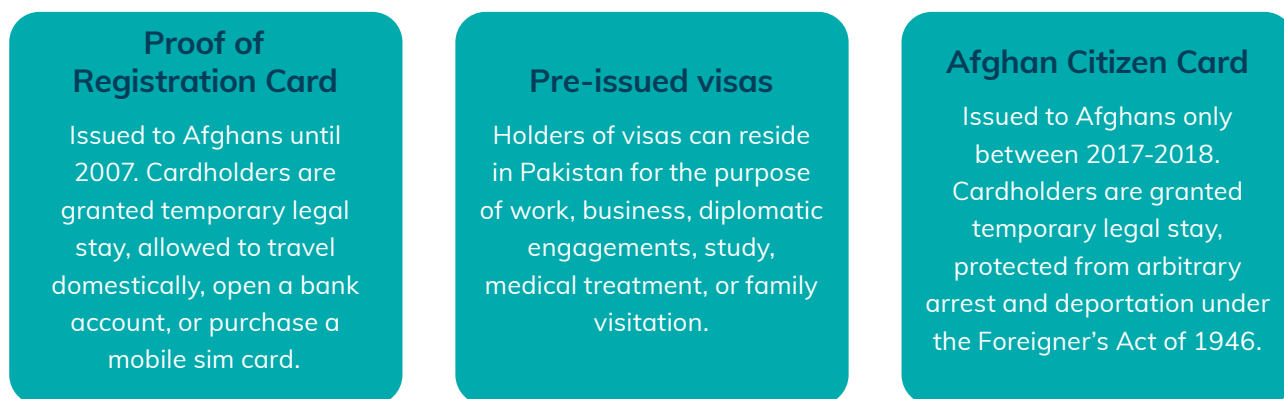
92 Ali, F. (2021) [Pakistan Refuses to Host Additional Afghan Refugees](#) VOA News.

93 Hashim, A. (2021) [Pakistan Eases Travel Restrictions, Announces Aid for Afghanistan](#) Al Jazeera.

The considerably history and shifting policy responses have led to a circumstance in which Afghans residing in Pakistan currently fall under four categories:

- Proof of Registration card holders
- Afghan Citizen card holders
- Passport and visa holders
- undocumented people.

Figure 4. Three types of identity documents Afghans have access to in Pakistan



Proof of Registration Card Holders

Afghans who arrived in Pakistan prior to 2007 were eligible for Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, granting them temporary legal stay and freedom of movement within Pakistan. PoR registration is no longer open to newly arrived Afghans or those who were not registered in 2007, with an exception for new-born children of PoR cardholders.⁹⁴ As of Jan 2022, there were 1.4 million PoR cardholders in Pakistan.⁹⁵ The most recent PoR renewal exercise was conducted in 2021, during which existing PoR cardholders and their children under the age of five were issued PoR cards that are valid until June 2023.

PoR cardholders have better access to services and protection rights than other Afghans in the country, including Afghan Citizen Card holders and Afghans without documentation. Opening a bank account or acquiring a mobile phone SIM card are only permitted for PoR cardholders, for example.⁹⁶

Afghan Citizen Card

In 2017 and 2018, the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR implemented an alternate registration process for Afghans in Pakistan. Afghans without documentation (PoR cardholders are considered documented) became eligible to register for an Afghan Citizen Card (ACC). As of January 2022, there were 840,000 ACC holders in Pakistan.⁹⁷ The legal status of ACC holders is unclear, as they fall under the mandate of the Government of Pakistan, not UNHCR. ACC holders are allowed to reside temporarily in Pakistan until their stay is regularised through the acquisition of an Afghan passport and a valid Pakistani visa.⁹⁸ While ACC holders are protected from arbitrary arrest and deportation under the Foreigner's Act of 1946, they are not granted refugee status in Pakistan. Like the PoR card, ACC registration is no longer open for newly arrived Afghans or to those who missed the 2017-2018 registration window.

Visa Holders

Afghans may also reside in Pakistan on valid visas for the purposes of work, business, diplomatic engagements, study, medical treatment, or family visitation. Pakistan has a special visa policy for Afghans, and a one-time dispensation

94 Zetter, R. (2018) [Protection for Forcibly Displaced Afghan Population in Pakistan and Iran](#) DRC.

95 UNHCR (2022) [Pakistan Factsheet January 2022](#)

96 Zeeshan, A. (2019) [PM Khan Allows Registered Afghan Refugees to Open Bank Accounts in Pakistan](#) Sharp-Pakistan; Asian Displacement Solutions Platform (2018) [On the Margins: Afghans in Pakistan](#)

97 UNHCR (2022) [Pakistan Factsheet January 2022](#)

98 EUAA (2022) Op. Cit.

may be granted to Afghan PoR cardholders. If they voluntarily surrender their PoR cards, they may be granted an appropriate visa on their valid passport within Pakistan. However, this depends on several factors, including a recommendation of the Ministry of States and Frontier Regions, fulfilment of all required conditions in specific visa categories that include for business, medical tourism, study and intermarriages. In addition, Afghan businessmen who have invested or intend to invest not less than USD 222,200 (PKR 50 million) in Pakistan would be granted a five-year business visa, and a two to three year business visa for those who have already invested or intend to invest between USD 88,800 – 222,200 (PKR 20-50 million) in Pakistan.⁹⁹

Afghans without Documentation

As of January 2022, there were an estimated 775,000 Afghans living without documentation in Pakistan.¹⁰⁰ Afghans without documentation are considered “illegal migrants” in Pakistan and are highly vulnerable to arrest and detention. Afghans without documentation face significant obstacles in Pakistan, including basic survival, maintaining any financial security, accessing assistance, and gaining employment.¹⁰¹ In November 2022, the Government of Pakistan further criminalised undocumented populations - declaring that those without documentation (including Afghans) would have until the end of 2022 to renew their documents, or else face up to three years in prison.¹⁰²

Tajikistan

Tajikistan is a signatory to the 1951 Convention. Compared to Iran and Pakistan however, the refugee population is relatively small, estimated to be 13,770 as of 2021.¹⁰³ The number of asylum seekers arriving from Afghanistan to Tajikistan by the end of 2021 increased more than seven times in comparison to the previous year, while the refugee population almost doubled.¹⁰⁴ This number has dropped since, following returns and the resettlement of some refugees. As of June 2022, there were 6,883 Afghan refugees in Tajikistan.¹⁰⁵

Issues pertaining to refugees in Tajikistan, including refugee status determination, are governed through the Law on Refugees. Refugees are granted basic rights including protection, right to work, access to healthcare, and education in Tajikistan.¹⁰⁶ However, in 2021, UNHCR reported that protection capacities in the country were shrinking, as authorities in charge of the asylum processes began to refuse to register Afghan refugees or issue documentation. This has put Afghans seeking asylum in Tajikistan in legal limbo.¹⁰⁷

Notwithstanding the established Tajik legal framework, issues related to immigration - including seeking asylum - are increasingly securitised and a ‘closed border’ policy is politically preferred. In July 2021, Tajik authorities suspended the issuance of residence permits - a prerequisite to claiming asylum in the country - to newly arrived Afghans. The ability of Afghans to settle in Tajikistan was further curtailed from mid-August 2021 as Tajik consular missions in Afghanistan received informal guidance from the Government of Tajikistan to stop issuing visas for Afghan citizens. Additionally, the Commission that works on refugee status determination suspended its work considering asylum applications for refugee status. As such, all Afghans who did not register their residence locally before these developments occurred, do not have access to asylum procedures and are subject to fines, possible arrest, and forced return. In September 2021, the Tajik Minister of the Interior stated that Tajikistan did not have the infrastructure to host the number of Afghan refugees it had pledged to host: 100,000.¹⁰⁸

99 Directorate General of Immigration & Passports Ministry of Interior, Government of Pakistan, [Visa Policy for Afghanistan](#), accessed 19 December 2022.

100 EUAA (2022) [Pakistan – Situation of Afghan Refugees](#)

101 ADSP (2018). Op. Cit.

102 Boudjikianian, R. (2022) [Pakistan Warns Paperless Migrants About Jail Time, Alarming Afghans Waiting to Come to Canada](#) CBC News.

103 This includes 10,724 refugees and 3,046 asylum seekers. See UNHCR (2021) [Refugee Data Finder: Tajikistan](#)

104 There were 5,573 refugees and 408 asylum seekers from Afghanistan in Tajikistan in 2020. See UNHCR (2021) [Refugee Data Finder: Tajikistan](#)

105 UNHCR [Operational Data Portal](#), accessed 5 December 2022.

106 Refworld (2014) [Tajikistan: Law No. 1124 of 2014 on Refugees](#)

107 UNHCR (2021) [Afghanistan Regional Response Plan](#)

108 RFE/RL. (2021) [Interior Minister Says Tajikistan Unable to Host Many Afghan Refugees](#) Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is the only country in Central Asia that has not ratified the 1951 Convention and does not have a national legal framework for asylum seekers and refugees. Prior to August 2021, Afghan passport holders could enter Uzbekistan on a tourist visa with relative ease. In 2021, 13,020 newly arrived Afghans entered Uzbekistan on short-term visas.¹⁰⁹

The country's refugee entry policies became increasingly restrictive in the months leading up to August 2021, when the Government of Uzbekistan decided to decline visa requests by Afghans and warned that "illegal crossings" would be "harshly suppressed".¹¹⁰ Following the fall of the former Afghan government, Uzbekistan closed its border with Afghanistan and announced that no Afghans would be permitted entry unless they possessed valid passports and visas for Uzbekistan.¹¹¹ Currently, access has become increasingly limited. Only holders of visas under the categories of education and business, or diplomatic visits are permitted to enter Uzbekistan from Afghanistan. As of July 2022, around 2,000 Afghans in Uzbekistan still held valid visas, while the large majority are now considered undocumented and at risk of deportation.

A few initiatives do indicate that there is a glimmer of hope for Afghans in Uzbekistan. In April 2022, the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan along with the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) launched an initiative to expand existing education opportunities for Afghans, with particular focus on women and youth. Under this initiative, enhanced vocational education and training programmes as well as short-term courses will be provided to 345 Afghan nationals, to study a range of disciplines, including humanitarianism, pedagogy, and engineering.¹¹²

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has ratified the 1951 Convention. In August 2005, following a registration exercise, the Government of Turkmenistan granted residence permits to 709 Afghan prima facie refugees.¹¹³ However, in response to the crisis in Afghanistan in 2021, the country has contributed minimally to sharing the responsibility of hosting refugees. As of June 2022, UNHCR recorded the presence of only nine Afghan refugees in the country. By March 2022, Turkmenistan became the first country in the world to accept a Taliban-appointed Afghan ambassador.¹¹⁴ Inaction on the part of Turkmenistan has been attributed to Turkmenistan accepting a Taliban controlled government in Afghanistan.

Shifts in Protection Responses in RRP Countries post-August 2021

Mobility options for Afghans within Central Asia were limited prior to August 2021. Even though Iran, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are signatories to the 1951 Convention, Afghan refugees and asylum seekers do not receive adequate protection assistance in neighbouring countries. Following the Taliban takeover in 2021, a markable shift in response of RRP countries was seen in the following areas:

- Afghans in Iran, barring those who arrived prior to 2002 or those who were registered during 2017-2018, have continued to live without documentation. However, in April 2022, Iran began registering incoming Afghans, granting them temporary legal residence.
- In October 2021, Pakistan introduced an e-visa facility for Afghans to reduce waiting time, waived visa fees, allowed trade corridors between the two countries to operate round the clock, and pedestrian border crossing points were left operational for longer hours.
- Uzbekistan introduced a vocational education training program, taking a step towards durable solutions for Afghans affected by the crisis.

109 UNHCR Asia and the Pacific (2021) [Country Profile: Uzbekistan](#)

110 Marnin, J. (2021) [Uzbekistan Declining Afghan Visa Requests, Warns Illegal Crossings 'Harshly Suppressed'](#) Newsweek.

111 Eurasianet (2021) [Uzbekistan: Afghans Fleeing Taliban Get Cold Shoulder From Tashkent](#); Ratwatte, I. (2021) [Afghans Struggle to Seek Safety as Borders Remain Shut to Most](#) UNHCR.

112 UNDP (2022) [New European Union and UNDP Initiative to Support Education of Afghan Citizens in Uzbekistan](#)

113 UNHCR (2005) [Turkmenistan: First Ever Registration of All Refugees Completed](#)

114 Majumdar, A. (2022) [Turkmenistan Becomes 1st Central Asian Nation To Accept Taliban-appointed Afghan Envoy](#) Republic World.

However, post-August 2021 positive protection responses from RRP countries have been outweighed by instances where countries have closed off borders with Afghanistan or engaged in pushbacks and deportations of Afghans.

- In August 2022, Iran deported 50,000 Afghan refugees to Afghanistan, disregarding protection risks awaiting deportees in Afghanistan.¹¹⁵
- In November 2022, Pakistan targeted migrants without documentation, in the process arresting thousands of Afghans and convicting women and children. Around 1,500 Afghans were arrested, among whom included 139 Afghan women and 165 children who were detained in a high-security prison for entering Pakistan "illegally" as per the Foreigner Act 1946.¹¹⁶
- Post-August 2021, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan further withdrew limited protection assistance they provided Afghans with by declining visa requests, refusing to register Afghan refugees or suspending issuing residence permits.

115 Danish, I. (2022) [Officials: Over 50,000 Afghans Deported from Iran in Past Month](#) Tolo News.

116 Siddique, A. (2022) ['Everyone Is Anxious': Pakistan's Mass Arrests Of Afghan Refugees Fuel Fear Of New Crackdown](#) RFE/RL; Gupta, M. (2022) [Major Crackdown on Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: 'Illegal' Women, Children Behind Bars in Karachi](#) News 18.

3. Türkiye and beyond the Aegean Sea

Türkiye

Having arrived in Iran, some Afghans continue towards Türkiye. Türkiye takes a hard-line approach to refugees and asylum seekers, however, including Afghans. Türkiye is a signatory to the 1951 Convention but has not signed its 1967 Protocol, effectively rendering its application in the current context impossible. Despite this limitation, it tolerates refugees, providing some protection and temporary asylum, pending UNHCR's provision of durable solutions elsewhere.

Türkiye currently hosts 3.7 million Syrians and approximately 330,000 refugees from other countries. According to UNHCR, as of 2022 there were 8,384 Afghan refugees and 135,445 Afghan asylum seekers in Türkiye.¹¹⁷ In 2017, the UNHCR ended its registration of asylum seekers in Türkiye and handed the responsibility to the Turkish authorities.¹¹⁸ Since the handover, there has been a drop in the number of asylum seekers who have been granted international protection in Türkiye.¹¹⁹ Afghan refugees and migrants are required to register asylum claims at municipalities where they first arrived or in satellite cities. In February 2022, Türkiye undertook new measures on migration and harmonisation, prohibiting the registration of foreigners in neighbourhoods where the foreigner population exceeded 25 percent of the total population. 781 neighbourhoods in Türkiye were thus closed for registration of asylum claims for Afghans.¹²⁰

Türkiye is not a safe country for Afghan refugees and migrants, and its securitisation of borders with Iran has resulted in Afghans being exposed to protection risks, including detention and forced return.¹²¹ 4Mi data collected between August 2021 and October 2022 across Türkiye shows that Afghans are most exposed to a risk of detention in Van and Urmia at Türkiye's border with Iran.¹²² The Van province has become particularly restrictive for Afghan refugees as an increased police presence has been observed in the province. In July 2021, Türkiye announced plans to construct a 295-kilometer wall in Van along the country's border with Iran.¹²³ Later in October 2021, the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management for Van province halted registration of all new asylum applications.¹²⁴

Afghans have the possibility of obtaining legal residence in Türkiye through making investments or through property ownership. However, since August 2021, Türkiye increased investment requirements for a regular pathway to migration from USD 250,000 to USD 400,000, and property ownership from USD 30-40,000 to USD 70,000.

117 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: Türkiye](#), accessed 24 December 2022.

118 Info Migrants (2017) [UNHCR Ends Asylum Seeker Registration in Türkiye](#)

119 MacGregor, M. (2022) [Afghan Migrants Beaten and Illegally Expelled by Turkish Authorities](#) Info Migrants.

120 Aslan, D. (2022) [Türkiye Restricts Temporary, International Protection Registry in 16 Provinces](#) Daily Sabah.

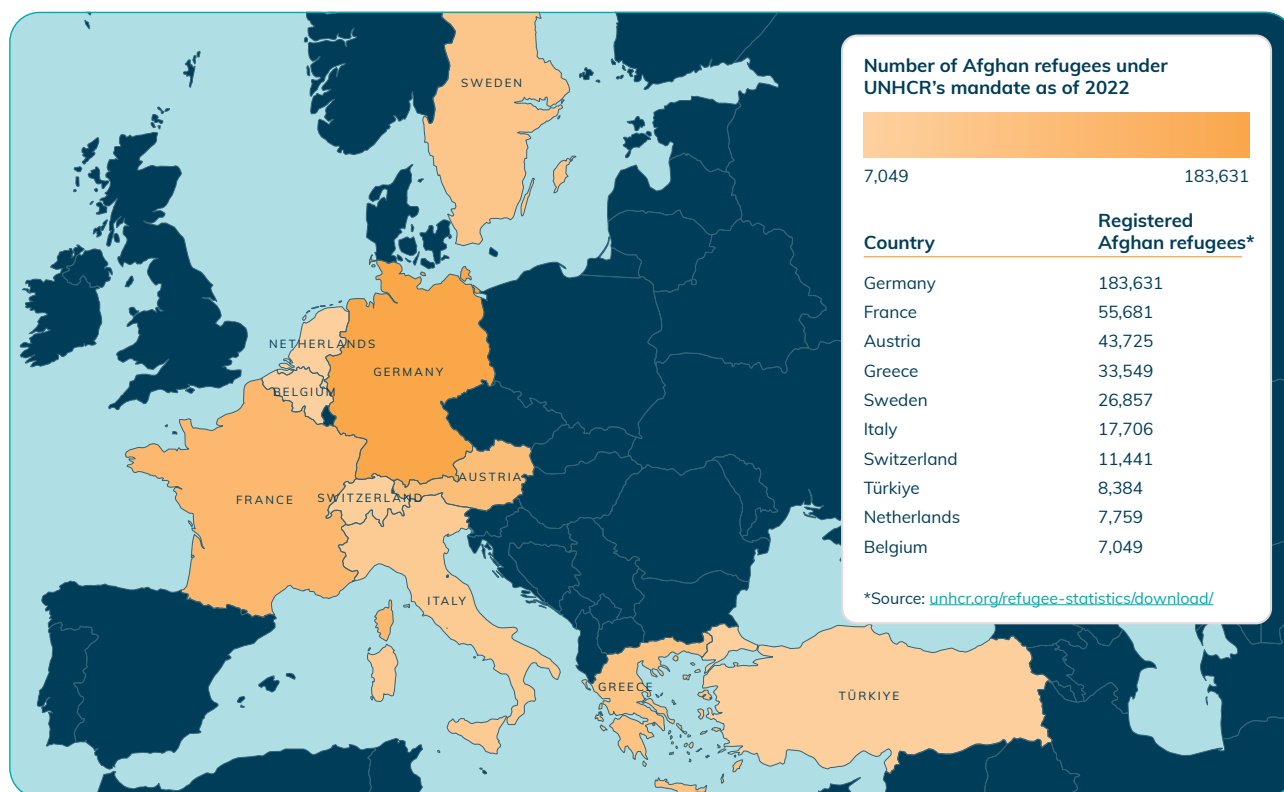
121 Mixed Migration Centre (2022). [Security Costs: How the EU's Exclusionary Migration Policies Place People on the Move Toward Italy and Greece at Greater Risk – A Quantitative Analysis](#)

122 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [4Mi Snapshot: Detention as a Protection Risk en route to Türkiye](#)

123 Daily Sabah (2021) [Türkiye's Eastern Iran Border to be Safer with Modular Wall System](#)

124 Augustova, K. (2021) [The Border Landscape in Eastern Türkiye After the Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan](#) IPC-Mercator Analysis; Yeung, P. (2021) [Afghan Refugees Accuse Türkiye of Violent Illegal Pushbacks](#) The Guardian.

Figure 5. Number of Afghan refugees under UNHCR’s mandate in Türkiye and Europe as of 2022



Afghans who arrive in Türkiye might move onwards along the ‘Western Balkan Route’ to Europe, with transit corridors through Bulgaria, northern Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, and Montenegro, via Bosnia and Herzegovina, or along the ‘Eastern Mediterranean Route’ through Greece. Between January and October 2022, the UNHCR estimated 31,513 persons intended to seek asylum in the Western Balkans. Afghans constituted 41 percent of the total number of persons intending to seek asylum on the Western Balkan route.¹²⁵ On the Eastern Mediterranean Route, the total number of sea arrivals in Greece was 11,775. Afghans constituted for 16.7 percent of the sea arrivals, the second most common nationality after Palestinians.¹²⁶

Following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, many Afghans arrived in Europe by irregular means or as a part of European Union (EU) Member States evacuation efforts for European and Afghan staff working in governmental or humanitarian organisations in Afghanistan. By October 2021, the EU had evacuated 22,000 Afghans and by December 2021, the EU pledged to resettle another 40,000 Afghan refugees.¹²⁷ The sections that follow provide an overview of what Afghans arriving in key EU Member States since August 2021 have received in terms of international protection and integration assistance.

Germany

As of 2022, there were 183,631 Afghan refugees and 41,300 Afghan asylum seekers in Germany, according to UNHCR.¹²⁸ Between August 2021 and June 2022, the Government of Germany evacuated 21,399 Afghan nationals on emergency visas.¹²⁹ However, prior to August 2021, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in Germany had decided to de-prioritise processing asylum applications from Afghanistan. The exception being cases where international protection could be granted according to the guidelines of the legal framework relevant for asylum procedures, or for cases where the political situation in Afghanistan was irrelevant to the decision-making process

125 UNHCR [Operational Data Portal: South Eastern Europe](#), accessed 7 February, 2023.

126 UNHCR [Operational Data Portal: Greece](#), accessed 24 December, 2022.

127 Euractiv (2021) [EU Member States Agree to Take in 40,000 Afghans](#)

128 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: Germany](#), accessed 24 December, 2022.

129 Hauswedell, C. (2022) [12,000 Afghans Still Waiting for Evacuation to Germany](#) Info Migrants.

on an application.¹³⁰ As a result, the number of pending applications by Afghan nationals seeking asylum in Germany significantly increased from 6,101 in 2020 to 27,846 at the end of 2021.

In 2022, Germany opened integration and language courses to Afghans whose asylum procedure was still pending, to facilitate faster labour market integration of incoming refugees and asylum seekers.¹³¹ Germany also introduced a new program to relocate Afghans most at risk. The program, set to continue until 2025, only includes Afghan citizens residing in Afghanistan at the time of application, people involved with women's and human rights, politics, justice, and other fields, as well as people at risk of persecution due to their religious or gender identity, and sexual orientation. As the Government of Germany has not had a presence in Afghanistan since August 2021, it will rely on civil society organisations present in Afghanistan to help determine which applicants meet the criteria of the new relocation program.¹³² The program faces implementation challenges, however. Afghans who meet the criteria will be unable to fly out of Afghanistan under the Taliban administration if they do not possess passports or belong to specific at-risk groups.¹³³

France

As of 2022, there were 55,681 Afghan refugees and 9,066 Afghan asylum seekers in France, according to UNHCR.¹³⁴ Since August 2021, the Government of France evacuated approximately 4,200 Afghan nationals.¹³⁵ The French Office for Immigration and Integration opened a single-desk contact point in Paris to enable Afghans evacuated by France to submit asylum claims. Although these claims were categorised under normal procedure, the applications were processed under fast-track systems. Meanwhile, all Afghan evacuees were entitled to a monthly allowance while their claim was assessed.

In November 2020, France had ended its policy of granting subsidiary protection to Afghans.¹³⁶ Though the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, France did not revisit this decision. Afghans who arrived by their own means in France therefore can only apply for refugee status - and not subsidiary forms of protection - under domestic law and French administrative process. This involves a long waiting period to secure the first appointment, during which time applicants are eligible for health insurance but are barred from working unless a decision on their application is not made in the first six months.¹³⁷

Austria

As of 2022, there were 43,725 Afghan refugees and 5,499 Afghan asylum seekers in Austria, according to UNHCR.¹³⁸ Austria's approach to Afghans has been hard-line. In 2015, Austria was to introduce a law whereby those under subsidiary protection (a majority of Afghans in the country) would have to wait for three years to apply for family reunification, and present an independent source of income, health insurance, and accommodation.¹³⁹ In August 2021, Austria refused to resettle Afghans escaping the crisis in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁰ Austria maintained its stance on deporting rejected Afghan asylum seekers to Afghanistan despite the Taliban takeover. Austria also proposed establishing deportation centres in countries neighbouring Afghanistan to deter Afghans who were fleeing from moving towards European countries.¹⁴¹

130 AIDA (2022) [Country Report: Germany](#) ECRE.

131 Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (2022) [Afghan Asylum Applicants to Gain Faster Access to Integration Courses](#)

132 Berry, A. (2022) [Germany to Take in 1,000 At-Risk Afghans Every Month](#) DW.

133 Noori, Z. and Noorzai, R. (2022) [Germany's New Program to Take in At-Risk Afghans Challenging](#) VOA News.

134 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: France](#), accessed 25 December 2022.

135 Gholshiri, G. (2022) [A Year after the Taliban Took Power, the Life of Afghan Refugees in France](#) Le Monde.

136 Info Migrants (2020) [Droit d'asile : la CNDA revoit à la baisse la protection des Afghans](#)

137 Le Gisti, [Information for Afghans Seeking Protection in France](#), updated on 15 October, 2021.

138 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: Austria](#), accessed 25 December, 2022.

139 Tran, M. (2015) [Austria Tightens Asylum Policy for Afghans](#) The Guardian.

140 Furlong, A. (2021) [Kurz: Austria Won't Take in Any More Afghan Refugees](#) Politico.

141 Euractiv (2021) [Austria Calls for 'Deportation Centres' to Host Afghans near Afghanistan](#)

Greece

As of 2022, there were 33,549 Afghan refugees and 3,407 Afghan asylum seekers in Greece, according to UNHCR.¹⁴² In 2021, the Government of Greece evacuated 819 Afghans.¹⁴³ However, in June 2022 Greece undertook 'securitisation' measures along its border with Türkiye. The construction of a 40-kilometer wall along the Turkish border has resulted in fewer Afghans arriving in Greece by land.¹⁴⁴

In 2021 and 2022, reports of the Greek police engaging in the pushback of migrants on the Evros river continued to emerge. Greek authorities have forcefully towed migrant ships out of Greek territory or engaged in violent pushback of migrants and asylum seekers with the help of Frontex.¹⁴⁵ In another instance, Greek authorities coerced asylum seekers belonging to other nationalities to engage in pushback operations against Afghans crossing the Evros river from Türkiye.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the system of applying for asylum in Greece has become increasingly expensive, with applicants - including children - expected to pay up to USD 100 for appeals.¹⁴⁷ Legal aid remains hard to find, and Afghan evacuees and refugees in Greece struggle with navigating the protection environment. As they do not have easy access to rent subsidies guaranteed under the HELIOS integration program,¹⁴⁸ they are unable to secure accommodation, face evictions, and are forced to rely on soup kitchens and solidarity networks to meet basic needs.¹⁴⁹

Sweden

As of 2022, there were 26,857 Afghan refugees and 1,904 Afghan asylum seekers in Sweden, according to UNHCR.¹⁵⁰ In August 2021, the Government of Sweden evacuated 1,100 people from Afghanistan, including 500 Swedish citizens.¹⁵¹ Sweden declared that all Afghan women and girls who apply for asylum would receive a three-year residence permit as of December 2022. In addition, unaccompanied Afghan minors who had previously been granted a residence permit under the Upper Secondary Act would not need to obtain a new passport when applying for an extension of the residence permit in case their passport ceases to be valid. Afghans who had received refusals on their asylum claims could file for a re-examination of the case.¹⁵² In Sweden, Afghan asylum seekers are able to avail themselves of accommodation, daily allowance, and emergency healthcare. Afghan asylum seekers can also apply for the AT-UND certificate which allows them to work while a decision on their asylum application is pending.¹⁵³

Italy

As of 2022, there were 17,706 Afghan refugees and 1,545 Afghan asylum seekers in Italy, according to UNHCR.¹⁵⁴ 6,809 Afghans also arrived in Italy by sea, via the Central Mediterranean Route.¹⁵⁵ Between August 2021 and August 2022, a total of 5,770 Afghans were granted international protection in Italy.¹⁵⁶ In November 2021, Italy announced the start of a 'humanitarian corridor' - a legal pathway for about 1,200 refugees from Afghanistan to seek asylum in Italy. Afghans accepted through the humanitarian corridor scheme were evacuated from Iran and Pakistan and offered accommodation and integration services on arrival in Italy provided by the Ministry of Interior in collaboration with affiliate religious and civil society organisations, UNHCR, and IOM.¹⁵⁷

142 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: Greece](#), accessed 24 December 2022.

143 AIDA (2021) [Country Report: Greece](#) ECRE.

144 Carassava, A. (2022) [Greece to Triple Length of Border Fence With Türkiye](#) VOA News.

145 Smith, H. (2021) [Greece Accused of 'Biggest Pushback in Years' of Stricken Refugee Ship](#) The Guardian; Fallon, K. (2022) [Revealed: EU Border Agency Involved in Hundreds of Refugee Pushbacks](#) The Guardian.

146 Fallon, K. (2022) [Revealed: Greek Police Coerce Asylum Seekers into Pushing Fellow Migrants Back to Türkiye](#) The Guardian.

147 KII: NGO practitioner, Greece, [remote], June 2022.

148 Project HELIOS was implemented by IOM Greece, to provide integration support to beneficiaries of international protection. This support includes integration courses, accommodation support, employability support, integration monitoring and sensitisation of local communities.

149 Fallon, K. (2022) ['Destitution is almost inevitable': Afghan Refugees in Greece Left Homeless by Failed System](#) The Guardian.

150 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: Sweden](#), accessed 25 December, 2022.

151 Government Offices of Sweden (2021) [Sweden's Engagement in Afghanistan](#)

152 Migrationsverket [Information Regarding the Situation in Afghanistan](#), last updated on 9 December, 2022.

153 Migrationsverket [Protection and Asylum in Sweden](#), accessed on 25 December, 2022.

154 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: Italy](#), accessed 24 December 2022.

155 UNHCR [Operational Data Portal: Italy](#), accessed 24 December 2022.

156 Info Migrants (2022) [Italy Releases New Figures on Refugees, Migrants](#)

157 Wallis, M. (2021) [First Afghans Arrive via Humanitarian Corridor in Italy Since August](#) Info Migrants; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (2022) [Farnesina and Interior Ministry Working on New Humanitarian Corridors for some 300 Afghan Citizens](#)

Switzerland

As of 2022, there were 11,441 Afghan refugees and 1,768 Afghan asylum seekers in Switzerland, according to UNHCR.¹⁵⁸ In August 2021, the Government of Switzerland evacuated 218 Afghans. Afghan evacuees were granted asylum under a pre-established resettlement quota.¹⁵⁹ For the year 2022 - 2023, Switzerland has decided on a quota of up to 1,600 for resettling refugees. Under this programme, Türkiye is designated as a priority country of 'first asylum'. In the case of resettlement from Türkiye, Afghan refugees will be considered as a priority by Switzerland. Afghans can also apply for a humanitarian visa for Switzerland, but only in Islamabad (Pakistan), New Delhi (India), Tehran (Iran), Istanbul (Türkiye) and Doha (Qatar).¹⁶⁰

The Netherlands

As of 2022, there were 7,759 Afghan refugees and 1,067 Afghan asylum seekers in the Netherlands, according to UNHCR.¹⁶¹ Since August 2021, the Government of Netherlands evacuated around 4,000 Afghans.¹⁶² On 26 August 2021, the Netherlands engaged a policy of temporarily suspending return of Afghans to Afghanistan. Decision making on asylum claims filed by Afghans was also suspended, in an acknowledgement of the volatile political situation in the country.

Afghan evacuees are provided accommodation by the Central Agency of Reception of Asylum Seekers, regardless of whether they possess a passport or not. Following this, their claims for asylum are processed by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service. Afghans arriving outside of the relocation program can apply for asylum at the reception centre in Ter Apel, and access language courses.¹⁶³ Afghan employees of the embassy of Netherlands in Kabul were offered integration, job matching and placement processes under the KabCare programme, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁶⁴

Belgium

As of 2022, there were 7,049 Afghan refugees and 5,302 Afghan asylum seekers in Belgium, according to UNHCR.¹⁶⁵ Between August to December 2021, the Government of Belgium evacuated 1,426 Afghans, following which the evacuation program ended.

Belgium has urged Afghans to apply for a Belgian visa at its embassy in Pakistan, as applications for asylum cannot be processed electronically.¹⁶⁶ In March 2022, Belgium cancelled its policy of granting subsidiary protection to Afghans following an assessment that the degree of violence in Afghanistan had decreased since the Taliban takeover.¹⁶⁷ Belgium has not reconsidered this policy change thus far. It has resulted in Belgium issuing rejections to 1,500 asylum seekers in April 2022.¹⁶⁸

158 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: Switzerland](#), accessed 25 December 2022.

159 Swissinfo (2021) [Switzerland Confirms Official End to Afghan Evacuations](#)

160 State Secretariate for Migration [Afghanistan Crisis: Key Information](#), last updated on 29 October 2021.

161 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: Netherlands](#), accessed 24 December 2022.

162 NL Times (2022) [Afghans "Arbitrarily" Selected for Evacuation to NL: 480 Still Waiting 1 Year Later](#)

163 Government of the Netherlands [Frequently Asked Questions About Reception in the Netherlands Following Evacuation from Afghanistan](#) accessed 24 December, 2022; ANN (2022) [In the Netherlands, Afghan Refugees Receive Language Lessons and Care](#)

164 SPARK (2022) [Supporting Afghan Refugees into Employment in The Netherlands](#); SPARK (2022) [The Netherlands: Afghan's Conclude Job Programme](#)

165 UNHCR, [Refugee Data Finder: Belgium](#), accessed 25 December, 2022.

166 IBZ (2021) [Afghanistan](#)

167 Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (2022) [Afghanistan: New Policy](#)

168 Info Migrants (2022) [Belgium Rejects Asylum Claims of Hundreds of Afghans](#)

Shifts in Protection Responses in Türkiye and Europe post August 2021

Figure 6. Number of Afghan evacuees in European countries post August 2021, as of December 2022

Country	Number of Afghan evacuees
Germany	21,399
Italy	5,770
France	4,200
The Netherlands	4,000
Belgium	1,426
Sweden	1,100
Greece	819
Switzerland	218
Austria	0

In 2015, the EU signed a deal with the Government of Afghanistan to facilitate the return of rejected Afghan asylum seekers to Afghanistan.¹⁶⁹ Afghanistan was categorised as a “safe country” by the EU despite the country’s continued state of insecurity. Through the years up until March 2021, Afghans have been forcefully returned from Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium and France to Afghanistan.¹⁷⁰ In 2020, France discontinued the policy of granting subsidiary protection to Afghan asylum seekers, limiting protection options available to Afghans.

Post August 2021, EU Member States’ approach to Afghan refugees and asylum seekers has seen a partial shift:

- Germany, France, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, and Norway have put a halt to deportations of rejected Afghan asylum seekers.
- Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Greece, and Switzerland resettled Afghan evacuees.
- Germany provided Afghan asylum seekers access to integration programs and started a new relocation program for at-risk Afghans in Afghanistan.
- Italy opened a humanitarian corridor for Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, while Switzerland introduced a resettlement program for Afghans in Türkiye and allowed Afghans to apply for humanitarian visas from a number of third countries in the region.
- Sweden began issuing three-year residence permits for Afghan women and girls, and relaxed requirements around validity of Afghan passports.
- Unlike other countries, in 2022 Belgium’s policy responses shifted for the worse as it withdrew the policy of providing Afghans with subsidiary protection.

At the same time, post August 2021, the hard-line approach of select EU Member States and Türkiye to Afghans continued, alongside a rise in pushbacks and deportations:

- In 2021, Türkiye continued securitising its border with Iran through the construction of a wall to prevent Afghans from crossing over. In 2022, Türkiye also prohibited the registration of refugees in specific neighbourhoods, engaged in violent pushback of Afghans at the border with Iran and stepped-up deportations.
- In June 2022, Greece continued securitising its border with Türkiye by means of constructing a wall, and continued to engage in illegal and violent pushbacks against Afghans on the Evros river.
- Austria refused to resettle Afghan evacuees or halt deportations of rejected Afghan asylum seekers, instead proposing the construction of detention centres in countries neighbouring Afghanistan as a means of containing Afghan movement towards Europe. France did not reconsider its decision to cancel the policy of providing subsidiary protection to Afghans.

169 Rasmussen, S. (2016) [EU Signs Deal to Deport Unlimited Numbers of Afghan Asylum Seekers](#) The Guardian.

170 Qazi, S. (2018) [Refugees Deported by Europe Attacked by Taliban, ISIL](#), Al Jazeera; MacGregor, M. (2021) [More Than 1,000 Afghan Asylum Seekers Deported from Germany](#) Info Migrants.

4. Conclusion

EU Member States demonstrated a timely, but inadequate, response to migration out of Afghanistan after August 2021. In most cases, Member States suspended deportations or returns of rejected Afghan asylum seekers and turned their attention to resettling Afghan evacuees following the Taliban takeover. Afghans previously employed in Western government services and international organisations, and their families benefitted from fast-track resettlement and integration procedures, and straightforward decisions by countries like Sweden to grant Afghan women and girls refugee status were demonstrative of good practice.

However, the approach to Afghans who arrived independently and often irregularly, has been considerably different. Afghans who had to flee the country without adequate documentation, information, or savings find it difficult to navigate complex and lengthy procedures required to file a claim for asylum. A lack of uniform response across Member States means that, depending on location, Afghan asylum seekers might not have access to a monthly allowance, the right to work, or access integration assistance and language courses. Exacerbating the challenge, Member States such as France and Belgium retain a policy of not granting subsidiary protection to Afghans, although aware of the risk in Afghanistan post-Taliban takeover. In April 2022, in Germany, Afghan asylum seekers were further pushed to the margins, facing evictions to make space for displaced persons from Ukraine.¹⁷¹

A number of factors will make it difficult for Afghans to seek asylum in Europe:

- Most Member States concluded evacuation programs at the end of 2021;
- Governments of European countries no longer have representation in Afghanistan. In order to apply for asylum, Afghans must first travel to neighbouring countries like Pakistan, Iran or India under valid documentation and acquire a visa for the respective European country;
- The new resettlement program launched by Germany will force Afghans at risk to pass through the Taliban administration when departing from Afghanistan;
- Scaling up of securitisation measures on the migration route to Europe, such as the construction of a steel wall on the Greece-Türkiye border, and violent pushback, detention, deportation and forced return of Afghans from Greece and Bulgaria to Türkiye will make it increasingly impossible for Afghans to arrive in European countries where they can go on to file asylum claims.

At the same time, the prospects of receiving protection in neighbouring countries are bleak for Afghans who travel within the region via irregular means. In Iran, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, despite having the right to claim asylum, complicated bureaucratic procedures, or the unwillingness of governments to accept Afghan refugees makes it difficult for Afghans to seek international protection. In Pakistan and Türkiye, Afghans are not directly eligible for the refugee status. In these cases, they are compelled to continue living in the country without documentation and be exposed to arbitrary arrests and lack of access to healthcare and livelihoods or migrate onwards and be exposed to risk of violent pushbacks and detention.

171 Schengen Visa (2022) [Germany to Evict Existing Afghan Refugees for Clearing Out Accommodation Centres for Arriving Ukrainians](#)

5. Looking Forward

Afghan migration has remained a constant for many decades and will remain so for the long term. There are few indications that there will be sufficient regular channels available to Afghans to migrate and as such migration from Afghanistan via irregular channels will continue. Data suggests that increased restrictions on mobility only augments risk and expense, as demonstrated through evolving irregular methods that bring higher numbers of fatalities, pushbacks, deportations, detentions, and other adverse responses. This circumstance serves only to further victimise populations in need of protection and criminalise those pursuing their fundamental right to seek asylum from persecution.

Bold initiatives from nations committed to Afghan safe passage and international protection have been inadequate. Neighbouring states are unlikely to feel any substantive obligation to uphold principles of regional and international solidarity, responsibility sharing, and humanitarian response, unless they receive adequate support from the international community. While effective leadership was seen in the immediate aftermath of August 2021 as countries organised evacuation programs, resettlement pledges have not proven to hold weight, and demonstrations of leadership have been critically lacking.

Taliban leadership in Afghanistan has not, to date, demonstrated any initiative towards creating an inclusive social and economic structure. To the contrary, Taliban administration officials have restricted fundamental rights of Afghans, forcibly relocated populations, barred women from education and large sections of the labour market, and done little to ensure overwhelming rates of poverty and malnutrition are mitigated through sound and responsible governance. As a result, increasing numbers of Afghans will seek to migrate to seek protection assistance, and neighbouring countries' responses will depend heavily on regional politics, international solidarity, and effective regional coordination.

6. Key Recommendations

Considering the dramatic developments in Afghanistan following August 2021 and subsequent shifts in migration and migration policy, and cognisant of current trends, the research team suggests the following key recommendations.

International humanitarian organisations and advocacy groups that maintain an operational presence in Afghanistan should:

- Advocate for systems that provide accurate pre-departure information on safe pathways for migration to those who are seeking to leave Afghanistan. Efforts in this direction should seek the engagement of countries that are willing to accept Afghans, as well as non-governmental actors in Afghanistan to maximise the chances of success. Information dissemination is likely to be most effective if provided in both Dari and Pashto languages, through hotlines and social media platforms.
- Develop resilience-focused interventions to reduce vulnerability and ensure long-term safety and security of Afghan people, increasing their capability to stay. Programmatic interventions should be directed at reducing immediate food insecurity, generating sustainable livelihood alternatives for Afghans. Given the importance of the agricultural sector to the Afghan economy, efforts should be directed at developing infrastructure in the country that helps mitigate the losses caused by drought and other climate-related challenges to agricultural productivity.
- Increase the reach of programmatic interventions that target female-headed households. This is particularly crucial given the rise in out migration of young Afghan men, and an increasing number of restrictions imposed on the mobility of Afghan women and girls in the country by the Taliban administration. Female-headed households are at a risk of losing access to income generation activities and will be unable to sustain themselves. It is therefore important to ensure they have safe and easy access to cash transfer programs and other forms of humanitarian assistance.
- Advocacy efforts should be directed towards ensuring that Afghan refugees and refused asylum seekers are not forcibly returned to Afghanistan. Particularly those most vulnerable, such as ethnic and religious minorities, and sex and gender minorities. Advocacy efforts should also include advocating against pushbacks along the Iran-Afghanistan, Pakistan-Afghanistan, Türkiye-Iran and Greece-Türkiye borders. Strict adherence to the principle of non-refoulement under international human rights law as stated in the 1951 Convention should be advocated for.¹⁷²
- Immediate advocacy efforts should be directed towards ensuring that Afghans currently present in Iran with a valid visa are not forced to cross back into Afghanistan to either renew their visa or the passport. As Afghans from vulnerable groups who re-enter Afghanistan to reapply for visas are at significant risk, those who find themselves nearing the expiration of their visa or passport should be provided temporary protection in Iran.
- Western and regional governments should upscale Afghan refugee settlement/resettlement programmes, including from Iran and Pakistan, in light of the volatile situation facing many Afghans. These efforts should place priority on particularly vulnerable groups, including single headed households, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQI+ populations, and others facing persecution under the current Afghan authorities or non-state actors.
- Further research should seek to understand how a collapse of the Afghan economy and banking system will shape the ability of Afghans to migrate or seek protection in countries across national borders. This includes a need to examine how incoming funds for humanitarian operations and remittances sent by the Afghan diaspora can help mitigate the increasing number of challenges.

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MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

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