

Migration and Mobility in Afghanistan

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Key recommendations

1. Recognising the complex migration patterns and adaptation strategies that surround mobility in Afghanistan, the international community, national authorities and civil society need to adopt a holistic, regional approach that accounts for both voluntary and forced movements. Organisations that play a key role in supporting protection and durable solutions to Afghans across borders require long-term support.
2. Policies addressing Afghan migration should reaffirm the rights-based principles of safe, orderly, and regular movement, while minimising risks and vulnerabilities, in line with the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees and Migration.
3. In Afghanistan, millions of forcibly repatriated returnees and internally displaced face precarious livelihoods and threats to human security. In order to solve these challenges Afghanistan needs long-term, area-based support, alongside investments in climate adaptation and access to international climate finance. The international community must mobilise resources and enable mechanisms to meet these urgent needs.

Introduction and purpose

Human mobility has played a significant role in Afghan society over centuries (Monsutti, 2008). Seasonal and long-term movements, within and across Afghanistan's borders, have constituted integral livelihood strategies of individuals and households. Migration is of such significance to Afghanistan that, before the return of the Taliban in 2021, the inclusion of managed migration was discussed as part of a development strategy for the young nation with its limited employment opportunities (Holzmann, 2018).

In 1979, forced displacement triggered by the Soviet invasion led to one of the world's most protracted

refugee crises. Today, we are witnessing the expulsion of millions of Afghans from Iran and Pakistan. In addition, Afghanistan is experiencing a dramatic increase in internal displacement due to extreme weather events.

This policy brief provides an understanding of the significant role of mobility to the life of Afghans, in order to enable their safe, orderly and regular migration while reducing risks and vulnerabilities. More specifically, it seeks to:

- Present the background to voluntary and forced migration;

- Identify current migration trends and their outcomes;
- Offer conclusions and recommendations for policy and action to meet needs related to forced migration and a durable migration regime.

Background

For a full understanding of migration in Afghanistan, it is important to recognise the regular population movements that Afghanistan shares with many other developing countries. Migration is a common household livelihood strategy that also plays an important role in the local and national economy. Even under periods of great insecurity, this particular kind of mobility has persisted. In short, different kinds of human mobility exist in parallel, superimposed on one another. Hence, internal and regional labour migration, seasonal and long-term, forced displacement, internally and across borders, and displacement due to natural disasters—often and increasingly climate-related—form part of a complex migration pattern (IOM, 2014).

In order to address the vulnerabilities of displaced Afghans, the objective is to prevent forced and involuntary displacement, while the rights of those displaced are protected and their needs met (IOM, 2026). Displacement due to short or long-term environmental change, which is increasingly climate-related, is often a deliberate adaptation strategy which should be enabled and facilitated.

Variations in labour migration are fundamentally expressions of social transformation that should be approached through tailored policies that maximise benefits to migrating individuals and sending and receiving communities, while preventing threats to migrants' rights (Castles, 2008).

Labour migration. Afghans have migrated to Iran and Pakistan for centuries. Shia Hazaras have migrated primarily to Iran, where they share both

the religion and language (Dari/Persian) with its citizens. Nomads moved to Iran seasonally for grazing of their livestock and to trade with sedentary farmers; mountain people went to urban centres and lowlands for work; and pilgrims and soldiers moved for shorter and longer periods (Monsutti, 2008). The Sunni Pashtu population in Eastern Afghanistan have traditionally moved within kinship Pashtu communities on the Pakistani side of the border.

In the 1970s, the global oil-boom transformed labour markets in Iran and Pakistan, creating a new labour demand (Holzmann, 2018). In Iran, the growing economy created an upward movement among the domestic labour force. Several hundred thousand Afghan migrants had thus moved to Iran before the Soviet invasion, mainly working in construction, brickmaking and agriculture (IOM, 2013). In Pakistan, many left for new employment opportunities in oil-rich Gulf states, which left a void in terms of low-skilled and low-wage labour that could be met by Afghans.

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Household studies show that migration is an income diversification and risk management strategy, rather than a response after a shock or extreme event (Ghobadi et al, 2005). Poorer and less literate households tend to migrate within Afghanistan, whereas those less poor seek employment in Iran and Pakistan to a higher degree, being better able to meet the costs associated with migrating across borders. In areas of Afghanistan where the labour-intensive poppy crop has been grown, there was less out-migration – instead people tended to migrate to those areas for seasonal work (Byrd & Ward, 2004).

Remittances. Earned income is sent back as remittances almost in its entirety and is primarily used to meet basic needs, such as food, clothing and health expenditure, rather than as investments. Remittances from migrants across borders are much higher than from internal migrants.

The total volume of remittances is difficult to measure as only 15% of Afghans had a bank account before the return of the Taliban in 2021 and most remittances therefore were transferred through the informal hawala system (Ross, 2022). Before 2021, it was estimated that remittances through the formal banking system constituted some 4% of Afghanistan's GDP (Ross, 2022). The total amount in 2024 was estimated at 15% of GDP (World Bank, 2025).

Remittance inflows were projected to fall by about 2% of GDP in 2025 as returnees from Iran and Pakistan no longer send money (World Bank, 2025). This has a severe negative impact on the welfare of families of the returnees and on the economy at large, while reportedly also leading to a labour crisis in Iran (Ghanbarpour, 2025).

Migration to Iran and Pakistan. The Soviet invasion in 1979 triggered extensive refugee movements across the borders to Iran and Pakistan. By 1990, a very large part of the population had left the country (Holzman, 2015). Although many returned in the early to mid-1990s following the Soviet withdrawal, internal strife between Mujahedeen factions and with the Taliban soon led to a new uptick in refugee numbers, particularly from urban areas, until the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 when returns again increased (IOM, 2013).

Iran has acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, but with reservations to articles on wage-earning employment, public relief, labour legislation, social security and freedom of movement (UNHCR, 2026). Some Afghans arriving in Iran were either registered as refugees by the

UNHCR and/or offered Amayesh cards, temporarily granting them conditional freedom of movement, work permits, and access to national education and healthcare services.

According to a census in Iran in 2022, some 2.6 million registered Afghans were counted while the number of undocumented were estimated at 500,000 (UNHCR, 2026a). Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, and before the current deportations, another one million Afghans fled to Iran. By the end of 2025, UNHCR estimated that there were 4.4 million Afghans in Iran (UNHCR, 2026b).

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Pakistan is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has no specific procedures in place to protect refugees. An estimated 1.3 million Afghan refugees with UNHCR-issued Proof of Residence cards reside in Pakistan, entitling them to certain rights and services (ICG, 2025). Additionally, there are an estimated 800,000 holders of Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC) that grant temporary residence but not formal refugee status. Another 1.3 million Afghans were identified as being undocumented in late 2023.

An estimated 600,000 Afghans entered Pakistan after the Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021, before the current deportations (ICG, 2025). By the end of 2025, UNHCR estimated that there were 1.98 million Afghans in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2026b).

Many families who arrived in Iran and Pakistan after the Soviet invasion have remained in the countries for decades. Children were born and went to school while their parents became integral to the local labour market, but with varying degrees of security depending on how they were registered. Higher education was generally closed to Afghan refugees.

When people remain in cross-border protracted displacement for many years, the distinction between refugee and labour migrant becomes increasingly blurred, particularly given the long pre-conflict history of Afghans migrating to Iran and Pakistan for a variety of reasons. Some may have moved back and forth across the border to Afghanistan more than once. The preferred destination for labour migrants has been Iran, rather than Pakistan, possibly reflecting the relatively better integration of Afghans in the local labour market (Holzmann, 2018).

In both Iran and Pakistan, many Afghans remain undocumented, leaving them in a precarious and insecure situation, particularly during times when national authorities have promoted policies scapegoating Afghans for internal security threats or social instability. While official attitudes were welcoming in the early years after the Soviet occupation, Afghans have since been subjected to systematic discrimination when it comes to access to services, higher education, and employment security. Neither of the countries allow the permanent integration of Afghan refugees.

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Several rounds of deportations have taken place since 2007, with the most recent mass expulsion beginning in 2024. Increasingly hostile official attitudes towards Afghans also contributed to the large increase of people leaving for Europe and other destinations in 2015. More recently, Afghans have been held responsible for attacks by the ISIS-Khorasan and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan, while in Iran, expulsions peaked after the Israeli attack in July, 2025, when Afghans were accused of being Israeli spies. In early 2026, the situation for Afghans in both Iran and Pakistan seems to be at its most

precarious point to date.

Internal displacement. The Taliban takeover in 2021 led to a drastic reduction in the number of new internal displacements due to conflict and violence (IDMC, 2025). Still, there were 4.2 million conflict-related internally displaced persons, (IDPs) at the end of 2024, indicating that few had returned to their places of origin.

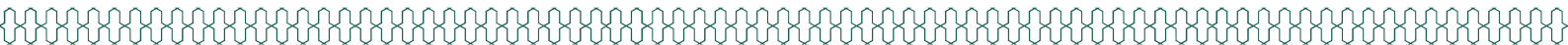
Disaster-related displacements increased dramatically between 2021 and 2024, mainly due to flooding. By the end of 2024, around 1.3 million people were living as IDPs as a result of disasters. During April to August, more than a million were displaced by floods. Roads and bridges were damaged, limiting IDPs' access to healthcare and other assistance. Thousands lost their crops and livestock as around 10,000 hectares of agricultural land were destroyed (IDMC, 2025).

Many of the flooded areas had previously been affected by four consecutive years of drought, leading to increased food insecurity and the erosion of people's resilience.

Afghanistan and Europe

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 there have been several episodes of Afghan refugee movements to Europe. Economic and livelihood factors have since the Taliban takeover been compounded by concerns over increasing repression and denial of rights – particularly for women and girls. Migration thus becomes a route to autonomy and dignity, especially among educated Afghans (IOM, 2024).

By 2015, a number of factors coincided that led to a dramatic peak in Afghan arrivals. Although the complex sequence of events is not quite clear, heightened insecurity in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of NATO troops in 2014, along with an



increasingly discriminatory and hostile environment in Iran, prompted Afghans to leave. As a result, they became the second largest group of asylum seekers in Europe in 2015, after Syrians (Crawley & Kaytaz, 2022). A large proportion among them were children not accompanied by adults.

As asylum seekers in Europe, they were faced with challenges unique to them. The granting of asylum to Afghans was highly inconsistent among European countries, ranging from 97% in Italy, 82% in France, 60% in Germany, to 46% in Sweden and only 2.5% in Bulgaria (ECRE, 2021). The overall rejection rate of 52% was high compared to asylum seekers from other conflict countries, such as Syria (5%), Yemen (5%) or Eritrea (7%).

One reason for these discrepancies is that most Afghans did not arrive directly from Afghanistan but had lived in protracted displacement in Iran for many years, sometimes all their lives. While their situation is directly related to the conflict in Afghanistan, it alienates them from categories “recognised” by the formal asylum process in destination countries (Crawley & Kaytaz, 2022). Their precarious and insecure status in both Iran and Pakistan, and their protection needs, has been dramatically illustrated through the current forced repatriation to Afghanistan.

Afghans arriving from Iran have generally been denied asylum in Sweden and deported to Afghanistan (Larrucea et al, 2021). After the Taliban’s return in 2021, they refused to accept deportees from the EU, although efforts are now made to resume deportations (Hakimi, 2025).

The Iranian origin was only taken into account in the asylum process in the case of unaccompanied minors, as they were deemed being particularly at risk if they were sent to Afghanistan, where they had no family network.

Integration outcomes for Afghans in Europe vary between destination countries. A recent study from Sweden shows a very high degree of employment among Afghan men, at a level similar to citizens born in Sweden (Wadensjö & Andersson, 2025).

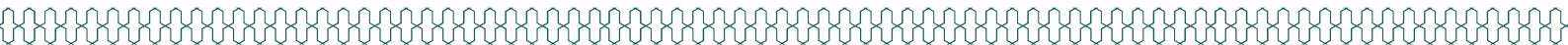
In 2024, Afghans were second in terms of protection approvals in the EU, after Syrians, with an approval rate of approximately 80% (EUROSTAT, 2026).

Current Situation

Current Afghan displacement occurs against the background of a double burden of protracted humanitarian crisis and systematic denial of human rights. Since the Taliban takeover, the country’s economy has contracted by around 25% under the combined pressures of international sanctions, a sharp decline in aid, the end of foreign military spending, and recurrent climate-driven droughts and floods (World Bank, 2024).

Since late 2023, more than four million refugees have returned from Pakistan and Iran—nearly half of whom arrived between March and August 2025—significantly contributing to an already fast-growing population (World Bank, 2025). This has reduced remittances and overwhelmed the absorption capacity of the already weak labour market and fragile public services. Tensions within communities of return are reported to be rising, driven in part by perceived or experienced competition over scarce resources such as water, land, employment opportunities, and basic services (ADSP, 2022).

The situation has been further exacerbated by a 30% contraction of international aid in 2025, mainly due to the closure of USAID but also reductions from other bilateral donors (OCHA, 2025). As a result, the UN revised its humanitarian response plan to prioritise only 12 out of the 23 million people in need of humanitarian and protection assistance in 2025. Public services have been stretched to the breaking



point, with 422 health facilities and more than 300 nutrition delivery points reportedly forced to close in 2025. According to recent data, approximately one quarter of the population faces high levels of acute food insecurity, while nearly four million children suffer from acute malnutrition (IPC, 2025).

A UNCHR survey from late 2025, conducted among returnees, provides a snapshot of their condition (UNCHR, 2025). Returnees from Iran reported higher levels of education, better food security, and greater access to housing than those from Pakistan, but were less likely to have income-generating employment. They also more often reported barriers to girls' education. Returnees from Pakistan faced deeper economic strain, relied more on daily wage labour, and carried higher debt.

All returnees continue to settle in areas with fragile conditions marked by poverty and limited access to services. Many cannot return to their areas of origin due to lack of shelter, land, or livelihoods. Over half lack documentation, restricting their access to education, healthcare, and housing. Access to healthcare is limited by cost, distance, and medicine shortages, with women disproportionately affected due to movement restrictions. Most returnees stated that their intention is to remain in Afghanistan. Two thirds experienced stress severe enough to disrupt their daily life. Economic hardship is the leading source of stress, alongside uncertainty about the future and food insecurity.

Since the Taliban takeover and the end of major hostilities, conflict is no longer the primary driver of new displacements in Afghanistan. Instead, intensifying floods and droughts have now emerged as the main displacement drivers. Afghanistan ranks among the world's most climate-vulnerable and least prepared countries. Climate-induced disasters therefore represent a key risk for continued displacement, given that three in four jobs depend on climate-sensitive subsistence farming (UNEP, 2021).

The convergence of multiple crises worsens the country's humanitarian situation.

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In response to protracted internal displacement, authorities have put pressure on IDPs to return while calling for support from humanitarian actors. In the near-absence of development programming in Afghanistan, the current response architecture remains ill-equipped to provide for the comprehensive, long-term support required for climate adaptation and durable resettlement. Most assistance to displaced and host communities remains short-to-medium-term while insufficiently addressing needs related to livelihoods, food security, water and sanitation, healthcare, and protection (ADSP, 2022).

Conclusions

Afghans are a people on the move, whether deliberately and voluntarily as they shape their lives, or forcibly due to violence, repression, or the forces of nature of anthropogenic or seismic origin. Any meaningful external intervention to address their mobility must recognise this fundamental fact and the fluidity of legal and administrative categories that are imposed in defining them. The failure of protection systems to capture the nature of protracted displacement, where the borders between refugees and labour migrants are blurred and transitory, is a case in point. For this reason, the international community, national authorities and civil society should adopt a holistic rather than narrow perspective on their mobility. Organisations

that are able to follow Afghans in their movements, from a comprehensive and regional perspective, hence play a particularly important role, whether in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan or in the West.

Anti-migrant attitudes have dominated policies in the West during the past decade. But the nature, determinants and significance of migration have not changed, as expressed in the Global Compact on Refugees and Migration in 2018. Given the tragedies surrounding irregular migration during the past decade, there is every reason to re-invoke the rights-based objectives of a safe, orderly and regular migration, while reducing risks and vulnerabilities, when designing policies to address Afghan migration.

Afghanistan's isolation affects not only its Taliban leaders but stands in the way of addressing the dramatic threats to human security facing the nation. The precarious livelihoods of forcibly repatriated returnees and internally displaced cannot be stabilised through short-term humanitarian support but requires area-based, long-term and sustained support. Afghanistan's extreme vulnerability to the impacts of climate change underscores the need for investments in climate adaptation and access to international finance already allocated for this purpose. The international community must find the means and mechanisms to help Afghans meet these urgent needs.

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