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AFGHANISTAN'S MIGRATION CRISIS: REPATRIATION REALITIES AND THE PATH FORWARD

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION	6
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	7
2.1.PRE-SOVIET INVASION: THE FIRST PHASE OF MIGRATION	7
2.2.SOVIET INVASION: THE SECOND WAVE OF MIGRATION	8
2.3.CIVIL WAR: THE THIRD WAVE OF MIGRATION	8
2.4.INTERNATIONAL TROOPS WITHDRAWAL AND THE RETURN OF THE TALIBAN	9
CURRENT SCENARIO OF MIGRATION FROM AFGHANISTAN	14
3.1.INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES AND CONTINUATION OF DEPORTATIONS	15
3.2.PAKISTAN'S REFUGEE POLICIES	15
3.3.IRAN'S REFUGEE POLICIES	17
3.4.TURKEY'S REFUGEE POLICIES	18
3.5.EUROPE'S REFUGEE POLICIES	19
3.5.1GERMANY'S REFUGEE POLICIES	19
THE RISE OF ANTI-MIGRATION MOVEMENTS AND POLICIES	22
THE REPATRIATION CONUNDRUM	24
5.1.HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND THE VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES	24
5.2.POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND SECURITY CONCERNS	25
5.3.AFGHANISTAN'S ECONOMIC CRISIS	25
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES -TALIBAN'S ANTI-WOMEN AND EXCLUSIONARY POLICIES TOWARDS OTHER GROUPS	19 27
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	28
REFERENCES	31
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	34

Executive Summary

This policy paper examines Afghanistan's continuing migration crisis in the context of forced deportations and the increasingly restrictive migration policies adopted by host countries. Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have created repeated waves of mass migration, with one of the most significant surges occurring after the Taliban's return and the fall of the Republic government on August 15, 2021. This paper provides a historical overview of Afghanistan's migration across different phases, with a particular focus on recent developments. It analyzes the current migration landscape, evaluates the policies of major host countries and explores the complex issue of repatriation, questioning its feasibility in the face of Afghanistan's current humanitarian and economic crisis. Finally, the paper offers the following points as specific policy recommendations for neighboring states, refugee-hosting states and EU member states:

Afghanistan remains unsafe, particularly for vulnerable groups such as the Hazaras, certain groups of Tajiks, Uzbeks, religious minorities (including Ismailis, Ahmadis, Sikhs and Hindus), women's rights activists, civil society members, journalists, LGBTQ+ individuals, and former security personnel; this situation needs to be factored into the deliberations of countries considering deportation and forced repatriation of Afghanistan's refugees.

Countries like Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and other host countries should halt forced repatriation and prioritize the safety and protection of asylum-seekers.

Countries with a history of welcoming refugees—including those in Europe, North America, Australia and neighboring nations—must consider and prioritize the needs of these vulnerable groups by offering resettlement, permanent residency and long-term asylum until conditions in Afghanistan improve.

Millions of Afghan citizens have fled the country in the past three and a half years due to the fear of persecution, targeted killings,

exclusionary policies and widespread human rights violations under the de facto Taliban government. The Taliban must form an inclusive government, put an end to the targeted killings and human rights violations and ensure that returnees are treated with dignity and respect.

1

Introduction

Afghanistan has experienced continuous migration for decades, making it one of the largest and longest displacement crises in recent history (GCR, 2023). The outflow of people from the country has been fueled by various factors, including political shocks leading to regime changes, persistent war and conflict and socio-economic factors such as poverty, food insecurity and widespread instability. As a result, Afghanistan now accounts for the third-largest refugee population globally, representing one of the most protracted displacement situations in UNHCR's seven-decade history (UNHCR, 2024).

In terms of destination, Afghan migrants have primarily sought refuge in neighboring countries, but a significant number have also moved to Europe and other Western nations. According to recent data, Afghanistan's documented global refugee population reaches 6.4 million, with 90% (5.8 million) residing in neighboring countries, mainly Iran and Pakistan (UNHCR, 2024). However, various reports suggest that the total number is much higher than the given documented Afghan refugee population.

Despite numerous international efforts to repatriate Afghan refugees, voluntary return remains a formidable challenge due to political instability and the worsening humanitarian and economic crisis under the Taliban's de facto rule. This article examines the key factors driving Afghanistan's migration crisis, evaluates the policy responses of host countries and highlights the ongoing challenges of repatriation. It also underscores the need for host countries to reassess their policies, particularly regarding the forced return of at-risk and vulnerable groups, such as women, ethnic groups and religious minorities and other persecuted communities, whose safety remains a matter of concern in Afghanistan. Furthermore, this article underscores the importance of providing resettlement opportunities to these populations in the host countries to ensure their protection and long-term safety.

2

Historical background

Afghanistan's migration crisis is rooted in decades of conflict, political instability and foreign intervention. These problems, in turn, have domestic and external dimensions. Domestically, exclusionary ethnic politics, a highly centralized government and weak institutions have fueled long-standing tensions, often marginalizing certain ethnic and political groups. Internationally, Afghanistan has been a battleground for global power rivalries, from the Great Game between Britain and Russia to the Cold War and post-9/11 interventions. These conflicts, along with foreign military occupations, have repeatedly forced millions of Afghan citizens to flee their homes.

Over the past five decades, Afghanistan has witnessed multiple waves of mass displacement, each driven by distinct political, economic and security factors. These migration trends can be categorized into four phases, each shaped by its own set of causes and circumstances.

2.1 Pre-Soviet invasion: The first phase of migration

The mass migration from Afghanistan is often associated with the late 1970s and early 1980s, but the first significant exodus occurred between 1971 and 1973. During this period, Afghanistan experienced an extreme drought that triggered widespread famine and starvation, particularly in the northern and central parts of the country (AAN, 2013). As a result, large numbers of Afghan citizens were forced to flee to neighboring countries, primarily Iran and Pakistan, for survival. This marks the beginning of Afghanistan's complex history of refugee movements (VIF, 2023).

As a landlocked and agrarian country highly reliant on snow and rainfall, Afghanistan has remained extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, experiencing repeated episodes of extreme drought, flooding and other natural disasters. Post-1970, Afghanistan has experienced eight major occurrences of drought (ACAPS Analysis Hub, 2024) and several seasonal and

periodic rounds of flooding and other nature-related incidents. These disasters have affected millions of people, triggering internal displacement and the outflow of thousands seeking refuge beyond its borders. Afghanistan continues to be one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and global warming, leading to ongoing internal displacement and mass migration.

2.2 Soviet Invasion: The second wave of migration

This major wave of migration from Afghanistan was triggered by the Soviet-backed Saur Revolution in 1978, which led to the overthrow of Daoud Khan (1973-1978), who had seized power in a coup against his cousin, King Zahir Shah, who had led Afghanistan between 1933 and 1973. This resulted in the establishment of a Soviet-backed communist government, marking the beginning of a prolonged period of war and instability in Afghanistan. The political turmoil and ensuing violence forced large numbers of Afghan citizens to flee in search of safety. The displacement crisis in this period further deepened when the Mujahideen groups launched an armed resistance against the Soviet-backed government, particularly during Dr. Najibullah's rule in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The conflict continued until Najibullah's government collapsed in 1992. As data in Figure 1 indicates, Afghanistan's refugee population began with approximately 500,000 people (on the heels of the Soviet Union's invasion in 1979), surged rapidly in the years that followed, reaching 4.7 million by 1983, ultimately peaking at 6.5 million in 1990. This dramatic increase in displacement was caused by the Soviet occupation and the resistance movements fighting against Soviet forces.

2.3 Civil war: The third wave of migration

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992, Afghanistan plunged into a brutal civil war between various Mujahideen factions. This period saw continued displacement as millions of people fled violence, instability, lawlessness and a collapsing economy. The

emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s further exacerbated the situation. Their harsh rule and ongoing conflicts forced many to flee in search of safety, primarily to neighboring countries and the West. As shown in Figure 1, despite the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, refugee outflows from Afghanistan remained high (the figure fluctuating between 3.3 million and 4.5 million) due to the Mujahideen-led civil war (1992–1996). The rise of the Taliban (1996–2001) sustained this trend, with numbers surging to around 4 million by 2000.

2.4 International troop withdrawal and the return of the Taliban

Following the U.S.-led intervention in 2001, the Taliban regime collapsed, and a new government was established with international support. This brief period of relative stability led many Afghan refugees to return, mainly from neighboring countries. However, the Taliban's resurgence after 2005, combined with corruption, political instability and rising violence, created renewed uncertainty. This was further deepened by the 2011 announcement of the gradual withdrawal of international troops, shifting their role from combat to training Afghanistan's forces (NATO, 2022). As a result, migration increased again, especially after 2015, when Europe opened its doors to asylum seekers.

However, a major turning point occurred in 2021 when the U.S. chaotically withdrew its troops, and the Taliban swiftly regained control of Afghanistan. This sudden political shift triggered mass panic, with thousands of Afghan citizens desperately attempting to flee, fearing persecution under Taliban rule. The fall of Kabul marked the beginning of yet another major refugee crisis. As shown in Figure 1, refugee numbers surged dramatically following this event. According to recent UN reports, an estimated 8 million Afghanistan citizens have left the country since then. In the first two weeks following the Taliban takeover, thousands

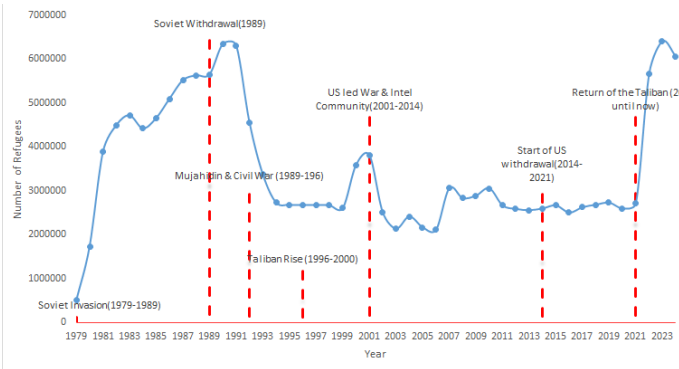
¹The figures provided by the UNHCR represent documented refugees. However, the actual number, including both documented and undocumented individuals, is significantly higher than the official data.

were evacuated by Western nations to destinations such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and various European countries.

However, mass migration continues as worsening humanitarian and economic crises push more Afghan citizens to leave, mostly through legal and irregular routes. Currently, Pakistan and Iran are the primary migration transit routes through which Afghan citizens make their way to other destinations.

Figure 1 presents Afghanistan's migration trends from 1979 to 2023, while Figure 2 presents the conflict data from 1989 to 2021. To better understand the relationship between conflict and migration, the figures can be analyzed together to identify patterns and correlations between periods of heightened violence and increased migration flows.

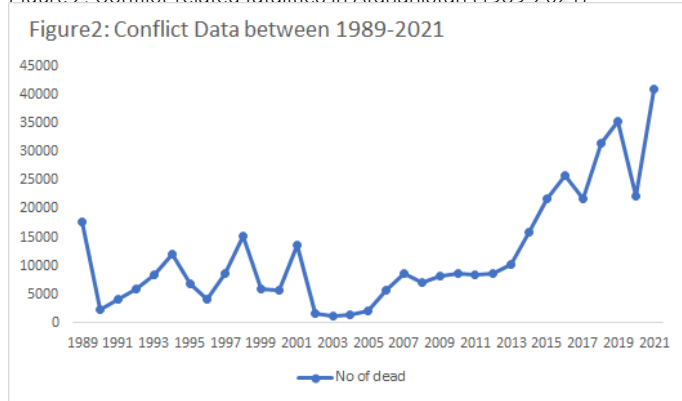
Figure 1: Afghanistan's refugee trend (1979-2024)



Data source: UNHCR, 2024. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download>

Figure 1 shows the trend of Afghanistan's refugee movements from 1979 to 2024, highlighting key historical events that triggered displacement. Major spikes in refugee numbers correspond to events such as the Soviet invasion (1979-1989), the Mujahideen civil war (1989-1996), the rise of the Taliban (1996-2000), the U.S.-led intervention (2001-2014) and the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

Figure 2: Conflict-related fatalities in Afghanistan (1989-2021)



Data source: UCDP, 2023, available at <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>

The correlation between conflict intensity in Afghanistan and refugee outflows is evident. Periods of heightened violence, such as the Soviet–Mujahideen War in the 1980s, the Mujahideen-led civil war in the 1990s, the U.S.-led intervention post-2001 and the Taliban's return to power in 2021, coincide with significant spikes in refugee numbers.

As shown in Figure 2, conflict intensity in Afghanistan since 1989 has closely aligned with refugee movement patterns. The high conflict levels in 1989 correspond with the last years of the Soviet withdrawal and continued clashes with resistance groups. The mid-1990s conflict surge is linked to the rise of the Taliban and the subsequent war between multiple rival groups, driving sustained displacement. A notable drop in both, conflict intensity

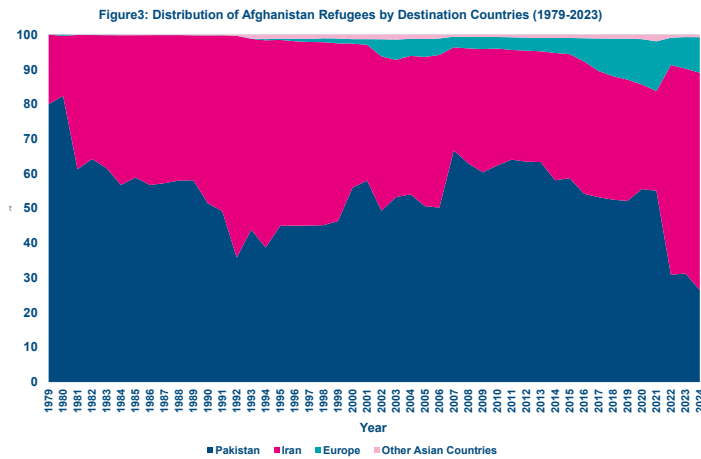
and refugee numbers, came in the early 2000s following the initial U.S.-led intervention, a brief period of relative stability that assisted refugees' return. However, as conflict steadily intensified from 2005 to 2014, refugee numbers remained consistently between 2 to 3 million. The significant correlation appears from 2015 onward, when escalating violence peaked around 2019–2020, leading to a massive surge in refugee numbers after 2020. This peak in conflict, followed by the Taliban's takeover in 2021, triggered another major refugee crisis, surpassing the 1990's peak. Also, the displacement patterns of the recent conflict surge (2015–2020) and the Taliban's return to power resemble those of the Soviet–Afghanistan War (1983 to 1989), highlighting Afghanistan's cyclical nature of conflict and forced migration over generations.

Regarding the distribution and destination of Afghan refugees, Figure 3 illustrates that neighboring countries such as Pakistan (blue in the graph) and Iran (orange in the graph) have predominantly hosted the majority of refugees, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s when their combined totals often exceeded 90% of Afghan refugees. This was primarily due to geographical proximity and shared religious, cultural and linguistic ties. From the mid-1990s onward, with the rise of the Taliban, a significant number of Afghan citizens began migrating to Europe and other Western countries for long-term resettlement. As the graph shows, the share of Afghan refugees moving to Western countries, mainly to Europe (green in the graph), has become increasingly significant, indicating a noticeable shift in migration patterns. A relatively smaller proportion of Afghan refugees have moved to other Asian countries (yellow in the graph), such as the Middle East, India, Central Asian countries and Australia.

Overall, the trend in refugee movements is closely tied to the political changes and conflicts in Afghanistan. During periods of escalating violence, displacement numbers have risen sharply. Conversely, when relative stability is achieved, the number

²According to the definition used in UCDP-GED (Uppsala Conflict Data Program – Georeferenced Event Dataset), an event is recorded as a conflict if it results in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year. Events with fewer fatalities do not meet the threshold for inclusion. For details, please visit the website available at <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>

Figure 3: Distribution of Afghan refugees by destination countries (1979-2023)



Data source: UNHCR, 2024. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download>

of refugees has slightly declined. However, fear and future uncertainty have often prevented full-scale returns even during these stable periods.

3

Current scenario of migration from Afghanistan

With the continuation of political instability and uncertainty, conflict and a shrinking and fragile economy, Afghanistan remains a major point of migration outflow and grapples with a severe migration crisis. The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 has intensified these challenges and pushed more Afghan citizens to seek safety and better opportunities abroad. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a UN agency for migration, Afghanistan's undocumented migration post-August 2021 is around 8 million, of which 6.4 million are documented (UNHCR, 2024). Of these, 85% reside in neighboring countries, mainly Iran and Pakistan, and close to one million have sought refuge in Europe and other Western countries (Amu TV, 2024).

Apart from the individuals who have migrated beyond Afghanistan's borders, there exists a substantial number of Afghan citizens who remain internally displaced. This internal displacement is driven by a range of factors, including instability, political motives, economics and environmental reasons. Since August 2021, the Taliban and affiliated groups have forcibly displaced many communities and groups from their homes and lands. Documented reports indicate that thousands of members of the Hazaras community have been subjected to repeated forced evictions (The Diplomat, 2024). They were forced to leave their ancestral homes and lands (The Guardian, 2021). Similarly, some members of the Uzbeks, Turkmen (Radio Free Europe, 2021) and Tajiks have also faced forced displacement from their homes and lands.

According to estimates from UN-affiliated organizations, around 6.3 million people have been internally displaced within Afghanistan, which adds an extra burden to the already fragile situation of the country. Additionally, as the country continues

struggling economically, over 23 million individuals currently require assistance, including food, health services, shelter and livelihood support. Vulnerable groups, particularly women, children and displaced populations, are at the highest risk and in urgent need of sustained humanitarian aid (IOM, 2025).

3.1 International responses and continuation of deportations

With respect to the influx of Afghan refugees, the policy responses of neighboring and Western countries have varied based on circumstances. Their policies have shifted from a welcoming stance to becoming more restrictive and less accommodating, turning anti-refugee, even resorting to forced deportation. Afghanistan's neighbors, Iran and Pakistan, host to around 90% of Afghanistan's refugees, are an example of such a change. Below, we discuss in detail the policies of major host countries for refugees from Afghanistan.

3.2 Pakistan's refugee policies

Pakistan's policies toward Afghan refugees have evolved significantly since the late 1970s; however, they have largely been a function of its relationship with the governments of Afghanistan, international commitments and relations and domestic political considerations (Ishaque, W., Gul, S., & Asghar, M. F., 2021).

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan adopted an open-door policy, which allowed Afghanistan's refugees to enter freely. This approach was largely due to Cold War geopolitics and alignment with Western allies (UNHCR, 2008). Meanwhile, Pakistan set up refugee camps along the eastern border, which also served as recruitment hubs against Soviet forces (Middle East Institute, 2011). After the Soviet withdrawal, renewed conflict and the rise of the Taliban triggered another refugee wave in the 1980s–90s. As international aid declined, Pakistan faced growing economic and security concerns, leading to anti-refugee sentiment, and its refugee policy shifted towards regulation, registration and repatriation of Afghanistan's refugees (Zubair, M., Khan, M. A., & Shah, M., 2019). By the mid-1990s,

Pakistan promoted voluntary repatriation; by the late 1990s, the country had closed its borders to illegal refugees entering the country (HRW, 2002).

After the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, Pakistan continued its registration and repatriation policies. Still, it increasingly used its refugee policies as a political bargaining chip with Afghanistan and the international community involved in Afghanistan's affairs (CGD, 2021). Also, due to the emergence of anti-Pakistan groups post-2001, Pakistan viewed Afghan refugees primarily through a security lens, fearing that Afghan refugees could pose a threat to its national security. As a result, in the early 2000s, it began closing refugee camps in various parts of the country, requesting the refugees to repatriate voluntarily (HRW, 2002). Later, for some security incidents in Pakistan, refugees were blamed (Tribune, 2011).

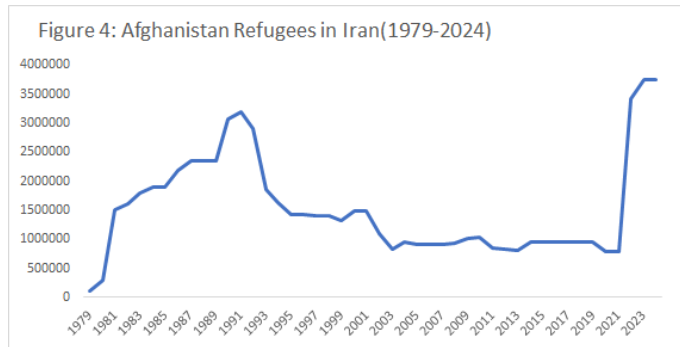
In terms of documentation and refugee management, in 2006, Pakistan initiated the Proof of Registration (PoR) card, which gave some legal residency and access to certain rights to the cardholders. Later, in 2017, the Pakistani government introduced the Comprehensive Policy on Voluntary Repatriation and Management of Afghanistan Nationals, aiming to regulate the stay of Afghan nationals through visa mechanisms and the registration of undocumented Afghan citizens. This policy led to the issuance of Afghanistan Citizen Cards (ACCs), which legalized their stay without granting official refugee status (CGD, 2021).

Since 2021, with the return of the Taliban, Pakistan has faced another fresh stream of refugees from Afghanistan. In response, Pakistan has adopted stricter immigration policies, citing security concerns over militant groups with ties to the Taliban that pose a threat to its military. In 2023, Pakistan introduced the policy of mandatory repatriation of Afghan refugees, asking the undocumented refugees to return to Afghanistan. This led to mass deportations of undocumented refugees (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023) and widespread detentions (Amnesty International, 2024), which have persisted to this day.

3.3 Iran's refugee policies

Iran's refugee policy towards Afghan refugees started initially with a welcoming stance, especially after the 1979 Soviet invasion, when around 2.3 million entered the country between 1979 and 1989 (see Figure 4 for the trend) (UNHCR, 2008). This openness was said to be driven by Islamic solidarity, anti-communism and strategic interests, though some argue it was also out of necessity due to Iran's post-revolution instability and war with Iraq (A. N. Esfahani & S. H. Hosseini, 2018). Although many returned after the Soviet withdrawal, throughout the 1990s, as the conflict in Afghanistan continued and a new wave of refugees started arriving, Iran gradually shifted to stricter policies such as limiting rights, reducing services, promoting repatriation and deporting undocumented refugees (Naseh, M., 2025)

Figure 4: Trend of Afghan refugees in Iran (1979-2024)



Data source: UNHCR, 2024. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download>

Post 2001, with the international presence in Afghanistan, Afghan refugees started returning to the country. However, with the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, most of those who had returned from Iran re-migrated. Post-2001, Iran continued its restrictive policies and focused on the documentation and repatriation of Afghan refugees. For documentation purposes, Iran introduced the Amayesh card system as a refugee identification card in 2003, enabling them to benefit from certain services.

Since the takeover of the Taliban in 2021, Iran has faced another wave of Afghan refugees, with the number reaching around 4 million. Despite Iran having maintained a friendly relationship with the de facto Taliban government over the past three years, the country has continued implementing its restrictive policies, citing security concerns with new undocumented Afghan refugees. Between 2022 and 2024, Iran deported approximately 1.8 million migrants, including thousands who possessed legal documentation (VOA, 2025). Reports indicate that many previous Afghanistan army officers are among the deportees, and many have been killed post-return to Afghanistan.

3.4 Turkey's refugee policies

Like Pakistan and Iran, Turkey has also tightened its borders and adopted stricter policies toward Afghan refugees. Due to its geographical location, for decades now, Turkey has served as a key transit route for Afghan refugees seeking to reach Europe, particularly after 2015, when the latter opened its doors to refugees. However, with the increase in instability in Afghanistan and Turkey's 2017 policy of citizenship by investment, Afghan citizens began to see Turkey not just as a transit country but also as a destination for long-term settlement. Many affluent Afghan citizens, including government officials and businessmen, bought properties under this scheme (Nordic Monitor, 2021). Post the Taliban takeover, a significant number of Afghan citizens made their way to Turkey with the hope of making it to Europe, but remained stuck there. Despite their belonging to high-risk groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities, women and former members of the Afghanistan army and police [many of whom have faced persecution upon return (Radio Free Europe,

2024)], the Turkish government continues deporting them back to Afghanistan.

3.5 Europe's refugee policies

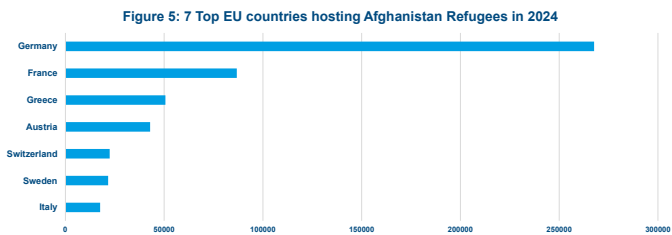
Due to the high influx of refugees from conflict-affected regions such as Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine and some African countries, European countries have also revised their policies regarding refugees, including those from Afghanistan. Over time, European refugee policies have shifted from taking a humanitarian approach to becoming increasingly restrictive, influenced by security concerns, economic pressures and political considerations. Germany and the UK have hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees from Afghanistan. However, some of the EU member states have implemented stricter asylum and immigration measures in recent years.

3.5.1 Germany's refugee policies

Germany hosts approximately 2.5 million refugees, making it the third-largest refugee-hosting country globally and the largest within the European Union (UNHCR, 2025). Data indicates that Germany is home to the largest Afghani diaspora community in Europe; after Syrians, Afghan refugees represent the second-largest Asian foreign population in the country. As of January 2025, the Afghani diaspora, including refugees, asylum seekers and German citizens of Afghani descent, totals around 442,020 individuals (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024).

³The data used here is from the UNHCR database and includes the number of Afghan citizens who have applied for asylum in Germany. It does not reflect the total number of Afghan nationals in Germany, which is higher, as it includes German citizens of Afghan descent. The data for the total population of Afghan nationals in Germany can be accessed here: Federal Statistical Office (Destatis), <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Tabellen/auslaendische-bevoelkerung-staatsangehoerigkeit-jahre.html>

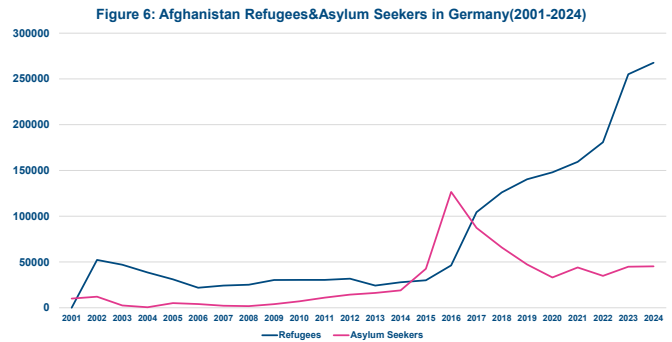
Figure 5: Top EU countries hosting Afghan refugees in 2024 ³



Data source: UNHCR, 2024. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download?url=MT6rk6>

Over the past decades, Germany has provided resettlement, long-term visas and asylum to refugees fleeing humanitarian crises, persecution and conflict, particularly those from Afghanistan and other conflict-affected countries.

Figure 6: Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in Germany (2001-2024)



Data source: UNHCR, 2024. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download?url=MT6rk6>

Europe has been a major destination for Afghan refugees, with Germany being one of the leading host countries. Since 2001, as Figure 6 shows, the number of Afghan refugees in Germany has seen significant spikes, most notably after 2015, which coincides with the broader European refugee crisis and deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan. This trend accelerated dramatically after 2021, following the Taliban's return to power, as individuals and families at risk of persecution sought refuge in Germany, where many have been granted protection (DW, 2025).

Germany has largely fulfilled its humanitarian obligations over the past decades by hosting and protecting vulnerable and at-risk individuals. As illustrated in Figure 6, a significant portion of Afghan asylum seekers (indicated in red) have been granted long-term protection. However, the growing refugee population and security concerns have led the country to adopt stricter migration policies, including the deportation of Afghan refugees. For instance, between December 2016 and early 2021, the country collectively deported around 960 Afghans on 35 flights to their home country (Aljazeera, 2021).

In August 2024, Germany resumed the deportation of convicted Afghan criminals, a practice that had been suspended since the Taliban's return to power. The first deportation involved 28 individuals and was carried out through intermediaries in Qatar (Reuters, 2024). In 2024, Germany deported around 1300 Afghan citizens from the country (Khama Press, 2025). This decision has sparked debate as governments seek to balance national security concerns with human rights obligations.

However, concerns remain that Afghanistan is still unsafe for repatriation, with no justification for the deportation of vulnerable individuals and members of certain groups and communities. Afghanistan continues to face a severe humanitarian and economic crisis, widespread human rights violations and targeted killings; hence, the vulnerable and at-risk need protection and consideration.

4

The rise of anti-migration movements and policies

In response to the recent surge in migration, many countries have responded by tightening their immigration policies, as discussed in the previous section. Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and several European countries have begun deporting Afghan migrants, including those who had sought asylum or educational or business opportunities. Reports by the BBC (2023), Al Jazeera (2025) and The Diplomat (2024) suggest that hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees have been forcibly sent back to Afghanistan from Iran, Pakistan and Turkey despite their fears of persecution under the Taliban regime. Many have spoken to the media of concerns about their safety and the harsh conditions they face upon return. Countries like Iran and Pakistan have not paid attention to the protests and requests to stop the repatriations and deportations so far.

In Afghanistan, repatriation has frequently occurred over the past few decades whenever the situation has shown signs of improvement. The first phase of voluntary repatriation involved refugees returning mainly from Iran and Pakistan, after the Soviet Union's withdrawal in the early 1990s. Refugees hoped that peace and stability would resume after the Soviet departure. However, this process soon halted as subsequent events in the 1990s drastically altered the situation. The second phase of voluntary repatriation began after the Taliban's fall in 2001. Within the first two months, over 350,000 Afghan refugees—10% of those in neighboring countries—returned home under UNHCR programs (US Department of States, 2002). By mid-2002, nearly a million had been repatriated, primarily from Pakistan and Iran. Since

2002, more than six million citizens of Afghanistan have returned, though repatriation rates have declined over time. Similar repatriations happened from Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries. However, the returnees had to migrate again to escape persecution and insecurity. Most of the recent repatriations and deportations have been forced and have kept people vulnerable. The rise in deportations is linked to shifting geopolitical dynamics. While Iran and Pakistan historically maintained friendly ties with the Taliban, post-republic power struggles have strained relations, impacted refugee policies and exacerbated forced returns. Countries such as the USA, members of the EU, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Russia and China have been involved in the region's political dynamics, seeking to maintain their influence—sometimes leading to greater instability and political unrest.

5

The repatriation conundrum

The possibility of repatriating Afghanistan's refugees remains deeply problematic due to the ongoing insecurity and humanitarian and economic issues. While some host countries push for return programs, the reality on the ground suggests that Afghanistan is not safe for large-scale or voluntary repatriation, particularly for individuals belonging to vulnerable groups.

5.1 Humanitarian crisis and the vulnerable communities

Considering the complex migration challenge driven by various factors and the current scenario involving strict migration policies in refugee-welcoming countries, millions of Afghan refugees are facing a dire situation. Many countries that initially welcomed refugees are now implementing stricter immigration policies, including voluntary and forced repatriation programs. However, the feasibility of repatriation is questionable for individuals returning to countries experiencing ongoing conflict, such as Afghanistan, Myanmar (Burma), Ukraine, Syria, Palestine and Sudan. Millions of refugees remain vulnerable and face significant risks if they return to these unstable environments. Voluntary repatriation is considered the preferred solution for displaced populations, but it can only be successful when returnees have access to safety, economic opportunities and basic services in the country of origin. Unfortunately, Afghanistan currently lacks these essential conditions. Political instability, security concerns, economic hardships and human rights violations pose significant barriers to voluntary repatriation.

5.2 Political instability and security concerns

Afghanistan remains deeply unstable, with the Taliban's rigid and uncompromising stance contributing significantly to the country's political deadlock. Its refusal to engage meaningfully with different political and social groups, as well as its lack of cooperation with the international community, has eroded hopes for a democratic and stable Afghanistan. The Taliban's manner of governance excludes political pluralism, silences opposition and relies on repressive measures rather than consensus-building.

Since its takeover in August 2021, the Taliban has failed to establish a functional and widely accepted government, leading to deep internal divisions. Its rule has been marked by targeted killings, internal purges, crackdowns on dissent and groups opposing its beliefs and ideologies. This political stagnation has fueled security concerns as armed resistance movements, such as the National Resistance Front (NRF) and other opposition groups, have continued to challenge its authority.

Additionally, extremist groups like ISIS-K have exploited the situation, launching deadly attacks against civilians, particularly targeting ethnic and religious minorities. These factors, combined with the ongoing inability of the Taliban to govern effectively, have made the prospects for long-term political stability and security slim. Despite efforts by international and regional actors to facilitate negotiations with the Taliban, no meaningful progress has been achieved. With the international community growing increasingly frustrated, Afghanistan remains in a prolonged state of uncertainty and volatility. This indicates that Afghanistan is not safe for the repatriation of certain groups of refugees, which is discussed in other sections as well.

5.3 Afghanistan's economic crisis

Afghanistan's economic situation has deteriorated significantly since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, pushing the country into a worse humanitarian and economic crisis, with more than 60% of its population facing food insecurity and in need of assistance. Following the withdrawal of the international community on

August 15, based on some estimates, Afghanistan's economy contracted by 25-30%, leaving it among the poorest nations in the world (USIP, 2023).

Before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan's economy was heavily dependent on foreign aid, which made up nearly 40% of its GDP. However, after August 2021, most of the aid was either halted, frozen or significantly reduced due to concerns over the Taliban's policies and its links with terrorist groups. Additionally, the nature of aid has shifted from long-term development and military aid support to short-term humanitarian relief, offering temporary respite. The aid flow situation has been further exacerbated by the US administration's new policy, which has halted or suspended aid to multiple countries, including Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's economic future looks increasingly bleak as the country's economy has significantly shrunk under the Taliban's de facto rule. With the suspension or reduction of foreign aid, the country faces severe financial hardship. The Taliban's continued policies, including restrictions on women's participation in the workforce, and an overall lack of economic planning have further deepened the crisis. Currently, one of the critical challenges for the country's economy is the isolation of Afghanistan's banking sector, which remains disconnected from the international financial system, limiting access to trade, investment and even remittances. With soaring unemployment, collapsing businesses and limited economic opportunities, voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees appears unlikely. Instead, worsening conditions are likely to fuel further outmigration as people seek livelihoods and security elsewhere.

Over the past three years, relief effort from UN agencies and international organizations has helped protect people from further food insecurity and starvation. However, the amount of aid and relief has declined over the past six months, leaving people to face an increasingly uncertain future as the economic crisis continues to worsen. Additionally, the stability of the Afghani currency and the livelihoods of millions largely depend on the \$80 million in cash provided every 14 days by the United States as part of ongoing humanitarian aid (The Economics Times, 2024).

6

Human rights issues: Taliban's anti-women and exclusionary policies (towards other groups)

Since the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan has witnessed severe human rights violations, particularly against women, certain ethnic and religious groups, minorities and marginalized groups. The Taliban has systematically dismantled women's rights, enforcing policies that bar women from education, employment and public spaces. Girls are banned from attending secondary schools and universities, erasing decades of progress in female education. Women have been removed from most jobs, with exceptions in limited healthcare sectors. The Taliban de facto government has issued more than 80 decrees, most of them targeting and restricting women (The Guardian, 2025).

The repression extends beyond gender-based discrimination. Ethnic and religious groups, particularly the Hazaras, due to their ethnic and religious affiliations, continue to be at high risk. The UN and various human rights organizations have warned of potential genocide against the Hazara community given repeated attacks targeting their religious sites, educational centers and communities (X, 2025). The Sikh community, once a vibrant minority in Afghanistan, has nearly vanished due to persecution, with many seeking refuge in India, Canada and other countries. LGBTQ+ individuals face extreme danger under Taliban rule, as homosexuality is punishable by death under its interpretation of Sharia law. Similarly, members of the Ismaili and Ahmadiyya communities, Tajiks, Uzbeks and certain members of Pashtun tribal groups face discrimination, forced displacement and targeted killings. This requires much deeper consideration and attention from the international community and refugee-friendly countries.

7

Conclusions and recommendations

Afghanistan's prolonged and complex migration crisis underscores the deep-rooted challenges the country faces, spanning political, economic, environmental and social dimensions. The historical waves of displacement, driven by conflict, political upheaval and natural disasters, have created a continuous pattern of migration that persists today. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 exacerbated these issues, leading to a significant surge in refugee outflows, further complicating the prospects for voluntary repatriation.

The country's political instability, marked by the Taliban's exclusionary governance and the resurgence of extremist groups, poses significant barriers to creating a safe and stable environment for returnees. Afghanistan's economic decline, characterized by a sharp drop in foreign aid, high unemployment rates and a struggling financial system, further diminishes the feasibility of a sustainable return. Additionally, the systematic human rights violations, particularly against women and certain ethnic and religious groups, highlight the severe risks faced by those who remain or return to Afghanistan.

The recent policy response from the international community, particularly from neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan, who have historically borne the brunt of hosting Afghan refugees, has added to their plight. Increasingly restrictive immigration policies and forced deportations exacerbate the difficulties faced by those fleeing Afghanistan.

Therefore, countries accepting refugees must strike a careful balance between humanitarian responsibility and national interests. The following measures can be taken by the refugee-welcoming and host countries in Europe, North America, Australia and those in the region:

- Migration policies should address the urgent needs of vulnerable groups—including women, the Hazaras, activists, former government employees and ethnic and religious minorities—who face significant risks under Afghanistan's de facto government. At the same time, these policies must be sustainable, ensuring economic stability while upholding international obligations. It is also important to recognize the role of neighboring and influential countries whose political involvement has shaped the current situation.
- Specific groups face heightened vulnerabilities. The Hazara community, due to its ethnic, religious and cultural identity, remains particularly at risk. Similarly, certain groups and members of the Uzbek and Tajik communities face threats over their ethnicity, cultural affiliation and perceived association with particular parties or groups.
- Religious minorities, including Ismaili Muslims, Ahmadis, Sikhs and Hindus, experience suppression and threats due to their beliefs. Additionally, women's rights activists, civil society members, writers, media professionals, LGBTQ+ members and former members of the Afghanistan army and police are also reported to be under threat.
- Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and other host countries should suspend forced repatriation until conditions in Afghanistan improve, prioritizing the safety and security of those seeking asylum, particularly individuals requiring protection.
- Countries that have historically welcomed refugees, such as those in Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and others, must consider and prioritize the needs of vulnerable ethnic and religious groups, women, minorities and other at-risk individuals and communities. These countries must offer resettlement, permanent residency and long-term asylum until conditions in Afghanistan significantly improve.
- As Germany hosts the largest number of Afghan refugees in Europe, any policies related to deportation or restrictions

must take into account their humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities.

- Around 8 million Afghan citizens have fled the country in the past three and a half years, becoming refugees and asylum seekers due to the fear of persecution, forced displacements, targeted killings, exclusionary ethnic and ideological policies and widespread human rights violations under the de facto Taliban government. The de facto Taliban government must form an inclusive government, put an end to forced displacements, targeted killings and human rights violations, while ensuring that returnees are treated with dignity and respect.

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