

RESEARCH REPORT

Migration from Afghanistan to Europe (2014-2017)

Drivers, Return and
Reintegration

October 2017

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Executive Summary

The decision to migrate to a new country is complex. Perhaps even harder is the decision to return from a host country to a person's country of origin. Increasing numbers of Afghans are making these decisions, and often under strained and difficult circumstances. While research exists on different aspects of decision-making surrounding migration to Europe, little has been done to understand the thought process and the experience of returning when circumstances in Europe do not permit for asylum and resettlement.

This assessment relies on semi-structured interviews with 28 purposely-selected Afghan returnees who migrated to Europe and returned to Afghanistan between 2014 and 2017. Through these interviews, the assessment seeks to better understand the socio-economic profile of Afghans returning from Europe, to identify the motivations behind their return, and to investigate the challenges and vulnerabilities they face once they arrive in Afghanistan. The assessment compares the current situation of Afghans who have returned by different means, either voluntarily (on an individual basis and without assistance), through assisted programmes (primarily through IOM's AVRR programme) or through forced deportation. The key findings from the assessment show that:

1. **Most returnees decided to leave Afghanistan due to violent conflict and insecurity, as well as a lack of employment opportunities.** Respondents reported that violent conflict or lack of employment opportunities alone would not have pushed them to leave Afghanistan. However, the two coupled together made it nearly impossible to build livelihoods and support one's family.
2. **Despite the carefully crafted definitions that governments and the humanitarian community have coined to distinguish between different categories of returnees, distinctions between them are often blurred in reality.**¹ While there are distinctions in how they returned to Afghanistan, there are few differences in how people within these three categories integrated and accessed resources back in Afghanistan. Though assisted returnees seemed to feel a stronger sense of agency and capacity in decision-making during the course of their journeys, overall experiences between returnee categories were often similar. In some cases, it was especially difficult to differentiate between forced and voluntary returnees, when returnees of both categories felt that they had no other option than to return. These findings challenge the notion of voluntary return in particular, when some voluntary returnees are coerced into returning.²
3. **For those respondents who made the unforced decision to return, economic issues associated with a lack of access to livelihoods, family issues back in Afghanistan, border closures and the inability to access asylum heavily influenced decisions to return.** Economic issues stemming from the inability to work and access livelihoods were the most common factor cited by respondents as influencing their decision to return. The second most common factor affecting decisions to return related to family matters back in Afghanistan. Several voluntary and assisted returnees reported that they decided to return after finding out that a family member had fallen ill. Border closures and the inability to access asylum were the joint third most pressing reason to return to Afghanistan. Sixteen out of 28

¹ Vathi, Zana and Russell King (Eds.) (2017) *Return Migration and Psychological Wellbeing*, Routledge Research in Race and Ethnicity.

² Mixed Migration Platform (FORTHCOMING) *Between Choice and Coercion: Forced, assisted and voluntary returns from Afghanistan to Europe*.

respondents found themselves unable to continue on to their desired countries of destination due to forced deportation, walls, fences, and closed national borders. For those that were able to reach their desired destinations in Europe, several reported their inability to access asylum as a factor in their decision to return.

4. **The biggest challenges related to reintegration back in Afghanistan had to do with the ability to develop and maintain livelihoods.** Back in Afghanistan, the main source of support for most returnees of all three categories was family. Aside from resources and support provided by family members, only a couple of respondents reported having received short-term financial aid from EU governments, the government of Afghanistan or UN agencies. While nearly all respondents received housing and food from family, some reported that this kind of support was not sustainable in the long-term and only enhanced the vulnerability of their families. Finding work opportunities would enable them to contribute to their communities, to save and provide for their families and to offer them stability and the possibility of real, long-term reintegration.
5. **Most returnees had clear ideas of what type of support they would like to receive.** Many respondents identified micro-finance loans and investment support to start small businesses as ways to build sustainable livelihoods. Other respondents recognised educational opportunities and scholarships as facilitating access to livelihoods, and by consequence, sustainable return and reintegration.
6. **Despite negative experiences related to the journey to Europe, the often poor conditions faced in Europe, and the threat of forced return, almost all returnees still viewed migration positively.** Even though extremely few respondents were able to access work – formal or informal – in Europe, the prospects of accessing employment, education, a safe and more secure life fostered renewed intentions to migrate to Europe. With little hope of accessing either employment or education, and with fear of the general insecurity in Afghanistan, most respondents wanted to return to Europe, and planned to do so after they had been able to save enough money and resources for a second attempt at the journey.

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Introduction

This assessment seeks to better understand the socio-economic profile of Afghans returning from Europe, to identify the motivations behind their return, and to investigate the challenges and vulnerabilities they face once they arrive in Afghanistan. The assessment will provide new primary data about the situation and experiences of Afghan returnees through which to understand European repatriation strategies.

Nearly forty years of conflict, economic hardship and natural disasters that are both regular and widespread have resulted in the migration of millions of Afghans, both internally and externally.³ According to a study conducted by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in 2012, 75% of Afghans had experienced some form of displacement at least once during their lives.⁴ In 2015 and 2016, the conflict in Afghanistan intensified due to a resurgence of the Taliban coinciding with the end of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) mission in Afghanistan and the subsequent departure of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Armed opposition groups quickly gained power and territory, and military operations spread across the country.

For hundreds of thousands of Afghans mobility was, and still remains, their only mechanism to cope with conflict.⁵ Although Afghans have been migrating to Europe for decades, the numbers have substantially increased in the last few years. Between 2015 and 2016, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded over 300,000 Afghan arrivals in Europe. At that time, Afghans formed the second largest group of arrivals after Syrians.

In October 2016, the European Union (EU) and Afghanistan ratified the "Joint Way Forward", an agreement which seeks improved coordination between countries involved in preventing irregular migration to Europe from Afghanistan.⁶ The agreement also seeks to facilitate the return of irregular migrants whose asylum applications have been rejected.⁷ The deal has opened a legal pathway for large-scale repatriations, as there is no cap on the number of daily deportation flights to Afghanistan.⁸ Between January and March 2017, three charter flights carrying 75 Afghan deportees each arrived in Kabul from different European nations.⁹ Some Afghans, finding life untenable in Europe, are deciding to return voluntarily (unassisted). They often use their own resources or those of their family to return, while others return through assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes such as the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme led by IOM.

While a growing number of media organisations and humanitarian actors are documenting the experiences of the large numbers of Afghans returning from Pakistan and Iran¹⁰, much less is known about the considerably smaller numbers of Afghans returning from Europe, nor about the conditions of life and challenges to reintegration that await them once they return. In particular, there is a lack of information about the influence of socio-economic backgrounds and demographic profiles on return dynamics, and on the extent to which returnees' situations, needs and aspirations are shaped by their experiences along the journey to Europe, upon arrival in Europe, and on the way back to Afghanistan.

³ IRC (2016) Afghanistan: What you need to know about one of the world's longest refugee crises, 8 September 2016.

⁴ IDMC (2012) Afghanistan: Durable solutions far from reach amid escalating conflict, NRC, 16 April 2012.

⁵ OCHA (2017) Afghanistan: 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan (January – December 2017), 21 January 2017.

⁶ European External Action Service (2016) Joint Way Forward on migration issues between Afghanistan and the EU.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rasmussen, Sune Engel (2016) EU signs deal to deport unlimited numbers of Afghan asylum seekers, The Guardian, 3 October 2016.

⁹ IOM/UNHCR, Afghanistan Refugee and Returnee Chapter Meeting Minutes, 15 March 2017.

¹⁰ HRW (2017) Pakistan Coercion, UN Complicity: The Mass Forced Return of Afghan Refugees, 13 February 2017.

The return of rejected asylum applicants, both through deportation and assisted voluntary return programmes, has become increasingly important to European governments over the last decade.¹¹ Taking into consideration the large and recent waves of Afghan migration to Europe and the new corresponding EU rulings concerning deportations, it is likely that the number of Afghans returning from Europe will rise in the near future.¹² The ability to reintegrate will play a large part in shaping future intentions, and a further understanding of it will reveal whether most Afghans are actually re-entering into a cycle of migration, and attempting to return to Europe at the earliest possible opportunity.

This report focuses on the profiles and experiences of those who returned to Afghanistan voluntarily (on an individual basis and without assistance), through assisted programmes (primarily through IOM's AVRR programme) and through forced deportation. By looking at people in these different categories, an understanding of what experiences, skills and motivations lead to a successful return to Afghanistan can be reached. The assessment will investigate the trends behind sustainable reintegration, whereby those returning are inclined to stay in Afghanistan rather than migrate again and whose family lives have improved as a result of their time abroad. 'Sustainable reintegration', as defined by UNHCR, refers to a returnee's ability to re-establish herself into her community, and exercise her social, economic, civil, political and cultural rights to the same extent as other members of her community.¹³ Sustainable return and reintegration may reduce the future number of Afghans migrating to Europe and could also drive others in Europe to consider returning home.

Methodology

Approach

This assessment relied on a qualitative data collection approach to examine the drivers behind the decision to migrate from Afghanistan to Europe, the decision to return to Afghanistan from Europe, and, upon return, the ability to reintegrate into life in Afghanistan. To assess how the different categories of return (voluntary, assisted and forced) could influence the experience of return to Afghanistan and reintegration into life there, the sample was designed to equally divide and draw on ten respondents from each return category for a total of 30 interviews. While REACH Afghanistan field staff were able to locate and speak with 10 assisted returnees and 10 forced returnees, it proved very difficult to identify ten voluntary returnees. The method of identifying respondents built on established channels of communication, and snowballing outwards to include different perspectives. Respondents were identified through a combination of social networks, organisational networks, and existing REACH networks.

Though the goal was to conduct 30 interviews, in the end, only 28 interviews were conducted, with Afghan returnees based in greater Kabul and in the northern and eastern regions of Afghanistan. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted on an individual basis, in the respondents' native language, between 21 May and 20 June 2017. Seventeen interviews were conducted in person, primarily in the greater Kabul region, while 11 interviews were conducted over the phone with respondents based in more difficult to reach locations. Respondents' answers were recorded by enumerators, and later translated into English by a bilingual senior staff member. This person was debriefed every two days to check answers for errors, to identify

¹¹ Strand, Arne et al. (2008) *Return with Dignity, Return to What? Review of the Voluntary Return Programme to Afghanistan*, Chr. Michelsen Institute.

¹² Shea, Anna (2017) *European governments return nearly 10,000 Afghans to risk of death and torture*, Amnesty International, 5 October 2017; Taylor, Lin (2017) *Rise in Afghans returning home threatens overstretched resources*, U.N. says, Reuters, 11 January 2017.

¹³ UNHCR (2012) *Pursuing Sustainable Reintegration in Afghanistan*.

and amend any issues with the interview questions and to monitor data saturation. For more information about the questionnaire and data collection methodology, please refer to Annexes 2 and 3 respectively.

Analytical Framework

This assessment combines several different theoretical frameworks to inform how outgoing migration is first approached and decided upon and how migration creates, or is seen to create, capabilities. The analysis then relies on several frameworks to consider how capability and capacity change in return migration, particularly through readiness to return, and how these ultimately affect the sustainability of return.

Migration to Europe

The “migration thresholds” framework, introduced by van der Velde and van Naerssen, and expanded on by Hagen-Zanker and Mallet, maintains that before one migrates, a person must pass through a number of thresholds with regards to decision-making, namely:

1. The person stops feeling indifferent towards the idea of migration
2. The person starts to see the idea of migration as something that could be potentially positive
3. The person selects a destination
4. The person decides on a route by which to reach the desired destination¹⁴

The migration threshold approach takes into account the different factors Afghans considered throughout the process of migration, from the time they first began weighing up the idea. Through the threshold approach, it is possible to better understand when and how Afghan respondents reassessed migration, resulting ultimately in their departure. While this assessment looks to this approach for guidance, the four thresholds have been modified slightly to adjust to the particular context of Afghan migration.

Since 2011, the Asia Foundation has included a question in their annual survey to Afghan respondents about whether, given the opportunity, they would live somewhere else.¹⁵ From 2011 to 2015, the proportion of respondents who answered “yes” increased to 39.9%, before dropping to 29.9% in 2016. Despite fluctuation during these years, most Afghans still favoured staying in Afghanistan over migrating elsewhere. Based on these statistics as well as previous respondent data indicating primarily negative attitudes towards migration, especially amongst older Afghans, this assessment understood migration to be generally viewed unfavourably by Afghans. In adopting the migration thresholds framework, this assessment therefore assumed that the first threshold would be to overcome negative attitudes towards migration. This implies that in the Afghan context, beginning to consider the idea of migration entails beginning to feel indifferent towards it. This culturally-adjusted first threshold was reflected in the questionnaire used to collect data as well as in the indicators developed for this assessment (please see Annex 2). The remaining thresholds were modified in a similar way to adapt to the Afghan context.

At the macro-scale, this research views migration as part of greater processes of social transformation and development following Hein de Haas’ aspirations-

¹⁴ Martin van der Velde and Ton van Naerssen (Eds)(2015) *Mobility and migration choices: Thresholds to crossing borders*. Farnham: Ashgate; Hagen-Zanker, Jessica and Richard Mallet (2016) *Journeys to Europe: The role of policy in migrant decision-making*, ODI, February 2016.

¹⁵ The Asia Foundation (2016) *A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2016*.

capabilities framework.¹⁶ Within this framework, migration can be seen as a “function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within a given set of opportunity structures”.¹⁷ De Haas, in turn looks to Sen’s original capability approach, which rests on individuals’ capability to achieve the type of lives they desire or have reason to value.¹⁸ Afghan returnees, as this assessment will demonstrate, desire to live in safety and security and to be able to access work opportunities that enable them to provide for their families. These desires lead to many Afghans’ migration or attempted migration. Through migration, Afghan respondents believed they had the capability to achieve better lives for themselves and for their families. Capability here is defined as being able to provide for family, being able to work, being able to live in peace, and the majority of Afghan respondents only viewed this as possible through migration.

Return

Making the decision to return, particularly to a country plagued with violent conflict, is complex and in the case of Afghans, involves different levels of choice. While some Afghans return voluntarily through their own means, others are forced to return by European host governments against their wills.

Van Houte, Siegel and Davids recognize the different levels of choice in return but argue that no decision to return is entirely voluntary or free of legal constraints, while almost no return is entirely forced either.¹⁹ With this recognition, the authors attempt, first, to develop a framework that understands return migration from an actor-based perspective, and second, to deconstruct how Afghan migrants make sense of their return migration. Van Houte et al. deconstruct the meanings and motivations of return migration into an interaction between structures, capacities, agency and desires. The authors argue that “all actors can display a degree of agency over their actions, either through enhancing their capacities to meet their desires, or by redefining their desires to match their capacities”.²⁰ Return migration back to Afghanistan, is therefore extremely complex and depending on the particular case, structures, capacities, agency and desires play out and weigh out to different degrees.

Reintegration

Once back in Afghanistan, returnees face new challenges associated with reintegration. Davids and van Houte investigate the ability and ease of returnees to reconstruct a livelihood in their former countries of origin, and whether the types of livelihoods they access are sustainable allowing for long term reintegration and *embeddedness*.²¹ In parallel to REACH’s report on ‘Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Drivers, Return and Reintegration’, this assessment combines respondent experience during return to Afghanistan and reintegration, with the analytical framework of ‘Embeddedness’.²² The sustainability of return to Afghanistan is thereby measured in terms of economic and social embeddedness, where economic embeddedness refers to if and how returnees are able to provide for themselves financially and construct livelihoods, and social embeddedness refers to the ability of returnees to access social nets, networks and support.

¹⁶ De Haas, H. (2014) *Migration Theory: Quo Vadis?*, International Migration Institute at the University of Oxford, Working Paper 100, November 2014.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Sen, A.K. (1993) *Capability and Well-Being*, In: Nussbaum, M. and Sen, A.K. (1993) *The Quality of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ Van Houte et al. (2016) *Deconstructing the meanings of and motivations for return: an Afghan case study*, *Comparative Migration Studies* 4:21.

²⁰ Van Houte et al. (2016) *Deconstructing the meanings of and motivations for return: an Afghan case study*, *Comparative Migration Studies* 4:21.

²¹ Davids, T. and van Houte, M. (2008) *Remigration, Development and Mixed Embeddedness: An Agenda for Qualitative Research?*, *International Journal on Multicultural Societies (IJMS)*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008 “The Conditions of Modern Return Migrants”

²² REACH (2017) *Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Drivers, Return and Reintegration*.

Overall approach

Drawing on the above-mentioned theories by De Haas, Sens, Van Houte et al. this research assesses Afghan returnees' migration and reintegration experiences primarily through themes of agency, capacity, desire and intention, this assessment examines Afghan returnees' migration and reintegration experiences primarily through the themes of agency, capacity, desire and intention. **Agency** is defined as autonomy over decision-making where a respondent chooses to do something or to not do something. Similar but distinct, **capacity** is understood as a respondent's ability or inability to access resources and affect the outcome of a situation. Though they often overlap, the respondent's **intention** is her long-term plan or goal, while her **desire** is what she would like to do or achieve. Intention here is viewed as more tangible while desire is more of a dream, and not based on any type of concrete planning. Building on these, **perception**, or the way the respondent experiences and understands contexts, is recognised as another principal theme, present in all stages of the journey. These five themes interact within the physical and political power structures Afghan refugees and other migrants move between, travelling to Europe and returning to Afghanistan. The five themes form a framework to understand the decision-making process behind migration as well as how migration creates, or is seen to create, capacity, and to consider how capacity changes in return migration, through readiness to return, and how it ultimately affects the sustainability of return.

Challenges and Limitations

The qualitative approach taken in this assessment means that findings are not statistically representative of the experiences of Afghan returnees from Europe. Instead, the findings indicate trends in Afghan migration and reintegration experiences. Furthermore, the findings highlight differences in such trends between Afghans who voluntarily returned, those who were assisted in their return by IOM or European host governments, and those who were forced to return.

The following limitations should also be considered:

- Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques means there is a selection bias. Respondents were either contacted by REACH after participating in past assessments, recommended through informal networks or by earlier respondents.
- Data collection focused on the greater Kabul area and the northeast of the country.
- The timeframe for the assessment, from 2014 to 2017, means all recorded experiences are particular to this time period. Laws, policies, rights and resources may have changed since 2017.
- As respondents discussed actions and decisions made years ago, there is the possibility of recall bias.
- Not all of the participants provided answers to all questions.
- Due to cultural constraints, all interviews were conducted with male returnees. A 2014 report by Samuel Hall indicates that Afghan men who migrate tend to outnumber Afghan women, but only marginally.²³ Despite this fact, it was not possible to identify female returnees to participate in the assessment. This means that the sample cannot be considered gender-balanced, nor can it illustrate trends in the experiences of female returnees.

²³ IOM (2014) Afghanistan Migration Profile, Prepared for IOM by Samuel Hall.

A Note on Terminology

Based on how they returned to Afghanistan, respondents were assigned one of three categories - voluntary, assisted and forced – each involving different levels of agency and capacity from the decision to return, to defining the return experience.²⁴

- Assisted voluntary returns are made possible both financially and logistically by a national government and/or IOM.²⁵ In Europe, failed asylum seekers, irregular migrants, and even refugees can either approach IOM or their European host government for assistance in returning to their country of origin, or can be approached by IOM or the government with an offer of repatriation. In either case, for the return to be considered an assisted voluntary return, the individual should be able to make a free and independent choice to return without threat or coercion.²⁶
- Forced returns, as understood by the European Commission and the IOM's 2004 Glossary of migration, include deportation, removal and rejection, as well as transit for the purpose of removal.²⁷ Forced returns can be considered returns that are usually planned, arranged, and paid for by a national government against an individual's will.
- Voluntary returns should, in theory, involve the voluntary choice to return made by the individual, uninfluenced by physical, psychosocial or material coercion, and based on accurate and unbiased information.²⁸ As such, voluntary returnees, or their social network, plan, arrange and pay for their returns.²⁹

Findings

Returnee Profiles

Identifying Afghan returnees from Europe proved more difficult than initially expected. In recent years, hundreds of thousands of Afghans have returned from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. In 2016 alone, more than 248,000 Afghans returned from Pakistan and more than 443,000 from Iran.³⁰ The numbers of people migrating to Europe and subsequently returning to Afghanistan pale in comparison.³¹ While IOM has data regarding Afghans it has assisted with return, little monitoring is done following deportation outcomes and the well-being of deportees.³² As voluntary returnees do not need to register with any governmental or international non-governmental organisation (INGO), their return to and reintegration once in Afghanistan remains largely undocumented.

Through social, organisational and existing REACH networks from past assessments, it was possible to locate and speak with ten forced, ten assisted, and eight voluntary returnees. Though the initial aim was to interview ten respondents from each group, identifying additional voluntary returns proved challenging, and may indicate that

²⁴ While there is limited literature on forced and assisted voluntary returns, there is a lack of information on (unassisted) voluntary returns. Aware that some Afghans are returning voluntarily (and unassisted), REACH sought to go beyond the available, existing insights and to build a more accurate understanding of returnee profiles in Afghanistan. The assessment was therefore designed to look at three categories including the less studied category of (unassisted) voluntary returnees. Based on respondents' classifications of themselves, and based on their return stories, REACH enumerators classified each respondent as pertaining to one of the three returnee categories, namely: forced, assisted voluntary and (unassisted) voluntary.

²⁵ IOM, Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ European Commission, European Migration Network Return Migration; IOM, Glossary on Migration, International Migration Law, No. 25, 2nd Edition.

²⁸ IOM, Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration.

²⁹ During the design of this assessment REACH assessment and enumerator staff agreed that if a respondent paid for his or her own trip back to Afghanistan, he or she would be considered a voluntary returnee.

³⁰ ACAPS (2017) Afghanistan: Undocumented Returnees from Pakistan and Iran, ACAPS Briefing Note, 7 April 2017.

³¹ IMF (2017) Return of Afghan Refugees to Afghanistan Surges as Country Copes to Rebuild, 26 January 2017.

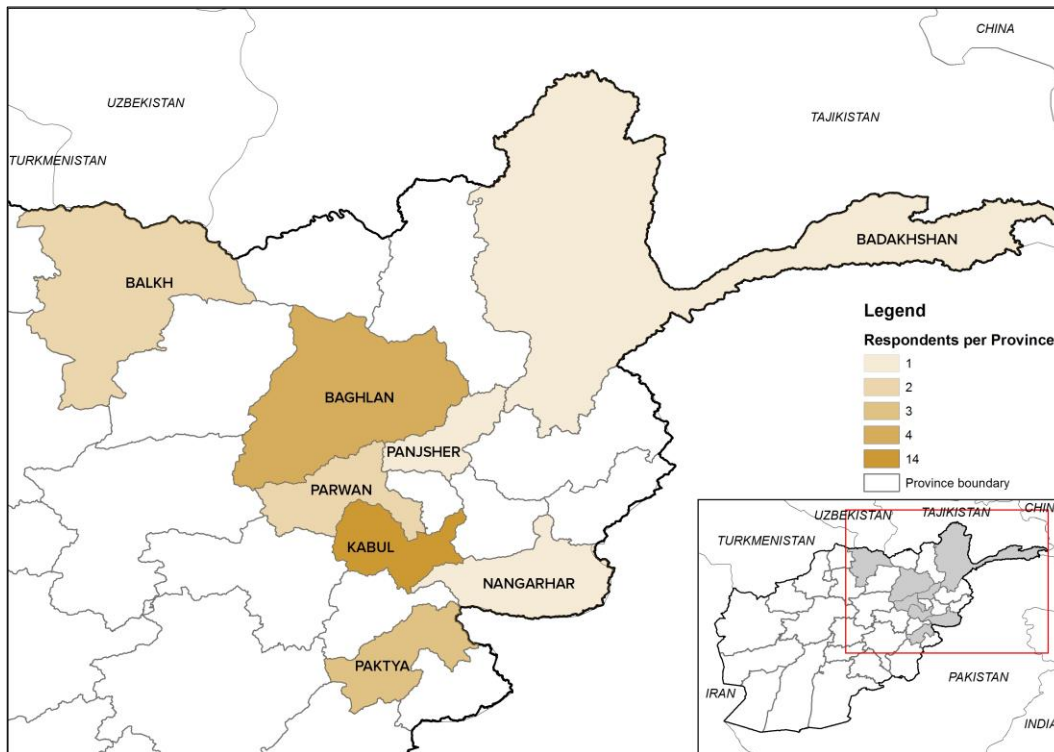
³² Forced Migration Review (2017) Post deportation risks and monitoring, Forced Migration Review Mini Feature, 7 March 2017.

the majority of Afghan returnees are either forced to return or chose to return with assistance from EU host governments and/or IOM.

Despite the fact that both Afghan men and women migrate to Europe, all returnees identified were male.³³ The fact that respondents were all male is consistent with the findings of a 2016 IOM study on assisted voluntary returns to Afghanistan.³⁴ IOM reported that in 2016 it assisted a total of 6,864 Afghans to return, 78% of whom were male. Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 42 years, with a median age of 26 years. The same IOM study found that the majority of returnees were between 19 and 40 years old, similar to the age range of respondents who participated in this study.³⁵

Almost all respondents began their journey along the Eastern Mediterranean route, crossing Turkey to enter Europe, mostly via Greece.³⁶ Twenty-six respondents began their journey in Afghanistan, while the remaining two left from Iran, where one respondent had spent most of his life, and the other had lived and worked for a year.³⁷ The 26 men who began their journeys in Afghanistan came mostly from northern and eastern provinces (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Map of respondents' origin in Afghanistan by province



At the time they migrated to Europe, 13 of the 28 respondents had attained at least a secondary education. Seven respondents had reportedly completed primary education only, and smaller numbers of respondents had completed university and vocational school. A small portion of respondents, however, had received no formal education (see Figure 2 below).

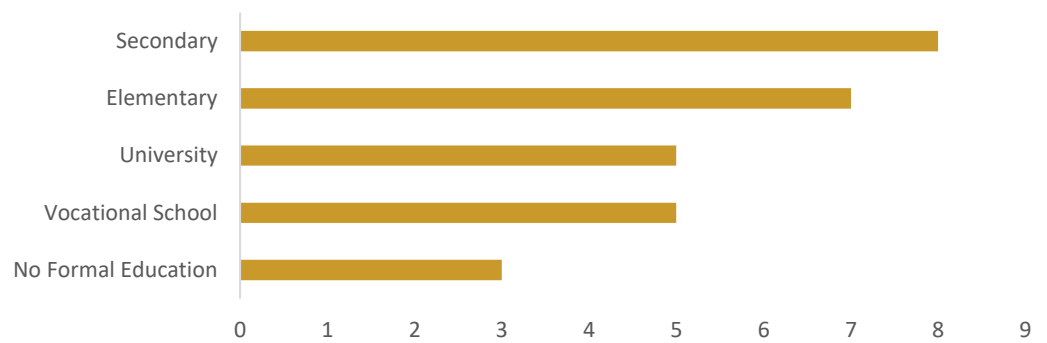
³³ Arjomand, Noah (2016) Afghan Exodus: Smuggling networks, migration and settlement patterns in Turkey, Afghan Analysis Network, 10 September 2016; IOM (2014) Afghanistan Migration Profile, Prepared for IOM by Samuel Hall.

³⁴ IOM (2016) IOM Afghanistan: Overview of Voluntary Returns in 2016.

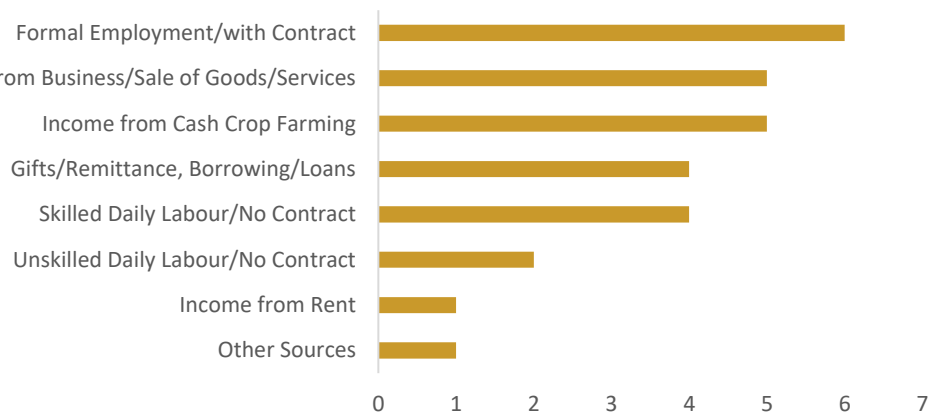
³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ BBC News (2014) Mapping Mediterranean migration, 15 September 2014; Frontex, Eastern Mediterranean Route.

³⁷ AFG18, Assisted returnee, 23 years old. AFG18 left Afghanistan when he was four years old and spent most of his life in Iran; AFG24, Voluntary returnee, 36 years old. AFG24 left Afghanistan in 2015 to work in Iran one year. In 2016, he left Iran directly for Europe.

Figure 2: Highest level of education achieved prior to migration

Prior to migration to Europe, respondents tended to earn money, in descending order of magnitude, through formal employment with a contract, through business and the sale of goods and services, and through cash crop farming (see Figure 3 below). Smaller numbers of respondents accessed income primarily through gifts and remittances or skilled daily labour without a contract; unskilled labour represented the primary source of income for the smallest portion of respondents. Within their families, the majority of respondents had acted as secondary household contributors. A smaller portion had been the primary breadwinner and an even smaller portion had been students and had acted as household assistants.³⁸

Figure 3: Primary source of income prior to migration

Migration to Europe

Making the Decision to Migrate

Building on findings from the REACH reports ‘Separated Families: who stays, who goes and why?’ and ‘Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Drivers, Return and Reintegration’, this assessment reinforces the point that making the decision to migrate is complicated and planning the logistics for migration often takes months.³⁹ Once the decision to migrate is made, those who decide to make the journey often

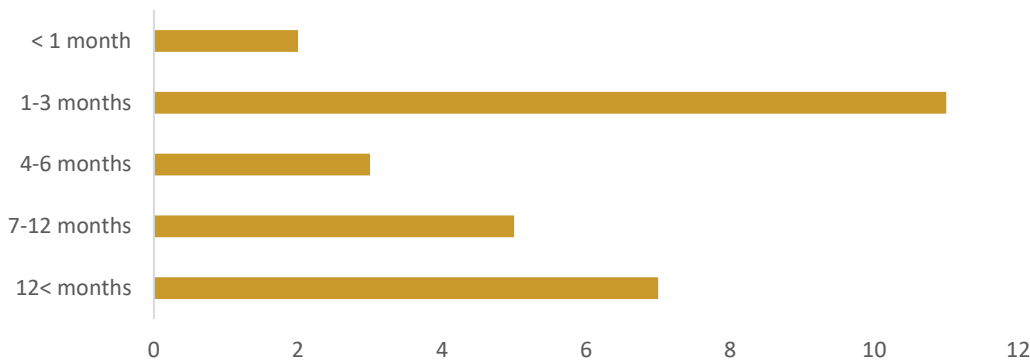
³⁸ During the design phase of this assessment, the term ‘household assistant’ was used to refer to someone who assists with household related tasks and labour instead of working inside or outside the household for paid wages. The term should not, however, be mistaken with the term ‘secondary breadwinner’ which refers to someone that assists in earning income, whether inside or outside of the household, for paid wages.

³⁹ REACH (2017) Separated families: who stays, who goes and why?; REACH (2017) Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Drivers, Return and Reintegration.

need time to collect resources, plan routes and identify journey facilitators before actually traveling.

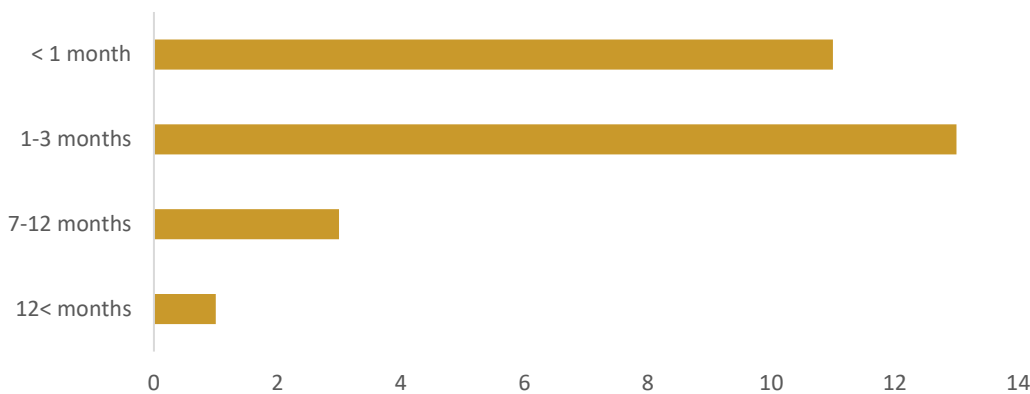
In line with the migration thresholds approach, Afghan returnees demonstrated a multi-step migration decision-making process, as well as a multi-step physical migration process. For most respondents, several months passed between the time they began to consider the idea of migration and the time they actually decided to migrate (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4: Time between beginning to consider migrating and deciding to migrate



Once respondents made the decision to migrate, they tended to need a short amount of time to plan and arrange travel to Europe (see Figure 5 below). While the median amount of time it took for a respondent to decide to migrate since first considering migration was five months, the median amount of time for a respondent to actually leave for Europe after making the decision to migrate was only one month.

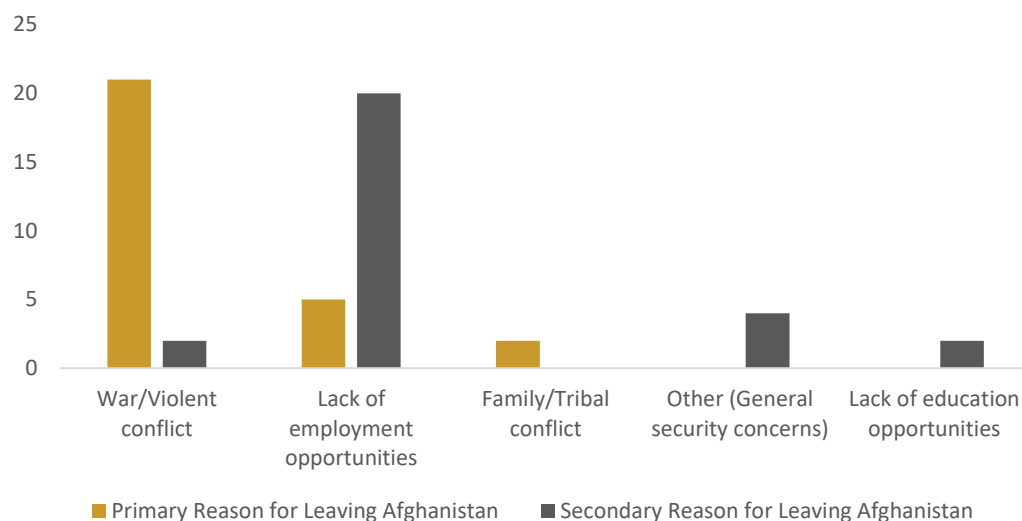
Figure 5: Time between deciding to migrate and starting the migration journey



Multiple factors influenced respondents' decisions to leave. During the pilot phase of the survey, respondents were asked to identify the primary reason why they left. Respondents tended to give two and sometimes three reasons. When enumerators brought up the multiple responses, respondents explained that the war and violent conflict in Afghanistan were not reasons enough for them to leave their country, but the violence coupled with a lack of employment possibilities made it impossible to stay and maintain any type of livelihood. These findings are supported by a 2015 study conducted by The Asia Foundation, which, among other things, looked at the two reasons Afghans thought their country was "moving in the wrong direction"; the

most common answers were insecurity and unemployment.⁴⁰ Furthermore, a 2016 article by the Migration Policy Institute suggested that there is no single driver of migration; instead Afghans tend to migrate for a variety of reasons including security and a lack of livelihoods, among others (see Figure 6 below).⁴¹

Figure 6: Main reasons for leaving Afghanistan



Migratory Routes

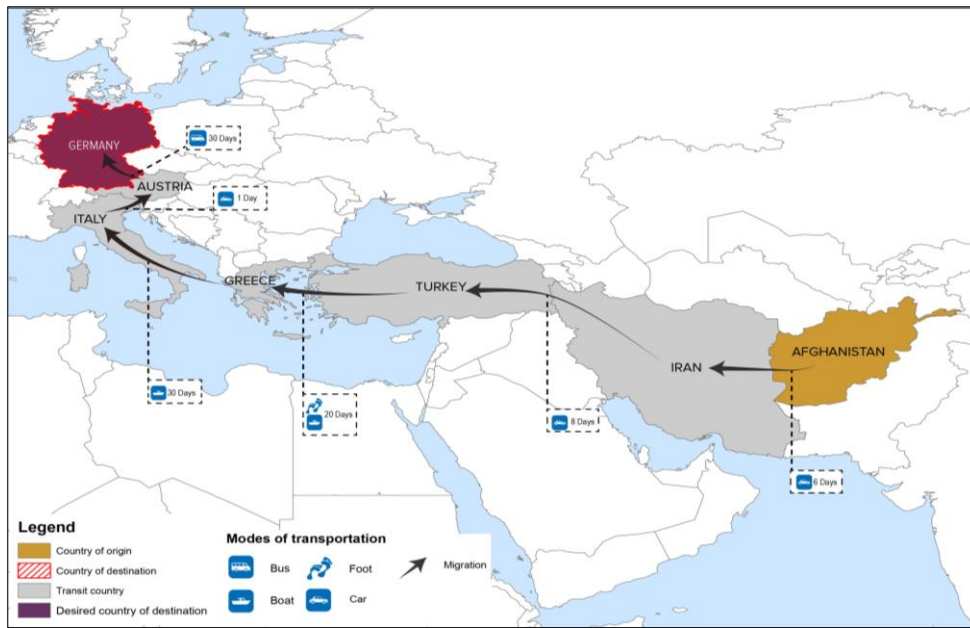
On average, respondents travelled through six countries before reaching a final destination, be it desired or undesired. In two cases, respondents were only able to travel through three countries before they were stopped in Greece. On the opposite end of the spectrum, one respondent who did make it to his final desired destination, travelled through a total of 11 countries.

The final destinations and the routes respondents decided on differed, but not dramatically. After leaving Afghanistan the majority of respondents entered either Iran or Pakistan and then Iran. From Iran, they travelled through Turkey and into Greece. Respondents often used multiple forms of transportation including: car, boat, plane, train, bus, and walking. Most respondents described having travelled from Afghanistan to Turkey by car or bus, crossing from Turkey to Greece via boat, and then travelling through Europe on foot and via hired car. Figures 7 and 8 depict two of the routes taken.

⁴⁰ The Asia Foundation (2015) A survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2015.

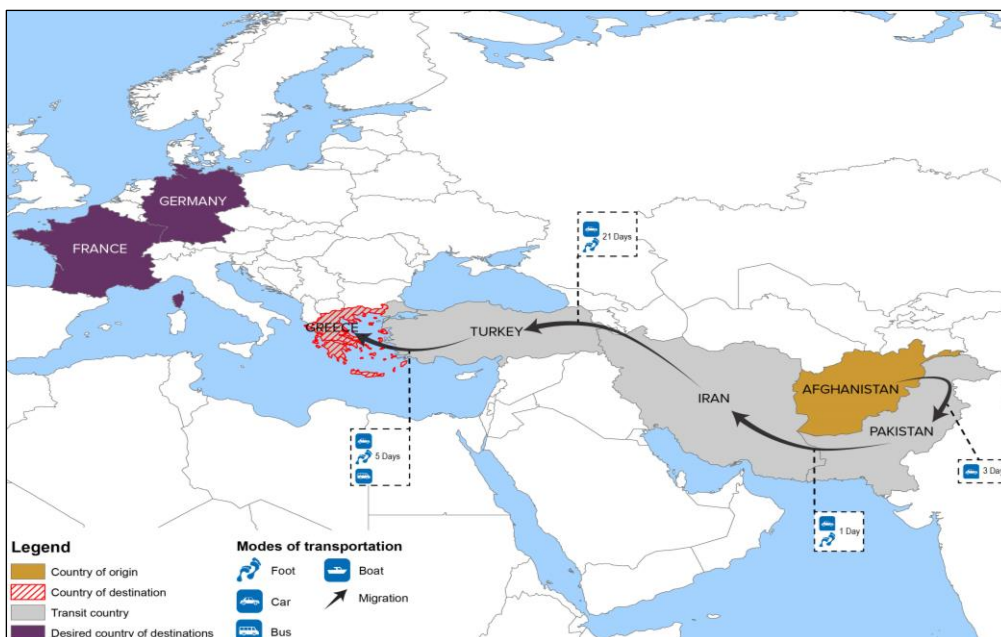
⁴¹ Majidi, Nassim et al. (2016) Seeking Safety, Jobs and More: Afghanistan's Mixed Flows Test Migration Policy, Migration Policy Institute, 25 February 2016.

Figure 7: Qais's migration route to Europe⁴²



Qais traveled through six countries to successfully reach his final destination, Germany. His journey from Afghanistan to Germany took nearly three months, and involved travelling by car, boat, bus and by foot. Importantly, Qais's journey shows how migration can become broken up into segments, where refugees and other migrants often spend more time than planned in certain locations due to problems crossing borders, not having enough money, and renegotiating passage with smugglers among other challenges.⁴³

Figure 8: Jalal's migration route to Europe⁴⁴



⁴² AFG10, Forced returnee, 20 years old. All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

⁴³ UNICEF/REACH (2017) Children on the Move in Italy and Greece, June 2017; REACH (FORTHCOMING) Youth on the Move: Investigating Decision-Making, Migration Trajectories and Expectations of Youth on the Way to Italy.

⁴⁴ AFG25, Forced returnee, 20 years old. All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

Jalal began along a similar route but upon arriving in Greece, he found that he could not continue his journey due to border closures. Like many other refugees and other migrants, Jalal became stranded in Greece, unable to travel any further.⁴⁵ Unlike Qais, Jalal never reached his desired final destination.

Agency and capacity

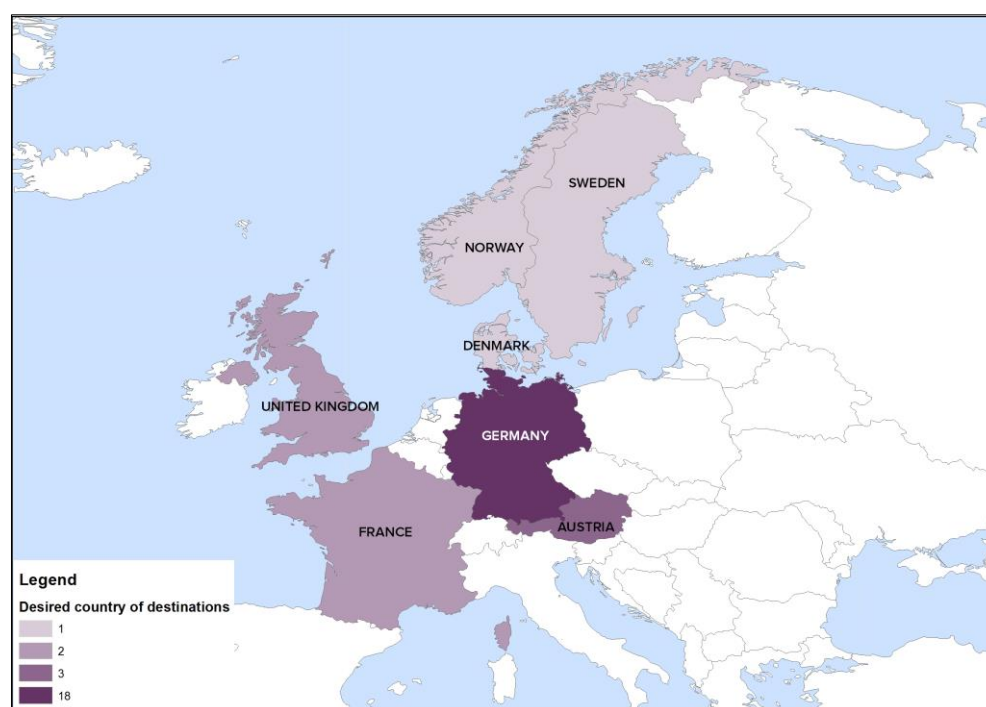
All respondents demonstrated a strong sense of agency in their migration to Europe - each individual made the decision to migrate. Similarly, respondents showed capacity in making the decision to leave, preparing for the journey and actually travelling to Europe.

A lack of agency, however, was manifest once in Europe, when many respondents were unable to reach their desired final destinations. Their journeys ended abruptly when they encountered border closures, something outside of their control and ability to affect. As such, many respondents lacked the capacity to continue on their journeys and were unable to reach their planned destinations. Jalal's migration route and his story demonstrate this clearly.

Desires and intentions

At the time they travelled to Europe, there were no real differences between respondent categories. All 28 respondents shared similar desires and intentions to travel to and settle in Europe. All returnees both desired and intended to migrate to destinations in northern and Western Europe (see Figure 9 below). In line with previous findings from a 2016 REACH report on migration to Europe through the Western Balkans, most respondents began their migration journeys with the intention of reaching Germany.⁴⁶

Figure 9: Most desired European countries of destination



Many respondents chose their desired destination based on recommendations by friends and family. A small number of respondents stated that having family

⁴⁵ REACH (2016) Migration to Europe through the Western Balkans: Serbia & the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

members and friends in their desired destination was a factor in their decision to migrate there. For the most part, however, decisions to migrate to particular destinations were based on perceptions of ease of being granted asylum and finding employment. Germany in particular was perceived to offer the most in the way of employment opportunities.

“Our intended destination was Germany due to recommendations by friends in Germany who told us Germany was the best country for employment opportunities.”⁴⁷

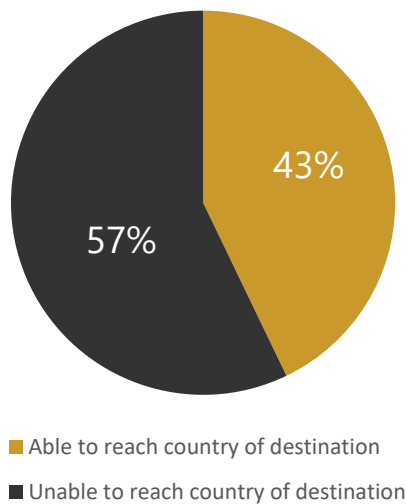
Obstacles

Respondents did not report on obstacles on their journeys, but once in Europe a number of respondents encountered closed borders, which affected onward movement. Several respondents who ended up in Greek and Bulgarian camps reported poor treatment on the part of authorities, poor quality of housing and food, and in some cases a lack of food.⁴⁸

Other respondents who were able to reach their desired destination encountered obstacles when trying to access asylum as well as employment opportunities. Despite reaching their intended destination, they lacked the capacity to access some of the positive resources they associated with migration, such as employment, education and protection.

Just over half of the 28 respondents were able to reach their desired destination (see Figure 10 below).

Figure 10: Ability to reach desired destination



Return to Afghanistan

Migratory Routes

The route of return to Afghanistan was not nearly as complicated as the route to Europe. The return journey of all 28 respondents involved air travel in at least one leg of the journey. For most respondents, return involved two flights. For a smaller

⁴⁷ AFG09, Forced returnee, 26 years old.

⁴⁸ Poor treatment by authorities reflects direct translation of responses and could imply anything from unresponsiveness to verbal or physical abuse.

number of respondents, deportation from Greece resulted in either a flight or a boat ride to Turkey before they were able to fly back to Afghanistan. Twenty-seven of the 28 returnees flew from the European country they had been living in to Kabul, transiting either through Turkey or the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Assisted returnees had flights arranged by European host governments or IOM. In some cases, they were given a certain amount of cash assistance for the trip, and in one case, a returnee was put up in a hotel during a long layover in Istanbul.

In most cases, **forced returnees** were put on flights and escorted from European host countries through Turkey or the UAE, to Kabul. In a couple of cases, however, forced returnees reported being deported from Greece to Turkey, kept in detention in Turkey, and then deported again, this time from Turkey to Afghanistan.⁴⁹

Some **voluntary returnees** flew home from European host countries through Turkey or the UAE after their families arranged for their return tickets. Other voluntary returns made it as far as Greece or Bulgaria and then, either turned themselves in to Greek and Bulgarian authorities so that they could be returned (instead of approaching IOM for assisted return), or were arrested and forcibly deported from Greece or Bulgaria to Turkey. Once in Turkish custody, respondents reported being given the option to remain in Turkish detention or to return to Afghanistan, whereupon respondents all called family and friends to help arrange their return.⁵⁰ While these respondents did pay for their return, it is questionable whether their return can be considered voluntary under such circumstances.

Agency and capacity

Respondents' sense of agency and capacity tended to link to the circumstance of their return, and how voluntary they perceived their return to have been. Assisted returnees tended to describe positive feelings of agency and capacity. Forced returnees described negative feelings, in that they could not make choices and affect their own fates. Voluntary returnees, however, were split. Some felt that they had been able to make the free choice to return, while others felt they had no other option.

Nine out of ten **assisted returnees** described feelings of positive agency over their return. While in one case an assisted returnee was approached by IOM, in the other nine cases, assisted returnees were the ones to approach national authorities and IOM to ask to return. At the same time, assisted returnees displayed mixed feelings over their capacity during the return. Seven out of ten spoke of the inability to access asylum and employment in Europe, which led them to the decision to return.

Not surprisingly, **forced returnees** reported feeling a lack of agency due to the fact that they were arrested, detained and deported against their will. None of the ten was given the choice to remain in Europe.

"After five days in Greece, we could not go any further and [the] police arrested us and consequently I was deported."⁵¹

Forced returnees also reported feeling a lack of capacity – they could not go anywhere else or gather resources before being deported.⁵²

⁴⁹ AFG12, Forced returnee, 29 years old. AFG12 was arrested by Greek police, kept in detention for a month and a half before being deported to Turkey and ultimately deported from Turkey to Afghanistan.

⁵⁰ AFG02, Voluntary returnee, 23 years old; AFG13, Voluntary returnee, 23 years old; AFG14, Voluntary returnee, 22 years old; AFG02, AFG13 and AFG14 were arrested by Greek police and then deported to Turkey where they had to procure their own return tickets to Afghanistan.

⁵¹ AFG25, Forced returnee, 20 years old.

⁵² AFG07, Forced returnee, 21 years old; AFG12, Forced returnee, 29 years old; AFG28, Forced returnee, 23 years old.

Voluntary returnees described feeling a lack of both agency and capacity because of the inability to continue to their desired destinations. Several made this decision based on family-related factors.⁵³ When Amir's pregnant wife suffered psychological trauma during their trip and her condition worsened, Amir made the decision to return to Afghanistan (see Box 1).⁵⁴ Returnees like Amir felt they did not have another option when family members asked them to return. Despite being able to say no in theory, these men felt a lack of agency in their decision to return.

Box 1: Making the Decision to Return

Amir made the decision to approach the Swiss authorities to return to Afghanistan due to his wife's poor health. The two made the journey to Europe but his wife began to suffer psychological trauma due to the different hardships they bore witness to along the way. In the end, Amir realised that his wife, who had since become pregnant as she struggled with mental trauma, needed to return to Afghanistan to be with her family. Despite the fact that Amir approached the Swiss authorities, he did not feel that the choice to return was actually theirs (ed. his and his wife's). He felt that return was their only real option - the only thing they could do because of his wife's poor health. Flights were subsequently arranged by Swiss authorities.⁵⁵

Most of the voluntary returnees felt they had few other options than to return to Afghanistan; some even felt that it was their only choice. In some cases, closed borders meant that respondents would wait indefinitely in uncertain conditions to continue to their desired destinations.

*"Not being able to receive refugee status and not being able to work – through which I could have supported my family financially – besides doing nothing and spending my time in the [refugee] camp was boring. An unforeseen future, where it is unclear whether after spending more years in Europe I would have received refugee status, [was not worth it]."*⁵⁶

In several cases, voluntary returnees reported turning themselves over to Greek police so that they could be sent back.⁵⁷ Tareq described being arrested by Greek police, handed over to Turkish police and then being given the option to remain in detention or pay for his own ticket to Afghanistan.⁵⁸ Eventually he paid for his ticket, but his situation raises questions about whether his return can really be considered voluntary when he had to choose between detention and return. While it can be argued that voluntary returnees had agency in their decision to return, it can be questioned whether such a narrow set of options really allows for genuine and unobstructed voluntary decision-making and therefore positive agency. The breakdown between who is considered a voluntary returnee, who is an assisted returnee and who is a forced returnee was not always clear or easy to ascertain, and can even be arbitrary. Furthermore, and despite their different capacities to control their situations, the return to Afghanistan was marked by overall similar shared experiences.

⁵³ AFG03, Assisted returnee, 28 years old; AFG19, Voluntary returnee, 23 years old; AFG27, Voluntary returnee, 27 years old.

⁵⁴ AFG26, Assisted returnee, 26 years old. All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

⁵⁵ AFG08, Assisted returnee, 26 years old. All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

⁵⁶ AFG03, Assisted returnee, 28 years old.

⁵⁷ AFG20, Voluntary returnee, 20 years old; AFG24, Voluntary returnee, 36 years old.

⁵⁸ AFG20, Voluntary returnee, 20 years old. All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

Desires and intentions

In general, very few respondents expressed an intention or desire to return to Afghanistan but three respondents (two voluntary and one assisted) stated that they sought to return to support family members.⁵⁹

Obstacles

Obstacles faced by the different groups varied, but the common challenges of closed physical borders, legal barriers to applying for asylum, and the inability to access employment in EU host countries were expressed by respondents in all three returnee categories.

Several **assisted returnees** reported poor conditions in the refugee camps, where they were unable to access enough food. Many reported that the repatriation process took a long time.

Aside from being unable to reach their desired destinations in Europe, several **forced returnees** reported being arrested and ill-treated en route to and in Europe. For example, one respondent travelled to Bulgaria where he spent time in a camp.⁶⁰ He stated that at some point authorities stopped serving food in the camp as a way to force refugees and other migrants to leave. The respondent reported that after two weeks without food in the camp, asylum seekers were arrested, ill-treated and detained by the police for one month. Four other forced returnee respondents reported not being able to access enough food or water while in camps in Europe, or during return to Afghanistan.⁶¹

Voluntary returnees who were first deported to Turkey reported similar situations.

Support and resources

Information about and access to support and resources varied considerably between forced, voluntary and assisted returnees during their return.

Unlike voluntary and forced returnees, **assisted returnees** received direct assistance from IOM in some cases, and EU governments in others. IOM facilitated half of the returns, while the governments of Sweden, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark were reported to have facilitated the other half. Respondents learned about the assisted return option from different sources including: the police, friends and personal networks, and in one case, Germany's International Broadcaster - *Deutsche Welle* - website.⁶² Several assisted returnees also described being enticed to return by incentives reportedly advertised by UN agencies and EU governments.⁶³ They understood that upon their return they would receive money, land and jobs.⁶⁴

As **forced returnees** did not have control or direct access to resources or support when leaving Europe for Afghanistan, EU governments tended to arrange for the return financially. Generally, forced returnees tended to have access to very few resources and several reported that they were not given enough time to collect the few belongings and resources they did have before they were deported.

⁵⁹ AFG02, Voluntary returnee, 23 years old; AFG05, Assisted returnee, 24 years old; AFG27, Voluntary returnee, 27 years old.

⁶⁰ AFG06, Forced returnee, 19 years old.

⁶¹ AFG09, Forced returnee, 26 years old; AFG12, Forced returnee, 29 years old; AFG15, Forced returnee, 22 years old; AFG28, Forced returnee, 23 years old.

⁶² AFG04, Assisted returnee, 26 years old.

⁶³ IOM describes its AVRR programme in Afghanistan as providing the following services to returnees: arrangement of travel, including assistance in transit and reception on arrival; pre-departure and post-arrival provision of information, counseling and referral; temporary accommodation in Kabul; medical assistance/referrals; arrangement of onward transportation to final in-country destination; provision of immediate and longer-term reintegration assistance; IOM (2017) IOM Afghanistan: Overview of Voluntary Returns in 2016, 30 March 2017.

⁶⁴ These reports could not be verified by UN agencies in Afghanistan.

Voluntary returnees tended to not have much in the way of monetary resources, but were able to receive financial support from friends and family. It was family members who tended to pay for their tickets to return, after respondents felt that they had no other option than to do so. In several cases, voluntary returnees decided to return after hearing from friends and family that the borders were closed or would remain closed. Personal networks informed their decisions to return.

“[I decided to return after] news and stories heard from friends that EU borders will remain closed for a long time. Living in Greece with no work and no support from [the] government was not possible.”⁶⁵

For voluntary returnees who were deported from Greece or Bulgaria to Turkey only, neither European nor Turkish authorities paid for their full travel back to Afghanistan. In these cases, respondents similarly ended up having to rely on friends and family.

Reintegration

Despite the fact that respondents returned under different sets of circumstances, their experiences of reintegration tended to be similar. All respondents commented on the lack of employment and education opportunities and general insecurity back in Afghanistan. Though some faced difficulty accessing food and shelter, health services were reported to be good. Others spoke about how friends and family created positive conditions for reintegration.

Agency and capacity

Voluntary and assisted returnees in particular spoke of agency with regards to decision-making and planning for the future. Respondents described intentions to stay in current locations in Afghanistan, to return to Europe, or to borrow money and to restart businesses. At the same time, respondents from all three returnee categories also referred to a lack of agency in their being back in Afghanistan; two forced returnees described having nowhere else to go.⁶⁶

Capacity was viewed negatively overall by those in all three returnee categories. A majority of respondents reported being unable to access employment back in Afghanistan. The inability to access money more generally was reported – this impacted their ability to pay rent, access shelter and leave the country again.

Contrary to the majority of returnees, three assisted returnees and two forced returnees described their capacity to work in Afghanistan and provide for their families, despite challenging conditions and low wages.⁶⁷ All five explained that they had been unable to legally work in Europe.

Desire and intention

All three groups of returnees expressed similar desires, which included: leaving Afghanistan again, mostly to try once again to get to Europe; working, developing livelihoods and being able to support their families; and owning their own homes.

⁶⁵ AFG24, Voluntary returnee, 36 years old.

⁶⁶ AFG09, Forced returnee, 26 years old; AFG10, Forced returnee, 20 years old.

⁶⁷ AFG01, Assisted returnee, 32 years old; AFG05, Assisted returnee, 24 years old; AFG16, Assisted returnee, 20 years old; AFG06, Forced returnee, 19 years old; AFG25, Forced returnee, 20 years old.

“[I am] staying here for the time being, however, if I had the chance to move with family [to] Europe, I will take the chances again.”⁶⁸

A smaller number of respondents also voiced the desire to receive financial support to complete their university studies. Like desires, intentions tended to be similar across the three groups of returnees. Most expressed an intention to remain where they were in Afghanistan for the time being, while some expressed an intention to ultimately leave for another destination.

Obstacles

Obstacles also tended to be cross-cutting between the three respondent categories. A lack of access to livelihoods and employment were seen as the greatest obstacles to reintegration. Most respondents returned with no money and no jobs. Instead, respondents referred to debts they needed to pay off, as nearly all had borrowed money to travel to Europe. These respondents, like Bilal (see Box 2 below), ended up relying on family members for almost total support. Several believed their return would only further increase unemployment in Afghanistan as they competed for already limited opportunities.⁶⁹ Related obstacles for returnees included the inability to pay rent and access housing, as well as insecurity.

Traditional notions of reintegration, in terms of cultural and social factors, posed challenges for very few of the respondents. Twenty-six out of 28 were comfortable back in Afghanistan and faced no challenges in this respect. Only two respondents commented on cultural challenges to reintegration. Hassan moved to Iran with his family when he was four and returned to an almost foreign country when he was forced to return to Afghanistan.⁷⁰ He reported problems because of his lack of understanding of the local language⁷¹ and culture, and not having family or any kind of social network. Another respondent reported that he had gotten used to speaking German, and switching back to his mother tongue took some time and effort.⁷²

Support and resources

While all respondents had some type of support and resources during their return migration from Europe to Afghanistan, once at home this was almost completely limited to support from their families.

“Apart from my family that is supporting me by providing accommodation, food and financial assistance, I have received no assistance from anyone else.”⁷³

Though returnees acknowledged these basic and important services provided by their families, they expressed concern about how long this support could last. Box 2 (below) describes a common scenario faced by respondents upon return.

⁶⁸ AFG17, Assisted returnee, 27 years old.

⁶⁹ AFG12, Forced returnee, 29 years old.

⁷⁰ AFG18, Assisted returnee, 23 years old. All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

⁷¹ This respondent's traditional language in Afghanistan was Dari (as opposed to the Iranian Farsi he grew up speaking).

⁷² AFG11, Forced returnee, 26 years old.

⁷³ AFG14, Voluntary returnee, 22 years old.

Box 2: Challenges to reintegration

Bilal has lived with his family since November 2016. Apart from the housing and food his family provides him with, he has not received any financial or service related support from the Danish government or any organisation. Since returning, Bilal has been unable to find a job. His brother financially supports him, but he is unsure how sustainable this is in the long-term. In addition to his economic concerns, Bilal is also worried about housing. Since leaving for Europe, his family expanded. He does not know how much longer he will be able to stay in his family's house given that space is a concern.⁷⁴

Respondents viewed food and housing as short-term resources and therefore, unsustainable. While several of the assisted returnees reported having been promised support upon return by UN agencies, respondents reported that monetary amounts of between US\$20 and US\$733 were not enough to sustain their well-being for more than a few months. In other cases, despite reporting that they were promised similar forms of support, respondents said they received nothing. Land or jobs were not provided to any of the respondents.

"The support I receive from my [family] will come to an end one day and then I will face more issues. A sustainable support include[s] providing job opportunity, financial support to repay the loan and establish [my] own business."⁷⁵

As a result, almost all returnees spoke of the importance of finding a job or a way to develop a source of livelihood. Some also spoke of the need for more educational opportunities. When asked about what type of support they would like to receive, the majority across all categories spoke of loans with which they could establish businesses and small enterprises. Those who referenced starting a small business tended to want to establish grocery stores. Respondents also spoke of sustainable support in terms of scholarships or loans that would allow them to pursue their education so they could access better jobs upon graduation.

Finally, a small number of respondents stated that the best form of sustainable support would be to be sent back to Europe by INGOs. When the enumerators questioned respondents about this answer, returnees explained that through a return to Europe they could access education and jobs and enjoy stability without fear or threat of insecurity.

Respondents' comments point to the fact that sustainable return and reintegration is impossible without systems that enable returnees to financially support themselves. Several assisted returnees agreed to return under the impression that they would receive jobs, land or money on return. Instead, all returnees described the same scarcity of livelihood opportunities they experienced before they left. The inability to earn wages and support their families led respondents to report feeling unsettled and unstable back in their communities of origin. As a result, many spoke of a desire to attempt another migration to Europe or in one case, the Arabian Gulf.

Perception of Migration

Migration to Europe

Towards the end of the interviews, respondents were asked about their perception of migration to Europe and return to Afghanistan having experienced first-hand the challenges of the journeys both ways. Despite the difficulties they experienced, most

⁷⁴ AFG03, Assisted returnee, 28 years old. All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

⁷⁵ AFG11, Forced returnee, 26 years old.

retained a positive idea of migration to Europe and reported that their communities did likewise.

“In our community migration is viewed positively because those who are abroad make enough money and support their families better than those who are working in Afghanistan.”⁷⁶

When designing the parameters, research questions and indicators for this assessment, it was understood that migration was widely viewed negatively. A 2016 survey conducted by the Asia Foundation among Afghan respondents in Afghanistan (who had never migrated and therefore never returned) showed that the majority of Afghan respondents were not keen to migrate and live somewhere outside of Afghanistan in the first place. Respondents’ answers, however, contradict this assumption. Instead, most returnees and their communities saw migration to Europe as offering prospects of employment, competitive education, a better life and security - things that respondents did not perceive to exist in Afghanistan. Many returnees therefore planned to migrate to Europe again once they have saved enough money.

Overall, the majority of **assisted returnees** viewed migration to Europe as positive. The group recognised that their communities still viewed migration positively, but at a personal level, there were mixed opinions. Several assisted returnees felt negatively about the risks they had taken migrating to Europe, as well as about the financial resources that they had spent on the journey. The same assisted returnees viewed this money as wasted, given they were unable to access the rights and services they thought were available to them.

Forced returnee respondents for the most part reported that both they and their communities shared positive views about migration to Europe. Despite the risks and dangers of traveling to Europe, they believed that Europe offered opportunities for a better life.

Two out of the ten forced returnees, however, described negative feelings towards migration to Europe. These men expressed concern over the dangerous journey, in particular the water crossing from Turkey to Greece.

Voluntary returnees tended to view migration to Europe very positively, with their reasons being similar to those of forced returnees. Given the fact that many were not under governmental pressure to return but rather made the choice to do so, their positive attitudes seem a bit surprising. Supporting de Haas’ aspirations-capabilities framework, a majority of voluntary and forced returnees viewed Europe through a lens of aspirations, capabilities and unlimited potential.

Return to Afghanistan

Overall, most returnees viewed return as negative, due to a lack of job opportunities and insecurity in particular. In a 2017 article, Reuters described how young male returnees viewed return negatively,⁷⁷ with similar findings to this assessment – the men interviewed by Reuters did not view the country as safe for return because of the Taliban and other insurgent threats.

At the same time, individuals in all categories reported one positive aspect of return – being reunited with family.

For the most part, **assisted returnees** approached EU officials when they were ready to return. They showed greater agency in their decision to return than even

⁷⁶ AFG10, Forced returnee, 20 years old.

⁷⁷ Wliques, Tommy (2017) Afghans deported from Europe arrive home, to war and unemployment, Reuters, 31 March 2017.

voluntary returnees. Because of a perceived greater choice in return, assisted returnees also maintained more positive attitudes regarding return. Salem described how, based upon his challenging experience migrating to Europe and trying to access resources including employment, his community now views migration negatively and return positively.⁷⁸ Back in Afghanistan he is once again with his family, and can try to help provide for their well-being.

Forced returnees tended to view return as negative, largely due to a lack of jobs and insecurity. Furthermore, forced returnees also reflected on the financial investment in migration to Europe, which they perceived as lost since they were forced to return. Their feelings of a lack of agency mirrored several of the voluntary returnees' own sentiments regarding a lack of options and choice over return, demonstrating once again how similar voluntary and forced returnee experiences can be.

Most of the **voluntary returnees** felt that they did not have a real choice over their return. Their families had either told them to come back, or they felt that they had to due to a family member's illness, or not being able to continue their journey in Europe because of closed borders or arrest. For these reasons, respondents saw return as not really voluntary, and regretted having to return.

Conclusion

This study focused on the experience of Afghan returnees who returned from Europe to Afghanistan between 2014 and 2017. Based on 28 semi-structured interviews with voluntary, assisted and forced Afghan returnees, it sought to answer four main questions: **i) What factors influence Afghans to move to Europe, which factors influence the return to Afghanistan and where do these returnees go back to and why?; ii) What factors make it possible for individuals to return to Afghanistan?; iii) What factors facilitate reintegration of returnees and how do returnees feel they are perceived by the community?; and iv) What are the current situational conditions for returnees and how is that affected by different actors?**

This assessment found that the main reasons for Afghans to migrate to Europe were conflict and instability, as well as a lack of employment opportunities.

Excluding forced returnees who had no option other than to return, the assessment found that the factors that influenced assisted and voluntary returnees to return to Afghanistan consisted of family pressure (specifically families' desire for respondents' return), an inability to reach their country of destination due to border closures, and an inability to access asylum and employment opportunities once in Europe. Voluntary returnees tended to see themselves as having no other option than to return. Many voluntary returnees made the decision after a relative became ill or when family members in Afghanistan asked them to return. Some described being told to return by family members rather than asked, but in both cases family related factors carried urgency and weight in the decision-making process. Other voluntary returnees, along with most assisted returnees, returned after finding themselves blocked by closed borders and unable to continue their journey to their desired destinations, mainly in northern Europe. Others – assisted returnees in particular – made the decision to return after facing obstacles to accessing asylum and employment in Europe.

The most important factors that made return possible for respondents included financial assistance from family and logistical assistance by EU governments and/or IOM. For forced returnees, return was financially and

⁷⁸ AFG04, Assisted returnee, 26 years old. All names have been changed to protect the identity of respondents.

logistically facilitated by EU host governments who arranged and paid for their flights home. For assisted returnees, EU host governments and/or IOM also facilitated the return process. For voluntary returnees, however, family members back in Afghanistan were the ones who tended to pay for return flights home.

Most respondents felt that their return was perceived positively by their families, but overall negatively by their communities. Respondents generally felt that their families were grateful for their safe return and the chance to see them again. At the same time, most respondents described how their return was viewed negatively by their community, due to the high costs associated with migration to Europe. A lot of money was invested in each respondent's migration to Europe and since respondents had returned, it was now perceived by many as wasted. Furthermore, community members viewed return negatively due to the insecurity and instability as well as the lack of jobs available to returnees upon return.

The single most important factor that made it possible for returnees to reintegrate was unanimously reported to be family. Almost all respondents stated that family members met them at the airport and provided them with housing and food. In some cases, family members attempted to help returnees find work. Interestingly, however, respondents did not immediately recognise their social support networks as providing them assistance, as it is assumed families will provide aid. Aside from resources and support provided by family members, only a couple of respondents reported having received short-term financial aid from EU governments, the government of Afghanistan, or UN agencies. Several assisted returnees stated that they were promised support by INGOs, but never received them.

The situational conditions facing all respondents upon return were similar, regardless of their modality of return.⁷⁹ Almost all returnees described a lack of employment or livelihood-building opportunities, and prevailing insecurity. Many respondents worried about the sustainability of their current living situations as they shared rooms and houses with family members, and put economic pressure on them. Returnees in such situations linked sparse employment opportunities with an inability to afford housing other than what their families provided them with.

Returnees of all three categories recognised educational and livelihood opportunities as conditions for sustainable return. Returnees suggested micro-finance and small enterprise loans as a way to support their long-term reintegration. Several returnees were specifically interested in opening small businesses like grocery stores, and saw micro-loans as a feasible way to do this. Generally, respondents suggested that job creation and increased educational opportunities would create conditions for more sustainable return and reintegration.

Respondents reported, however, that they will likely not receive such loans, scholarships and support. As a result, many expressed a desire to attempt another migration to Europe once they were able to gather the necessary financial resources.

⁷⁹ Situational conditions for returnees refer to the challenges they face in accessing protection, housing, basic services, livelihoods; their specific needs and vulnerabilities; how their current situation differs from what they imagined it to be; if they intend to stay or to migrate again; and whether the situation differs based on respondent age, gender and socio-economic profile.

Annex 1: List of participants

Form ID	Nationality	Gender	Age	Return type	Displacement status	Current location
AFG01	Afghan	Male	32	Assisted	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG02	Afghan	Male	23	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG03	Afghan	Male	28	Assisted	IDP	Afghanistan
AFG04	Afghan	Male	26	Assisted	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG05	Afghan	Male	24	Assisted	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG06	Afghan	Male	19	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG07	Afghan	Male	21	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG08	Afghan	Male	26	Assisted	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG09	Afghan	Male	26	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG10	Afghan	Male	20	Forced	Refugee	Afghanistan
AFG11	Afghan	Male	26	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG12	Afghan	Male	29	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG13	Afghan	Male	23	Voluntary	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG14	Afghan	Male	22	Voluntary	IDP	Afghanistan
AFG15	Afghan	Male	22	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG16	Afghan	Male	20	Assisted	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG17	Afghan	Male	27	Assisted	IDP	Afghanistan
AFG18	Afghan	Male	23	Assisted	Refugee	Afghanistan
AFG19	Afghan	Male	23	Voluntary	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG20	Afghan	Male	40	Voluntary	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG21	Afghan	Male	30	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG22	Afghan	Male	42	Assisted	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG23	Afghan	Male	38	Assisted	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG24	Afghan	Male	36	Voluntary	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG25	Afghan	Male	20	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG26	Afghan	Male	30	Voluntary	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG27	Afghan	Male	27	Voluntary	Non-displaced	Afghanistan
AFG28	Afghan	Male	23	Forced	Non-displaced	Afghanistan

Annex 2: Questionnaire

Question ID	Question	Answer options (if relevant)
A_1_1	Are you male or female?	
A_1_2	How old are you?	
A_2	In which province and district of Afghanistan was your main residence?	Fill in province Fill in district
A_3_1	What source covered MOST of your household expenses in a month, prior to traveling to Europe?	Select one: -Income from cash crop farming -Income from livestock farming -Income from rent -Income from business/sale of goods/services -Unskilled daily labour/no contract -Skilled daily labour/no contract -Formal employment/with contract -Government benefits -Humanitarian assistance -Gifts/remittances, borrowing/loans -Savings -Other [specify]
A_3_2	What is the highest education level you've completed up until now (2017)?	Select one: -Elementary -Secondary -Vocational school -University -Other [specify]
A_3_3	When did you leave Afghanistan?	Month Year
A_3_4	When did you return to Afghanistan?	Month Year
A_3_5	What was your role within the household before leaving Afghanistan?	Select all that apply: -Breadwinner -Secondary household contributor -Child care -Household assistance -Child of household/student -Other [specify]
A_4	Describe your displacement history before moving to Europe.	
A_5	With whom did you travel to Europe?	
B_1	What was your main reason for wanting to leave Afghanistan?	Select one: -War/violent conflict -Natural disaster -Lack of employment opportunities -Lack of education opportunities -Family/tribal conflict -Other [specify]
B_2	When did you begin to feel indifferent about migration?	Month Year
B_3	When did you actually make the decision to move to Europe?	Month Year
B_4_1	Where in Europe did you travel to?	City Country
B_4_2	Was this the location you intended to travel to?	
B_4_3	Why did you choose this city and country?	
B_5_1	What was your route to this country and why did you choose this route?	
B_5_2	What mode of transport was used to travel to Europe?	Select all that apply: -Boat -Bus

Question ID	Question	Answer options (if relevant)
		-Plane -Train -Car -By foot -Other [specify]
B_5_3	How long did the journey to the final destination in Europe take?	Weeks Months
C_1	Once in Europe, when did you start to think about returning to Afghanistan?	Month Year
C_2	When did you make the decision to travel back to Afghanistan?	Month Year
C_3	How did you decide to return to your current location in Afghanistan? What were the reasons behind this decision?	
C_4	What were your main reasons for leaving Europe?	
C_5	What was your route back to Afghanistan? How did you decide on the route and methods of travel back to Afghanistan?	
D_1	Which information sources influenced your decision to return to Afghanistan?	
D_2	If you still have family members in Afghanistan, have they facilitated your return?	
D_3	Once you arrived in Afghanistan, what resources existed in Afghanistan that you could access and make use of?	
D_4_1	How many weeks passed between the time of your decision to return to Afghanistan and your actual departure from Europe?	Weeks Months
D_4_2	Was this enough time to gather resources?	
D_5	What are the main obstacles you faced when you decided you wanted to return to Afghanistan?	
E_1	What were the main difficulties you faced on the return journey?	
E_2	What (if any) support did you receive during your return journey?	
F_1	What kind of impact and effects do you think your return had? On your family and on your community?	
F_2	Do you think migration to Europe is viewed positively or negatively in your community?	
F_3	Do you returning to Afghanistan is viewed positively or negatively in your community?	
G_1	Do you have a personal network or a support network in Afghanistan you can rely on?	
G_2	What were your perceptions of migration and return to Afghanistan while you were still in Europe? How have these changed since you came back to Afghanistan?	
G_3	What are the economic advantages and disadvantages of migrating and returning?	
G_4	How has your decision to return to Afghanistan affected your ability to construct a livelihood?	
G_5	What are the main difficulties you face having returning to Afghanistan?	
G_6	Do you intend to stay in the same location now or do you intend to move elsewhere?	
H_1	What are the main (social, cultural and economic) challenges and difficulties you have faced and	

Question ID	Question	Answer options (if relevant)
	believe you will face as you readjust into life in Afghanistan?	
L_1_1	What types of resources and support are you currently receiving in Afghanistan? And from whom?	
L_1_2	What kind of challenges have you faced since returning to Afghanistan when trying to access basic services?	
L_2_1	How sustainable are the different types of support you received (including economic, social and cultural support) on arrival? Do you think you will be able to find support in these resources, groups and mechanisms? Why and why not? In your opinion, what could be a sustainable form of support?	
L_2_2	What other type of support would you like to receive?	
J_1	What are your priority needs?	
J_2	How did you choose to live in your current location in Afghanistan?	
K_1	Have you heard of the AVRR programmes?	

Annex 3: Additional notes on methodology

The number of respondents chosen to participate in this study was guided by assumptions relating to data saturation. Data saturation refers to when enough data has been collected to replicate the study.⁸⁰ In laymen terms, data saturation means that consistently answers to questions are the same and that no new information is being captured by a question. Guest et al. noted that data saturation could be attained with as few as six interviews.⁸¹

Data saturation on certain questions occurred quite quickly - about halfway into data collection (which began on 21 May and ended 20 June 2017) – for forced and assisted returnees' responses.⁸² Data saturation occurred most frequently in questions related to respondents' return to Afghanistan, the access to resources they had, and the way they returned. Overall, however, responses to most questions remained varied, especially for questions asking what respondents did and hoped to do once they returned to Afghanistan. Because of this, enumerators continued to ask the complete set of questions to respondents.

The translated and typed transcripts were later coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO, for reoccurring themes relating to the research questions and based in the theoretical frameworks used to guide this assessment.

⁸⁰ Fusch, Patricia I. and Lawrence R. Ness (2015) Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research, *The Qualitative Report* 2015 Volume 20, Number 9, How to Article 1, 1408-1416.

⁸¹ Guest, Greg et al. (2006) How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability, *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59-82.

⁸² Data saturation refers to the point during data collection when almost identical data is being consistently received and there are no new answers. When respondents continue to give the same answers, it becomes redundant and unnecessary to keep asking the same questions. Consequently, questions where data saturation can either be revised or omitted completely, as no new information can be acquired through them.

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