



Concerns and Confusion: Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey face COVID-related challenges every day

Afghan voices from Turkey

Executive Summary

Turkey has one of the highest number of reported COVID-19 cases in the Middle East. As of 15 July 2020, the number of confirmed cases stands at 215,000 and 5,400 deaths have been [reported](#).¹ The country witnessed a very rapid increase in the first two weeks of April, peaking on 11 April with more than 5,100 confirmed cases on a single day. To stop the fast-growing outbreak,

the government of Turkey imposed various measures. Among other things, international borders were closed, flights suspended, and freedom of movement restricted. This has not only impacted Turkish citizens but also the largest refugee population in a single country in the world (mainly 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection), as well over [56,000](#) Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians who have

1 Johns Hopkins University (2020). [COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering \(CSSE\)](#)

applied for international protection², and [454,000](#)³ migrants and refugees who arrived [irregularly](#).⁴

Apart from restricted freedom of movement and increased barriers to accessing basic services and needs, following the partial suspension of Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) activities, it is not clear how migrants and refugees are affected by COVID-19 and government measures to control the disease. Hence, to get an initial sense, MMC conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with migrants and refugees as well as community leaders and NGO representatives between 14 April and 19 May 2020. Being the largest group of irregular arrivals in Turkey since 2017, the focus was on Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey.⁵

Respondents told MMC that Afghan refugees and migrants are severely affected by COVID-19 and the related government-imposed measures to slow down the outbreak. They are **very much concerned about the virus and access to healthcare** if needed. For the majority, health insurance was cancelled due to recent changes to the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) and as such there is great confusion about what Afghans can do if they become sick. Without health insurance, they fear that going to the hospital might incur costs if they are not diagnosed with the virus, even though COVID-19 treatment is free of charge. Fuelled by rumours, people also fear that going to the hospital could not only result in quarantine, but also detention and deportation.

Information is available about their right to free medical healthcare – if concerned about being infected - however, often not in an accessible form or language for Afghans. As such, **lack of accurate information reportedly causes a lot of confusion** which, inadvertently, could lead to more complicated health problems among refugees and migrants because they do not seek medical

assistance when needed, also for non-COVID related health issues. This not only brings the risk of spreading the virus if infected, but also of worsening other medical conditions and more expensive treatment in the future.

Meanwhile, the refugees and migrants try to apply self-protection against the disease, but face difficulties. Most have lost access to work, income and cannot feed themselves and their families. Interviewees experience the dangerous trade-off between protecting themselves against COVID-19 and going out in search for work, income, and food. For some, **the fear of dying from hunger is greater than that of dying from the virus**. While Afghans' purchasing power has gone down during the crisis, prices for food, essential commodities and rent have [gone up](#).⁶ Apart from well-meaning but insufficient local support initiatives, also from Turkish neighbours, a majority has no structural access to services and support. This is reportedly especially difficult for recent arrivals who have not been able to apply for international protection, due to partially suspended DGMM activities, and cannot access most services.

In general, **Afghans feel neglected by the authorities and the humanitarian community**. In their host communities, some have faced violent incidents of xenophobia because of accusations about bringing the virus into Turkey. Respondents told MMC that many Afghan refugees and migrants are **desperate, emotionally exhausted, and uncertain about the future**. With mixed feelings, they say that they put their trust and fate in the hands of God.

Illustrated with direct interview quotes, the following sections provide more detail on the methodology and findings.

2 In 2019, there have been 56,417 people who applied for international protection. Afghans (35,042) represent the largest proportion of foreign nationals, followed by Iraqis (15,532), Iranians (3,558), and others (2,285). See Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) (2020). [International Protection Statistics Turkey](#).

3 The majority of irregular arrivals are from Afghanistan. In 2019, 201,437 (44%) out of the 454,662 irregular arrivals came from Afghanistan. See DGMM (2020). [Irregular Migration Statistics Turkey](#).

4 There are also an additional 1 million foreign nationals who have residence permits; including humanitarian residency. See DGMM (2020). [Residence Permits Statistics Turkey](#).

5 For an analysis of the COVID-19 impact on Syrian refugees in South East Turkey, please refer to the needs assessment report from the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), DRC (2020) [COVID-19 impact on refugees in South East Turkey; Needs Assessment Report](#)

6 Hürriyet Daily News (2020) [Turkey's inflation rate up in May amid COVID-19](#)

Methodology

The interviews were [organised](#) by MMC⁷ in collaboration with TANDANS DSC in Turkey and conducted by Najibullah Ali Bakhsh over the phone. The sample included eight male and three female interviewees from Ankara, Van, Eskisehir, Konya, Kayseri, Erzurum, Yalova and Istanbul. The respondents were between 34 and 59 years old and most arrived in Turkey between 2016 and 2019.

The interviews followed a predefined interview guide that was also translated into Dari. The interviewer used his own network as well as TANDANS DSC's network to find interviewees willing to participate. With the limited resources available, priority was given to Afghan community leaders in Turkey as well as Afghans who work for NGOs. This turned out to be especially challenging when interviewing community leaders as they were reluctant to talk with 'outsiders' about their situation. Another challenge was that the interviewing coincided with Ramadan, which was observed by most Afghans, and allowed for only a relatively small window of time for interviewing in the evenings. The main criteria

applied selecting interviewees was to ensure diversity when considering geography, gender, and professional/community background. All interviews were transcribed in Dari and then translated into English. The English translations, as well as key observations from the interviewer, serve as the main source for the analysis.

This brief is intentionally descriptive in nature and almost exclusively based on the data coming from the qualitative semi-structured interviews. Kindly refer to MMC's study on [Afghans on the move in Turkey](#)⁸ for an in-depth analysis on key drivers behind Afghan migration and factors influencing short- to long-term intentions, such as decisions to either stay in Turkey or continue onward movement. The report was published in June 2020 and also details living conditions of Afghans in Turkey, focusing on the policy framework that shapes legal and socio-economic factors, while highlighting the vulnerabilities and protection challenges Afghans encounter.

Findings

Concerns about the virus, but protection measures are difficult

Only a few interviewees reported knowing of Afghan refugees and migrants infected with the virus. However, there is a great fear among the Afghans about the virus spreading. People do report a willingness to take precautionary measures to protect themselves from catching the virus and transmitting it to others. This includes staying at home and not visiting family, friends, and relatives as well as using protective gear. However, there are difficulties applying the measures due to a lack of protective gear (masks, gloves, sanitizers) or inability to pay for it. Because of this, some decide to make the material themselves. An interviewee from an NGO said she was working with UNHCR to create masks for refugees and migrants.

With the help of Afghan volunteers, we have produced five thousand masks in ten days and donated them to the Health Department of Kayseri Municipality to be distributed in the hospital. From tomorrow, we will start distributing the masks among refugees.

35-year-old Afghan woman, Kayseri

An Afghan medical doctor in Ankara also indicated that people do not know how to implement protective measures, for example continuing to touch the face and eyes while wearing gloves and thus risking infection and transmission. Also, the instruction to stay at home is a challenge for many refugees and migrants as this also means that they cannot work and feed themselves and their families. This is a dangerous trade-off: going out does bring more exposure to the virus, but many people may not see another choice than to try and generate income for their daily expenses.

7 MMC has been conducting qualitative interviews relating to the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants in a number of regions, and has also revised its flagship quantitative data collection system, the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi). 4Mi has adapted to remotely recruit and interview respondents, and is conducting a revised survey with greater emphasis on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

8 Mixed Migration Centre (2020), [Destination Unknown – Afghans on the move in Turkey](#)

But unemployment is a major concern for us. We are poor and cannot stay at home when we are hungry. Those who have some kind of work, they go to it.

45-year-old Afghan man, Erzurum

The requirement to stay at home is also problematic for Afghan migrants and refugees who live in shared accommodation where they can easily infect others. As confirmed by one interviewee:

There are many single Afghan migrants who are living in houses like dorms with 10–15 people in one room. Unfortunately, they do not or cannot follow health protocols in dorms. I heard that one of these young Afghans was identified as infected with the virus and transferred to a hospital, but his roommates were not transferred to hospital and are just in quarantine in their dorm. It is because they do not have legal documents.

58-year-old Afghan man, Konya

If people cannot take protection measures, there are risks of the virus spreading among migrant and refugee communities and beyond.

Information is available, but not accessible

Many Afghans seem to gather information about the disease and government measures via mainstream media, such as the TV and internet. However, public information is often exclusively shared in Turkish, which is not understood by most Afghans. On top of that, illiteracy and lack of education make it difficult for Afghans to fully understand and comprehend the information shared.

Well, first I did not know what to do to avoid getting infected by corona, and honestly, I don't know the Turkish language and therefore, I didn't understand much about what they were recommending on TV. So, I called some other Afghans here (...)

59-year-old Afghan man, Ankara

Hence, social media, telephone calls as well as smartphone applications like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram, reportedly used by volunteers or local NGOs, have become an important means and source of information.

Our association has arranged some online sessions for awareness raising on corona outbreak among this community. Since the start of the outbreak, we have held six informative online sessions via our Facebook page. (...) In addition, volunteers in our organisation try to translate announcements from the Turkish Ministry of Health into Dari and share it with refugees and migrants through Telegram and WhatsApp groups. (...) Of course, we have distributed some information via brochures and leaflets on how to wash hands with soaps and how to wear masks properly.

35-year-old Afghan woman, Kayseri

However, the information available does not reach all who are in need and this lack of reliable and accessible information seems to fuel fear and stress.

Some days ago, my brother got sick. Everybody told me don't take him out to hospital unless his condition gets worse. When I wanted to take him to hospital, I did not know how to call for an ambulance, so I had to ask another Afghan who knows Turkish and he helped me to find an ambulance.

59-year-old Afghan man, Ankara

Confusion about eligibility for health insurance

A law passed in December 2019 brought amendments to the [LFIP](#)⁹, including limiting the [coverage](#)¹⁰ of general health insurance of international protection applicants or beneficiaries to one year after registration (except those with special needs). An interviewee indicated that she was aware of pregnant women, children under 18 years old and families with (severely) sick members being eligible for the insurance if certain documentation is provided. However, two other interviewees indicated that refugees and migrants do not get health insurance even if they have special needs and can provide documentation. The rejection of health insurance for those who have special needs is reportedly not in accordance with the LFIP:

Insurances of refugees are cancelled and closed and even those who have severe conditions or physically disabled, cannot access free medical services. Despite submitting necessary documents by Afghan refugees, DGMM has not opened these insurances yet while they have to activate insurances legally.

45-year-old Afghan man, Yalova

9 See [Law on Foreigners and International Protection No. 6458](#) and [Amendment on Law published on Official Gazette No.30988 on 24/12/2019](#)

10 Multeci-Der (2019). [Ortak değerlendirme: Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanununda Yapılması Öngörülen Değişiklikler](#)

Another problem is related to the likelihood of being granted international protection, and thus benefit from the one-year health insurance. As indicated by interviewees, the majority of Afghans have their applications for international protection rejected and are, in effect, without health insurance. Afghans who had been under international protection for more than a year had their health insurance cancelled.

As the following sections will describe, accurate information about the virus, precautionary measures and access to healthcare is often not available to Afghan migrants and refugees. This reportedly leads to a lot of confusion, rumours, and inaccurate information. Inadvertently, this could lead to more complicated health problems among refugees and migrants because they do not seek medical assistance when needed, and risk spreading the virus.

Confusion about access to healthcare

The changes in the LFIP have led to confusion among Afghans about their access to healthcare. Consequently, those who have applied for international protection and are currently without insurance are afraid that they will be denied treatment if they go to the hospital. There are reports of migrants and refugees becoming sick and being taken care of by the authorities, and the government has assured that everyone can access healthcare if they think that they are infected. However, this information is either not known by people or ignored. Based on the interviews, there are likely two main reasons for this.

Firstly, there is the fear of being charged for medical costs, especially if they are not diagnosed with the virus, and not being able to pay:

The outbreak was like a disaster to everyone. But Turks (...) have access to jobs, income, or assistance. If they get sick, they can call an ambulance and go to the hospital. For migrants it is totally different. The Turkish President announced that they treat corona patients for free, but many migrants do not know about this. Besides, if they get sick, they are all afraid of calling an ambulance because they are afraid that it takes time to determine their disease and if it's not corona, they have to pay for all services. So, when they do not have any insurance, how they can afford all these expenses?

42-year-old Afghan woman, Konya

During my conversations with refugees and migrants, many of them reported that they are afraid of going to hospitals. They are afraid that if they test for the virus and if the result is negative, they must pay for the test costs themselves. So, we are informing them that these services are all free and if even your test is negative, there is no cost for you to pay, so do not be afraid. But still many are concerned about the possible costs.

35-year-old Afghan woman, Kayseri

Secondly, there is the fear of being put under quarantine in a detention centre and deported:

The majority do not have insurance and access to [health] services. In addition, there is a rumour that if we go to hospitals, the government will quarantine us for 14 days and then will deport us back to Afghanistan. So, many Afghans do not go to hospitals because of these rumours and false information.

58-year-old Afghan man, Konya

Detention centres are not only feared because of potential deportation from Turkey, but also because of the heightened exposure to the virus in overcrowded detention centres. Court proceedings were also suspended during the lockdown therefore those in detention could not appeal detention decisions and were required to remain detained for an unknown period.

Lack of comprehensive support, but support initiatives do exist

While the belief is strong that the virus is not discriminating, interviewees do feel that the government of Turkey is prioritising its citizens over migrants and refugees. Respondents report not receiving any assistance prior to the crisis and this has not changed. Some interviewees do report receiving support, but these initiatives are reportedly very local and small scale. These initiatives are also very targeted to, for example, one neighbouring family, or triggered by an increased sense of solidarity during Ramadan.

Now after the outbreak, the relation between Afghans and Turks got better. I know some Afghan families whose rents are paid by Turks. A few days ago, a woman with her children came here. A Turk found a house for her and paid her water and electricity bills. There is some support and help from Turks for migrants and refugees.

45-year-old Afghan man, Eskisehir

Migrants have always had problems, but with the coronavirus, these problems are increasing. Many are without jobs and those who were working have lost their income. This is a big challenge as nobody helps them.

42-year-old Afghan woman, Konya

The lack of available support increases people's feeling of neglect and increases their stress and worries.

[We] are stuck in limbo. The economic situation of Afghans who I am in contact with is very bad. They see themselves as a burden, a walking dead that all organisations and officials try to avoid. They feel that they are forgotten, and no one is there to help them.

34-year-old Afghan man, Ankara

A dangerous trade-off, becoming sick or hungry

Because of the current situation, interviewees indicated that their greatest fear is becoming sick and dying from the virus, but for some the fear of dying from hunger is stronger:

They [Afghan refugees and migrants] are more worried about how to feed their families than the virus itself.

42-year-old Afghan woman, Konya

Most Afghans here are surviving only with bread.

34-year-old Afghan man, Ankara

Apart from some Afghans residing in rural areas and working in agriculture and with livestock, most Afghans have lost their employment and access to income. This reduces their purchasing power, while at the same time prices of basic commodities, food, electricity, and rent are [increasing](#).¹¹

Our food is only vegetables and eggs. Since the corona outbreak, food prices like eggs and oil have increased. For example, I bought a pack of eggs for 10-12 TL, but I must pay 18 TL for the same pack now. The prices for all food items have increased. We have not received any assistance so far.

35-year-old Afghan woman, Van

We cannot pay the rent. Yesterday, our landlord came here for the rent and we begged him to give us a month, but he did not accept and only gave us a few more days to pay the rent.

35-year-old Afghan woman, Van

Lack of employment, income and access to basic needs also forces people to go out for food and work whereby the risk catching and transmitting the virus increases.

Since the outbreak, I am more stressed than before. And providing food for my family has added to all my stresses. We will not leave our houses unless it is for buying our daily needs such as food. Sometimes, our men go out to find work, but they return soon as there are no jobs.

35-year-old Afghan woman, Van

Incidents of xenophobia

Some interviewees indicated that Turkish citizens are treating them well.

Turks are treating Afghans well. They call us 'brothers' and help us.

58-year-old Afghan man, Konya

Recently arrived Afghans from Iran, which has been hit hard by the pandemic, may have carried the virus with them. This has fuelled rumours about Afghans and foreigners in general about causing the outbreak of the virus in Turkey. Reportedly, this has led to incidents of racism and xenophobia.

My neighbour is pregnant and needs an ultrasound and other tests. Today, I took her to a hospital for some tests and they treated us in a very bad way, doing nothing for us. So, to find another hospital, I asked a Turkish woman to give us an address, but she told us: Foreigner, corona! Foreigner, corona! And start following us and trying to stone us. It is really difficult here.

35-year-old Afghan woman, Van

[In Konya, an] Afghan was beaten by Turks as they said: 'you Afghans brought the virus to Turkey.' Fortunately, we have not witnessed such incidents in Erzurum.

45-years-old Afghan man, Erzurum

We just arrived in Turkey and do not know the language. But when we go to shops and bazars to buy stuff, they point at us saying 'corona, corona' and making fun of us. Although we do not know the language, we can understand from their gestures that they are verbally abusing us.

35-year-old Afghan woman, Van

11 Trading Economics (2020). [Turkey Consumer Price Index \(CPI\)](#)

Psychological distress and increased uncertainty about the future

Interviewees report experiencing or observing increased psychological distress, tensions within families, and uncertainty about the future.

Migrants and refugees are very worried, including myself. In general, their stress has increased during the last weeks.

34-year-old Afghan man, Ankara

Beside the poverty, hunger and unemployment, the corona outbreak added to our challenges here and caused many mental and psychological problems too. The tensions within families are becoming common. Fighting between family members has increased. But unfortunately, no mental or psychological assistance and support is provided to them

34-year-old Afghan man, Ankara

Until recently, the society of Turkey was treating Afghan refugees and migrants well because our numbers were low. But after many Afghans came to this country during last year, their [Turks'] behaviour has changed, and they do not even answer our questions. If they see that you are a migrant or refugee, they will not help you, or even they try to avoid any communication with you. After the outbreak, there is a panic among people. Turks are afraid themselves, let alone the migrants and refugees. We are all in a terrible situation psychologically, having stress about what will happen in the future.

34-year-old Afghan man, Ankara

With DGMM services shut down and cancelled asylum application interviews, people face uncertainties about their asylum status as well as potential for accessing third country resettlement. The uncertainty and lack of prospects of improved living conditions in Turkey or elsewhere increase their worries. Some Afghan refugees and migrants have started to consider [going back to Afghanistan](#) because of all the difficulties faced in Turkey.¹² However, travel restrictions force people to remain in Turkey.

Those who were going to travel to a third country as part of their resettlement, they are stuck here. In Konya, there are migrants who are willing to go back to Afghanistan, but because of this situation there is no flight to take them back to Afghanistan.

42-year-old Afghan woman, Konya

Another interviewee, although observing desperation, ruled out return to Afghanistan as an option that people consider:

Returning to Afghanistan is out of the question for Afghan migrants and refugees. There is no sign of improvement in the country and the situation there even has gotten worse. Those who are in Afghanistan are trying to get out of there. Afghan refugees and migrants do not see a future for themselves in Turkey.

35-year-old Afghan woman, Kayseri

One interviewee indicated that nothing could prevent those who want to go to Europe from doing so irregularly.

Due to the outbreak, many refugees and migrants who wanted to go to Europe with the help of smugglers cannot continue their journey any more and they are waiting for the route to be opened again. Nothing can prevent them from going to Europe. Turkey is not a final destination for them. Most of them want to reach Europe as they do not see any future in Turkey. Even those who are registered as refugees are tired of waiting for resettlement.

36-year-old Afghan man, Istanbul

'In the hands of God'

Despite increased needs and lack of access to support, people do report clinging on to their belief in God. The virus does not distinguish between nationalities and has affected everyone. This has also created a sense of togetherness with other migrants and refugees as well as Turkish citizens.

Corona does not distinguish between Afghans, Turks, or Iranians and affects everyone.

45-year-old Afghan male, Yalova

[Some] people say that it (COVID-19) is something sent from God and they say that life is in the hands of God and we should trust in him.

45-year-old Afghan man, Erzurum

Migrants are more affected than the Turkish citizens. The government here assists its citizens but we, migrants, don't have anybody to help us financially or solve our problems. In one word, we are by ourselves and our god.

45-years-old Afghan man, Erzurum

Only God can help us with this crisis.

59-year-old Afghan man, Ankara

12 For more data on the situation of Afghan returnees in Afghanistan, please refer to our [4Mi snapshot: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on Afghan returnees](#) and the most recent [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update](#) from MMC Asia.

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

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Amman, Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

More information

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

