

Seeking Sanctuary: Information Needs and Migration Prospects for Afghan Nationals in Pakistan

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Amidst the backdrop of Afghanistan’s political upheaval, this policy brief delves into the precarious situation of Afghan nationals in Pakistan and emphasises the importance for policy approaches targeting this group to take this wider context into account. Afghans in Pakistan are making migration decisions related to return and onward migration in a constrained environment, and therefore have particular information needs that could support and empower their decision-making process. Indeed, despite international efforts to provide protection and assistance, Afghan refugees continue to face hurdles in accessing legal pathways to migration. This policy brief examines existing legal pathways and protection measures, highlights their main gaps and challenges, and advocates the need to enhance humanitarian support and improve integration efforts. The brief underscores the importance of improving access of Afghans in Pakistan not only to accurate and reliable information on migration but also to concrete legal pathways in order to foster safe and orderly migration.

Introduction

With the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the humanitarian and economic situation in Afghanistan deteriorated rapidly. Recent estimates of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs suggest that 28.3 million people (two thirds of the country’s population) need urgent humanitarian assistance.¹ Far from being isolated, the situation in Afghanistan intertwines with – and risks further compromising – the precarious stability of the region. More than forty years of local and international conflicts have displaced millions, both internally and to neighbouring countries: Pakistan and Iran, in particular, are host to millions of Afghan nationals. In more recent years, many Afghans returned home but others remained in protracted displacement, often without legal recognition and in precarious accommodations. Following the Taliban’s recent takeover, an additional 1.6 million Afghan nationals – including many relatively skilled workers employed in the public administration, service and welfare sectors, or in the foreign diplomatic missions² – fled to neighbouring countries, overburdening their capacity to host yet more Afghan nationals in need of protection, as well as escalating international concerns over knock-on effects in terms of potential increased irregular migration from Iran and Pakistan to Europe.

¹ UNOCHA, “Humanitarian Needs Overview – Afghanistan” (New York: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2023), <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>.

² EUAA, “Afghanistan – Country Focus. Country of Origin Information Report” (Valletta: European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023), <https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/afghanistan-country-focus>.



Drawing upon research conducted among potential Afghan migrants in Pakistan in the framework of the EU-funded project *Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration in Pakistan (PARIM-II)*, this policy brief aims at understanding the current context for Afghans in the country, examining the policy frameworks that regulate their potential onwards migration to Europe, and discussing policy conclusions for the establishment of safe, orderly, and regular migratory channels and effective policy responses targeting this population.

Current Context

The situation for Afghans in Pakistan is particularly tense. According to the UNHCR, since August 2021 more than 600,000 Afghans have fled to Pakistan, adding to the three million already present in the country, many of whom born in refugee camps or living there for years but still with precarious legal status or lacking formal registration.³ In October 2023, the Pakistani government announced the ‘Illegal Foreigners’ Repatriation Plan,’ aiming to forcibly repatriate unregistered nationals in the country. The plan develops around three phases. The first phase envisages the forced deportation of undocumented nationals – including the 600,000 that entered the country following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan – starting from November 2023, allowing them to leave the country autonomously before that date. The second and third phases envisage the deportation of Afghans with various forms of documentation and permission to stay in the country. On 15 April 2024, the second phase of the repatriation started, with plans to return approximately one million Afghans holding Afghan Citizenship Cards to Afghanistan.⁴

According to UNHCR and IOM, since the announcement of the repatriation plan in September and up to March 2024, more than 545,000 Afghan nationals have been forcibly returned to Afghanistan.⁵ Since then, Afghans in Pakistan have been living in an even more uncertain condition, experiencing a situation of protracted displacement in a country where their options of permanent settlement are non-existent, their possibilities to migrate legally to other countries are restricted, and the idea of return to their country is inconceivable due to human rights violations and security issues.

This context is highly relevant for migration intentions among this community in Pakistan. Within our survey examining migration aspirations of Afghans in Pakistan, conducted immediately after the announcement of the new Pakistani government policy, onwards migration towards third countries remains a viable option for mostly young, male, relatively uneducated individuals who fear deportation to their country of origin or want to improve their livelihoods (see Figure 1). Many respondents from

³ Among the 3.1 million Afghan nationals in Pakistan, 1.35 million are registered Afghan refugees with Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, 800,000 are registered by Pakistani authorities through Afghan Citizenship Cards (ACC), and other 950,000 are undocumented or unregistered individuals. UNHCR, “Afghanistan Situation,” Operational Data Portal, March 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>.

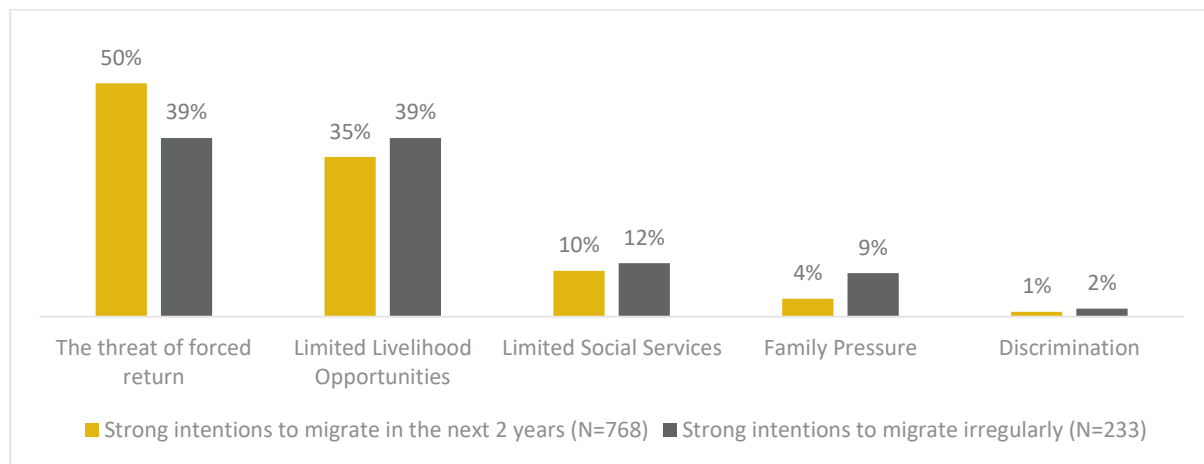
⁴ N.A., “All Set for Second Phase of Afghan Repatriation,” The Express Tribune, April 16, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2462719/all-set-for-second-phase-of-afghan-repatriation>.

⁵ UNHCR-IOM, “UNHCR-IOM Flash Update #17 on Arrest and Detention/Flow Monitoring (15 September 2023 – 31 March 2024)” (UNHCR, April 2024), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107700>.



the survey also mentioned the lack of legal options for migration as the predominant reason to consider irregular migration, particularly among those who had Europe as intended destination. As a non-governmental stakeholder from Mansehra interviewed in our research reported, “migration methods vary between regular and irregular means, with some opting for irregular migration due to challenges in obtaining legal documentation [... as well as to] its less time-consuming and more cost-effective nature.”

Figure 1: Reasons for onwards migration from Pakistan to third countries



Source: Mogiani, Qaisrani, and Reis (2024).

Migration and Protection Options for Afghan Nationals

In this challenging situation, it is important to also contextualise the legal pathways that exist or have been planned for Afghans in Pakistan, as well as the key obstacles to their implementation, in order to better plan holistic policy approaches to the population at large. In response to the Taliban takeover, European institutions and Member States have granted Afghans asylum and protection in Europe, including through emergency evacuations (especially in the early phases of regime change), refugee resettlements, humanitarian admission programmes and other complementary pathways, education and work schemes, and family reunifications. Moreover, they committed to host more than 60,000 people in need of protection in the 2024/2025 period, most of whom are Afghan nationals from Afghanistan or neighbouring countries.⁶ Operational measures aside, EU and Pakistan launched a comprehensive dialogue on migration and mobility aimed at discussing, among other things, legal pathways for migration to Europe, irregular migration, and migrant smuggling. Besides, at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum the EU pledged additional EUR 348.3 million to support basic needs assistance

⁶ European Commission, “Pledges Submitted by the Member States for 2024-2025” (European Commission–DG HOME, 2023), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/e02df697-269d-4bf8-a3c1-c86fd5f3e881_en?filename=Resettlement%20pledges%20submitted%20by%20Member%20States%20for%202024-2025_en.pdf.

and provide durable solutions for displaced Afghans and their host communities.⁷ However, the dire situation in Afghanistan and the precarious conditions of Afghans in Pakistan call for a critical evaluation of the measures in place and the strengthening of cooperative efforts to tackle related issues more effectively.

As highlighted by the International Rescue Committee, the efforts implemented by European institutions and Member States have been insufficient to meet the needs of the Afghan population in need of protection.⁸ This includes also not meeting pledges for humanitarian admissions made to the international community: In 2022, EU Member States relocated only 271 Afghan refugees from Afghanistan and neighbouring countries to Europe against 1,111 pledges for resettlement, and the following year 968 Afghan refugees were resettled to Europe against 1,200 pledges.⁹ At the same time, in 2023 about 270,000 Afghan refugees were in need of resettlement (the world's second largest population after Syrians), more than 150,000 of whom were located in Pakistan.¹⁰ The limited options for humanitarian protection combined with the delays and slowness in their implementation may prompt some – even those eligible for resettlement – to abandon their plans and consider irregular migration routes.¹¹ Our own research corroborated these findings, showing that the lack of legal travel documentation may be a reason for Afghan youth in Pakistan to opt for irregular migration, which is often perceived as quicker and cheaper than regular migration channels. As one non-governmental stakeholder from Mardan put it: “The lack of a place to stay in Afghanistan and the perceived need to start life anew if they return are driving factors behind their inclination for onwards migration. European countries are identified as the preferred destinations for Afghan youth residing in Pakistan. Given the absence of legal documents, passports, or ID cards, it is anticipated that this migration will predominantly occur through irregular means. The major reasons for choosing irregular migration stem from the lack of legal documents, as these individuals are reluctant to return to Afghanistan to obtain the necessary paperwork.”

Where policy measures do exist to address displaced Afghans, there are important barriers that prevent them from accessing protection and inclusion measures, such as strict requirements, administrative delays, and lack of coordination. For resettlement in particular, administrative procedures can be extensive and drawn out due to lack of staff, backlogs, and lengthy security screenings. As a result, the average Afghan individual can wait several months before their claim is processed and answered, with severe repercussions for their personal security, mental health, and livelihoods.¹² Given the difficulty or impossibility for Afghans to obtain travel documents from the current Taliban government and visas from transit or destination countries, some have resorted to the

⁷ UNHCR, “Outcomes of the Global Refugee Forum 2023” (Geneva: UNHCR, 2023), <https://www.unhcr.org/media/outcomes-global-refugee-forum-2023>.

⁸ IRC, “Two Years on: Afghans Still Lack Pathways to Safety in the EU” (New York: International Rescue Committee, 2023).

⁹ UNHCR, “Resettlement Data Finder,” 2024, <https://rsq.unhcr.org/en/#EwJ9>.

¹⁰ UNHCR, “Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2023” (Geneva, 2023).

¹¹ Sarah Zaman, “Resettling Afghans Facing Expulsion from Pakistan Poses Challenge for UNHCR,” *Voice of America*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/resettling-afghans-facing-expulsion-from-pakistan-poses-challenge-for-unhcr-/7341362.html>.

¹² IRC, “Two Years on: Afghans Still Lack Pathways to Safety in the EU” (New York: International Rescue Committee, 2023).

informal market to get them. The narrow eligibility criteria and the limited geographic scope of resettlement or other programmes complicate the journey towards asylum and discourage many from applying. In some cases, people often struggle to provide the documentation required, have to travel great lengths to obtain them, or might not be eligible due to technical quibbles. Financial requirements constitute another challenge: Not only are applicants subject to time- and money-consuming procedures when applying for asylum and resettlement, but they are also burdened by the Pakistani government's application of a USD 830 fee to exit the country.¹³

The lack of coordination and solidarity among EU Member States represents another aspect that might prevent Afghan refugees from accessing international protection in the EU. In terms of coordination, Member States have joined the Expert Platform on safe pathways for Afghans, a global initiative kickstarted by the European Union Asylum Agency in October 2021 with the aim of strengthening collaborative efforts among different states and stakeholders to ensure legal and safe pathways for Afghans in need of protection. However, the efforts put in place by Member States seem scattered, and the policies implemented change drastically across countries and over time. Looking at the resettlement process, only few countries have pledged and effectively hosted several Afghan refugees since August 2021, while others have committed to hosting only a handful of them, and at least nine Member States have not made any pledge for resettlement. As noted by one non-governmental stakeholder interviewed in Haripur, some Western countries have restricted their policies towards Afghan refugees, given their (mis)perception that peace has been restored in the country, which has led to reduced humanitarian assistance and limited opportunities for regular migration.

The differences in policies and measures implemented in destination countries, as well as their rapid changes, can hinder Afghans' access to timely and accurate information on legal pathways. Just as an example, the announcement of some Scandinavian countries to grant asylum to Afghan women already in their territory simply based on their gender – a measure positively welcomed by international organisations and institutions – created confusion among clients of Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs)¹⁴ in the countries of origin, thinking that Afghan women could apply for asylum and protection directly from Afghanistan and the region. The need for relevant information on migration policies emerged also from our survey, which highlighted that information on the conditions of reception in the countries of destination, either in terms of rights, services available, or integration measures, is more relevant than information on the dangers of irregular migration and the costs of the journey. Even many stakeholders interviewed explicitly mentioned the importance of providing migrants with specific information on documentation and legal pathways when preparing for the migration journey.

¹³ Caroline Davies, "Pakistan Charging Refugees \$830 to Leave," BBC, November 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67512576>.

¹⁴ Established through EU-funded projects and embedded in the governments of countries of origin, MRCs generally provide support and assistance to potential, outgoing, and returned migrants. Under the Budapest Process, ICMPD supported the creation of several MRCs in the Silk Route countries, including three in Pakistan (Lahore, Islamabad, and Peshawar) and one in Afghanistan (Kabul, which started its operations in 2018 but has moved online since the Taliban takeover in August 2021).

Within this framework, MRCs can act not only as intermediaries between European institutions, Member States, and governments in countries of origin, but also as providers of migration information to potential migrants. In this respect, MRCs have played an important role in developing coordination mechanisms among European Member States and other states participating in the Expert Platform, reporting on their pledges for Afghan nationals, and disseminating accurate and timely information about these pledges and other migration matters to the Afghan population. Unlike common understandings and other research on the topic, our survey showed that Afghan nationals in Pakistan tend to trust official institutions and non-governmental organisations during the migration decision-making and the relative preparation process, thus highlighting their high potential to mediate potential misunderstandings and provide correct and reliable information. To do so, however, research has pointed out that the provision of migration information can benefit from including positive messaging or useful information on legal migration pathways and migrant rights, instead of focusing on negative messaging that might be ineffective or unheard.¹⁵

In this respect, the role of information campaigns is crucial but not sufficient to deal with migration movements in a safe and orderly way. As the literature shows, information campaigns *alone* are unable to entirely change migration intentions and behaviours away from irregular migratory routes.¹⁶ This is particularly true for campaigns using primarily negative messaging on the risks of irregular migration, which often do not duly consider the high migration aspirations, the limited socio-economic opportunities in the country of residence as well as abroad, and the information gaps on eligible migration pathways. Instead, such awareness campaigns should target the specific information needs of potential migrants, disseminating positive messaging on legal migration pathways and migrant rights in countries of transit and destination. Besides, they must be accompanied by concrete policy measures in countries of origin, transit, and destination to facilitate potential migrants' knowledge of and access to such measures.

¹⁵ Florian Trauner, Omar N. Cham, and Rosangela Caleprico, "EU-Funded Information Campaigns Targeting Potential Migrants: State of the Art," BRIDGES Working Paper, 2022; Djamila Schans and Caitlin Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior? Combatting Irregular Migration through Information Campaigns," Cahier (Amsterdam: Ministerie von Veiligheid en Justitie, 2016), https://www.eerstekamer.nl/overig/20170328/raising_awareness_changing.

¹⁶ Jasper Tjaden, Sandra Morgenstern, and Frank Laczko, "Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, and Practical Guidance" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2018); Jasper Tjaden, "Assessing the Impact of Awareness-Raising Campaigns on Potential Migrants – What We Have Learned so Far," in Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean, ed. Philippe Fargues and Marzia Rango (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020), 426–34.

Policy Conclusions

With this in mind, extensive research conducted among Afghan nationals in Pakistan in the framework of the PARIM-II and other ICMPD projects¹⁷ has highlighted the following needs and conclusions aiming to address these concerns in a concrete manner:

- **Protection measures in European countries:** The different mechanisms currently in place in European countries provide important support but are often limited in scope, failing to cover the protection needs of many who, in turn, might resort to irregular migration pathways to reach Europe. Therefore, it is paramount not only to avoid forced returns of Afghans to their country of origin but also to comply with the pledges for resettlement and humanitarian admissions, for example by easing bureaucratic and administrative hurdles, including with regard to application requirements and eligibility criteria.
- **European solidarity:** It is important to ensure that all EU Member States contribute either financially or operationally to the implementation of protection measures according to their capacities and resources. Where it may not be politically or practically feasible to expand resettlement programmes, other complementary pathways could be considered, for example student or work visas – an option that many respondents from our survey believe to be eligible to. In other cases, support to stakeholders on the ground who assist in the processing of resettlement applications and provide humanitarian assistance or information provision to Afghans in Pakistan (and elsewhere in protracted displacement) could also be considered.
- **Integration process:** The integration of refugees is key to foster harmonious living conditions and togetherness in destination countries and empower them to achieve their own potential. In this respect, and considering the relatively higher skills and qualifications of recently displaced Afghans, it is important to promote and facilitate the social inclusion of refugees through language courses, skill recognition, and labour schemes.
- **Information provision on migration:** When it comes to migration, information on regular pathways, policies, and rights is key. Our research findings have confirmed that potential migrants often need more information on regular migration pathways as well as on their rights and options as migrants. Actors on the ground such as MRCs have proved invaluable in this respect, providing potential migrants and people in need with relevant information on their migration options. For this reason, it is important not only to expand such services but also to ensure that information is shared with target groups in a correct and timely manner.

Migration is a complex phenomenon that poses its own challenges for both the individuals undertaking it and the different actors regulating it. Understandably, one of the main aims and ambitions of governments and international institutions dealing with migration movements has been to reduce

¹⁷ See for example Caitlin Katsiaficas et al., “Outward and Upward Mobility. How Afghan and Syrian Refugees Can Use Mobility to Improve Their Prospects,” TRAFIG Policy Brief (Bonn: BICC, 2021); Maegan Hendow, “Bridging Refugee Protection and Development. Policy Recommendations for Applying a Development-Displacement Nexus Approach” (Vienna: ICMPD, 2019).

irregular migration. However, to achieve this, it is important to create the conditions for people in need to travel in a safe and authorised way.

Related Publications

Hendow, Maegan. “Bridging Refugee Protection and Development. Policy Recommendations for Applying a Development-Displacement Nexus Approach.” Vienna: ICMPD, 2019.

Katsiaficas, Caitlin, Martin Wagner, Katja Mielke, Sarah A. Tobin, Fawwaz A. Momani, Tamara Al Yakoub, and Mudassar M. Javed. “Outward and Upward Mobility. How Afghan and Syrian Refugees Can Use Mobility to Improve Their Prospects.” TRAFIG Policy Brief. Bonn: BICC, 2021.

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Qaisrani, Ayesha. “Migration Insights: Understanding Onward Migration Dynamics among Afghan Nationals in Pakistan.” PARIM-II Background Report. Vienna: ICMPD, 2023. [Download](#).

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