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Article

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Clara Albrecht, Britta Rude and Tanja Stitteneder*

Afghanistan's Free Fall – Return of the Taliban and Flight as a Last Resort

A variety of factors are driving flight and migration movements in and out of Afghanistan—the Taliban were once responsible for many Afghans having to leave their country—now they are back, and the question is how this might affect future flight movements. Traditionally, migration is driven by both push factors and pull factors. This is also the case in Afghanistan. To better understand the motives behind flight and migration movements, it is necessary to look more closely at the positive developments in the country over the past 20 years, which could now be undone by the return of the Taliban.

PUSH FACTORS OF FLIGHT AND MIGRATION MOVEMENT FROM AFGHANISTAN

Table 1 shows that the push factors for flight and migration decisions in Afghanistan are manifold. They range from political to economic and social to environmental factors. Political factors include terrorism, war, human rights violations and persecution, violence and crime, and corruption and poor governance. Economic factors range from poverty and hunger to poor labor market conditions. Demographic and social factors are driven by the young age structure in the country and poor infrastructure in the education, health, social, and transportation sectors. Afghanistan is particularly affected by climate change and natural disasters, which is why climate refugees are also emerging in the country. Furthermore, there are now exacerbating factors for flight and migration movements that have emerged due to the withdrawal of international troops, the return of the Taliban, and the decline in development aid in the country.

Political Factors

Afghanistan has been marked by conflict, war, and terrorism for many years. In 2021, it ranked last in the Global Peace Index. The country's situation has hardly improved in recent years; in 2009, the country occupied the third-last place (GPI 2021). Afghanistan was the most affected country by terrorism in 2019, a significant deterioration compared to 2002, when the

ABSTRACT

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2020, almost half of the population lived in poverty, and 19.1 million people were hungry. One in three children under the age of five is underdeveloped, and six in ten women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. The country ranks last on the Global Peace Index in 2021. Political, economic, social, and environmental factors are driving flight and migration in and out of Afghanistan. The withdrawal of international troops, the return of the Taliban, and the decline in development aid are exacerbating the situation. As of early September 2021, nine out of ten Afghans are suffering from food shortages, and the stagnation of the financial sector poses a problem for aid organizations. Many Afghans are being forced to leave their homes, with internal migration accounting for the majority of migration in Afghanistan. Of those who dare to flee abroad, most move to neighboring Pakistan and Iran. The two countries currently host about 80 percent of Afghan migrants; in comparison, only a few are heading to Western countries.

country was ranked 16th in the world. Afghanistan is marked by a history of conflict, which are interstate and intrastate, as well as non-state conflict. In particular, the increased resurgence of the Taliban in 2006 was accompanied by an increase in violence in the country. Combat-related deaths increased from 1,595 in 2005 to 29,940 in 2019 (World Bank 2021a). The internal conflict between the Taliban and the government has intensified since 2013 and was the bloodiest conflict in the world in 2018 (UCDP 2021, see Figure 1). In addition, the Islamic State (IS) became active in the country in early 2015, leading to an increase in terrorist attacks, particularly in the capital Kabul. Between 2009 and 2018, the murder rate nearly doubled (World Bank 2021a). The return of the Taliban could intensify the conflict between IS and the Taliban. There are already first signs of increased terrorist activity in the country (The Wall Street Journal 2021).

On the Human Rights and Rule of Law Index, Afghanistan ranks 44th out of 172 countries in 2021, with Egypt taking the first place as the weakest coun-

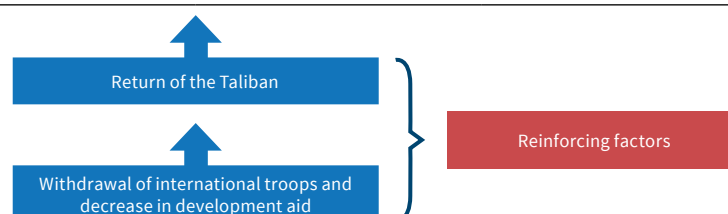
* ifo Institute.

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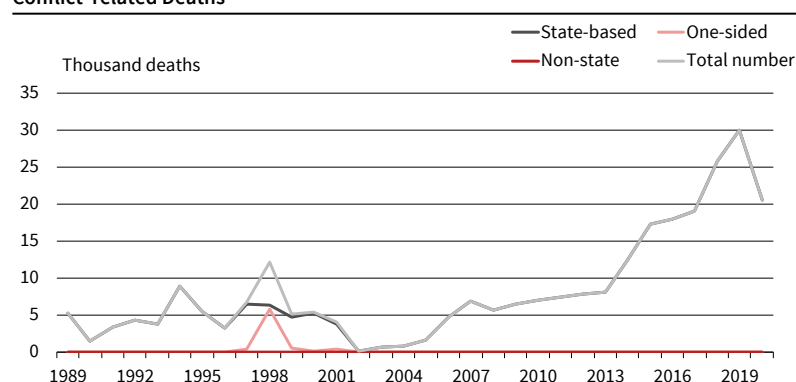
Table 1

Push Factors Behind Flight and Migration Movements from Afghanistan

Political factors	Economic factors	Demographic and social factors	Environmental factors
Terrorism and war	Poverty and hunger	Young age structure	Climate change
Persecution and human rights violations	Unemployment	Poor access to education and health	Natural disasters
Violence and crime	Informality and precarious forms of employment	Poor social protection	
Corruption and poor governance		Low infrastructure	

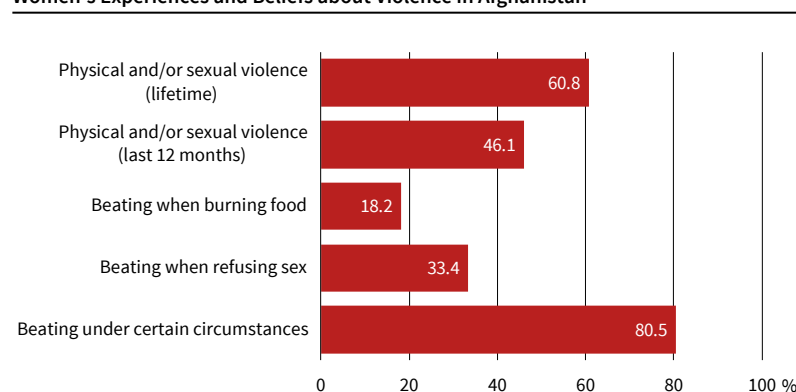


Source: ifo Institute.

Figure 1
Conflict-related Deaths

Source: UCDP (2021).

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Figure 2
Women's Experiences and Beliefs about Violence in Afghanistan

Source: World Bank (2021); OECD (2021).

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try (The Global Economy 2021). Nevertheless, there are signs of significant progress in recent years, as Afghanistan ranked 24th in 2006 when compared globally (The Fund for Peace 2021). Violations of women's rights are a particular problem. While reforms to protect women and girls from violence were implemented between 2001 and mid-August 2021,

these laws were poorly enforced (HRW 2021a). When women reported crimes, they faced social stigma, family pressure, invasive investigations, and prison sentences. According to Medica Mondiale (2021), rape is often equated with adultery, which is illegal in Afghanistan. There are already early signs of human rights violations, especially against women, by the Taliban since their invasion of Kabul (HRW 2021b).

In 2015, 46.1 percent of women experienced physical or sexual violence within a 12-month period (World Bank 2021). This puts Afghanistan at the top of a list of countries for which data was reported between 2012 and 2017. If we look at the likelihood of becoming a victim of intimate partner violence during a woman's lifetime, the number is even higher: six out of ten women are affected (OECD 2021). The acceptance of violence against women is deeply rooted in social norms and general beliefs. Eight in ten women believe that beating a woman is justified under certain circumstances (OECD 2021; World Bank 2021a, see Figure 2). Child marriage (nearly three in ten girls are married before age 18), teenage pregnancy (with an incidence of 12 percent), and prenatal sex discrimination further worsen women's situations and lead to a vicious cycle of violence. Under the renewed Taliban rule, this cycle could be further fueled. The Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs has already been closed by the Taliban and replaced by the dreaded Ministry of Morals (Aljazeera 2021).

Afghanistan's public sector has suffered from corruption, weak rule of law, and low quality of legislation over the past two decades; in contrast, accountability has improved significantly over time. According to the 2020 BTI Transformation Index, Afghanistan ranks 14th from the bottom, down from 7th in 2006. According to the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), the country ranked among the bottom in anti-corruption and rule of law in 1996, with

little improvement since then. In contrast, the quality of legislation increased. There were slight positive developments in political stability and the absence of violence and terror. Government efficiency, while low overall, has improved since 1996. At that time, Afghanistan was the worst-performing country in the world in terms of the quality of public and civil services. Despite significant progress in accountability, institutions remain fragmented along ethnic, class, clan, racial, and religious lines, with the country ranking 37th on the 2021 Fractionalized Elites Index (The Global Economy 2021). The return of the Taliban is likely to throw the country back into a period of ultra-weak institutions.

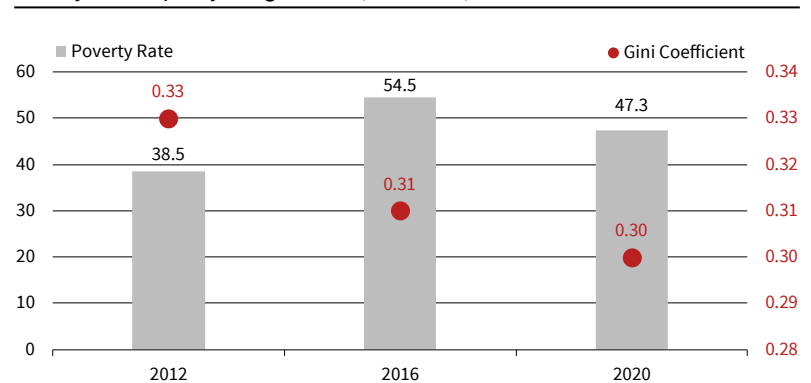
Economic Factors

In 2020, almost half of the population—15 million people—lived below the national poverty line. In 2012, 10.3 million people, or 38.5 percent of the population, lived in poverty, and 59.5 percent of the population (19.1 million people) suffered from hunger. The GINI coefficient has stagnated at 0.3, a value similar to that in Bangladesh or Pakistan (see Figure 3). Since the return of the Taliban, the situation has deteriorated drastically, and the country is on the verge of economic collapse (Norwegian Refugee Council 2021). According to a World Food Program survey, nine out of ten respondents suffer from food shortages (WFP 2021). In addition, food prices are rising dramatically. There are reports that the prices of flour, oil, gas, and beans have increased by 63 percent in one month (Save the Children 2021). Many public-sector employees have not received money for at least a month (Alarabiya News 2021), and the United Nations warns of a humanitarian disaster (UN News 2021).

The labor force participation rate of the Afghan population has stagnated at around 50 percent since 2000 (see Figure 4). This is mainly due to the still low inclusion of women in the labor market. Although women's participation shows an increase from only 15.4 percent in 2000 to 22.7 percent in 2019, it is still far from other low- and middle-income countries. Unemployment was persistently high at 11.7 percent in 2020 and has increased over time (World Bank 2021a). The NEET rate (share of youth not in education, employment, or training) was one of the highest in the world at 42.0 percent in 2017, again driven by young women (World Bank 2021a). In 2014, by contrast, the NEET share was 9.5 percent. The labor market situation in the country has continued to change drastically since the Taliban invasion. In early September 50 percent of respondents to a WFP survey reported job losses (WFP 2021). The exclusion of women from the labor market could have a negative impact on the household income of many families.

In 2000, more than nine out of ten workers were in precarious employment (World Bank 2021a). While

Figure 3
Poverty and Inequality in Afghanistan (2012–2020)



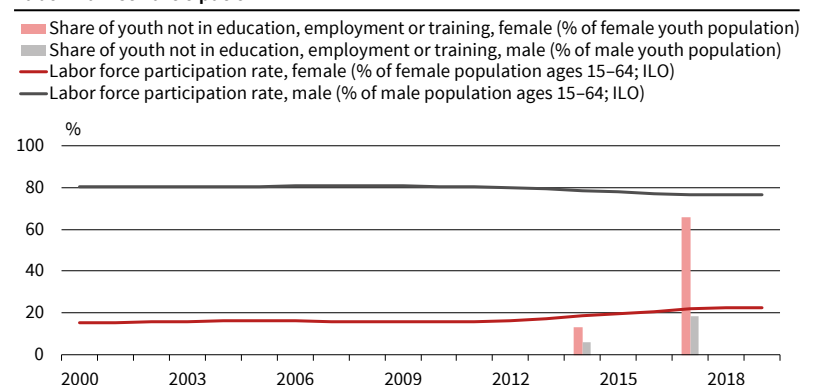
Source: NSIA (2021).

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this share was only eight out of ten workers in 2019, it is still high by international standards. In 2000, of the employed women, almost all were exposed to precarious employment. While this proportion fell slightly to nine in ten women in 2019, it is still higher than in most other countries. Estimates from 2012 show that the majority of employment is informal and among the highest in the world at 80–90 percent (ILO 2012). Low productivity in the agricultural sector, gender norms, and poor human capital endowments have held back employment growth in the country (ACAPS 2013). Since employment growth may also have been dependent on international aid (ACAPS 2013), this may have led to a lack of sustained employment growth (ILO 2012). All of this is likely to be exacerbated by the current situation in the country.

While the population's access to the financial sector has improved in recent years, it still falls behind that in most countries. In 2017, 15 percent of the population had a bank account, compared with 9 percent in 2011 (Findex 2021). By comparison, 70 percent of the population in South Asia had a bank account in 2017 (Findex 2021). Again, Afghan women fall far behind Afghans at 7 percent. Since the Taliban invasion of Kabul, the financial sector in the country has been on the verge of stagnation. Since the central bank no

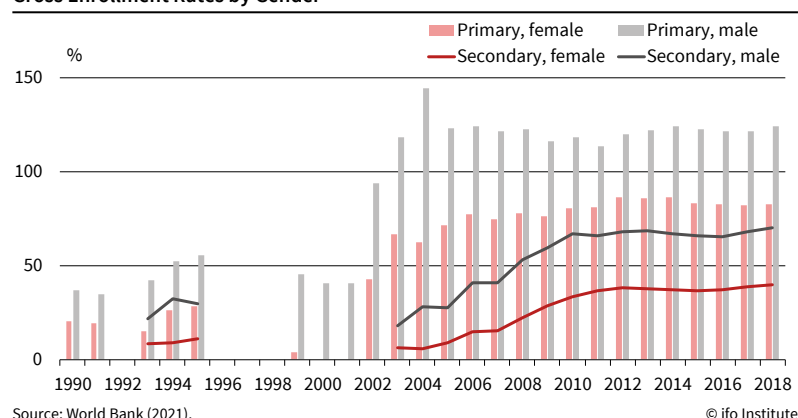
Figure 4
Labor Market Participation



Source: World Bank; ILO (2021).

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Figure 5
Gross Enrollment Rates by Gender



Source: World Bank (2021).

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longer has access to its reserves, much of which are stored abroad, money circulation in the country is limited. It is estimated that the Taliban has access to 0.1–0.2 percent of the USD 9.0 billion in international reserves (Aljazeera 2021). Afghans are currently not allowed to withdraw more than USD 200 per week (France24 2021), and aid organizations report problems bringing money into the country to pay their staff or continue their projects (Norwegian Refugee Council 2021).

For years, researchers have pointed out the country's dependence on international development assistance (Karimi 2020). In 2019, the rate of official development assistance per capita was 16 times higher than the average in low- to middle-income countries (World Bank 2021a). The abrupt withdrawal of many aid workers and the freezing of aid funds now clearly demonstrates this. Based on a survey of 150 aid organizations in September, OCHA data shows that three-quarters of these aid organizations are having trouble continuing their projects after the Taliban came to power (USAID 2021). Currently, 62 percent of their projects are paused, which is additionally due to security concerns and the ban on female employees working (USAID 2021). It is currently unclear how development assistance will continue. In order to gain access to international reserves, the Taliban will most likely have to follow international standards and conditions (Financial Times 2021).

Demographic and Social Factors

Afghanistan's population is one of the youngest in the world, with 55.5 percent of the population in 2020 of working age and 41.8 percent under 15 years old (World Bank 2021a). Only 2.6 percent of the population is older than 64. Youth pose a major burden on the country's working population. Afghanistan's dependency ratio was 80.1 percent in 2020 and is among the highest in the world (World Bank 2021a). This means that each working-age person must provide for 0.8 people under 15 or over 64. Turning this burden into a demographic dividend will require ma-

jor investments in the country's youth, particularly with regard to gender equality (UNFPA 2015). The labor market is having great difficulty absorbing the influx of circa 450,000 new workers annually (Reuters 2020).

Since the end of the first Taliban rule in 2001, during which Afghan girls were almost completely excluded from the educational system, Afghan girls had caught up by mid-August 2021. Figure 5 shows that the gross enrollment rate for girls in primary education was zero at the end of the first Taliban rule in 2001. By 2018, the proportion of girls in primary education had increased significantly to 82.9 percent (World Bank 2021a). The picture is similar for gross enrollment rates at the secondary level, although enrollment rates are lower for both genders. Tertiary enrollment rates are extremely low, with only five out of every 100 women and 15 out of every 100 men attending tertiary education institutions (World Bank 2021a). The return of the Taliban could have extreme negative consequences for human capital formation in the country, especially for girls. Already, they are once again being excluded from secondary education and can only participate in tertiary education under strict conditions.

Afghanistan has made some progress in the health sector in recent years. Life expectancy has increased, and infant mortality rates and child underdevelopment have fallen (World Bank 2021a). While only one in ten births were attended by skilled health personnel in 2000, this was true for nearly six in ten in 2019 (World Bank 2019). However, maternal mortality rates have increased since 2010, and in 2019, one in three children was still underdeveloped (World Bank 2021a). The health-sector infrastructure has seen little development in recent years, and the country continues to fall behind globally. Even though the number of doctors has increased, there is a lack of well-trained personnel. Violence and conflict further affect the provision of health services (Mirzazada 2021). In addition, there are institutional factors and a lack of financial resources. Cultural norms, particularly regarding gender equality, also play a role. The pandemic poses additional challenge to the health system in the country. The health sector has been in a dire state since the return of the Taliban. Based on USAID data, barely 20 percent of health facilities are currently operational (USAID 2021). There is a lack of medicines and medical equipment. Salaries are not paid and vaccination campaigns are suspended. Some women no longer dare to seek medical help (USAID 2021).

A 2012 World Bank analysis concluded that social protection programs are fragmented and unbudgeted (World Bank 2012). While innovative approaches exist, they are mainly implemented by humanitarian aid organizations (Humanitarian Response 2013). Moreover, in 2018 scholars pointed to the unsustainable design of the pension program in Afghanistan (Reuters 2018).

A 2016 study by UNICEF concluded that social safety nets are limited and almost nonexistent for women and children (UNICEF 2016). This problem is now likely to worsen under the Taliban. UNICEF, for example, states that many of the organization's in-country programs targeting women and girls are currently facing operational difficulties (UNICEF 2021).

Access to public services had improved greatly by 2020. For example, half of the population had access to at least basic sanitation services in 2019, compared with only 21.9 percent in 2000 (World Bank 2021a). Still, only one in three had access to purified drinking water in 2019. Electricity is now available to the population almost universally, and some have begun to use the Internet (8.3 percent of the population). Sixty percent of the population is connected to a public cell phone service. New migration flows in the country and uncertainties about the Taliban's financial situation are now likely to complicate both access to and maintenance of public services among the population.

Environmental Factors

Afghanistan ranks 175 out of 181 countries in the 2019 ND Gain Index (ND Gain 2021). This is due to high vulnerability, but also low capacity, to address climate change impacts. Afghanistan is the 12th most vulnerable country to climate change and the 10th least prepared country. Afghanistan's vulnerability to climate change has increased compared to 2001. At that time, the country ranked 157th on the ND-GAIN index.

In addition, the population is exposed to a high risk of natural disasters. The country ranks fourth on the INFORM Risk Index in 2021, particularly due to its high exposure to earthquakes and droughts (DRMKC 2021). The Afghan population is facing severe drought this year, similar to 2017 and 2018, with the last drought resulting in 13.5 million people suffering increased food shortages (Climate Change Project 2021). According to WFP reports, the Taliban do not have the resources to address hunger among the population (Reuters 2021).

PULL FACTORS OF FLIGHT AND MIGRATION MOVEMENTS FROM AFGHANISTAN

It is not only push factors that lead to flight and migration movements in and out of Afghanistan. Similar to observations in other countries, pull factors

are also at work. These are listed in Table 2 and are divided into political, economic, demographic, and social factors.

FLIGHT AND MIGRATION MOVEMENTS IN AND OUT OF AFGHANISTAN

As a consequence, refugee and migration movements have long been a part of Afghanistan's history. Around 6 million of the 70.8 million displaced people worldwide are Afghans who were forced to leave their homes (UNHCR 2021b and 2021c). Afghanistan is thus the country with the third largest displaced population in the world after Syria and Venezuela, and the country of origin of the second largest refugee group. As of May 2021, Afghanistan has nearly 390,000 displaced persons—approximately 80 percent of whom are women and children. Since the beginning of the year, the number has even exceeded half a million.

Recurring natural disasters such as droughts, floods, storms, and earthquakes, as well as ongoing violence and conflict, are the main causes of migration in and out of Afghanistan. In 2020 alone, natural disasters caused 46,000 internal movements and conflict and violence caused 404,000 internal movements (iDMC 2021). By the end of 2020, Afghanistan recorded over 3.5 million internally displaced persons due to conflict and over 1 million internally displaced persons due to natural disasters. Thus, internally displaced Afghans account for well over half of all Afghan migrants (UNHCR 2021b). Many of the Afghans who flee within the country's borders move from the north to the south of the country, where they seek shelter with family and acquaintances. This "system of informal assistance" is under severe strain due to additional stresses such as the prolonged drought that affects 80 percent of the country, and 60 percent of farmers, as well as the rapid spread of the Corona pandemic (Reliefweb 2021a). Food and water shortages, as well as a lack of medicines and medical supplies, continue to spread. Covid-19 vaccinations are also progressing slowly (UN Refugee Agency 2021; UNHCR 2021b): only 4 percent of the nearly 40 million Afghans are currently vaccinated against Covid-19 (UNICEF 2021c).

Most Afghans who leave the country travel to neighboring Pakistan and Iran, where more than 80 percent of those who have fled the country currently reside (UNHCR 2021b; Media Service Integration 2021a). In contrast, international migration to other, mainly Western, countries is low (see Figure 6). Many

Table 2

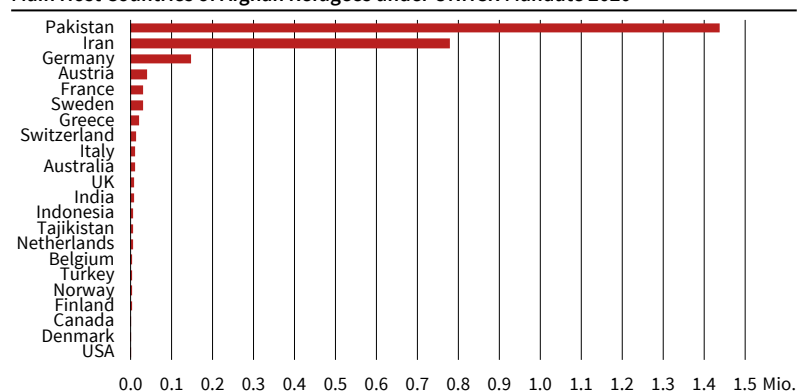
Pull Factors Behind Flight and Migration Movements from Afghanistan

Political factors	Economic factors	Demographic and social factors
Asylum law	Labor market conditions in the host country	Social networks
Political interests	Education	Media, culture and language

Source: ifo Institute.

Figure 6

Main Host Countries of Afghan Refugees under UNHCR Mandate 2020

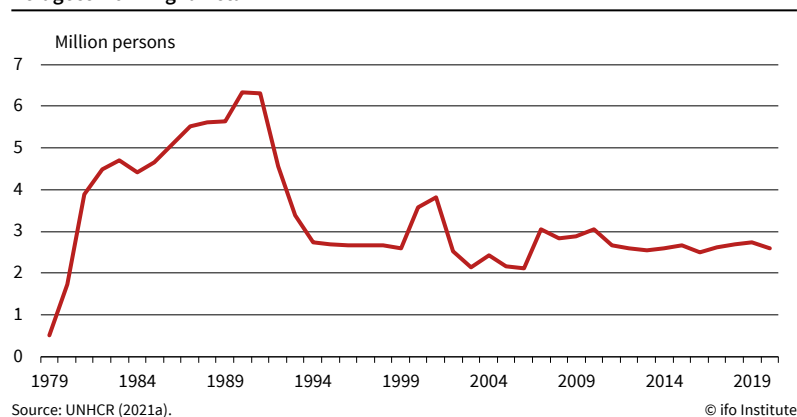


Source: UNHCR (2021a).

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Figure 7

Refugees from Afghanistan

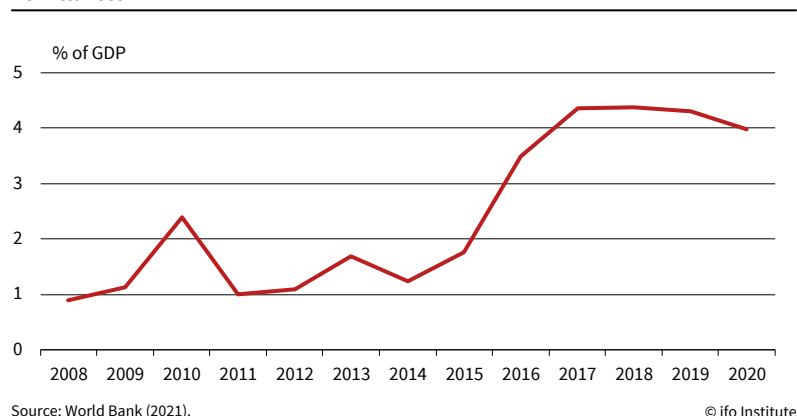


Source: UNHCR (2021a).

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Figure 8

Remittances



Source: World Bank (2021).

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of the refugees are stuck in a vicious circle: on the one hand, returning to their home country is dangerous or not possible at all; on the other hand, they do not receive residence permits in the host countries and are housed in refugee camps (UNHCR 2021c). For the poorer population in particular, the costs and the associated distance to the destination country are decisive factors in the decision of where to flee (Cai 2020).

The number of undocumented migrants who leave the country without official travel documents is probably high. It is estimated that roughly 20,000

to 30,000 Afghans fled the country through irregular channels each week in August 2021 (CNN 2021). However, usually only those who are healthy and have the necessary financial means can flee, whether within the region or abroad. Those left behind are likely to be the injured, the sick, the elderly, and the very poorest in the country.

DEVELOPMENT OF REFUGEE FLOWS OVER TIME

In the 1980s, the flow of refugees from Afghanistan increased rapidly. After the Soviet Union invasion, many Afghans left the country. Most went to Pakistan and Iran (Amstutz 1994), and a resistance movement against Soviet rule developed: on one side was the Afghan-Soviet government, and on the other side were the Islamic resistance forces, the Mujahideen, who received both military and humanitarian support from the United States (Reliefweb 2021b).¹

After the end of the Soviet-Afghan war and the withdrawal of the Soviets in the late 1980s, the government was overthrown by the resistance forces in the early 1990s. However, subgroups also formed within the resistance, with a more moderate orientation on the one hand and a more radical orientation on the other. In the early 1990s, the number of refugees was small compared to the years before. Kabul, however, continued to be contested by the various resistance groups (Asylum Insight 2021), and the Taliban gained prominence in the ongoing civil war (Reliefweb 2021b).

The rise of the Taliban in the 1990s pushed many Afghans into flight (Reliefweb 2021b; Asylum Insight 2021). Women and girls were largely excluded from public life and denied fundamental human rights. After the defeat of the Taliban in 2001, UNHCR initiated extensive mass repatriation programs. With the end of the regime, the number of Afghan refugees also decreased, and in the following years it rose again slightly to the level of the mid-1990s (see Figure 7).

THE ROLE OF REMITTANCES FROM ABROAD

About 10 percent of Afghan households receive remittances from Afghans living abroad. They have been shown to contribute to poverty reduction in the recipient country and increase household investment in education (UNDP 2011). In 2020, formal remittances from abroad to Afghanistan totalled USD 788 million and accounted for nearly 4 percent of Afghanistan's GDP. Since 2014, there has been a massive increase in remittances from abroad (see Figure 8). In absolute terms, private contributions coming from abroad experienced an increase of over 300 percent. This development is closely related to a fundamental deterioration in the overall economic, political, and

¹ See also the documentary series "Afghanistan - A Wounded Land", about the history and development of Afghanistan in the last decades.

security situation. The Taliban intensified their military interventions which caused a sharp increase in civilian casualties. At the same time, government aid payments from abroad saw a sharp reduction, and the political system became increasingly fragile after the 2014 presidential elections (World Bank 2021e).

The informal financial sector plays a major role in Afghanistan. It can be assumed that the real amount of money coming from abroad is much higher, as by far the largest part of the money Afghans receive from abroad enters the country through informal channels. The informal financial transaction system known as *hawala*, which transfers cash at low costs across national borders through intermediaries, is estimated to account for up to 90 percent of Afghan financial transactions. The regular banking sector does not play a significant role for the population in Afghanistan, with only 15 percent of Afghans owning a bank account. Since the Taliban came to power, the importance of money entering the country through *hawala* has increased further as the Afghan financial system is on the verge of collapse and national cash reserves are running low (Ross and Barratt 2021).

OUTLOOK: WHERE WILL FLEEING AFGHANS FIND REFUGE IN THE FUTURE?

The burden on neighboring countries is great and could now intensify. The United Nations estimates that re-established Taliban rule could cause over half a million people to flee abroad by the end of the year. An overwhelming proportion of those fleeing are expected to attempt to reach neighboring Pakistan and Iran, and the UN believes it is imperative that the international community provide immediate and sustained support to the first-receiving countries. The humanitarian assistance program currently underway for Afghan refugees in Iran, Pakistan, and other host countries in the region is underfunded. Pakistan, with nearly 1.5 million Afghan refugees already in the country, has announced that it will not allow Afghans without valid travel documents to enter the country (UNHCR 2021). The first 700 Afghan refugees without valid documents have already been deported (ZEIT ONLINE 2021). Iran, where 780,000 Afghans already found refuge in 2020, announced that it would only accommodate Afghan refugees in temporary camps near the border until they could be returned to Afghanistan.²

According to UNHCR data (UNHCR 2021d), the number of irregular border crossings into neighboring countries has sharply increased. The vast majority of refugees currently arriving in Pakistan and Iran do not have valid identity documents and cite the poor security situation in Afghanistan as the reason for their flight.

POTENTIAL HOST COUNTRIES OF AFGHANS SEEKING PROTECTION

It is currently unclear how evacuations from Afghanistan will proceed. More than 123,000 civilians have been flown out to third countries as part of the US-led air evacuation mission through Kabul airport. It is unsure how many of these were Afghan citizens (BBC 2021). The German contribution to the evacuation of vulnerable people was small. In total, German forces flew just over 5,300 people out of the country (Bundesregierung 2021). This included 231 local agents working for the NATO-led international Afghanistan mission and 848 dependents. According to the German Foreign Ministry, the number of people in Afghanistan that Germany considers itself to be responsible for amounts to about 50,000 (ZEIT ONLINE 2021a). Meanwhile, it remains unclear how a safe evacuation to Germany could be arranged. The air route is currently not to be considered due to the poor security situation. Evacuation by land would be most likely via Uzbekistan or Pakistan. There are currently no indications of a possible screening process for those entitled to leave the country (ZEIT ONLINE 2021b).

Worldwide, the general willingness to accept refugees is relatively low. For the time being, Germany has pledged to take in 2,600 Afghans in particular need of protection as part of a resettlement program. These would then not have to apply for asylum but would immediately receive a residence permit. Other European countries, including Austria, Poland, and Switzerland, have already ruled out taking in Afghans and are instead relying on increased security measures at their external borders (BBC 2021). Turkey, the main transit country for Afghan refugees en route to Europe and the country that has taken in the most refugees worldwide, has also not shown an increased willingness to accept additional Afghan refugees. To make it generally more difficult for refugees to enter the country in the long term, Turkey has begun building a border wall on the Turkish-Iranian border (BBC 2021). Greece, which has already received the most Afghan refugees within Europe in the past (25 percent), has expanded a border fence on the Greek-Turkish border to 37 km (Lang et al. 2021).

The US approach in this regard could be a signal. As part of the evacuation mission, the US has already taken in 64,000 Afghans in need of protection, 49,000 of whom are still housed in US military bases. The US has been able to evacuate another 18,000 Afghans to other countries via the airlift, where they are also housed in military bases, mainly in Germany (New York Times 2021). In order to be able to take in additional people in need of protection, the US government has sharply raised the upper limit of refugees to be taken in. For the fiscal year beginning October 1, US President Joe Biden pledged to take in up to 125,000 refugees (NPR 2021). The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR welcomes this decision and hopes

² In addition to the officially registered Afghan refugees, estimates suggest that there are an additional 1 million unregistered refugees in Pakistan and an additional 2 million in Iran (MPI 2021).

that this will be seen as a signal by other countries to also increase refugee quotas (UNHCR 2021f). Canada and the United Kingdom have each pledged to accept up to 20,000 Afghans in need of special protection. Australia has reserved 3,000 places for Afghans in its annual refugee quota (Mediendienst Integration 2021b).

A common strategy at the EU level is not in sight. Although EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson considers it a “moral duty” for Europe to evacuate Afghans in need of protection and bring them to safety and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has criticized member states for refusing to cooperate transnationally (NPR 2021a), and despite the European Parliament calling on member states to cooperate to facilitate the evacuation of vulnerable Afghans (European Parliament 2021), as of mid-September 2021, no concrete measures have been adopted at the EU level. At the end of August, the Home Affairs ministers of the EU member states announced in a joint statement at a special meeting that they did not want to incentivize illegal migration (Tagesschau 2021). However, the fear of a similarly high influx of migrants is unfounded in the medium term, as the either closed or heavily secured border crossings out of Afghanistan towards Europe represent a major hurdle. In addition, human smuggling rings are not affordable for the vast majority of Afghans (MPI 2021).³

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The need for humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan is immense. 18.4 million people in the country are in need of humanitarian assistance, including 9.7 million children (UNICEF 2021). The UN issued an emergency appeal in mid-September for additional donations to address the humanitarian crisis. According to the appeal, USD 606 million is needed by the end of 2021 (UNOCHA 2021). So far, only 20 percent of this has been raised (UNOCHA 2021). Against the backdrop outlined above, the following recommendations for action in the area of refugee and development policy can be derived.

Refugee Policy

The outlook for refugees in and from Afghanistan is extremely difficult. Since the resurgence of the Taliban, land and air routes have been closed. As a result, leaving through regular routes is no longer an option, leading to an increase in demand for irregular border crossings by illegal trafficking groups. To remain undetected by immigration officials and avoid Taliban-staffed border checkpoints, routes have become

even more remote. Migration has thus become more costly and dangerous (Mixed Migration Centre 2021). Even those who make it out of Afghanistan face a difficult future—usually without access to education, adequate health care, employment, and social connection to the domestic society.

It should be ensured that Afghans in particular need of protection continue to have access to evacuation opportunities. To this end, bureaucratic hurdles must be removed, and underlying processes reviewed. New and digital technologies can help in sending the necessary documents and in the efficient organization of formalities. Family reunification should be ensured, and funds should be made available for refugee camps in Afghanistan’s neighboring countries. However, refugee camps should not be a long-term condition, especially for children. The international community should work together on solutions to prevent refugee camps from being a permanent condition for refugees.

Development Policy

To address hunger and the dire state of the health sector, financial aid should be channeled through international organizations, such as UNHCR, and NGOs working in the country. This could also be an alternative to traditional development projects, which often operate through local governments on the ground. Innovative approaches are needed to establish a functioning financial sector. In the long term, the provision of international funds should be linked to the fulfillment of international standards. The international community should stand up for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan and work on innovative solutions to make education accessible to girls both in the country and in refugee camps.

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³ In 2015, the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation estimated that a transit to Europe organized through smuggling rings costs USD 7,500, an amount that few Afghans could even afford considering that one-third of the population lives below the poverty line (MPI 2021).

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