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Afghanistan In-Brief

Displacement in Afghanistan: Post-2014 Origins, Current Situation and Potential Flows

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*This document provides an overview of the origins and current challenges of displacement flows by refugees and IDPs in Afghanistan. Furthermore, it presents, based on an open-source research, the potential flows that could occur in Afghanistan post 2014. Related information is available at www.cimicweb.org. **Hyperlinks to source material are highlighted in blue and underlined in the text.***

Historically, severe fluctuations in [displacement and population movement](#) in Afghanistan correlate to periods of armed conflict and political instability, according to the Overseas Development Institute. These periods include: the Soviet invasion (1978–88); the Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent civil war (1989–96); the Taliban rule (1996–2001); the post-9/11 US-led invasion (2001–2002); the defeat of the Taliban and the establishment of an interim government (2002–2004); and the neo-Taliban insurgency (2004 to the present). Data compiled by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2009 suggests that [76 per cent of Afghans](#) are displaced at least once in their lives.

The think tank STATT categorises the patterns that define displacement and population movement in Afghanistan as [economic migration, conflict-induced migration and elite migration](#). Economic migration is primarily from rural to urban areas and from Afghanistan to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Some labour immigrants also migrate to Central Asia and Gulf Countries, as well as Europe, North America and Australia. Migration from rural to urban areas is unidirectional, permanent and involves entire families. Migration to Iran is most common among Afghan men, many of whom make multiple journeys, earning income critical to support their families back home. On the other hand, Afghan migration to Pakistan has historically been characterised as conflict induced, but has also involved a strong economic incentive as a temporary destination. Conflict-induced migration has generated more than three million Afghan refugees fleeing insecurity, mainly as internally displaced persons (IDPs), but also seeking refuge in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. The situation in Pakistan is [tense and uncertain](#); as the Pakistani government, partly due to the country's own security and economic troubles, applies an ambivalent approach towards hosting the large number of Afghan refugees. In Iran, Afghan refugees suffer severe working

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conditions in the informal sector. Iranian authorities regard them as a burden, resulting in at least 150,000 forced returns in 2011 alone, as well as [recurrent human rights violations](#), claims Human Rights Watch (HRW). Despite the heavy flow of returning refugees between 2002 and 2008, voluntary repatriations led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have steadily declined, given that many returnees struggle to rebuild their lives while encountering worse and more uncertain living conditions than in their countries of asylum. Elite migration has been overlooked during the last decade, with the only reliable data [dating from 2000](#). Civil society activists have voiced concerns over a growing number of skilled [Afghans seeking asylum abroad](#). This “brain drain” could further weaken the country, as those most qualified to rebuild the country are the ones most likely to leave. The Parliamentary Commission on International Affairs has, for instance, reported that in the past eight years, governmental officials, diplomats, journalists, athletes and students have not returned to Afghanistan after visiting abroad.

According to a joint report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, there are approximately [425,900 IDPs](#) in Afghanistan, including [64 per cent children](#) (0-18 years), of whom [90 per cent](#) originate from rural communities. UNHCR says that [causes of internal displacement](#) vary across regions; however, the most common causes are: armed conflict, general insecurity, threats/intimidation, military operations, internal tribal conflict, cross border shelling, extortion, forced recruitment, illegal-taxation and land disputes. Humanitarian organisations lack access to 95 per cent of IDPs in southeast Afghanistan, 80 per cent of IDPs in northern Afghanistan and 55 per cent in north-eastern Afghanistan.

Displacement Figures

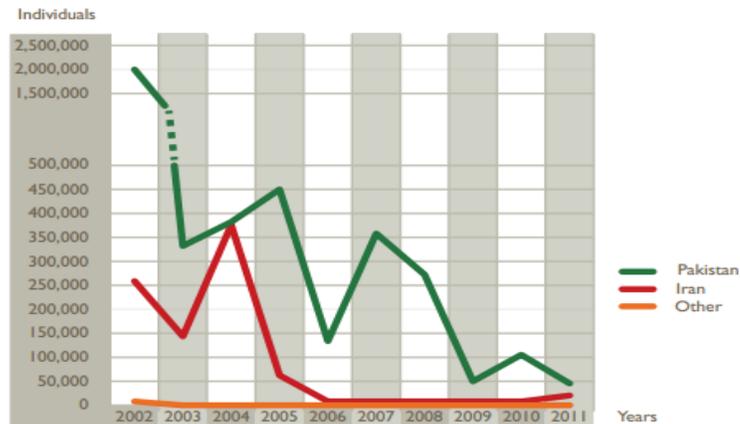
The following section is a compilation of the most relevant figures that show displacement of refugees and IDPs from and to Afghanistan during the last decade.

- There are 1.9 million registered [Afghan refugees](#) and 1 million undocumented Afghans in Pakistan. In Iran, the number of registered refugees is around 1.4 million and the undocumented are at 1 million, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
- Approximately forty per cent of [Afghan refugees](#) in Pakistan live in refugee villages/camps and sixty per cent in rural and urban areas. In Iran, only three per cent of Afghans live in rural areas, according to UNHCR.
- [Ethnically](#), the majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan are Pashtun (85 per cent), whereas those seeking refuge in Iran are Hazaras and Tajiks (70 per cent), adds UNHCR.
- The largest [demographic group](#) of Afghan refugees in Pakistan includes children up to nine years old, an indication of the high growth rate among the Afghan refugees, according to a joint report by UNCHR and the World Bank. In Iran, fifty per cent of the registered refugees are younger than eighteen years. Each year, the Afghan population in Pakistan increases at a higher rate than the number of individuals repatriated to Afghanistan from its neighbouring country.
- Since 2002, more than [5.7 million](#) Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan, 4.3 million of them with the assistance of UNHCR (Figure 1). The major flow of refugees occurred during the period 2002-2008, but overall figures for returnees during the last years have declined due to worsening economic and security prospects and difficulties with reintegration. [Kabul and the eastern provinces](#) have been the destinations for 20 per cent of returnees (Figure 2).
- In terms of [ethnic groups](#), 56 per cent of the returnees were Pashtuns, 25 per cent Tajiks, 8 per cent Hazaras and 11 per cent other ethnicities, according to UNHCR.



- Furthermore, UNCHR says that, of the returnees, 40 per cent have not reintegrated into their home communities, but rather have chosen to settle in [new locations](#), mainly large urban areas.

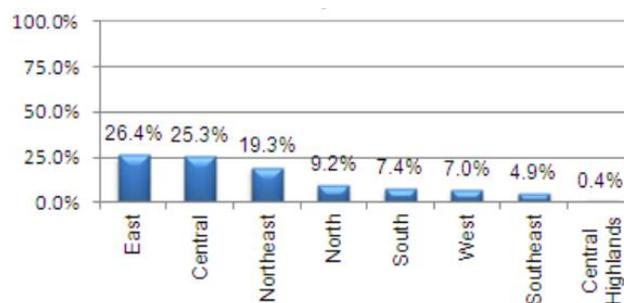
Figure I. Returnees assisted by UNHCR



Source: “[Solutions Strategies for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries](#)”, UNHCR, May 2012.

- An estimated 1.84 million returnees have [failed to reintegrate](#), facing problems with access to land, shelter, services and livelihoods, writes UNHCR. Experience has shown that duration of displacement influences successful reintegration. The majority of the Afghan refugees have been in exile for more than 25 years and half of them have never lived in Afghanistan. For these groups, access to land and housing is particularly difficult. An estimated 15 per cent of the population have become secondary migrants.

Figure 2. 2012 Returnees by Destination in Afghanistan



Source: “[UNHCR Afghanistan Update on Voluntary Repatriation and Border Monitoring](#)”, UNHCR, May 2012.

Characteristics of Displacement and Population Movement in Afghanistan

Pakistan is [not a signatory](#) to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and does not have any other national refugee legal framework in place. The Tripartite Agreement between UNHCR and the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan protects Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The recent 31 December 2012 expiration deadline of the Proof of Registration cards was extended until [31 June 2013](#), reports *The Pakistan Tribune*. The Afghan government and UNHCR expressed the need to extend the [Tripartite for three more years](#), a decision which is on hold awaiting deliberations and inter-ministerial consultations within the Pakistani government. However, [further extensions](#) of the Tripartite Agreement are unlikely as public statements by



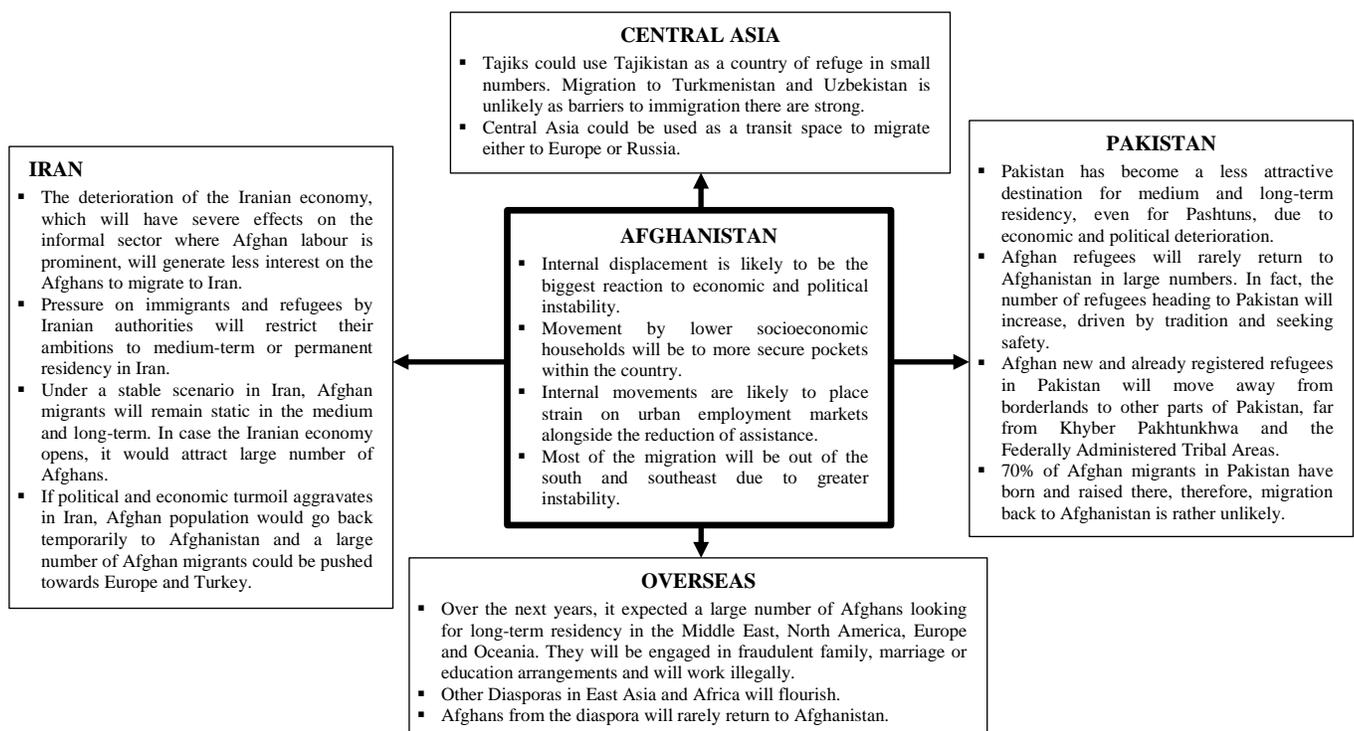
Pakistani officials and pressures from Pakistani police over Afghan refugees have significantly increased during the last two years, writes *IRIN*. Iran is signatory to the Geneva Convention on refugees; however the country continues to deport undocumented Afghan migrants on the grounds that they are [economic migrants](#). Meanwhile, Iran provides assurances to UNHCR that they will [commit to asylum spaces](#).

In light of the complex situation affecting the region as a whole and the uncertainty and volatility of the forthcoming transition process, the governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, with the support of UNHCR, initiated a [quadripartite consultative process](#) in 2011. The backbone of the consultative process is the implementation of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) to support voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and assistance to host countries. The multilateral SSAR framework seeks to sustain an international focus on humanitarian issues during the upcoming transition in Afghanistan. The experience of the quadripartite consultative process has led the three governments to agree to establish a Quadripartite Steering Committee that will guide the overall implementation of the SSAR. This Committee will also coordinate follow-up, mobilise resources, and manage the new multi-donor trust fund. The Steering Committee will meet periodically to review and discuss implementation of the Strategy at the sub-regional level, and seek participation as needed from relevant stakeholders, donors, and development and bilateral actors. The committee has not met since meeting in Abu Dhabi on [31 January 2013](#). It is important to highlight that the SSAR may not have a preventive or mitigating mechanism in place in case of a reverse scenario, e.g. a large scale influx of Afghan refugees migrating to Iran and Pakistan in post-2014 due to the deterioration of the economic, political and security environments in Afghanistan.

Displacement post-2014

Based on potential scenarios of political and economic turmoil within Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries, STATT foresees the [displacement flows](#) shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Potential Displacement Flows in Afghanistan's Post 2014



Source: adapted from "[Afghan Migration in Flux](#)", *STATT Synapse*, Issue 10, January 2010.



Conclusion

Historically, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan have been countries of displacement; all three have been the source and host for refugees and IDPs. During the last decade, displacement in the region has escalated with 5.7 million refugees returning to Afghanistan while conflict has driven thousands of IDPs from their homes. These displacement flows pose challenges for the Afghanistan government and the international and humanitarian agencies providing assistance to refugees and IDPs. As coalition forces withdraw and international aid starts drying up, Afghanistan and its neighbours will be tested in their capacity to handle displacement in the coming years. Depending on Afghanistan's progress toward stabilisation and the unfolding of political and economic dynamics in Pakistan and Iran, the region could experience significant displacement flows in both directions (from/to Afghanistan and to/from neighbouring countries). Of particular concern is the potential revocation of refugee cards in Pakistan and Iran, which could spawn large amounts of returnees in the short-term into Afghanistan thereby, straining the absorption capacity and resources of the government and international agencies.