



Afghanistan Analysts Network

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Int. Engagement

Voluntary and Forced Returns to Afghanistan in 2016/17: Trends, statistics and experiences

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Anti-migration graffiti on the wall of the Ministry of Telecommunication in Kabul, Afghanistan. The caption on the left reads: "There is no rest in flight." The caption on the right reads: "The real face of a smuggler" – whatever picture had been stencilled on the wall below looks to have been scrubbed out. (Photo: Fazal Muzhary, AAN 2017)

While hundreds of thousands of Afghans sought protection in Europe throughout 2015/16, an increasing number have been returning to Afghanistan, both voluntarily and involuntarily. The number of voluntary returnees from Europe picked up significantly throughout 2016, with additional returns in the first four months of 2017, reaching a total figure of over 8,000. By contrast, the number of deportations has been significantly lower, at only around 350 over the same period. AAN's Jelena Bjelica and Thomas Ruttig examine the trends, policies and practices relevant to those who have returned. They found that services available to those returning – in both categories – are patchy.

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What are the trends and figures for returns?

Over 250,000 Afghans left Afghanistan in 2015/16 (see previous AAN reporting [here](#)) and, along with refugees from Syria, Iraq and other countries, travelled via the Balkan route – through Greece, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, towards Europe (see previous AAN reporting [here](#)). While reaching Europe has become increasingly difficult (outward migration from Afghanistan is back to pre-2015 levels) and tens of thousands of people still stuck in Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, there is also a counter-trend: since 2016, the number of Afghans returning to their country has been on the increase. These returns include both voluntary and forced returns and refugees who left Afghanistan in 2015/16 and much earlier.

These returns have been facilitated by the Joint Way Forward (JWF) umbrella agreement between Afghanistan and the European Union as well as the bilateral repatriation agreements between Afghanistan and Germany, Sweden and Finland. All agreements were signed in October 2016. Afghanistan also has agreements with other countries, to which UNHCR is a party in certain cases. (1) While these agreements enable host countries to repatriate rejected asylum seekers against their will, the signatories expressed their intention to prioritise voluntary returns. In fact, the threat of deportation is a means to encouraging the target group to opt for a voluntary return (for example, see AAN's case study on Germany [here](#)).

(1) Voluntary returns

In 2016, IOM assisted 6,864 individuals to return to Afghanistan through its Afghanistan Voluntary Repatriation (AVR) programme. Between January and September 2016, IOM recorded approximately 200 returns a week. After September 2016, the agency noted a slowdown in returns, to less than half of previous figures, between 82 and 100 returns a week. In 2015, only 1,419 individuals had used this option.

The highest number of voluntary returns in 2016 were recorded from Germany (3,159), Greece (1,257) and Turkey (577). (2) Most of the returnees were young men – 78 percent or 5,382 individuals – with the biggest group, 2,781 returnees between 19 to 26 years of age and 2,101 children and teenagers of up to 18 years. A further 1,982 were 27 or older. Only 1,482 of the voluntary returnees were women. Among the total figure, IOM registered 733 families but did not state how many people were in each of these families.

Herat, with 391 people, was the main destination for voluntary returnees in 2016, of those choosing to receive onward transportation support included in the assistance provided by IOM. This was followed by Balkh (187), Kandahar (66), Ghazni (58) and Nangrahar (53). The second largest number, 201 individuals, opted to remain in Kabul. Here, they received money for taxi fares to different neighbourhoods throughout the city. According to IOM, in 2015 most of the returnees had indicated that Nangrahar was their final destination. Based on anecdotal evidence collected by IOM, most of those who returned voluntarily in 2016 had left Afghanistan in 2015.

By the end of April 2017, IOM had assisted 1,322 voluntary returnees from 17 countries, among them ten EU members with 1,067 cases through its AVR programme. Additionally, IOM assisted eight voluntary returnees (six from Austria and two from Sweden) through a separate project (Post-Arrival and Reintegration Assistance, PARA, see [here](#))

(3) This equates to around 80 voluntary Afghan returnees on average per week in the first four months of 2017.

Most returnees seem to return directly to their families or other destinations they trust. Few, as will be discussed later, opt for the MoRR/IOM shelter at the Jangalak reception centre in the west of the city.

(2) Deportations

The Joint Way Forward (JWF) and the three new bilateral agreements (unlike the older ones) allow host countries to operate non-scheduled flights to Afghanistan in order to repatriate rejected asylum seekers. The JWF operational plan – an unpublicised annex to the umbrella agreement – foresees a maximum of 10,000 returns a year. It does not specify whether the total figure refers to voluntary or forced returns, however it is AAN's understanding that the number includes both categories.

The document also states that there cannot be more than two non-scheduled flights a week, ie a maximum of 100 forced returnees a week (or 400 a month, which would mean a maximum of 5,000 deportees a year). This calculation indicates that an estimated 5,000 deportees and 5,000 voluntary returnees are expected a year. Nevertheless, given the high number of voluntary returns in 2016 and in the first four months of 2017, as well as the relatively low number of deportations so far (figures below), it can be expected that there will be more than 5,000 voluntary returnees this year.

According to IOM, between October 2016 and April 2017, 12 planes with a total of 176 Afghan deportees from Europe landed in Kabul (for dates and a breakdown per country, see table below). (4) The highest number of deportations on the non-scheduled flights in a single month was carried out in December 2016, when three charter flights landed in Kabul, bringing in a total 50 people, and in March 2017 when four charter flights landed in Kabul, bringing in a total of 56 people.

	Arrival Date	Country	# of Returnees
1	13-Dec-16	SWEDEN	13
2	15-Dec-16	GERMANY	34
3	28-Dec-16	FINLAND	3
4	24-Jan-17	GERMANY	25
5	23-Feb-17	GERMANY	18
6	25-Feb-17	FINLAND	3
7	1-Mar-17	DENMARK	12
8	28-Mar-17	GERMANY	15
9	29-Mar-17	AUSTRIA	19
10	29-Mar-17	SWEDEN	10
11	4-Apr-17	FINLAND	10
12	25-Apr-17	GERMANY	14

Source: IOM figures

In addition to those returned on chartered flights from European countries under the auspices of the Joint Way Forward, Afghans are also being deported on commercial flights, and non-EU countries are deporting Afghans based on their own agreements with Afghanistan, as is the case with Australia. For example, during the first four months of 2017, IOM assisted 177 forced returnees through its Post-Arrival and Reintegration Assistance (PARA) project (more on this below). This included returnees from European countries (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden and the UK), and from Australia, which has had an agreement in place with Afghanistan since 2003. Of those assisted, 126 have been returned on chartered flights and 51 on commercial flights. The highest number of forced returnees during the first four months of 2017 (all on charter flights) was from Germany – 72 individuals, followed by the UK, which deported 43 individuals to Afghanistan (the UK does all its deportations on commercial flights.)

Munich to Kabul: Charter flight with Afghan deportees

On 23 February 2017, AAN had the opportunity to be at the airport when a charter flight from Munich – the third German one of five so far – landed at Hamed Karzai International Airport in Kabul. It was operated by Italy-based holiday flyer Air Meridiana, as German carriers had refused the contract, fearing loss of image. On the flight were 18 Afghan men whose asylum applications had been rejected by the German government, aged between 19 and 53 years. Originally, they came from ten different provinces, Balkh, Kabul and Herat as well as from Kandahar, Khost, Maidan-Wardak, Uruzgan, Kunduz, Paktia and Nangrahar. Only the first three provinces are considered safe (in part) for deportations by the German government, which has been the cause of a heated domestic policy debate. (5) There were also almost 60 German policemen on board the plane (three policemen per deportee). Returnees interviewed by AAN claimed their “personal” policemen threatened them with being shackled if they “misbehaved”, so they did not even dare to speak with their fellow Afghans on board.

The final list of those on the plane was only handed over to the Afghan authorities by a representative of the German embassy upon the plane’s arrival. Before it arrived, the Afghan authorities had a list of 88 Afghan names, apparently a ‘pool’ of Afghans earmarked for deportation. While the German government, for domestic consumption, claims that “many” of the deportees were criminal offenders (see a late April 2017 interview by foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel [here](#)), it also admitted that it does not inform the Afghan authorities about this, “for reasons of data protection,” as it [wrote](#) in an answer to an official parliamentary query dated 20 April 2017. This has been confirmed by a number of Afghan officials present on 23 February 2017, leading to complaints on the German side.

As the steady drop in the number of passengers on these five flights demonstrate, the German authorities appear to be struggling to fill the quota agreed on with the Afghan government of 50 deportees per flight. Lawyers and pro-refugee groups regularly manage to acquire last-minute halts to deportation for Afghan clients from German courts.

General Al-Haj Muhammad Asef Jabbarkhel, the paunchy airport police commander greeted the arrivals with “I do not welcome you as a policeman, but as a fellow-Afghan,” in an obvious attempt to cheer up the 18 men. The general asked his assistants to bring “water, tea and biscuits” and told the new arrivals that Afghan authorities would take care of their initial accommodation. He said that they were back on their home country’s “holy ground” and managed to entice the men into joining him in a joint prayer for peace.

Following this, all deportees were registered in the MoRR office in the airport's arrival lounge that opened just two days prior to the flight's arrival. Other government representatives included officials from the foreign ministry and the Ministry of Interior's Criminal Investigation Department. Representatives of the UN-related International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and German-funded International Psycho-Social Organisation (IPSO) were also present at the arrival lounge, situated in the area before passport control. IOM had a doctor present to provide immediate medical treatment, if necessary. In that case, one older and obviously sick deportee (he was shaking and had to be helped out of the shuttle bus by two assistants), was immediately led into a separate room for medical care.

Those deportees who expressed a wish to travel on to home provinces or to relatives outside Kabul received travel money from IOM. Some of the 18, however, left the airport without bothering to speak to any of the organisations present. Eight, with no relatives in either Kabul or elsewhere in the country (most of them had lived in Iran for many years prior to their travel to Germany), took up the offer by IOM and MoRR for temporary accommodation in the Jangalak "reception centre" funded and managed by IOM (more on Jangalak below.) AAN spoke to some of the Afghan journalists present who had also been there when earlier flights had landed, and they noted that this time there were no relatives waiting.

One of the deportees that AAN spoke to was Gul Sayyed Hussain, a 23-year old from Kunduz province. He said that he could not tell his family that he had been deported back to Afghanistan. "It is embarrassing," he said. Gul Sayed told AAN he had been in Frankfurt since 2011 and had left Afghanistan when he was 17-year old boy. He said he had travelled via Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece and Italy to Germany, which was his final destination. He learned German and finished school in Darmstadt. In 2012 he found a job as a cook, and "fell in love with cooking", he emphasised. At the time he was deported, he had been working in a restaurant of a large hotel chain. Gul Sayyed, who had been a bread-winner for his big family in Afghanistan, consisting of 14 sisters and five brothers, does not see his future in Afghanistan. He said he was now thinking of going to Dubai and trying his luck with restaurants there. He was going to first spend some time with his sister in Kabul, and figure out what story to tell his father back in Kunduz province.

There was another cook among the 18 deportees on this flight, a young man from Nangrahar who did not want to have his name published. After his five year stay in Germany, one could barely make out any accent in his impeccable German (with only possibly a hint of accent from the Baden area, where he had worked in a high-class bar and restaurant and, where, he insisted, he paid his taxes.) His colleagues had tried to keep him in the country, he told AAN, and ended his story by just shaking his head and with tears in his eyes.

The Afghan Government's Returnee Policy and Coordination

The Afghan National Unity Government [established](#) the High Commission for Migration in April 2015, "with a view to formulate [sic] policies and initiate [sic] cooperation to re-integrate and accommodate internally displaced people and those refugees returning to [the] homeland on their own will;" the document fails to refer to deportees. But this commission seemed to be overwhelmed primarily by the massive number of returns from Pakistan and Iran. In November 2016, a more concrete step was taken, ie a decision had been reached between the international community (led by the UN Deputy Special Representative/Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan) and the Afghan Government that, in coordination with the Office of the Afghan Chief Executive, a forum should be established aiming to coordinate national and international efforts regarding immediate response and long-term solutions to the crisis of returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). (See also previous AAN reporting on the mass return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan in 2016 [here](#), and on the increase in the number of IDPs in Afghanistan in 2016, [here](#).) In late November 2016, it was further decided that the Displacement and Returnees

Executive Committee (DiREC) between the Afghan government and the international community should be established and tasked to define a management strategy for coordinating the humanitarian and development programmes; assign responsibilities for updating policy and government response as new information arrives; and define the reporting responsibilities of working groups.

Under the auspices of the DiREC, which is co-chaired by Sayed Hussain Alemi Balkhi, the Minister of Refugees and Repatriation, as well as Mustafa Mastoor, the Special Representative and Senior Adviser of the Chief Executive, and Mark Bodwen, the UN Deputy Special Representative/Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan (Toby Lanzer replaced Bodwen in March 2017 as resident and humanitarian coordinator), a new policy framework for returnees and IDPs was developed. In force since December 2016, this policy framework, seen by AAN, deals with returnees from the region (Iran and Pakistan) as well as returnees from Europe and IDPs. It foresees a multidimensional approach to their reintegration. It calls for, among other things, individual financial support to be followed up by a “whole of community” approach “wherever possible,” meaning that the support will be handed out not only to individuals but also to the communities in which they settle. The policy views “land allocation as critical to the success of durable solutions.” It foresees changes in legislation and interventions at the general (ie state-level) as crucial. One envisaged change in legislation, on land distribution, is particularly essential as the current law, the so-called Presidential Decree 104 from 2005, has been proven vulnerable to corruption and mismanagement (see previous AAN reporting [here](#)).

Although it is not known how many returnees from Europe have received land from the government, and if so under which conditions, this could be an incentive for people who left Afghanistan a long time ago and who are now at the mercy of European governments’ decisions about deportations. At the same time, as AAN’s dispatch from Nangrahar [showed](#), early hopes have proven futile to many returnees, and the hold of quasi-immune power holders to grabbed state land – which is supposed to be used for resettlement – is widely known among Afghans.

In practice, what assistance do returnees and deportees currently receive?

There are several types of assistance that those returning, both forcibly and voluntarily, can pursue. The assistance comes from the Afghan government, the countries which sent the returnees back, international organisations such as IOM and local non-governmental organisation like IPSO and the [Afghanistan Migrants Advice & Support Organisation \(AMASO\)](#). There seem to be no established coordination mechanisms to ensure that all returnees receive the support they need or that they are treated somewhat equally, that some returnees do not receive more support than they are entitled to or to ensure that there is comprehensive monitoring. The German government, for example, argues that their responsibility for returnees ends when they are handed over to the Afghan authorities upon arrival.

Here below, an overview of available assistance:

- *Afghan Government assistance*

The government’s current support to returnees from Europe is centred around legal aid, job placement (which is done through the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs/MoLSA), land and shelter, Murtaza Rasuli, a director of an MoRR department that works with returnees from Europe told AAN. Nevertheless, AAN was told by several returnees that word of mouth among them was that few had actually received any other form of assistance, except the two-week provision of shelter from the government.

The Afghan parliament summoned MoRR, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and MoLSA representatives on 3 May 2017 for an interpellation session regarding, among other things, problems faced by repatriates and returnees following their arrival back in country. The questions posed by the MPs, however, focussed mainly on the largest group, the returnees from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan and those Afghan refugees still living there as well as in Saudi Arabia, and government preparations and plans for returning refugees in general. The small group of returnees – both volunteers and deportees – seems to figure only on the side-lines.

- *Financial assistance*

For those returning voluntarily, financial assistance is available. The amount, however, depends on which country is returning them. It ranges from between 700 and 4,000 USD. Sweden, for example, gives a cash payment per person of 30,000 Swedish Kronas (approximately 3,150 Euros) and Belgium provides 500 Euros. Germany gives 700 Euros in cash in Germany at the departure airport and reintegration assistance in the range of between 800 to 2,500 Euros through IOM on a case-to-case basis following their arrival. The latter assistance is not cash-in-hands assistance, but a grant that could be used for education, vocational training, salary subsidy, micro business plans, etc.

- *Reintegration assistance*

Through the European Reintegration Network Specific Action Programme for Afghanistan (see [here](#)), IOM provides post-arrival and reintegration assistance to both forcibly and voluntarily returned Afghan nationals from 18 countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. (6) The planes for deportations, however, are paid for by the EU's Frontex border management agency. (7) Additionally, in early March 2017, the IOM signed an agreement with the EU Commissions' Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO), worth 18 million Euros for a four-year term that will provide reintegration support to returnees and host communities across Afghanistan (see [here](#)). This programme will offer, in addition to individual assistance, community-based initiatives, which are meant to ease and facilitate the reintegration of individuals.

In 2016, only 1,094 of over 6,800 returnees received post-arrival reintegration assistance, eligibility to which is essentially decided by sending countries on an individual basis. This obviously means that even not all voluntary returnees receive financial support following their return to Afghanistan.

The majority of those 1,094 who were eligible for post-arrival assistance in 2016 chose to start a small business – 874 individuals. With 131 persons, a significantly lower number opted for financial support for housing; 76 received household items. Eight opted for an assisted job placement, two for house renovation, two for education or training assistance and only one for medical reimbursement.

According to Masood Ahmadi, an IOM reintegration programme manager, “a lot of people do not ask for a reintegration package, even if they are eligible. They simply do not come back to IOM to claim it.” This is mainly due to technical and bureaucratic hurdles, although eligible returnees are informed about reintegration packages, both in the sending country and upon arrival. Ahmadi adds that “Many do not have a [local] phone number when they come back; and they can't follow up. We were thinking of distributing SIM cards, but that was not possible due to legal issues. We, however, do ask them to get in contact with the local IOM office in their province or main office in Kabul,” he said, underlining that “returnees are essentially informed about reintegration packages that they are eligible to receive, both in Kabul and in the sending countries.” IOM staff and migration authorities in sending

and receiving countries inform voluntary returnees about the entitlements they are eligible to – but in practice, as NGO research in Germany showed (see this previous AAN [dispatch](#)), this often seems to be presented by authorities as a way to facilitate more ‘voluntary’ returns.

IOM post-arrival humanitarian assistance to forced returnees is a basic package, which includes a transportation fee from the airport to the person’s residence and temporary accommodation if required. German authorities, for example, provide a small amount of pocket money to deportees. Some are also eligible for reintegration assistance similar to the one for those returning voluntarily. According to Laurence Hart, the head of IOM Afghanistan, in most cases this is only “a parachute package,” an immediate form of post-arrival survival help, rather than sustainable and long-term assistance. As AAN interviews have shown, this is not sufficient to allay the considerable fears deportees have regarding their future.

(3) Temporary housing

Most of the returnees and deportees return directly to their families or communities. However, for those who cannot do this, the government and IOM provide temporary accommodation. The Jangalak reception centre for those with that need is located within the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation’s compound in the former Jangalak factory, which was once one of the country’s biggest but was destroyed during the war because it was Soviet-built. The 24-room (with two to three beds each) reception centre is open for both voluntary and forced returnees for a maximum of two weeks. A 12-member staff team headed by a former Hezb-e Islami commander looks after them. Each room is equipped with a fridge, TV, air conditioner and wardrobe. In 2016, only 43 individuals (including both voluntary and forced returnees) opted to stay in the centre. On average they stayed there for seven nights, meaning that in 2016, the reception centre had been occupied for a total of 149 nights, IOM told AAN.

AAN visited the Jangalak reception centre in late February 2017, several days after the third non-scheduled flight from Germany landed in Kabul. At the time, there were ten men in the centre, eight from the German flight, one who was returned by Finland and a Pakistani from the UK, who, as he admitted, had initially had himself registered there as an ‘Afghan’. (It was not clear whether he admitted Pakistani citizenship in the UK already or only after having been deported to Afghanistan.)

Essa, a 28-year old man from Ghazni province and one of the deportees from Germany, opted for Jangalak because he had spent almost ten years living in Germany. Before he had grown up in Iran where his parents had moved in the mid-1990s and where he finished high school. As a result, he had no family in the country to return to. Essa had never even been in Kabul before. In Germany, he had applied for asylum but had been rejected. He managed to get a work permit anyway but following a change of policy, he lost it in 2014 after working for a company producing spare parts for cars in Stuttgart for four years. He told AAN, “I am scared here, there are people with guns everywhere.” The last time AAN saw him in mid-March 2017, he said that he was planning to go back to Iran to reunite with his family. He was waiting for the money that his family promised to send him to pay for the journey. In contrast to Germany, Switzerland has a policy in place that does not send back Afghans to Afghanistan who have spent most of their time in Iran.

The Afghanistan Migrants Advice and Support Organisation, run by Abdul Ghafoor, a returnee from Norway himself, aids returnees mainly from Nordic countries. The organisation opened a safe house in January 2017, offering accommodation to those who have nowhere to go following the two weeks – the maximum period allowed – in the government-run shelter. This was the case with a deportee from Germany, who arrived on 24 January 2017 and who was injured in the bomb blast near the Supreme Court on 7 February 2017 (see [here](#)) Since his injury, he has been accommodated in the AMASO safe house, financed by private donations from Europe.

(4) Psycho-social assistance

The German government has contracted [IPSO](#), a humanitarian organisation of German-origin based in Kabul, to offer psycho-social help to those deported from Germany. The organisation assists 400 to 500 individuals a day, but this number includes also, and mainly, local people that need psycho-social help, as Inge Missmahl, founder and director of IPSO told AAN. The organisation organises self-awareness groups, Afghan-life skills training, one-to-one counselling, painting and handcraft skills.

“We talk to them about why they decided to leave, why they were not accepted, what experiences they had en route, why they came back,” Missmahl told AAN. She pointed out that those Afghans who have been returned, but left a long time ago have some very different experiences and needs to those who left in 2015 and only returned recently. According to her, those who left years ago have accepted and adjusted to a European value system, which is not the case for those who left in 2015. Nevertheless, both groups experience stigma and feel a deep humiliation once they have been deported back. This requires both mitigation and counselling that Missmahl’s organisation provides. “We try to provide them with a moment of empowerment, so they feel self-efficient again,” she said, adding that a lot of people “never really found their own voice,” and left Afghanistan in search of one. IPSO provides up to five sessions for those in need, and the organisation keeps in Skype contact with returnees in remote provinces. They have also assisted people who have been deported from Finland and Norway, although the organisation does not have bilateral grant agreements with these two countries.

At the time AAN met the INSO director, she said she was not required to keep separate statistics of how many deportees had taken up her organisation’s offer of support. This has now changed. According to German official [data](#), IPSO had held “94 individual psycho-social counselling sessions and 64 individual meetings [of another, non-specific character]” – which, in AAN’s experience, seems to refer to the offers given at the airport upon arrival. 17 deportees participated in “support groups”, five visited the organisation’s psychiatrist, seven used IPSO’s day care and food offer, “others left to their provinces after a few contacts.” This means that only a minority of the deportees from Germany took up IPSO’s offers.

(5) Monitoring

Upon request of the donor countries, IOM also monitors returnees’ reintegration for up to a year. Norway, however, was the only country that has so far requested this, an IOM official told AAN. In late 2016, the organisation launched a community response map, which monitors beneficiaries for up to a three-month period. The map also includes the responses of those who returned from Pakistan (see [here](#)).

Institutional unpreparedness, patchy support

Although the Afghan government and local and international organisations managed to organise some kind of first response to both voluntary and forced returnees, it seems that services available to those returning are patchy and in many cases insufficient to provide a realistic chance to start a new life in Afghanistan. There is also no convincing approach yet on what to do in particular with ‘returnees’ who have spent years in Iran and are out of touch with life in Afghanistan.

Despite certain improvements – such as setting up of a software-based registration system at most official border crossings and at the airport office –, the government is still institutionally widely unprepared to cope with the massive influx of returnees. It is still in the process of developing policies and fundraising mechanisms. The

variations in numbers between IOM and the MoRR, but also between IOM and individual member states show that there is incomplete information about those who returned from Europe in 2016 and early 2017. The voluntary returns and particularly the deportations from Europe add an additional and untimely burden.

The available but very limited care and accommodation is far from sufficient for some returnees who need to re-acclimatise to a society that is effectively still war-ridden and under social duress. The mass return from Iran and Pakistan significantly adds to this duress. There is a great chance, therefore, that those returning from Europe in comparatively low numbers will end being sidelined, as a quantitatively less important and therefore less urgent humanitarian issue. Nevertheless, the fact that European governments continue to push for returns to Afghanistan in this situation (see AAN's previous reporting [here](#)) is another example of a purely donor-driven policy in Afghanistan. As AAN has [shown](#) earlier, official Afghan buy-in into such a policy is achieved by financial pressure.

(1) Since 2001, Afghanistan has signed memoranda of understandings on returns and readmissions with several EU/ Schengen members, including France (2002), UK (2002), Netherlands (2002), Denmark (2004), Switzerland (2005), Norway (2005), and Sweden (2006, until 2009); also, see AAN's previous reporting [here](#) and [here](#).

(2) IOM figures differ from individual member states' figures, as the organisation counts only those that it aided. France, for example, has a higher number on their list, as their numbers include deportees, which IOM had not assisted. France rejected three Afghans in 2015, and 136 in 2014 (see [here](#)). Official German statistics register 3,322 „voluntary returnees” to Afghanistan for **2016**. IOM figures also include returnees from non-EU countries such as Turkey and Australia.

The Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) also keeps track of voluntary returns and deportations, however, the variation in figures between theirs and IOM's is striking. This might be due to methodology or the fact that Afghan authorities might not be informed by the sending country or unable to identify voluntary returnees when they board commercial flights. MoRR statistics for 2016 only show 911 individuals under the category “voluntary returnees who came via Kabul airport” and 1,275 under the category “the returnees who received IOM assistance and have been interviewed.” It also documented 536 individuals who were forcibly returned in 2016, and of those 536, ten had been returned to the country of deportation by the Afghan authorities. This contrasts with IOM figures, which documents 166 forced returns in 2016.

Additionally, according to MoRR figures, during the solar year 1395 (21 March 2016 to 20 March 2017), the ministry registered 4,074 spontaneous returns. The table on spontaneous returns suggests that there were only nine spontaneous returns from Pakistan and seven from Iran in the solar year 1395. UN figures, however, indicate that 614,411 people moved from Pakistan to Afghanistan in 2016 (see AAN's previous reporting [here](#)).

(3) The remaining returnees came from non-EU countries, ie from Australia – 2 individuals; Azerbaijan – 4; Indonesia – 30; Nauru – 1, Serbia – 3; Switzerland – 10; and Turkey – 195.

(4) IOM keeps track of both voluntary and forcible returns, but there is possibly an additional number of returns and deportations outside of the IOM statistical overview. For example, the Netherlands was mentioned as a deporting country (twice by German interior minister Thomas de Mazière, one quote [here](#)), but AAN was unable to find any reference in IOM or MoRR statistics overviews on deportations from the Netherlands.

(5) The debate is fuelled by the continued refusal of the German government to name those provinces, or areas within them, which it considers safe enough for Afghans being deported there, arguing the information is classified

(see the latest example in its answer to an official parliamentary query, dated 20 April 2017, [here](#)).

(6) IOM has bilateral agreements with Australia, the UK and Denmark for assisted voluntary returns, the funds for which are channelled through IOM's global programme for voluntary returnees. The organisation also used to have a bilateral agreement with Norway, but after allegations of corruption in February 2016, the Norwegian government stopped the funding (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Although it is most likely that Norway will renew its funding to IOM this year, after all allegations have been cleared, the Norwegian government has currently contracted a local law firm in Afghanistan, Shahjan and Associates, which runs post-arrival assistance including the guest house, Roshan Plaza, (located in Shahr-e Now neighbourhood, central Kabul) for those returning from Norway. The rules related to the possible duration of stay in Roshan Plaza are the same as for the Jangalak facility, where individuals can stay up to two weeks.

(7) In one instance, IOM chartered a plane in February 2016 for 125 voluntary returnees from [Germany](#), which cost the German government 98,000 Euros. According to Hart, the head of IOM in Afghanistan, buying 125 tickets on commercial flights would have cost only 68,000 Euros; the German government, however, had insisted that the plane should be chartered. It is not only the German government that opts for this expensive option. Finland, for example, has twice chartered a plane for three deportees each time. According to German government [figures](#), charter costs for the country's first four deportation flights were between 319,000 and 330,000 Euros.

Tagged with: [Afghan migrants](#), [migration](#), [Refugee](#), [Returnees](#)

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