

# Will the Taliban's Takeover Lead to a New Refugee Crisis from Afghanistan?

September 2, 2021 FEATURE | By Nasrat Sayed, Fahim Sadat, and Hamayun Khan

The decision to withdraw U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan and the subsequent abrupt takeover by the Taliban have triggered profound concerns among Afghans, who fear for the future under the Taliban's rule. Internationally, one key concern is that a major refugee crisis may be imminent, which could swell the numbers of Afghans previously displaced within and beyond the country's borders during prior decades of war. Already this year, more than 558,000 Afghans have been displaced internally. Under a worst-case scenario, an estimated 515,000 refugees could be forced out of the country by the end of this year. Future flight would add to the existing 2.8 million Afghan refugees and asylum seekers around the world, who have long been among the planet's largest humanitarian populations.

Afghanistan's neighbors—particularly Pakistan and Iran, which already host more than 2.2 million registered Afghan refugees and more than 3 million others with varying status—would be the most affected by any large-scale migration. However, refugees could also seek refuge in Europe, in a possible echo of the more than 1 million asylum seekers and others from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere who reached EU borders in 2015 and 2016. Fearing such a repetition, European policymakers initially pressed for continued returns to Afghanistan of irregular Afghan migrants and failed asylum seekers; however, several countries leading the charge for a stiff returns policy, among them Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, quickly reversed course as the Taliban gained ground.

The likelihood of a new Afghan refugee crisis primarily depends on the formation and structure of a government by the Taliban, its rules (such as regarding rights for women and girls to an education and work), and the country's economic situation. The inability of the Taliban to form an inclusive government that is acceptable to all Afghans may cause turbulence. This, along with continued drought that has compounded the humanitarian situation, may increase the number of people who are willing to flee, especially to neighboring countries where leaders have worried openly about a new refugee crisis. More broadly, global powers have fretted that a fragmented Afghanistan could again play host to extremist groups as it did ahead of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

However, these outcomes are not inevitable. Taliban leaders have suggested they will behave differently than the last time the group was in power, with more tolerance and respect for women and minority rights. The international community's ongoing relationship with Afghanistan and Afghan organizations can affect the new government's performance and ability to maintain control. External pressures, particularly from Afghanistan's neighbors, may limit civilians' ability to flee. Negotiations between the Taliban and opposition forces could lead to an inclusive government. While there remains the prospect that renewed fighting, economic disaster, or reduced freedom will prompt a large-scale refugee crisis, the countries that are most likely to be affected will be those located in Afghanistan's immediate

neighborhood, many of which have invested diplomatic and other resources to prevent huge displacement.

This article reviews the prospects for a new refugee crisis from Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover. It tracks the history of forced migration from Afghanistan, including in the two decades since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, and examines the factors that could be crucial in seeding a new refugee crisis.

## Four Decades of Refugees

After Syrians and Venezuelans, Afghans already account for the third largest population of forced migrants worldwide. A portion of this migration has been going on for more than four decades, as the country has been engulfed by a series of wars and invasions including by the Soviet Union and, more recently, a U.S.-led coalition.

Historically, Pakistan and Iran have hosted most of these refugees; as of December 2020, Pakistan hosted 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees and Iran hosted 780,000. Many more Afghans live in those countries without registration; estimates suggest that 1 million unregistered Afghans live in Pakistan and more than 2 million Afghans live in Iran in irregular status.

The years between the Soviet Union's invasion in 1979 and the end of the Taliban's previous regime in 2001 saw intense refugee movements to Pakistan, Iran, and the West. Initially, both Iran and Pakistan welcomed influxes of Afghan refugees, with financial support from the international community. However, in the 1990s both countries changed their policies and in 1997 stopped registering new Afghan refugees.

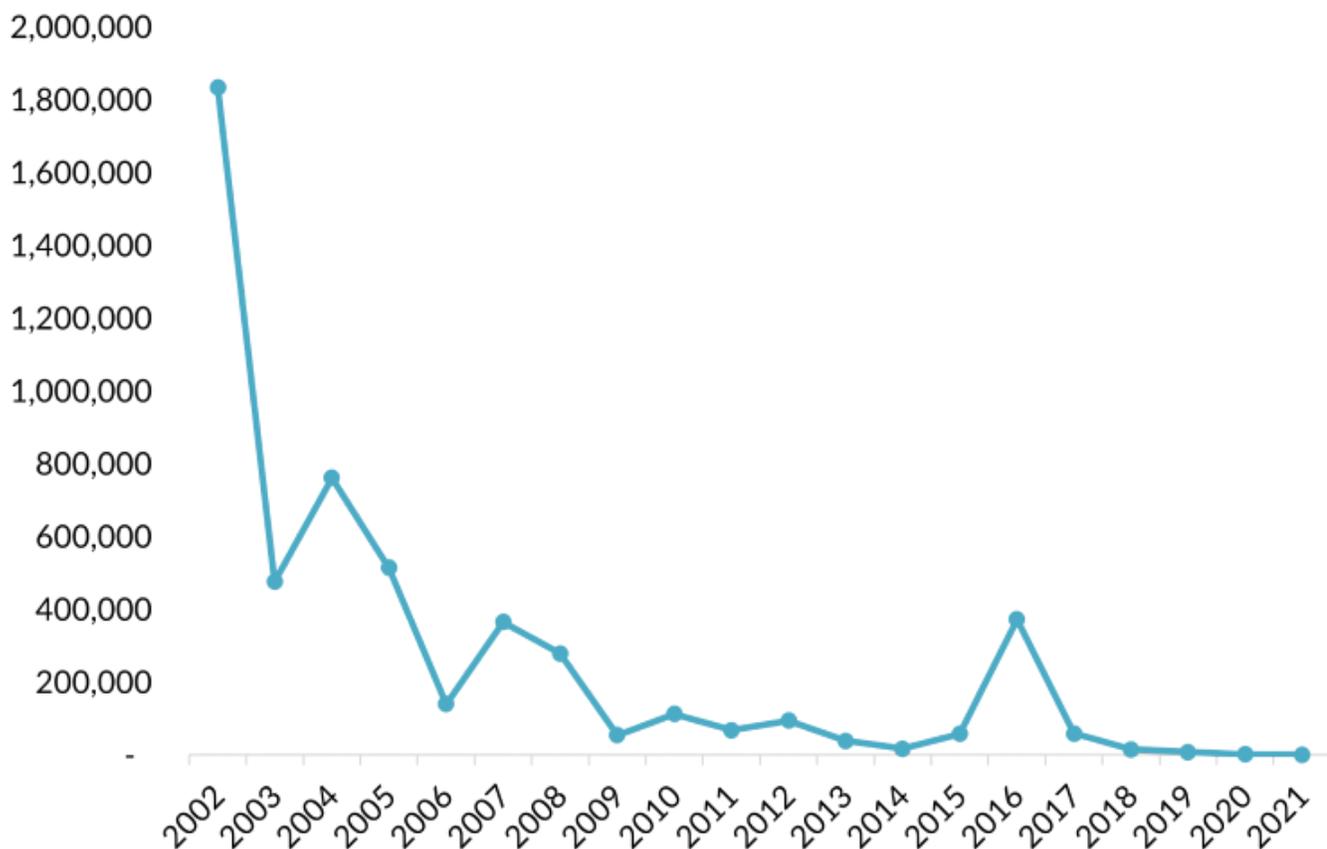
These two countries have had different policies in terms of refugees' access to education, right to work, and freedom of movement. For example, Pakistan permits freedom of movement for registered Afghans, whereas Iran imposes restrictions. In Pakistan, approximately one-third of refugees lived in refugee villages as of 2018, while the vast majority of Afghan refugees in Iran lived in urban areas. However, both countries have been host to many cases of mistreatment and alleged violations of Afghan refugees' human rights, including forced deportation, detention, and physical abuse.

Europe also has been a significant destination for Afghans, dating to the 1980s. Within Europe, Germany hosts the largest number of Afghan nationals (nearly 272,000 as of 2020, according to the German Federal Statistical Office). Turkey has been a typical host and transit country for irregular migration of Afghans to Europe. But since 2002, due to the engagement of the international community in Afghanistan and the 2015-16 refugee crisis, Afghans seeking protection in Europe have seen lower rates of approval for their asylum claims—at times significantly lower than rates for asylum seekers from Syria and other conflict zones.

### *Uneven Returns*

Between 2002 and 2014, during which time Afghanistan saw large numbers of international forces on its soil, refugee movements not only slowed but millions of Afghans returned. Since 2002, nearly 5.3 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan under a program facilitated by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, this program's pace has slowed dramatically. More than 1.8 million refugees returned to the country through this program in 2002, but fewer than 2,150 returned in 2020 (see Figure 1).

## Figure 1. Refugee Returns to Afghanistan, 2002-21



*Note:* Data for 2021 run through August 23.

*Source:* UN High Commissioner for Refugees, “Operational Data Portal: Afghanistan Situation,” updated August 23, 2021, [available online](#).

Unregistered Afghans in Iran have been returning at a much greater rate. In 2020, more than 859,000 Afghans with irregular status in Iran returned to Afghanistan, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM)—more than ever before. Many of these migrants were deported or forcibly returned by Iranian authorities. In May 2020, the harsh conditions for Iran-bound Afghans attracted international news when 45 migrant workers reportedly drowned in the Harirud River after being forced into the water at gunpoint by Iranian border guards.

Some Afghans have also been forcibly returned from Pakistan, their treatment usually depending on Pakistan’s political relations with Afghanistan at the time. For example, due to the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan, nearly 365,000 refugees and more than 200,000 irregular migrants were forced to return to Afghanistan in just the second half of 2016, in what Human Rights Watch called “the world’s largest unlawful mass forced return of refugees in recent times.”

Outside the region, the European Union and Afghanistan signed a Joint Way Forward (JWF) agreement in 2016, with the aim to return failed Afghan asylum seekers. This April, the JWF was replaced with Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation (JDMC). Nearly 30,000 Afghan citizens were returned from the 27 EU Member States between 2016 and 2020, according to EU statistics. Elsewhere, Turkey has also deported irregular Afghans, including some 6,000 people deported to Afghanistan in 2020.

Returned Afghans often face unemployment and precarious socioeconomic conditions in their native country. This situation has become more extreme in recent weeks, with the economy slowing down drastically following the Taliban’s resurgence. COVID-19 also remains a perilous issue, having a negative impact on the livelihoods of all Afghans, especially returnees. The pandemic significantly

limited returnees' access to work, and they have also faced barriers accessing health-care facilities, financial sources, and information on where to obtain basic services.

## **A New Crisis?**

Fears of a new refugee crisis have mounted since February 2020, when the United States signed a peace agreement with the Taliban and pledged to withdraw troops in 2021. President Joe Biden confirmed the U.S. commitment to withdraw troops by September, and the final U.S. forces left the country at the end of August. Ahead of their departure, the Taliban laid claim to large swaths of Afghanistan and, on August 15, took over the capital of Kabul, likely presaging new limitations on civil liberties and a rollback of the country's embryonic democracy.

In coming months, a few key factors may determine the country's future and whether many civilians will flee their homes. One will be the nature of the Taliban's leadership, and whether it respects human rights or follows a strict interpretation of Sharia law. New leaders also face the task of bringing political and economic stability to their country and preventing the growth of the Islamic State.

A second issue is whether the withdrawal of international troops leads the international community to abandon Afghanistan as a whole and for the long term. Financial aid and other humanitarian assistance could be more crucial than ever in coming months and years. The United States and NATO had previously pledged continuing support to Afghanistan post-withdrawal, but Western powers and multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have frozen the country's access to money in recent weeks. The Taliban's lip service to rights for women and girls and slow formation of a new government may indicate leaders' hopes to gain international recognition and avoid diplomatic and financial isolation. Doing so might make possible the flow of international assistance. The European Union, for instance, has said that the billions of dollars it has pledged in development aid depend on conditions such as the Taliban's respect for human rights.

Another outstanding question is whether there will be a resumption of full-scale civil war, which would be unlikely to benefit any single group or the country as a whole. The emergence of a group of resistance fighters based in Panjshir province, called the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, is sure to add a new chapter to the situation, as will tensions with a regional affiliate of the Islamic State that was behind the August attack outside Hamid Karzai International Airport, which killed more than 180 people. Renewed war would imperil the formation of a new Taliban government and could make further remote the opportunity for international organizations to implement developmental projects and provide support for good governance.

If large-scale refugee flows do occur, they would be most likely to affect Pakistan and Iran in the short term, followed by central Asian countries, some of which have previously bristled at hosting Afghan refugees. Under a worst-case scenario, UNHCR estimated that up to 515,000 refugees could cross into these neighboring countries by the end of the year, although the agency had not observed large numbers of border crossings as of late August, perhaps partly due to frequent border closures. In many of these neighboring countries, anxieties about Afghanistan's uncertain situation have been exacerbated by the economic fallout due to the COVID-19 pandemic and, for Iran, from ongoing crippling U.S. economic sanctions. Iran and Pakistan also are dealing with significant water scarcity, which may affect their attitudes towards regional stability.

### *High Obstacles to Reach Europe*

At present, the prospects appear slim that a major refugee crisis will spread significantly beyond the region and ultimately to Europe, at least in the near term. One barrier is the high cost that smugglers charge asylum seekers, which averaged U.S. \$7,500 in 2015, Afghanistan's Ministry of Refugees and

Repatriations said at the time. Given the abysmal poverty in Afghanistan, where more than one-third of the population lives below the international poverty line of U.S. \$1.90 per day, this cost is far beyond the capacity of most Afghans. Individuals' financial situations have been even more constrained since the outbreak of the pandemic.

Additionally, many Afghans are already aware of the dangers of irregular migration and strict border-control measures that have been imposed by several European countries since the 2015-16 period. In 2016, the European Union and Turkey agreed on a deal to prevent irregular migration from Turkey to Greece, involving the return of irregular migrants reaching the Greek islands. The EU-Turkey deal contributed to decreasing numbers of irregular migrants arriving in Europe: there were nearly 862,000 irregular arrivals in Greece in 2015, but fewer than 16,000 in 2020.

Some of these border measures have been bolstered in recent weeks: Turkey, which is already hosting more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees and is a main transit hub for Europe-bound Afghan asylum seekers and other migrants, has started to reinforce its border with Iran with a three-meter high wall, ditches, and barbed wire. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said his country will not be "Europe's refugee warehouse." Greece, meanwhile, has completed a 25-mile (40-kilometer) fence barrier along its border with Turkey. These border measures show that the path to Europe will be difficult for Afghans.

## **Tough Choices Ahead**

Serious talks for a political settlement between the Taliban and resistance forces could avoid a situation in which large numbers of civilians feel the need to flee the country for their own safety. Partners such as the European Union and the United States could contribute to this end by providing economic and humanitarian support to Afghan organizations operating on the ground. The U.S. Treasury Department recently took a step in this direction by allowing humanitarian organizations to provide aid in the country, despite antiterrorism sanctions against the Taliban.

The Taliban's ability to gain recognition as a government could hinge on a political settlement with resistance fighters, which might grant it a degree of trust and legitimacy both within and outside the country. Decades of war have shown that peace is not easily won. Both the Taliban and resistance leaders have called for negotiations and an inclusive government; if achieved, this might prove the surest way of bringing peace to the country and allow Afghans to feel safe in their communities.

Finally, Taliban leaders have a crucial role to play in carrying out the duties of governing. Tolerance for human rights, including rights for women and girls, will win it respect internationally and from the Afghan people. Furthermore, corruption has been a serious issue which eroded the previous government's legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Good governance and effective delivery of basic services could therefore instill trust in the new government and reinforce its mandate. This includes the government's attention to former refugees and other returned migrants, whose reintegration will be critical for Afghanistan's future. Diplomatic and other efforts that support reforms along these lines would pay dividends.

*The views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not reflect their affiliated institutions.*

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