

THE VOICES BEHIND THE REFUGEE OUTFLOW FROM AFGHANISTAN

Hameed Hakimi*
Barin Sultani Haymon**

For more than three decades, Afghanistan was the number one source country of the global refugee population. This only changed in late 2014, as the increasing severity of the Syrian crisis tipped Afghanistan into second position in terms of gross headcount. Growing insecurity, ominously demonstrated in Taliban's recent brief occupation of Kunduz province, coupled with the economic hardships facing Afghans as evident in growing unemployment figures, an increasing number of Afghans are seeking refuge outside their country – especially in Europe.

In response, the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation recently launched a campaign¹, for instance, to tackle the exodus of Afghan youth – the so-called 'brain drain'². The campaign makes use of evocative messaging and threatening imagery to caution potential emigrants; examples include pictures of an overcrowded boat, a shipwreck, or a group of young Afghans detained behind a fence. This is meant to illustrate the perils of the journey out of the 'homeland'. Facebook is being used as a popular tool to dissuade those intent on leaving Afghanistan, with emerging localised³ efforts appealing to a sense of patriotic pride or, more cynically, leveraging 'guilt' as a motivating factor to deter the 'abandonment of the homeland' in a time of dire need. In this context, those who decide to seek a new life in Europe, Australia and America are portrayed as uncaring and callous individuals. This is not endemic of Afghans only – most recently, Germany's Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière suggested that middle class Afghans should remain and help build the country up.

The current narrative in the West explaining why Afghans are leaving is media-centric and misleading. The voices of those who are leaving are largely unheard, quieted by the social media efforts of the Afghan government and a rising opposition in Europe, who are increasingly reluctant to treat Afghan asylum cases in par with the Syrians who are escaping civil war. Media commentary and the social media frenzy make little mention of the real voices of those Afghans who are leaving, often opting for a life of uncertainty in hopes of obtaining a refugee status in Western countries. Is leaving an easy decision? What factors are considered in choosing the target destination? How are the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in the region affecting Afghans' choice to leave their country? Is there a 'watershed' moment that pushes them to leave, or is it simply a matter of biding time until individual circumstances allow a means to an exit?

** Hameed Hakimi is a Research Associate at Chatham House in London. Previously, he has held researcher roles at various institutions including the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Between 2014 and 2015, Hameed was an International Advisor for policy and capacity development at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul.*

*** Barin Sultani Haymon is an independent researcher with more than a decade's experience in the non-profit sector, working closely with several charitable foundations focused on Afghanistan. She has received leadership training under Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire, former Commander of the U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda, and was the youngest-ever board member of the National Conference of Community and Justice (NCCJ).*

1. Facebook, 'Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations (2015)'- Don't go. Stay with me. There might be no return!.
2. VOA, 'Afghanistan's Other Security Threat: Brain Drain' (Sep 2015)
3. 'Afghanistan Needs You'(2015).

In exploring the exodus of Afghans – which includes a high number of educated Afghan youth – we are confronted with the complexities of a conflict-ridden country where seeking safety and finding economic security supersedes any sense of belonging and nationalist sentiments. These complexities can be untangled significantly through meaningful conversations with those Afghans who are intent on leaving. The aim of this paper is to uncover some of the factors driving the Afghan exodus as told by Afghans themselves. This is important for going beyond the simplistic and often sensationalist narrative around the problem of the net migration outflow from Afghanistan.

METHODOLOGY

In order to develop a better understanding of the complex issue of Afghans leaving their home country, a study was undertaken for this paper by way of 25 semi-structured interviews from a sample of Afghans, independent experts and researchers. The study was carried out during the period from January to April 2016, with the majority of the respondents located in Afghanistan, but also a few in the UK, Norway, Belgium and Greece. Many of the interviews were conducted via phone; however, in April 2016, one of the authors travelled to Kabul where a number of focused but informal extensive face to face conversations took place with Afghans who were either interested in leaving, or who were actively seeking an exit. The majority of the interviewees were males.⁴ The females participating in this study were either: a) attached to male spouses who were likewise pursuing an exit route, or b) seeking legal recourse for leaving Afghanistan (i.e. foreign visa). Many of the respondents were educated through secondary level at minimum, with nearly all having completed or in the process of completing postsecondary education. The age range of the respondents was 20 to 38 years old. Almost half were married with at least one child. Nearly everyone, excluding the respondents who were in full-time education, was employed, mostly in the public sector. Other vocations among the respondents included merchants, NGO employees, young people and day labourers.

The interview questions were designed to open the conversation with respondents on establishing a composite of relevant “push” factors. In addition to the questions we asked on push factors, the interviewees also discussed, where relevant, details of previous experiences of migration; family members who have been refugees; and whether the respondents used technology and social media to keep in touch relatives outside Afghanistan, particularly in the West if applicable.

The interviews also explored questions with respondents on the timing and manner of their decision to leave, how they were planning to leave (or how they had left), which country they targeted as their final destination; their thoughts on the prospects of settling in neighbouring countries; and their reasons for wanting to exit Afghanistan. In coding the data, numerous themes began to emerge. However, it should be noted that a separate, broader study would be more appropriate to undertake an in-depth and fully comprehensive exploration of all thematic issues surrounding the commonalities and differences that came to fore as a result of these interviews. The limited scope and the space of this paper does not allow for such an analysis.

4. Women who wish to pursue illegal (i.e., smuggling) routes out of Afghanistan face a significant social stigma; as such, identifying willing female participants in a study of this nature has been an onerous challenge.

PICTURE OF THE EXODUS

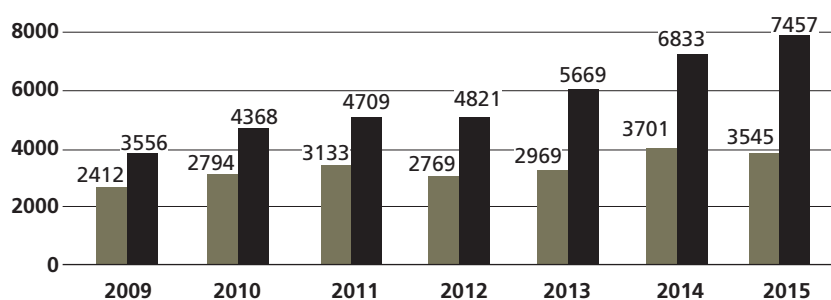
Data and Analysis

The most salient explanatory factors for leavers were: *security, unemployment* and economic uncertainty, *corruption, and/or a crisis of confidence in Afghan government and Afghanistan's future*. These factors were often explained in connection with one another, suggesting a linked set of circumstances which are pushing Afghans to seek an exit. Based on the interviews with Afghans and as supported by discussions with independent experts, all of these themes were prevalent, recurrent, and intertwined to such a degree that the authors feel it would be arbitrary to categorise them in a particular objective order of priority.

Security

The drawdown of NATO troops coupled with the fact the Taliban currently control more territory than at any time since the US invasion⁵ has led to increased violence and instability in Afghanistan. A recent example is the April 2016 Kabul attack which killed 64 and wounded 347, ranking as one of the deadliest incidents since the 2011 Ashura bombings. In February of this year, the UN released their annual report which documented over 11,000 civilian casualties in 2015 alone, the highest number recorded since UNAMA began tracking the figure in 2009 (See Figure 1).⁶ A separate source reported at least 10,000 security and terrorist incidents during 2015.⁷

Figure 1: Overview of Civilian Fatalities and Injuries January 2009 - December 2015⁸



While it is clearly evident that Afghanistan is facing a deteriorating security situation, this is often described from the collective perspective, e.g. as it relates to Afghanistan as a nation state – a broader analysis of the whole country. An oft-neglected angle which is directly relevant to the Afghan exodus is that of personal security; that is, how the conflict is impacting the daily lives of Afghans on an individual level. Each of the participants in this study cited security as a significant push factor, with most reflecting on the increased physical violence in Afghanistan since 2014, the resurgence of the Taliban and the presence of Da'esh

5. SIGAR Quarterly Report 5 January 2016

6. UNAMA, 'Afghanistan Annual Report 2015 Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict'.

7. Faridullah, 'Afghanistan Witnesses 10,000 Security, Terrorist Incidents In 2015'.

8. Ibid.

and Al-Qaeda as particularly damaging. While conducting interviews, it quickly became evident that individual security, rather than war and conflict in Afghanistan more generally, is the central force driving the Afghan exit.

Among our interviews, the account of a single, working mother highlights the desperate circumstances facing many Afghans. The woman described how she is forced to leave her two young daughters in her home in order to work. She lives in Kabul, which until recent years was thought to be relatively insulated from the violence afflicting the more volatile areas of the country.

We have been under attack twice and my daughter's leg was injured. There are bomb attacks here and my little girls get very scared. No matter what the situation is or how frightened my daughters have been, in order to work I have locked them in the house and left them alone. I have no choice – I have no one and have no help. When I come home, I open the door and my daughters come running towards me, screaming. The other day there was a bombing in Kabul and my daughters were distraught, crying and screaming... Safety is everything and I want to be safe. While I am eating I hear fighting and bombing. I leave the house and know that there is no guarantee that I will be back. I don't know if I will ever see my children again. I have no guarantee that I will return home to my girls at the end of the day. Even when I do make it home, I have to worry for tomorrow. There is no hope.

Another of our interviewees had just paid smugglers to facilitate her route to Europe via Iran. She described her decision to migrate as an extremely difficult one, made more complicated by the stigma women face in Afghan society when travelling alone. However, she ultimately came to the conclusion that she had no recourse but to pursue an exit, conveying that her strategy was essentially “anywhere but Afghanistan”:

Anywhere else would be safer. Life is dangerous here, especially for a woman. Women are the first ones to suffer in this country. That is why I want to get out.

While both of these interviewees spoke at length about safety in general, for the mother, security was understandably anchored to her children. The other female respondent raises an interesting factor: the effect of gender on security. Afghan women face greater levels of insecurity because of their lower social standing. Women require a male escort in order to transact everyday business in Afghanistan, and they are the first to fall victim to abuse and exploitation where the rule of law breaks down. As has been widely documented, for example, the Taliban have consistently and systematically suppressed the rights of women and applied brutal punishments for any perceived infractions; this is of course in addition to other actors, such as armed militia groups, who are not Taliban but are responsible for violating women's and human rights

Indeed, the quality of life for women in Afghanistan is substandard to that of men, and the degree of risks several orders of magnitude higher. As Abdul Ghafoor, the director of Afghanistan Migrants Advice and Support Organization (AMASO), told us in an interview:

Afghan females have their own set of complex issues in Afghanistan. Yes, they share the normal burdens of insecurity, joblessness, lack of a future, and others. Separate from that, they also face a lot of harassment, whether in the workplace or even just walking on the street. You see this even in government offices...They are not safe in any place in Afghanistan.

For all Afghans, beyond the perils of their daily life, their future opportunities have also been hampered severely by the security problem. A 20 year-old male with aspirations for post-secondary education said:

The security situation in Afghanistan is terrible and our future is not safe; studying is impossible. Our day-to-day life is difficult...the security situation affects everything. If you are not sure about your safety, all other factors are secondary.

One of our respondents was from an eastern province and is now in the process of claiming asylum in Norway. He described Western Europe with antipathy, but felt he had no choice but to emigrate.

I don't want to be in Western Europe – I don't like the weather, the bureaucracy and the veiled suspicion by authorities as if I am lying to them. But I had to leave Afghanistan after several kidnapping attempts and attacks on my life and damage to my property. I even went to the NDS [National Directorate of Security, the Afghan intelligence service] for help but they told me there was threat to my life. I have all the documents to prove these claims. If security improves tomorrow, I will be the first volunteer back in Afghanistan.

For some of our respondents, personal security is a greater risk due to a high profile position held by an immediate family member. While it might be true that any public figure faces an increased threat, regardless of locale, the risk is far greater in Afghanistan because the government's security forces are simply not equipped to deal with the many serious threats in the country. The Afghan government is also engaged active conflict with the armed opposition groups. Kidnapping, torture and violent killings are rampant; judiciaries and other high ranking government officials are specific targets of interest. A 20 year-old male from Kabul said

My mother is a judge in the Superior Court and because she holds a very important position, she receives a lot of threats - the whole family does. I honestly cannot see how my family can live safely in Afghanistan. There is no security for us here. Her job has created a security issue for the whole family.

The son of a military general, currently in medical school, said that he is constantly preoccupied with the problem of his personal security. 'My father is a three star general and a high profile person', he said. 'Whenever I leave the house, I am in constant fear because I am not sure if I will be killed or kidnapped'.

A former high-ranking government official told us that he had to relocate his family to Turkey because the threats of kidnapping to his children were extremely high in Kabul. He described a helpless situation whereby even

additional security measures, such as transport to and from school by armoured vehicle, were not enough to sufficiently mitigate the threat. He now lives alone in Kabul to work in the private sector while his family is based in Turkey; he visits them for few days every month. There are many cases of government officials and business elites who live alone while their families are abroad, often in Dubai and Turkey.

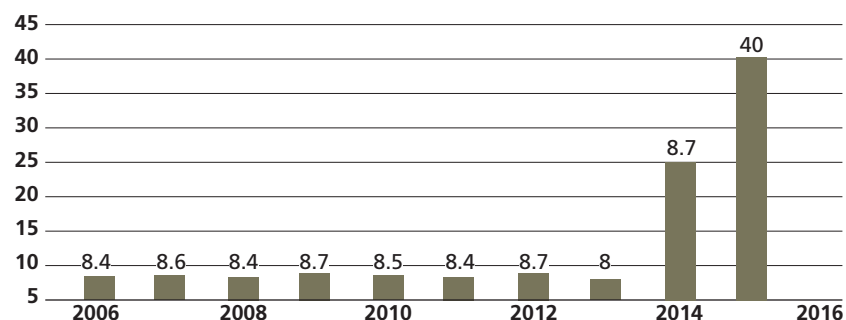
Clearly, the government faces a significant challenge in keeping order when those at leadership and senior positions are under constant threat to their personal safety and security. It is difficult to retain qualified personnel when the threat of physical violence is palpable and constant. These accounts also demonstrate the impact of the security situation in Afghanistan in a practical sense. While civilian casualty numbers are an important broad-based indicator for tracking the security situation in the country, the impact of the degradation of personal security is a less tangible factor which surfaces through individual conversations. The damaging effects of this uncertainty came through immediately in the interviews for this paper.

Unemployment and Economic Uncertainty

Many of our participants raised the issue of unemployment, in tandem with the lack of future development prospects, as one of the principal contributing factors towards their pursuit of an exit from Afghanistan. Remarkably, most of our interviewees were employed. The exceptions included a university student and a mother whose family had just arrived in Athens after being smuggled out of Afghanistan through Iran. Consistently, however, our interviewees expressed dim views of their future prospects, despite holding a full-time job. This is instructive, demonstrating the nuance that may be lost when considering economic indicators such as unemployment figures. That most of our participants are gainfully employed perhaps raises a challenge to the established notion that Afghans should be broadly considered as economic migrants.

With due regard for the perils of overemphasising headline unemployment figures, it is nonetheless apparent that Afghanistan is currently facing a crisis situation in terms of job loss. A quick glance at the numbers bears this out, illustrating sharp increases in 2014 and 2015. There is no expectation of any relief from this alarming trend in 2016, given the continuing impact of security and economic issues facing the country.⁹

Figure 2: Afghanistan's Unemployment Rates (%) 2006-2015¹⁰



9. Tradingeconomics, 'Afghanistan Unemployment Rate | 2006-2016'.

10. Ibid.

One substantial explanatory factor in this decline is the withdrawal of foreign military spending and the decline in international aid, although the deteriorating security situation certainly plays a key role as well. Real GDP growth in 2015 was negligible as compared to the growth rates seen over the previous five years, with the limited investment inflows suggesting pessimistic investor sentiment as to the business opportunities in Afghanistan. In a region which, if stable, should be primed for growth, and which has a potentially advantageous geographic position given its proximity to the world's second-largest economy (China), the lack of investment in Afghanistan is a sharp indicator of the current security risk and the impact of the political uncertainty enveloping the country.¹¹

Though unemployment was not a common condition among our respondents, where relevant, its impact was life-changing. A mother of an infant child had recently left Afghanistan with her husband in order to pursue a new life in Greece after it became clear that their family-owned business would no longer be able to support them:

We owned a store, but it was going nowhere. My husband couldn't get any business; there was nothing left for us and we didn't know what to do anymore.

Another of our interviewees, while not directly affected by joblessness, was keenly aware of the desperate state of the job market, remarking that *'there are no job opportunities for Afghans, and currently there are thousands of people without a job'*. While it is obviously no great discovery that unemployment is a devastating problem for those affected, and is a non-starter in terms of financial viability, it is worth pointing out that people who are out of work in Afghanistan are particularly vulnerable, given the absence of a welfare state and lack of adequate humanitarian support in the country from NGOs.

Among the respondents interviewed for this research, however, the larger issue was the lack of economic mobility in Afghanistan, and how this affected their perceptions and hopes for the future. A 20 year-old pharmacy worker who is currently pursuing university-level education identified *'a lack of long-term prospects for progression and success, particularly if I am unable to continue my education'*. He went on to say of leaving, *'it is very difficult to come to this decision, but what choice do I really have? There is no life here: no money, no education, and no jobs'*. In addition to financial worries, many also expressed concerns around the availability of basic services such as access to healthcare and other infrastructure. A common thread among our respondents was a concern about the availability of opportunities for education, particularly as it related to young people and children.

Inextricably Linked: Unemployment and Insecurity

Interwoven with all of the above, however, is the security situation, which is foremost in the minds of Afghans. While it is certainly fair to say that unemployment and a lack of opportunity for economic progression are significant factors, it is also a fallacy to try and unwind these from the broader question of security. As Abdul Ghafoor said via interview:

¹¹ World Bank, 'Afghanistan Development Update'(2016).

At the end it is like this: if you have security you will have a job, but if you do not have security you will not have a job. It is a very simple formula. Let's discuss what is causing these people to seek a life elsewhere. What about the lack of investors and businesses? It is all the fear of insecurity.

Indeed, it is very difficult to draw a line which would delineate where our interviewees' concerns around unemployment and economic progression end and where their anxiety about the security situation, and threat to their personal safety, begins. The two issues are inseparable. A working father said:

There is no clear understanding of the future – will the Taliban come back? I am worried about the future of my two daughters. Maybe they want to be a doctor or engineer, but now that possibility is insecure. There is no work available for my family in the future, so I want them to leave Afghanistan.

One of our interviewees abandoned a successful business due to concerns about his personal security, saying 'I owned a successful large-scale business which is now leaderless...but I had to leave Afghanistan after several kidnapping attempts and attacks on my life and damage to my property'. He is now in Europe in the process of claiming asylum.

The single working mother with two daughters also stated that she wished to leave 'because of my kids and their future, so that they can actually have a future and have something positive to look forward to', but also noted that she was also concerned about her own future prospects on a personal level as well.

These interlocks between physical and financial security speak to the complexity of the issue of Afghan migration from a policy perspective. A sagging economy is low-hanging fruit as a plausible push factor, but it is reductive to assign undue importance to this by viewing it as separate from the security problem, particularly the threat to personal safety which is difficult to capture through objective analysis of broader security problems in Afghanistan. The two issues combined are major factors which are driving the exodus. These interleaving forces 'make it increasingly difficult to fit migrants into the neat categories policy makers desire for legal purposes, e.g. refugees vs economic migrants'.¹²

Crisis of Confidence

Most of the interviewees expressed unfavourable opinions of the NUG. This can partly be explained by the many problems it faced before its formation, which included a six-month political stalemate and widespread allegations of voter fraud. Further damaging the government's credibility is the fact that President Ghani and CEO Abdullah have delivered few of the promises they made during the 2014 presidential elections.¹³ One respondent stated: '*Ashraf Ghani is lying...He promised to do many things, but he has not and cannot keep his promises*'. Making matters worse, there is widespread belief that the President and his CEO do not get along well; media reports allude to this notion regularly. This 'fracturing' was noted by several of our interviewees, who were quite sceptical of the ability of the NUG to coalesce into a fully functional governing body:

12. Schmeidl, 'Going, Going...Once Again Gone? The Human Capital Outflow from Afghanistan Post 2014 Elections'.

13. Faridullah, 'Ghani's Top Aide Criticizes NUG For Not Fulfilling Promises'(2016).

Instead of one president, there are two presidents. It seems that they have created two parliaments; the government has been split in two which has divided the country instead of unifying it, causing many more problems. The situation that they have created is only going to make matters worse in Afghanistan. They are not unified and have caused division, chaos and confusion.

A matter of higher and more immediate concern that emerged during the interviews, however, is the people's lack of faith in the government's capacity to protect them. As attacks have increased in frequency, Afghans' confidence has eroded to the point of utter resignation, in many cases, and this is a factor in leaving decisions. One of our respondents cited a lack of confidence in the NUG as his overriding push factor, saying 'I decided to leave when the fighting started up again and the government has not done anything about it. They have not been able to provide security for us'.

The origins of this crisis of confidence can be traced to the handover of security responsibilities to Afghan forces post the NATO drawdown. 'Now that the Afghan forces are fighting on their own', explains Michael Kugelman, a South Asia expert at the Woodrow Wilson Center, 'it introduces a new vulnerability in the sense that many Afghans don't feel that they would be protected by their own police, by their own military.'¹⁴ Among the interview sample, many of our respondents identified an increased inclination to leave the country around the beginning of 2015, which coincides with the timeline of the NATO withdrawal, and takeover of security responsibilities by the ANSF.

About a year ago¹⁵, the security situation began worsening and it was at that point that I decided to try and leave as soon as possible. After the NUG was established, the situation declined rapidly in Afghanistan.

Another respondent attributes the worsening situation to the withdrawal of western forces:

There is nothing for me here. It is back to bad times, getting worse by the day – Kabul will go back to the Taliban. The situation is getting worse with America and Europe leaving. It is very dangerous and unstable.

Public unease was further exacerbated when Kunduz was temporarily overrun by the Taliban in September 2015. Labelled a 'military, political and propaganda coup'¹⁶, the fall of Kunduz consolidated negative sentiments among Afghans and laid bare the inadequacies of the government leadership. The first major city overtaken by the Taliban since the arrival of the US-led coalition in 2001, the seizure of Kunduz confirmed the fears of many who view the Taliban to be resurgent and gaining strength, and the NUG ineffectual in stopping it.¹⁷ The recent series of attacks coupled with a severe lack of confidence in the NUG has, expectedly, resulted in a heightened sense of fear for personal security. A respondent reflected on the hopelessness of the situation and the extreme steps Afghans are willing to take to escape: 'the fighting is causing everyone to leave. People are choosing to drown, live in jungles, and risk the lives of their children, all to leave the situation here'.

In several of the interviews, respondents expressed a hope that the US would continue to provide direct military support on the ground, conveying a belief that Afghanistan will fail if left unto itself. Perhaps this sentiment

- 14. Kugelman, expert interview.
- 15. This interview took place in January 2016.
- 16. Graham-Harrison, 'However Long It Lasts, Taliban Capture of Kunduz Is a Major Blow to Afghan Government' (2015).
- 17. Kutsch, 'Fall of Kunduz Reveals Afghanistan's Security Gaps' (2015).

best demonstrates the crisis of confidence currently facing the NUG: *I ask America to continue to please help us find peace and to save us from all the problems that we are facing. The country cannot do it by itself.*

Corruption

Further fuelling the legitimacy crisis is Afghanistan's widely documented corruption problem, the country ranking as the third-most corrupt country worldwide (out of 168 rated).¹⁸ This is readily understood and appreciated as a serious challenge. What is perhaps less understood is the cost of this reputational damage to the government among its most important stakeholder group, the Afghan public. Distrust and scepticism are rampant among the people and this actively undermines the legitimacy and influence of the government, reinforcing a sense of pessimism among our respondents.

There is a lot of distrust in the government – and rightfully so – because the people are treated unfairly. Corruption is rampant and the people, especially the poor, cannot get what is rightfully theirs.

A university student described his struggle finding a suitably affordable institution at which to continue his education and was cynical about his job prospects after graduation.

It is nearly impossible to attend a well-known university because it is extremely expensive. Even when you do get in, they do not help you succeed because the whole system, including the administration, is corrupt. Finally, they would not help the students after graduation to find a job. They look out for themselves and their friends. They do not look at your credentials or who is best placed for the job; instead it is all about corruption and getting their friends in.

The ongoing failures of the government to make reasonable strides in curbing endemic corruption and systemic failures only reinforce the sense of foreboding among Afghans, resulting in a loss of hope as they weigh their future prospects. Corruption is not confined to the government in Afghanistan, however. It is pervasive, present in all areas of daily life. This is one of the main reasons why only looking at economic indicators is insufficient – Afghans in 'good' jobs can be equally exposed to hardships and abuses. Job security is a fluid concept, which can pressure employees into conforming and participating in the patronage system, perpetuating the cycle. Therefore, gainful employment does not necessarily serve as a barrier to leaving, and in some cases can actually serve as an impetus. A government employee explained as follows:

Even if one had a job, there is no sense of financial security as one could lose that any day depending on a person's whim. There is a system of corruption in this country and one is forced to participate in it just to scratch out a meagre livelihood. There is no sense of trust in the country. Everyone is looking out for themselves in a corrupt way; there is no sense of community and general goodwill among Afghans. Everyone is trying to exploit one another in order to survive and make the best life for themselves.

18. Transparency International, 'Afghanistan - Country Profiles'.

More than half of Afghans have reported paying bribes to the Afghan National Police (ANP).¹⁹ This is an alarming proportion, highlighting the problem of systemic corruption and offering an instructive snapshot of the transactional dynamics in Afghanistan between the public sector and the people it is presumed to serve. Such arrangements raise the obvious problem of the poor lacking the necessary resources to pay illicit fees for frontline and social services (e.g. support or protection) which should be provided by the government in the first instance.

Regional Issues

Respondents, including Afghans who had already successfully emigrated, spoke in generalities when asked to describe the decision-making process in targeting destination countries, stating the desire to go somewhere 'safe', 'peaceful' and with a 'future'.²⁰ The UK, US, Germany and Australia were the most popular choices, with reasons such as personal networks (i.e. family and friends) or an established, well-known Afghan community being the main attractants. In general, all respondents held the Western countries in high regard, believing that these places offered the best chances for a better life. By contrast, Pakistan and Iran have long been refugee destinations and labour markets for Afghans, but are increasingly deemed unsafe or not ideal. One respondent depicted abuse from law enforcement as a deterrent from Iran:

Refugees face a lot of problems there... There are a lot of police that are jailing Afghans. They also intimidate, harass, and cause many problems for Afghans...It is very difficult for Afghans to live in Iran.

Another interviewee described averseness to regional neighbours on the basis of religious discrimination:

The situation with Iran is complicated for me. We would not have religious freedom in Iran because we practice a different branch of Islam. Iran is Shia; we are Sunni...Iran is a theocracy. The Islam that we practice would not be accepted there.

Human rights organisations have extensively documented and repeatedly called for an end to the systematic discrimination that Afghan refugees face in Iran and Pakistan.²¹ In Pakistan, Afghans have faced police harassment, extortion, physical abuse in custody, forced expulsion and other oppressive tactics. Major incidents involving terrorist attacks, such as the Peshawar School bombing in 2014, result in reduced social and educational opportunities for Afghans in Pakistan. The Lahore suicide attacks, similarly, further entrenched anti-Afghan sentiments in Pakistan, as the Pakistani government blame militants based in Afghanistan for orchestrating the attacks.

Afghans in Iran face similar problems, including forced expulsions, denial of access to education, and severe restrictions on employment and residency. Practical conveniences such as ownership of motor vehicles are also prohibited.²² Both Iran and Pakistan have negatively stereotyped and scapegoated Afghans refugees, shaping public opinion and intensifying the resentment and hostility. As accounts of these injustices have spread

19. 'Asia Foundation: Afghanistan in 2015'.

20. Almost all respondents mentioned a concern for employment, continuing their education and/or establishing a livelihood for themselves in the host country. This challenges the wide belief that many seek to live off of the welfare programs available in European countries.

21. Human Rights Watch, 'Pakistan' (2016), HRW, 'Iran' (2016)

22. Hulpachova, 'The Price of an Education for Afghan Refugees in Iran' (2014).

throughout the Afghan community, it has deeply affected the perception of these countries as tenable destinations. Access to employment is low, future prospects are limited and security is not guaranteed. As such, Afghans see little benefit or prospect in targeting these regional neighbours.

I do not have much interest in Pakistan and Iran. The reason is because I can't pursue my goals in education in these countries. There is no future for me in these countries either it's very similar to Afghanistan.

Another respondent offered similar views:

I don't want to go to Pakistan or Iran. They are not welcoming to refugees and the police cause a lot of problems. They don't allow Afghans to become educated or to continue their education. They also stop them from developing or progressing in society.

One of our respondents left Kabul with her family five months ago to move to Iran. However, due to mistreatment and the hardships facing Afghans in Iran, she moved on within three months. At the time of the interview she was passing through Turkey into Greece via a smuggling network:

In Iran, we face similar problems such as lack of jobs and opportunities...The situation in Pakistan is not any better and we would have dealt with similar issues. For example, just like Afghanistan, Da'esh exists in Pakistan. We thought to take a chance and go to Iran. We thought we would find a job there, which didn't happen.

Such accounts, as they are relayed home, breed mistrust and wariness of Iran and Pakistan among Afghans, causing them to look beyond their region for a better life.

Iran and Pakistan are not good places for Afghans. They do not treat Afghans very well and cause a lot of problems for us. You read and hear about it in the news, but also I know many Afghans that have been there, so you hear many stories.

Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan face many of the same problems and challenges as those in Afghanistan, but are isolated in a place where they are regarded with hostility as foreigners, a situation which has worsened in recent years..This push factor, with the pull of a safer life in Europe and beyond, is forcing Afghans to look for safety outside the neighbouring countries.

Access to Asylum in Europe

There are challenges facing the asylum system in Europe, which is not equipped to cope with the complexity and nuances of the migrant 'story'. As Afghans matriculate from one country to the next, their "reason" for leaving Afghanistan, in legal terms, often alters. If they are continuing their journey for economic and social reasons, but were

initially displaced from Afghanistan due to security issues, which tick-box on the immigration chart defines them best? Afghans' migration stories converge and change along the journey, creating a processing conundrum in Europe. The need to retrofit the Afghan story into the rigid classification catalogue set out in the European asylum regulations is an unfortunate limitation of the system, which is unable to offer a true reflection of the circumstances of Afghans. Mona Bentzen, a Norwegian journalist and activist, zeros in on the problem:

When these people fled Afghanistan initially it was due to war and insecurity, just because they are coming from Pakistan and Iran, does their initial reason change?

The processing issue is exacerbated by the abuses and discrimination that Afghans face in Pakistan and Iran. This highlights the need for further work towards untangling the complexity of Afghan migration.

Aggregated Reasoning

This study shows the connected complexities of the Afghan migration story, which is presenting a challenge to the European asylum system. It is clear that insecurity, economics and corruption are amalgamated into creating the *aggregate reason* of the Afghan exodus. It is simplistic and perilous to pick out one factor in the absence of all the others. A more useful approach in understanding Afghan migration is to look at it from an 'aggregate' perspective, with reasons that are 'inextricably linked' according to Dr. Liza Schuster, a migration expert at City University London²³.

POST 2001 AFGHANISTAN

The World Bank has consistently ranked Afghanistan as a 'low income' country where nearly 40 per cent of the population lives under the national poverty line²⁴. Living in a landlocked country, mobility and migrations have been part of Afghan history for generations – which also entailed migration and settlement of diverse groups inside Afghanistan, as demonstrated by the ethnic and communal diversity in the country. However, contemporary waves of Afghan refugees into neighbouring countries, predominantly Pakistan and Iran, reached their peak after the Soviet forces entered Afghanistan and the civil war ensued beginning in 1979.²⁵

The American-led military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, and the subsequent removal of the Taliban regime from power, presented a unique opportunity for reconstruction and state building in the country. However this opportunity was largely wasted due to, among other factors, the distractions in the Middle East for the US-led international coalition – mainly the war in Iraq – and ignoring embryonic domestic Afghan challenges such as the endemic networks of nepotism and corruption that powerbrokers were weaving in a post Taliban Afghanistan. Nevertheless, as the insurgency-driven conflict intensified in Afghanistan after 2004, Western policymakers attempted to resolve the conditions in Afghanistan through the prism of counterinsurgency

23. Schuster, Expert Interview.

24. 'World Bank, 'Afghanistan I Data (2016)'.

25. Bleuer, 'The Afghanistan Analyst Conflict Bibliography'- provides a glance at the recent publications in English language on the theme of refugees and IDPs.

(COIN) doctrine.²⁶ Without much success with COIN, by 2012 the international and donor focus shifted to preparing for the various planned-transitions in Afghanistan. Both the Chicago Heads of States Summit²⁷ in June 2012 and the Tokyo Conference²⁸ in July 2012 provided the international community with new frameworks to define its engagement in Afghanistan.

Attaching new conditionality clauses to aid packages, working towards tight deadlines to prepare a 'credible' Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) that would take over security and combat responsibilities from the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) while also preparing for a political transition, all of these goals to be achieved before 2014, put an incredible amount of pressure on Afghan government's partnerships with the international community. The announced withdrawal of US combat forces further undermined confidence among Afghans in the future prospects of the country while allowing the Taliban and other armed opposition groups to simply wait for the end of 2014!

In so many ways, the current disarray over socioeconomic and political conditions in Afghanistan can be partially attributed to 'ill-completed' transitions that were supposed to take place as planned and effortlessly. Not enough attention was paid to how inconsistent and shifting policy priorities, mainly by the international donor community and the United States, could have implications for and contribute to waves of Afghans leaving their country due to eroding confidence levels. The fact that a sudden drop in the levels of aid assistance, and ignoring the fragile political foundations, could have catastrophic impact on Afghans' morale and optimism were fundamentally overlooked.

Afghanistan's National Unity Government (NUG)

Despite coming to power in September 2014 at a time when Afghans' expectations were extremely high, the NUG has been unable to deliver on key performance indicators such as economy, security, curbing corruption – and establishing a peace process with armed opposition groups. On the domestic side, high expectations of the NUG stemmed from Dr Ghani's election promises, where he was able to mobilise millions of Afghans and campaign as a 'global thinker' and 'fixer' of problems. On the international and regional matters, Afghans' expectations of the NUG were favourable because of seemingly improved relations with both the US²⁹ and Pakistan, relative to the latter part of Hamid Karzai's presidency. Another element of expectation emanated from a less aggressive domestic political opposition – the Afghan political elite could not offer an alternative to the NUG.

Continued arguments between the political camps of the President and his CEO, Dr. Abdullah, have hindered the government performance; for example, Afghans face record unemployment and record vacancies³⁰ within government departments simultaneously.

Less than a month after the inauguration of the NUG, on 06 October 2014 President Ghani signed a decree which declared all provincial governors as 'acting' until new governors were appointed³¹ with a further confirmation that there would be no prospect for appointments

26. See e.g. Jones (2008) 'Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan'; available online.
27. NATO, 'NATO Chicago Summit 2012'.
28. 'Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework'.
29. President Ghani signed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US immediately after his inauguration; previously the Afghan-American relations had been sour due to President Karzai's incessant refusal to sign the BSA
30. Faridullah, 'Thousands Of Govt Positions Stand Empty'.
31. Ruttig, 'The Start into the Better Governance Marathon'.

of the acting governors to new positions. Unfortunately, the appointment of governors has been a laborious process and a significant contributing factor to worsening security and economic conditions in the provinces. Appointments at the cabinet level have also remained dismal; the Afghan ministry of defence is still run by an acting minister.

Where the NUG has performed better, for instance by increasing revenues in 2015³², the messaging to Afghan citizens has been so poor that such good news is hardly in the public narrative.

Neighbours: Iran and Pakistan

Beginning with the Saur Revolution in April 1978, large segments of the Afghan population who felt disaffected with the Soviet-backed communist regime in Afghanistan left for Iran and Pakistan. In the majority of cases, the male members of the refugee families joined Afghan Mujahideen groups.

Shared border, language, culture and religious ties created an expected pull factor towards Iran for many Afghan refugees. For Afghan Mujahideen, and millions of refugees, among other factors (such as a long shared border and large numbers of Pashtuns in Pakistan), the accessibility to resources for training Mujahideen fighters, setting up refugee camps with Western donor support and establishing direct links with American and Western government agencies provided the pull factor towards Pakistan – and incentivised families of Afghan Mujahideen as well as other Afghans to settle in Pakistan as refugees.

At the peak of refugee crisis before 1992, there were over six million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran. When US-led military coalition started bombarding Taliban positions in October 2001, UNOCHA estimated there were at least 3.6 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran while at least over 700,000 were IDPs³³ inside Afghanistan. Despite hosting millions of Afghans for over 3 decades, there is no love for Iran and Pakistan among majority of Afghans including those who lived there as refugees; the sentiments of blame and holding neighbours accountable for the woes in Afghanistan are quite high among ordinary Afghans – and especially high among urban populations. These sentiments came to the fore during the interviews for this research, as discussed already.

Furthermore, in some expert interviews for this paper, the issue of citizenship was highlighted. Increasingly there is awareness among prospective Afghan refugees, and Afghan refugees already in neighbouring countries, that acquiring citizenship should be the ultimate ideal goal. There are no paths to citizenship for Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran even if other negative factors are disregarded – Afghans are pragmatically aware of this impediment.

Similarly, regional countries – such as Gulf countries, India, Turkey and Central Asia – do not present a ‘pull factor’ as there are virtually no routes to legal migration or access to job markets for Afghans. This is a difficulty even for the highly educated Afghans who may prefer legal migration into a regional country rather than aiming for an uncertain future and a dangerous journey towards Europe.

32. Byrd and Payenda, ‘Afghanistan’s Revenue Turnaround in 2015 | United States Institute of Peace’.

33. Forced Migration Review (2001) *Afghanistan: Conflict and displacement 1978 to 2001*

CONCLUSIONS

The future of the Afghan refugee situation will largely depend on the political stability and economic viability of Afghanistan, which currently leaves much to be desired. The Taliban will also play a central role; the cyclical violence is set to ramp up again during the spring and summer fighting seasons. This will require appropriate resourcing and preparation from the ANSF, which is currently overstretched and seemingly fatigued – as evidenced by the expansion of the Taliban footprint. The success of the Taliban is disheartening to Afghans and undermines the government's legitimacy. As for the role of the government, the functionality of the NUG is a key determiner of political stability. Recent reports of increasing infighting, to the point, reportedly, of the near-paralysis of the NUG are alarming.³⁴

The long-standing strenuous relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan will have a direct effect on Afghan migration, particularly in regards to repatriation and the extension of the Proof of Registration (PoR) process. Yet, recent reports that Pakistan is prepared to forcibly expel and demolish Afghans' homes in certain areas are discouraging for Afghans.³⁵ The lack of economic and settlement opportunities in Iran and Pakistan for Afghans is also linked to a growing youth bulge in all these countries. Nearly 65 per cent of Afghanistan's population (estimated at 31 million) is under the age of 25 – the projections are that the total population in Afghanistan will hit the 50 million mark by 2030.³⁶ According to CIA's *The World Factbook*, Pakistan's youth-bulge is also enormous with nearly 55 per cent under 25 years of age from a total population of 200 million; in Iran this figure is over 40 per cent from a total population of approximately 82 million people.

Prevailing socioeconomic conditions and growing security problems on the ground in Afghanistan mean that it is highly likely the flow of Afghans out of the country in search of refuge and better lives will continue in the current year and immediate future. Afghanistan's neighbouring countries are plagued by social, political and economic challenges; Iranians and Pakistanis often feature in the statistics of migrations into Europe – demonstrating that Afghanistan's neighbourhood is faced with a distinct kind of 'exodus', though not at same levels as Afghanistan. Therefore, it is tremendously difficult to conceive that either Iran or Pakistan will become abodes of settlement for potential Afghan refugees in the same manner as they did in 1970s and 1980s. The vigorous increase in youth populations across South Asia and Middle East (especially the Gulf states) is contributing to shrinking needs for labour and conducive space for compassionate hospitality of refugees.

In Afghanistan, the prevalent popularity of social media and the plethora of television channels have created an enhanced sense of connectivity with the outside world. Unlike the 1970s and 1980s when a dominant sense of 'defending Islam and motherland' played a central role in people's decisions to leave Afghanistan, the Afghans today – particularly urbanites – are more focused on a fear of an unstable future and not having access to the same levels of 'human security' (personal safety) as the citizens in the Western countries; this is acutely recorded in our fieldwork and interviews.

34. Reeves, 'Why Afghanistan Is Once Again On The Brink'(2016)

35. 'Khyber Officials Tell Afghan Refugees to Pack up and Leave or Face Stern Action'(2016).

36. Cincotta (Nov 2009) 'Could demography save Afghanistan?' – available online

Based on the evidence from our interactions, conversations and research for this paper, it can be argued that due to increased interaction with the forces of globalisation, which also includes contact with the international military and civilian presence since 2001, are more cosmopolitan and aspiring to benefit from the better resources that they feel citizens in securer societies enjoy. Our fieldwork and conversations with Afghans have demonstrated that the aspirations are not aimed solely at better material life, or becoming rich, but rather filling the 'void' that feels quite staggering when the society in Afghanistan is compared to more ideal places, such as Western Europe. Social media, television channels, wider connectivity through transport links – and in some cases the opportunity to travel abroad by air – have amplified that void of personal safety, or human security, intensifying the desire to be 'somewhere safe'.

In light of such complex picture, where more grassroots engagement is required to disentangle the complexities, it is even more imperative that policy makers in the EU do not rely on desk-research alone or on 'cosmetic' field data. Discouraging people, for example in Afghanistan, from leaving their country requires, initially, a comprehensive understanding of the reasons and nuances why people want to leave in the first place. Lazy approaches, such as spending money on billboard adverts in source countries of migration to dissuade people from coming to the West, and simplistic token-advocacy, as in the case of Facebook campaigning, cannot possibly be effective in Afghanistan. If the aim is to better inform the potential leavers about the challenges and difficulties awaiting them in Europe, much more needs to be done beyond producing leaflets, billboards and Facebook groups. For instance, partnership with local organisations to set up information centres for potential leavers – similar to citizens' advice centres – is one useful way forward.

In some ways, the question in EU capitals should not be framed around *'how to stop potential refugees/leavers coming to EU?'*; it would be more appropriate (and realistic) to examine the situation by asking: *'Inevitably, people will find ways to come to the EU due to significant push factors, what could EU countries do in the immediate terms to address this problem after people arrive inside the EU borders; and what could be done as a sustainable medium-to-long term approach to address the push factors in source countries?'* In this regard, the solution certainly does not lie in EU states acquiring signatures from source countries of migration for facilitating deportations. Anecdotal evidence, including in our expert interviews, points to a large number of deportees trying their luck again at getting to Europe.

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