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Message of Analysis

- It is expected that the migration flow in Afghanistan will continue in the long term.
- The foreign interventions, conflict, political instability and economic collapse that Afghanistan has been subjected to are causing large numbers of people to migrate across borders and internally displaced.

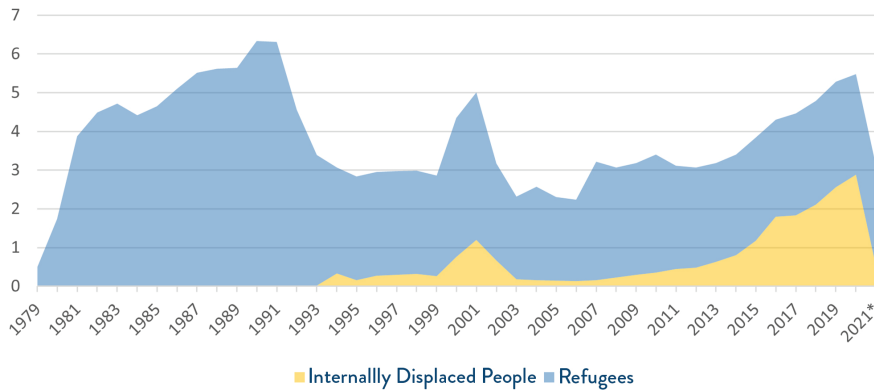
Why Do Afghans Migrate?

Immigrants in the Grip of the USA, Russia and the Taliban

Afghanistan is one of the main origin countries that constantly sends out immigrants. Instability, external interventions, psychological and environmental factors are among the main sources that cause the turmoil. The fact that the majority of Afghans who migrated are young men shows that the concerns are mostly economic. Migration flow from Afghanistan due to economic and environmental factors seems to continue in the near future.

The foreign interventions, conflicts, political instability, and thus economic collapse that Afghanistan has been exposed to since its establishment have led to the migration of large numbers of people across borders and internal displacement. It is possible to make a three-stage historical periodization in the mass migration movement of Afghanistan, which is defined as a country that constantly sends out immigrants. The migration flow, which started as a result of the Soviet occupation in 1979 and the withdrawal in 1989, continued with the civil war period after 1990 and has continued until today with the conflicts due to the 2001 US invasion and the US decision to withdraw in 2020.

Migration Flow in Afghanistan 1979-2021



Graph 1- Mass migration in Afghanistan. Source: UNCHR Refugee Data Finder. *The data for 2021 covers the period including August. Note: UNCHR internal displacement data prior to 1993 are unknown.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which lasted for 10 years, not only brought great destruction into the country but also caused the first mass migration movement in Afghanistan. While more than 5 million people, corresponding to one-fifth of the country's population, had to migrate to Iran and Pakistan, 2 million people were internally displaced (Cankara & Çerez, 2020: 451). Although the reasons for the migration of Afghans are mostly attributed to the first years of the Soviet occupation, the drought in the 1990s also led to an increase in refugee flows; Afghans had to migrate for centuries due to reasons like crop shortages, agricultural and economic instability (Margesson, 2007: 5).

As a result of the withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989, the disagreements over power sharing between the tribes and the "mujahideen" groups from Pakistan that started an armed rebellion in the country led to a civil war; internal displacement, which increased again in 1993-1994, continued until the Taliban came to power in 1996 (Schmeild, 2019: 11-12). In this period, during the first years of Taliban rule, there was not any new migration flow observed. Although peace and stability were achieved to a certain extent in the conquered regions, the strict practices and restrictions on women's education, social and cultural life later led some people, especially the educated, to migrate (Margesson, 2007: 3). Cases of internal displacement have risen as Afghanistan was hit by the worst drought in three decades in 2000.



Photo: Emin Özmen Turkey. Van. 2021. August 6. After having spotted a Turkish gendarmerie car with all lights on and sirens wailing driving towards them, migrants run away to avoid being caught.



Internal displacement have risen as Afghanistan was hit by the worst drought in three decades in 2000.



Info

Afghanistan, landlocked multiethnic country located in the heart of south-central Asia. Lying along important trade routes connecting southern and eastern Asia to Europe and the Middle East, Afghanistan has long been a prize sought by empire builders, and for millennia great armies have attempted to subdue it, leaving traces of their efforts in great monuments now fallen to ruin. [Brittanica]



Pakistan and Iran continue to host 90% of the world's 2.5 million registered and unregistered Afghan refugees.

The US intervention in the Taliban government as a result of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan was the main reason for the migration flow in 2021. During the US intervention in 2001, about 1.5 million Afghans began to flee within a few weeks due to air and ground bombardments. Moreover, after 2007, as the US-backed government gradually lost its legitimacy and internal revolts resumed, the security situation deteriorated, violence increased, and a new migration movement emerged (Schmeidl, 2019: 11–13).

After the US decided to withdraw in 2020, the conflicts between government forces and the Taliban led to the resurgence of the violence in Afghanistan, and therefore the periodically recurring irregular migration (Cookman: 2021; Gurcan, 2021). As a result of the destruction brought about by the US occupation and the conflicts between the actors in the region, political, social, and economic life has once again hit the bottom. The results of the Soviet invasion and then the US occupation made the phenomenon of migration chronic in Afghanistan (Cankara & Çerez, 2020: 455).

In Afghanistan, which experienced a mixture of both internal and external migration in times of intense conflicts, while there were returns during short periods of stability, migration movements frequently repeated during the re-intensifying conflicts (Schmeidl, 2019: 4). Since 2002, about 5.3 million Afghan refugees have returned to their country (UNHCR, 2020). However, with the internal displacement of approximately 400,000 from the beginning of 2021 to August, the total number of displaced has exceeded 3.5 million (UNCHR, August 2021). Currently, Pakistan and Iran continue to host 90% of the world's 2.5 million registered and hundreds of thousands of unregistered Afghan refugees (UNCHR, July 2021).

Why are they leaving Afghanistan?

Political change in Afghanistan since 2001 shows that migration is highly dependent on security, economic, and political conditions (Bizhan, 2016: 4). While war and ongoing conflicts bring along internal unrest and security risks, factors such as economic collapse, underdevelopment, and extreme poverty constitute the underlying causes of migration.

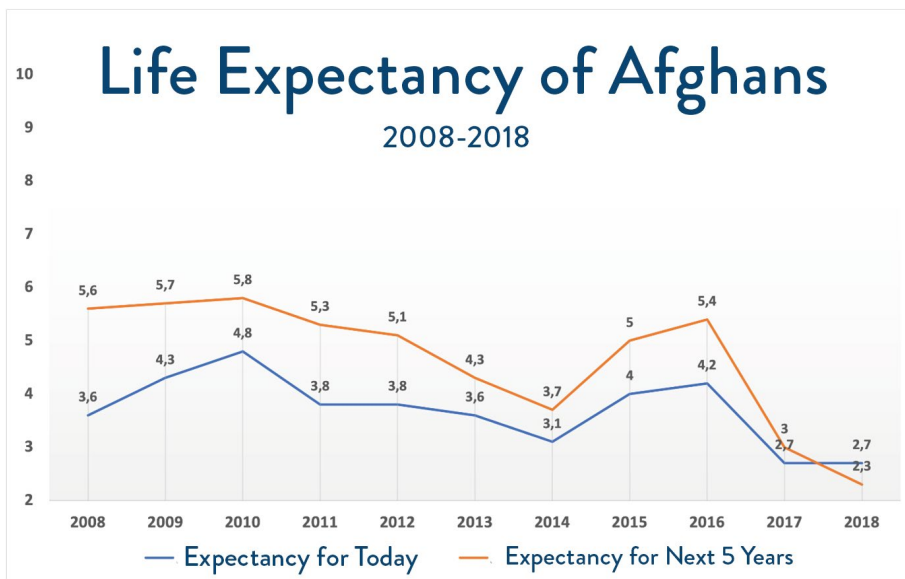
In Afghanistan, which has been called one of the most insecure countries in the world, 72% of the population lives below the poverty line (Dünya Küresel Barış Endeksi, 2020: 10; UNDP, 2021). Corruption and bribery problems in the country stand out as two of the major obstacles to development (Hall, 2011: 1). For example, the absence of a social base for the government that relies on the US military presence, and its administration with ingrained corruption has led to a weak rule of law (Roussos, 2021). While bribery and lack of infrastructure limit access to education and health services (Hall, 2011: 3; Schmeidl, 2019: 11), Afghans, who could not maintain their basic living needs due to economic instability and high unemployment, have been forced to migrate.

Psychological and social reasons for migration

Although there are reasons stemming from instability in the background of Afghan migration, psychological and social factors also play an important role. According to a study published by Human Rights Watch in 2019, 85% of the Afghan population has a history of. Afghan people do not have the opportunity to receive psychological support because of economic conditions, lack of awareness of the need for psychological help, and most importantly, social norms that put pressure on women. Indeed, it is stated that only 10% of Afghans are able to receive psychological support (HRW, 2019).



Especially for women, familial reasons are effective when deciding to migrate.



Graph 2: GALLUP World Poll, 2018.

In the 2019 GALLUP research, it was stated that 9 out of 10 Afghans are in a severe psychological crisis. When the participants are asked how they feel about their life in Afghanistan and their expectations from life, it is found out that the already low expectations and hopes have decreased further, especially after 2016. In addition, GALLUP, which measures the expectations of citizens in their own country worldwide, indicates that Afghanistan is one of the countries with the highest pessimism in the world (Crabtree, 2019). According to the study, Afghans are pushed to a high degree of anxiety and unhappiness. Many other studies also confirm that Afghan immigrants suffer from major depression, a severe form of depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Mghir vd., 1995; Mufti vd. 2007).

The social aspects behind migration are other factors that should not be neglected. Especially for women, familial reasons are effective when deciding to migrate. Domestic violence, usually perpetrated by older men in the family, verbal and physical threats, sexual abuse, and fear of forced or early marriage can force women to migrate to protect themselves and their children (MMC, June 2020: 61).



The main migration routes of Afghans are Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and European countries.

Environmental Conditions

Besides conflicts, political, economic, psychological, and social problems Afghan people have been exposed to for many years, they have also faced environmental factors. The pressure of Covid-19 on the Afghan economy and recurrent natural disasters, including drought, have deepened poverty, resulting in high levels of displacement (UNHCR, July 2021).

In the report published by the IFRC in August 2021, it was stated that more than 80% of Afghanistan is exposed to severe drought. The drought has had a devastating impact, as a significant percentage of the rural population is dependent on agriculture for survival (MMC, August 2021). According to estimates, 16.9 million people, which corresponds to 42% of the population, experience acute food insecurity in Afghanistan (OCHA, 2021). Factors like loss of property caused by severe and frequent disasters, the decline in cultivable land, and malnutrition are the reasons forcing Afghans to migrate. Afghan people are constantly migrating due to hunger, famine, drought, and frequent natural disasters such as floods, avalanches, and landslides (Schmeidl, 2019:6).

Where is the migration route of Afghans?

The main migration routes of Afghans are Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and European countries. While Pakistan and Iran have been hosting millions of Afghan refugees for many years, it can be stated that there has been an intense Afghan migration to Turkey in recent years.



Image 1: Main Migrant Routes From Afghanistan. [Although the main route is Turkey via Iran, alternative routes such as Uzbekistan and Pakistan can be followed by refugees]

Afghans attempt to cross from their border neighbors, Iran, to Turkey and then to European countries. While those with higher education levels and better financial resources are willing to go to Europe and stay there, those with low education levels and low financial resources prefer to go to Iran and Turkey in the first place (Roehrs & Hossaini, 2020). Access to employment and better living conditions in the transit country may influence the decision to stay in the current country rather than migrate. However, unemployment and poor living conditions, combined with the perception that conditions in the destination country are better, encourage immigrants to migrate further from the transit country to another country, which is mostly a European country (Kuschminder & Koser, 2016: 34).

Since the 2015 migration crisis, European countries have made it more difficult to migrate to Europe and have almost entirely closed their borders to refugees by making agreements against irregular migration flow and taking measures in the context of border security. Although the destination is European countries and Turkey is considered a transit country, Afghans seem to prefer to stay in Turkey due to Europe's closed borders against immigrants and the high cost of migration.

“ *In the survey conducted with Afghans who have returned to their country, the main reasons for returning are to reunite with family or friends (44%) or not being able to earn a living in the country they migrated to (32%). It is expected that most returnees will try to migrate again: While 41% of respondents stated that they plan to migrate again, 30% said that they are considering staying in Afghanistan, and 29% have not yet decided on their future migration intentions (MMC, June 2021: 1,5).* ”

The Mixed Migration Center (MMC) report, which examines the key factors that influence Afghans' short- and long-term intentions, such as their decision to stay in Turkey or continue their journey, states that "a specific destination country does not matter as long as asylum seekers will be safe, welcome, and enjoy better living conditions." 48.4% of the survey respondents state that their migration journey will continue. 30% of them indicate that they have come to the end of their journey and Turkey is or has become their actual destination. The results show that the forward movement will decrease if permanent residence and legal employment are established in Turkey (MMC, June 2020: 61-64). This situation shows that Turkey is now a destination country for immigrants who cannot continue to Europe.

The Afghan immigration that took place in the summer of 2020 is not a new movement; in fact, there was a significant increase in Afghan immigration in 2018. Behind this increase lie the signals of the US and NATO forces to withdraw from Afghanistan, as well as the embargo imposed by the US on Iran. The deterioration of the economic situation in Iran due to the embargo leads to a decrease in income opportunities for Afghans and their further deportation due to the harsh policies towards asylum seekers. As a result, many of them decide to migrate further west, primarily to Turkey, in the search of a job (Roehrs & Hossaini, 2020). At this point, it is necessary to recall the "destabilizing" external factors that influence the chronic migration problem in Afghanistan.



The Afghan immigration that took place in the summer of 2020 is not a new movement.



There are [more than] 300,000 unregistered Afghan immigrants in Turkey.

“Countries included in the Afghanistan migration route apply more restrictions, sometimes severely, in order to prevent entry and exit from their borders. While Iran deploys military forces on the Afghanistan border to prevent irregular entries, Turkey tries to secure the Iranian border by building a 149-km-long, 3-meters-high border wall. In Europe, countries like Greece violently push back immigrants who try to enter the country by sea.”

Why Turkey?

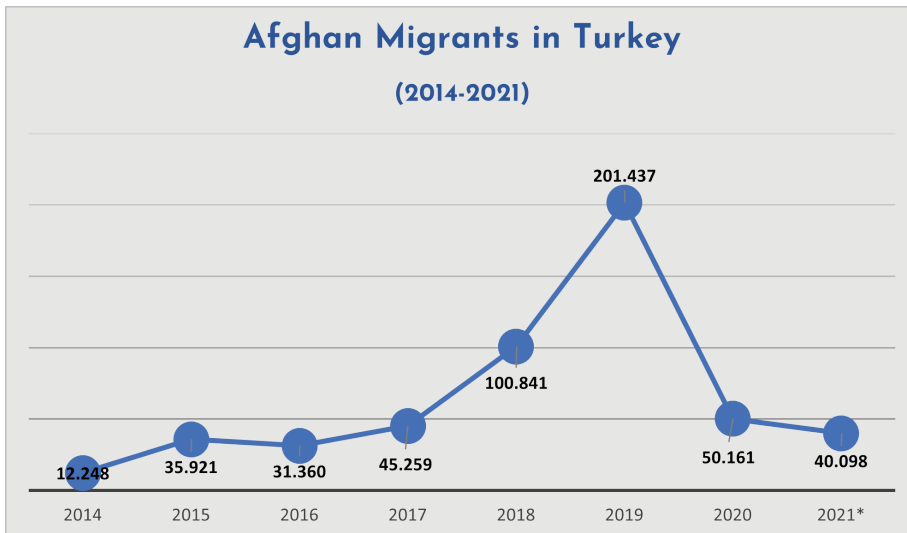
There are a number of basic dynamics behind the reasons for the migration of Afghans, the second largest foreign community in Turkey, to Turkey. Besides Turkey being a transit country that opens to European countries, security and job opportunities are among the first reasons for migration to Turkey as well. The migration flow over years brought with it some established connections and solidarity networks. While these social connections have become the main source of information about migration opportunities and their difficulties, they have also encouraged people in Afghanistan to migrate. In addition, cultural and religious similarities, as well as the demographic dominance of Muslims in Turkey, seem to be attractive factors that facilitate the adaptation process (Roehrs & Hossaini 2020).

According to the results of a survey conducted with Afghan participants in Turkey and Greece, it was revealed that the security of the target country, better living standards, the existence of a good amount of social aid, and health policies are the main reasons for Afghans to migrate. The research highlights that these expectations are actually based on participants' perceptions of the intended target country (Kuschminder & Koser, 2016: 32).

In the MMC 2020 report, the main reasons for choosing Turkey to migrate are listed as follows: the hope of coming together with family (48,7%), quick and easy access to asylum (45,2%), economic reasons (41,3%), better living standards (%34,3) (MMC, 2020: 61). The report also states that Turkey is chosen for its employment opportunity and its economic stability in comparison to other countries in the region such as Pakistan and Iran.

Afghans in Turkey

It is stated that, there are 300,000 undocumented Afghan immigrants in Turkey, together with the immigrants from the past (Hamsici, 2021). According to the data of the Directorate General of Migration Management of Turkey (GİGM) on irregular migration between 2014 and 2021, there was a serious increase in the number of apprehended migrants with 100,841 in 2018, illegal entries nearly doubled in 2019 with 201,437, and finally, it began to decrease in 2020.



Graph 3- *Updated 02.09.2021 Source: Presidency of Migration Management [GiGM]

Afghans constitute the largest group among irregular migrants apprehended in Turkey since 2018. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2020 census, there are 116,400 Afghan asylum seekers under international protection in Turkey.

It should also be noted that in 2018, UNHCR handed over the responsibility for the registration and processing of non-Syrian asylum seekers to the Turkish government. Since then, human rights organizations have reported that it has become more difficult for Afghans to receive protection in Turkey and that many of them were unable to apply for protection because they feared rejection and deportation (Cookman, 2021). In the country report of AIDA on asylum seekers in Turkey, it is stated that Afghans, who are listed as “undocumented irregular migrants” in the Turkish migration system, are treated within the scope of the accelerated procedure when they apply for international protection, and that their applications are rejected by default (AIDA Country Report: 33,38).



The majority of the migrants, moving from Afghanistan to Turkey, are young men.

The majority of the immigrants moving from Afghanistan to Turkey are young men between the ages of 16 and 25. Since the migration through Iran, which lasts for about a month, is quite challenging because of the fact that the journey requires walking long distances under difficult weather and terrain conditions, the number of women, children, and elderly immigrants is significantly low.





The migration flow has been going on for years.

Conclusion

Foreign intervention and internal conflicts in Afghanistan's political history are on the ground of the chronic migration problem. Long-lasting conflicts bring about economic instability, and therefore cause extreme poverty, and the lack of employment opportunities for people to sustain their lives triggers migration. Especially frequent natural disasters destroy the livelihoods of 80% of the population who live by agriculture and force Afghan people to migrate with the hope for a better life.

The question of whether there will be a new wave of migration after the withdrawal of the US and the subsequent takeover of the Taliban remains important. It is observed that behind the migration flow that has been going on for years, besides the economic and environmental factors, there is also the destruction brought about by the US occupation and war crimes. The absence of a state structure in the country that will guarantee the rights of the society, improve the employment conditions and follow a sustainable social assistance mechanism makes the society feel insecure.



Photo: Afghan immigrants on the Turkey-Iran border. 2021. Anadolu Agency.

The process and consequences of the occupation show that intervening in a country, with the values and understandings of the West, without considering the settled culture and sociological structure of the country, causes a rupture in the society and loss of legitimacy. As a matter of fact, no progress has been made in this respect in the 20-year period in Afghanistan. The establishment of a government within the Afghan society after the sequence of occupations created expectations for internal security and state order, however, it can only be observed in the future how the country's administration and practices will take place and how satisfied or uncomfortable the people will be with the new order. It is possible to say that political migrations may occur among the people who are in ideological conflict with the new government. However, it should be underlined that it is

not likely to expect a new mass migration flow due to an internal conflict or security concerns as in Syria. This is because the fact that the majority of Afghans who migrated are young men shows that the concerns are mostly economic. It is expected that migration flow from Afghanistan due to economic and environmental factors will continue in the near future.

Finally, the activity of migrant smuggling is increasing gradually, as the measures taken by the states included in the migration route to prevent entry into their own countries limit the possibility of legal migration. The states' ability to control the migration flow within a humanitarian and rights-based framework should not be through harsh practices against refugees but through policies aimed at improving the factors that cause migration. For this reason, states, international organizations and regional organizations should take the lead and negotiate with the new administration in order to create the conditions where Afghans can be employed and live in their own countries with sustainable social assistance and development programs.

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International and regional organizations should take the lead and negotiate with the new administration.



The activity of migrant smuggling is increasing gradually, as the measures taken by the states included in the migration route.

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Endnotes

1 In 2020, Afghanistan is the second country with the highest number of refugees, after Syria, with 3 million people. (Humanitarian Assistance Report, 2020: 28)

2 Total number of registered Afghan refugees and migrants in Pakistan and Iran are 2.215.445. (UNCHR, last updated: 31 December 2020)

3 UNDP says that by mid-2022, 97 percent of Afghans could fall into poverty.

4 An estimated 18.4 million people in Afghanistan in 2021 need humanitarian assistance.

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After graduating from the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul University in 2019, Yumurtacı continues her graduate studies at the same university in the field of migration and humanitarian aid.

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*Whoever
saves a life,
it will be as if they
saved all of humanity.*



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