

## Helpdesk Research Report

# Migration and conflict in Afghanistan

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### Question

*Is internal/international migration within/from Afghanistan a driver of conflict itself? To what extent is internal and international migration in/from Afghanistan driven by conflict? Are economic drivers a bigger factor driving migration? What role, if any, does age/gender play in migration within/from Afghanistan? Do issues related to migration act as sources of resilience and/or offer opportunities for peace?*

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## 1. Overview

Migration flows in Afghanistan includes external migration to neighbouring countries and across the world, and internal migration with many Internally Displaced People (IDPs). The last three decades of conflict have led to overlapping outflows and return of Afghan migrants driven by a complex set of factors. The literature on the topic is mostly qualitative and often based on interviews. Gaps and difficulties in data collection hamper the analysis of migrant profiles, migration drivers and of the relationship between conflict and migration. For example, whether migration is itself a driver of conflict does not seem to have been analysed.

While the key factor driving migration is conflict and insecurity, it is often interlinked and inseparable from economic factors. For example, conflict affecting rural livelihoods have pushed migration to cities or

neighbouring countries. In addition, Afghans have unequal opportunities to migration, depending on their economic and social status. Whereas urban and more educated groups tend to migrate to industrialised countries, the poorest make up a large part of IDPs. Demographic pressure with a growing amount of young Afghans looking for economic opportunities is also an important factor of migration. Women become extremely vulnerable as a result of migration.

However, the use of migration as a coping mechanism shows the resilience of the Afghan population. The diaspora also has a key role in the reconstruction and development of the country through remittances, investment, transfer of skills and knowledge.

Predictions for the years to come are not optimistic. Experts suggest that another major displacement crisis is likely to happen leading in particular to increasing internal displacement.

## 2. A recent history of migration in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has one of the largest refugee crises in history, claims the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 76 per cent of Afghans have had some experience of displacement in their lifetime. Out of these, 41 per cent were internally displaced while 42 per cent were externally displaced, and 17 per cent have lived both situations. Afghanistan is still one of the main countries of origin of refugees worldwide (Jackson 2009; Kuschminder *et al.* 2013). At the end of 2013 around 2.56 million Afghan refugees were living in 86 countries, of which around 95 per cent settled in Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR 2014). Moreover, forced displacement in Afghanistan has always included internal and cross-border movements with overlapping outflows and returns (Schmeidl 2014). The number of IDPs is estimated to be at least 948,000 people out of an estimated 30 million people at the end of June 2015 (Glatz 2015).

In the last three decades of conflict, the **first wave of migration** was triggered by the communist rule in Afghanistan (1978-79) and the Soviet intervention in 1979. A massive exodus of Afghans arrived in Pakistan and Iran in particular, and in the Gulf region. At the same time, many Afghans claimed political asylum in Europe, the US and Australia (Jazayery 2002; Schetter 2012).

The period following the **withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989** and the takeover of the Mujahedeen in 1992 was characterised by a fluid movement of people fleeing and returning to Afghanistan, and of internally displaced people (IDPs). These movements were mainly driven by insecurity and fighting across the country between the Mujahedeen and the communist administration, followed by fighting between rival Mujahedeen groups (Jazayery 2002; Schetter 2012).

Similar patterns of movements followed the **emergence of the Taliban in 1994**. Between 1994 and 2001, three to five million Afghans were living outside of their country as a result of large scale massacres that combined with Afghanistan's worst drought in 30 years. At the same time, restrictions imposed by Pakistan and Iran on their borders meant that more people were internally displaced (Jazayery 2002).

In 2001 the **US military intervention** caused over 300,000 people to become refugees (Schetter 2012). However, the **ousting of the Taliban** from power and the signing of the Bonn Accord later in 2001 opened the door to the return of an estimated 5.7 million Afghans mainly from Pakistan and Iran. A number of these returnees have been trying to migrate again (Agah 2013; Poppelwell 2007).

### 3. The drivers of migration

The literature on Afghan migration stresses that migration in Afghanistan is a complex phenomenon driven by various interlinked factors that carry different weight depending on changes in the Afghan context. Schetter (2012) argues for instance that clear-cut categories such as ‘refugee’ or ‘labour migrant’ do not always have much meaning in Afghanistan. The literature does not clearly differentiate between factors driving IDPs and external migration. The question whether migration can be a driver of conflict itself in Afghanistan is neither raised nor studied by the literature reviewed in this report.

The factor emphasised as the main driver of migration by the literature is **conflict and insecurity**. High civilian casualties, the mobile nature of the conflict, the general deterioration of security, intimidation and harassment by government and anti-government elements are all direct causes of displacement (Jackson 2009; O’Leary 2014; Schmeidl 2014). In Southern Afghanistan, Amiri (2014) shows that many families fled because of the expansion of military operations of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the International Military Force (IMF) in 2009. These operations meant increased door-to-door searches and harassment which made daily life more difficult. In contested areas with fighting between the international and state forces and non-state actors, people often flee internally and constantly re-evaluate when they should come back. In heavily contested areas, residents prepare to leave their village long term and move to a major urban centre in Afghanistan or to Pakistan. Many families leave out of fear of being killed for retaliation from the Taliban or the government.

Amiri (2014) shows how **security and economic factors are interconnected** drivers of migration. He provides the example of Afghans living in rural areas who become unable to cultivate their fields because they have been appropriated by the international forces to establish military bases. Jackson (2009) also argues that many fled for lack of other options once their property, agricultural land or other productive assets have been destroyed. More generally, underdevelopment and a deteriorating economic situation (also linked to conflict), in particular in rural areas, are key migration drivers (Schmeidl 2014). These drivers trigger large flows of rural-urban migration in the country with people migrating internally in search of opportunities (Kuschminder & Dora 2009). The interconnection of economic and security drivers also entails a confusion between refugee and labour migration status when Afghans relocate externally, in particular in neighbouring countries (Schetter 2012).

However, the relationship between poverty, conflict and migration is even more complex as poverty hampers many individuals to migrate for lack of financial resources. In case of insecurity they seek temporary refuge in a nearby village or district (Jackson 2009).

Finally, Jackson (2009) and Koser (2014) emphasise how the relationship between security and displacement can be mediated by **other types of factors** that motivate the decision to migrate. The decision depends on local understandings of the conflict at a specific point in time and on a range of economic, demographic, social, political and physical factors. Environmental risks such as earthquakes and droughts can also be important drivers of migration (Kuschminder *et al.* 2013). The increasing number of urban IDPs also functions as a strong pull factors for others to follow. This factor leads to the perpetuation of displacement movements. Similarly, the number of unaccompanied minors who have made it to the West provides an incentive for others to continue trying (Schmeidl 2014). Koser (2014) identifies that displacements are affected by external factors such as policies towards migrants and refugees in neighbouring countries.

## 4. The role of age and gender in migration

The literature on migration in Afghanistan acknowledges age and gender as factors that have significant roles in the dynamics of migration. However, not many studies explore these roles. Rapid demographic growth and the **young age** of the Afghan population are considered important drivers of migration.<sup>1</sup> A growing group of prospective young migrants are hoping to find better economic opportunities in big cities or abroad. They constitute the main group of internally migrants to Afghan cities (Kuschminder *et al.* 2013; Schmeidl 2014).

Studies on the **role of gender in migration** tend to focus on the impact of migration on the vulnerability of women. Tyler & Schmeidl (2014) stress how displaced young women in large Afghan cities suffer significantly more than men from difficult access to education, health and employment. Displacement means loss of freedom, of social capital and extreme marginalisation for women as a result of degraded socio-economic conditions and the loss of traditional support and protection mechanisms (Hennion 2014; Tyler & Schmeidl 2014). Finally, according to Jackson (2009), women are slightly more likely than men to have been internally but not externally displaced. On the contrary, they are underrepresented in terms of external migration (Schmeidl 2014).

## 5. Migration as a source of resilience and capacities for peace

Beyond the recognition that migration is an important coping mechanism showing the resilience of the Afghan population (Schmeidl 2014), the literature mostly engages with the role of the diaspora as a capacity for peace. For Kuschminder *et al.* (2013), the diaspora is a source of political, economic and social capital that could play a major role to foster the country's development.

**Remittances and investments** from the Afghan diaspora play an important role in the resilience and reconstruction of Afghanistan even though it is difficult to evaluate the exact amount (Agah 2013; Kuschminder *et al.* 2013). According to Kuschminder & Dora (2009), remittances account for greater flows than humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. They will also gain further importance for development as humanitarian assistance continues to decrease. Investments are sent in particular by migrants in the US, the EU and Australia (Agah 2013). For instance, the Afghan diaspora has made numerous business investments in sectors such as telecommunications, banking, civil aviation and real estate (Kouser 2014). Remittances come mostly from neighbouring countries, in particular from Iran, and are used for everyday needs of households (Agah 2013).

The Afghan diaspora has also been heavily involved in the 2001 **political negotiations** in Bonn and in the ensuing transitional government that ran the country (Agah 2013; Kouser 2014). Three quarters of the participants at the Bonn talks were exiled Afghans (Agah 2013). The diaspora further assumed several responsibilities such as working for reconciliation between ethnic groups, institutional capacity building and addressing economic issues (Kouser 2014).

The diaspora is considered to have important **social capital**, in particular those in industrialised countries (Van Houte 2014). Hence, programmes launched by international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United National Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank aimed to support the return of Afghan professionals to transfer knowledge and skills (Agah 2013; Kouser 2014; Kuschminder & Dora 2009). These programmes are difficult to evaluate. However, a study

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<sup>1</sup> 67 per cent of the estimated 30 million Afghans are under the age of 25 (Schmeidl 2014).

evaluating the IOM's temporary return of qualified nationals (TRQN) project (2006-2011) showed its positive contribution (Agah 2013). Another example is the Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Nationals (TOKTEN) programme launched by UNDP. It called on expatriate nationals to volunteer in Afghanistan for a short period of time to contribute to reconstruction without the need of permanent return (Kouser 2014).

Finally, the diaspora is also building its own networks to play a **role in the reconstruction** of Afghanistan (Kuschminder & Dora 2009). The non-profit organisation 'Afghans4Tomorrow' is an illustration of this role. It has been established by a volunteer group of the Afghan diaspora in the US. Its aim is to take part in the reconstruction and development of the country, in particular in the areas of education, agriculture and health (Agha 2013).

## 6. Future trends

In a policy research report discussing the historical and current displacement trends in Afghanistan, Schmeidl (2014) argues that Afghanistan is likely to witness another major displacement crisis. Internal displacement will be the preferred option to external displacement, and the main asylum option will be Kabul followed by bigger regional cities (see also Koser (2014) who makes the same prediction based on a review of the literature and on interviews). Schmeidl (2014) lists a number of reasons for her forecast: mobility has become an important coping mechanism for Afghans; most Afghans already have an exit strategy planned; there is an Afghan diaspora in many places; returns have not been as successful and sustainable as hoped for; there is added demographic stress; there is continuous insecurity, intimidation and human rights violations, the rise of impunity and the lack of protection provided by the Afghan government and its security forces; the lack of economic growth and livelihood opportunities; and a slow and inadequate policy response. An increased reluctance to move far away from home and reduced possibilities to move to Iran and Pakistan explain why displacements would be mostly internal (Koser 2014).

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