TransAtlantic Council on Migration
A Project of the Migration Policy Institute

From Forced Migration to Forced Returns in Afghanistan: Policy and Program Implications

By Nassim Majidi

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Executive Summary

Afghanistan has long been a source of migration, both within the region and further afield. Yet as the nature of these movements continues to change, little information is available about the numbers of Afghans who have experienced migration, displacement, and return to the country. One commonly referenced figure, drawn from a 2009 report by the International Committee of the Red Cross, estimates that three out of four Afghans had at some point in their lives experienced displacement. A key feature of Afghan migration today—beyond outward migration and displacement—is return to Afghanistan, at times voluntarily but often forced. These returns, which include both migrants who only recently left Afghanistan and others who have lived abroad for decades, have significant implications for individuals, the society to which they return, and the dynamics of the migration system more broadly.

Initially, most returnees were refugees. The refugee repatriation program that followed the fall of the Taliban in 2002 was the largest run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to date. Returns were voluntary and driven primarily by refugees' desire to return home and aid in the reconstruction of the country. A resurgence of violence in recent years and continued low economic growth have, however, brought spontaneous returns to a standstill. Instead, a rising number of Afghans continue to seek protection and a better life within and outside the region, including in European countries—a new Afghan exodus.

Returns have thus come to dominate Afghan migration patterns at one of the most insecure and unstable times in its recent history.

But forced movements out of Afghanistan and the experiences of destination countries is only one side of the migration picture. The other, less frequently discussed reality is one of forced returns, driven by restrictive policies in the countries where migrants and refugees have sought refuge. In the case of Afghanistan, these are returns from Iran, Pakistan, and now Europe. In 2016 alone, forced returns are estimated to have affected 1 million Afghans. This report draws on extensive field research, conducted between 2008 and 2017, to explore the dynamics of forced return through the lens of the Afghan experience.

At present, Afghanistan is faced with the difficult task of reintegrating unprecedented numbers of returning civilians while facing ongoing conflict and humanitarian crises. In parallel, the growing number of Afghan and other nationals seeking protection in Europe has motivated destination-country governments to look for ways to forestall further arrivals. European policymakers have favored two approaches: (1) attempting to address the root causes of migration through development and humanitarian assistance, and (2) facilitating repatriation through return and reintegration programs for those who are judged not to have legitimate protection needs. At the same time, neighboring Iran and Pakistan, which host the largest number of Afghan refugees and migrants, have increased pressure on Afghans to return. Returns have thus come to dominate Afghan migration patterns at one of the most insecure and unstable times in its recent history. This has created tensions for individuals, households, and entire communities across Afghanistan, with implications that are not only economic, but social and psychosocial as well.

By forcibly returning migrants and failed asylum seekers, with or without reintegration assistance upon arrival, policymakers hope to encourage returned migrants to remain in their country of origin and to deter others from undertaking the same journey. Yet migration from Afghanistan has remained high, and many

returnees choose to leave again—a trend that suggests such policies are not achieving their goals. Several features of Afghan migration and return contribute to the limited effectiveness of these policies:

- ***Migration is a key survival strategy and economic lifeline.*** For many Afghan individuals and families, migration remains a crucial strategy for mitigating the economic and security risks they face in Afghanistan. Without improved safety and livelihood prospects upon return, many will again turn to migration, creating a migration-return-remigration cycle as Afghans continue to move in search of protection and opportunities.

- ***Returning migrants are increasingly diverse and have complex protection needs.*** While earlier voluntary returns consisted primarily of adult men, children and families make up a growing share of those returned. Many experience a need for psychosocial support, and families are frequently split across borders with little hope of reuniting legally. Age, mental-health concerns, and emotional strain make it difficult for many who return to (re)build a life in Afghanistan.

- ***For many of those returned, Afghanistan is not "home."*** This is particularly the case among youth, many of whom have never lived in Afghanistan and have instead spent most of their lives in Pakistan or Iran. Others have spent their formative years in European countries, arriving as minors and later being forcibly removed once they hit adulthood. They have no personal networks in or connections to Afghanistan, with loved ones and friends more likely to be in the countries where they grew up. For these young returnees, "home" is not synonymous with the homeland or country of citizenship, and cultural, social, and economic integration will not be easy.

European governments engaged in forced or assisted returns generally offer assistance in an attempt to mitigate some reintegration challenges. Yet such efforts face numerous limitations, including:

- ***Thinking beyond economic integration.*** The support provided is often narrowly focused on economic integration and does not address more complex needs such as health care, psychological support, housing, or education.

- ***Addressing the information gap.*** Stakeholders assisting returnees need reliable information about postreturn realities if they are to develop strong, effective strategies. For example, few return programs base the support they offer on a mapping of the local context (e.g., of labor market needs). As a result, initiatives are often insufficiently targeted or tailored to help returnees integrate locally.

- ***Planning for reintegration before return.*** Support is provided only after return, despite evidence of more successful reintegration outcomes among returnees who are assisted in planning for their return prior to departure. Developing a reintegration plan before return can increase the commitment, confidence, and capacity of returnees to handle the high and low points of their postreturn lives to Afghanistan.

- ***Coordinating between internal and international stakeholders.*** A lack of coordination both within the Afghan government and with international partners has limited the effectiveness of reintegration initiatives. Government authorities and partners on the ground are not always aware of when or where returns are happening, thus limiting their ability to prepare for, identify, and reach out to new returnees with supports.

- ***Engaging migrants and communities in the process of designing supports for returnees.*** There is no broader dialogue on what being returned to Afghanistan means to individuals and families; returnees are not included in the process of defining pre- or postreturn support

needs, have limited access to information that would help them plan for return, and are often unable to mobilize the resources needed to make return a viable long-term strategy.

Policymakers in countries initiating returns could address some of these limitations by first improving coordination with partners in Afghanistan, linking predeparture with postreturn counseling and assistance. A more comprehensive mapping of returnee needs and local contexts would make tailored reintegration programs more effective, as would enabling returnees to prepare for their departure before they are returned. Monitoring and evaluation of returnee outcomes is also needed to better understand what is working and in which contexts. Where monitoring is not feasible due to conflict and insecurity, returns should not be occurring.

Efforts that fail to recognize the importance of movement as a survival strategy may find their ability to reduce unauthorized migration severely limited.

Finally, policymakers should bear in mind the development benefits migration can hold for Afghan families as well as for the nation as a whole. Further research on this dynamic in the Afghan context is needed to provide the evidence required to support policy decisions. Governments could consider ways to open legal migration channels for Afghans who lack opportunities to find security and economic self-sufficiency at home. The national labor migration strategy adopted by the Afghan government in 2016 could provide a basis for managing such a legal migration program. Efforts that fail to recognize the importance of movement as a survival strategy may find their ability to reduce unauthorized migration severely limited, leading to a lose-lose situation for governments and individual Afghans alike.

I. Introduction

Increased irregular migration to Europe in 2015 and 2016 focused the attention of governments, publics, and the media on those arriving. While the initial, and short-lived, response in Europe was one of welcome and open borders, the political focus soon shifted to issues of migration management and border control. Return and readmission policies that seek to return unauthorized migrants and those whose asylum claims have been denied to their countries of origin have become a key tool in pursuit of these goals.

Signing up to return "home" is often the last resort for migrants with no other legal option to remain. It may also be a source of logistical and financial support for those who need to return to their families, or for those who seek to return once the threat to their lives has diminished. Globally, returns have risen in recent years. This is evidenced by the increase in the number of participants in International Organization for Migration (IOM) Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programs, which rose from an average of 34,000 migrants globally per year between 2005 and 2014, to nearly 70,000 migrants in 2015 and more than 98,000 in 2016,[1] though the figures for 2017 are thus far slightly lower with 38,000

1 International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVR)" (fact sheet, IOM, Geneva, 2017), www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/DMM/AVRR/IOM-AVRR-Brochure-2017.pdf.

returns recorded in the first half of 2017.[2] Afghanistan has consistently been a key country of origin for these returns.

By returning migrants without a legal claim to stay and supporting their subsequent reintegration, policymakers hope to discourage others from undertaking the same journey. While many return policies focus on recent arrivals, there has been a parallel push by some first-asylum countries, such as Kenya and Pakistan, to return longstanding refugee populations. Yet policymakers and analysts know relatively little about how return interventions influence these dynamics.[3] As one of the least studied aspects of international migration and an evolving policy area, return migration does not have a standard meaning in national or international law. For this reason, as well as a general lack of data collection and aggregation, there are no accurate global estimates of return migration.

Further complicating matters, decisions about when to return and to where have increasingly been taken out of the hands of migrants themselves. The increased interest of governments in managing migration through return has meant that a rising proportion of returns are now orchestrated by states and facilitated by international organizations. Though still officially termed "voluntary," these returns often involve minimal input from the migrants in question. Such returns are accompanied by the risk that migrants are not psychologically, emotionally, or financially prepared to succeed after arrival. When returns are not followed by sustainable reintegration, they can have severe consequences for the receiving society—ranging from increased poverty and conflict to renewed emigration by migrants searching for better prospects in destinations old and new.[4]

Afghanistan—a country with a complex history of migration and a wide range of returning refugees and migrants—provides a valuable lens through which to explore the sustainability and effectiveness of return policies, as well as their implications for countries on the receiving end of returns. After Syrians, Afghans comprised the next largest refugee population (an estimated 2.5 million individuals globally in 2016)[5] and filed the second largest number of asylum applications in Europe in 2015 and 2016.[6] They are also one of the most longstanding displaced populations, with many Afghans living in displacement for more than three decades.[7] The duration and sheer size of this population has resulted in growing protection fatigue in neighboring Pakistan and Iran as well as in Europe, where the intensity and proximity of the Syrian conflict has taken precedence. Afghan refugees and migrants have thus become a central target of return-focused migration management policies in these countries.

This report draws on field research conducted by the author with Afghan returnees between 2008 and 2017 (see Box 1). It begins by examining current trends in returns to Afghanistan and the characteristics of those returning. Next, it considers the return and reintegration policies employed and the obstacles that limit their effective implementation. Finally, it concludes by examining the effects of these policies on the individuals returned and the implications for the migration-management and development objectives of the countries that initiated their return. The report focuses most closely on the situation of migrants deported from Europe, bringing in the experiences of those returning from Iran, Pakistan, and elsewhere when relevant.

2 IOM, "Over 38,000 Migrants Assisted with Voluntary Return by UN Migration Agency in First Half of 2017" (press release, IOM, Geneva, August 18, 2017), www.iom.int/news/over-38000-migrants-assisted-voluntary-return-un-migration-agency-first-half-2017.

3 Nassim Majidi and Laurence Hart, "Return and Reintegration to Afghanistan: Policy Implications," *Migration Policy Practice* 6, no. 3 (September 2016): 36–41, http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migration_policy_practice_journal_27.pdf.

4 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Dialogue on Voluntary Repatriation and Sustainable Reintegration in Africa," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2004): 267–74.

5 UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2017), www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/5943e8a34/global-trends-forced-displacement-2016.html.

6 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, "Asylum Applications in the EU/EFTA by Country, 2008–2016," accessed November 1, 2017, www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/asylum-applications-euefta-country-2008-2016-q3.

7 UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016*, 22.

Box 1. Primary Data Sources

This report draws on several research studies conducted by the author and Samuel Hall research teams in Afghanistan with returned refugees and migrants. These studies include:

- A 2016-2017 longitudinal assessment of Afghans who have attempted to migrate to Europe since 2015. Interviews are gathered from the same cohort on a bi-monthly basis, through their journey, at destination, in transit, and upon return to Afghanistan.
- A 2016 representative survey of urban displaced youth (ages 15 to 24) in Kabul. The survey included interviews with more than 2,000 youth, including returnees, deportees, internally displaced persons, rural-urban migrants, and nonmigrants.
- A 2014 evaluation of return and reintegration activities coordinated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) between 2008 and 2013 in the provinces of Herat, Kabul, Nangarhar, and Nimroz. The 588 household survey respondents included beneficiaries of reintegration assistance (394) and nonbeneficiaries (194).
- Qualitative interviews with 100 returnees from the United Kingdom conducted in 2009 and again in 2011. Interviewees included both voluntary and forced returnees, and interviews were conducted in the Afghan provinces of Balkh, Kabul, and Nangarhar.
- Interviews conducted since 2008 with more than 800 deportees in the northern Herat province and southern Nimroz province. The data include conversations with men, women, families, and unaccompanied minors.

Sources: Samuel Hall, *Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul, Part One: Mental Health Matters* (Kabul: Samuel Hall, 2016), http://samuelhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/UDY-Chapter-1-Mental-Health.pdf; Nassim Majidi, "Afghan Refugees: Conversations along the Migration Trail," Refugees Deeply, October 6, 2016, www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2016/10/06/afghan-refugees-conversations-along-the-migration-trail; Samuel Hall, *Evaluating IOM's Return and Reintegration Activities for Returnees and Other Displaced Populations: Afghanistan* (Kabul: IOM, 2014), https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/default/files/migrated_files/2013/04/Evaluating-IOMs-Return-and-Reintegration-Activities-for-Returnees-and-Other-Displaced-Populations-in-Afghanistan_Full-Report.pdf; Nassim Majidi, *A Longitudinal Study of Returnees and Reintegration from the UK* (unpublished report, Social Science Research Council, New York, 2011).

II. Characteristics and Trends in Returns to Afghanistan

Data on the number of migrants who return to Afghanistan each year are scarce, with figures available for certain groups (e.g., refugees) but not others. More than 5.2 million refugees have been assisted in their return to Afghanistan since 2002, one of the largest such movements on record.[8] This section considers historical and current trends in migration from and return to Afghanistan, both of refugees and

8 UNHCR, "UNHCR Afghanistan Voluntary Repatriation" (monthly report, UNHCR, Kabul, June 2017), https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/59085.

of migrants more broadly, highlighting a clear shift from voluntary to forced returns as well as the higher levels of vulnerability among forced returnees compared to voluntary returnees.

A. The Role of Migration in Afghanistan

Outward migration and return have played a critical role in shaping the social, political, and economic development of Afghanistan. More than three-quarters of Afghans are thought to have experienced displacement as of 2009,[9] and one in four Afghans had migrated internationally as of 2013.[10] Moreover, Afghanistan has experienced many types of migration and return—from the voluntary repatriation of refugees to the forced return of migrants and asylum seekers (see Box 2)—that overlap and interact to produce the complex and dynamic migration situation that Afghanistan is faced with today.

Box 2. Types of Return

Individuals who find themselves subject to returns fall into three broad categories:

- ***Refugees.*** Persons returning after having been granted asylum abroad. Both refugees participating in internationally assisted repatriation programs and those returning on their own are included in this category.
- ***Asylum seekers.*** Persons returning after seeking asylum abroad. This includes both persons who return after their asylum cases are rejected as well as those who may not have been able to apply for asylum but who stayed abroad under temporary protection for some time.
- ***Migrants.*** Persons who return to their country of citizenship after residing in another country and who intend to stay for at least one year.

While these represent distinct legal categories and sets of rights on paper, in reality, there are many overlaps. Take the example of Mansour, 45, a Hazara from Ghazni whose journey was documented as part of a 2016–17 longitudinal assessment by Samuel Hall. Mansour first sought refuge in Pakistan in the 1980s, then in Iran in the 1990s, before returning to Afghanistan voluntarily in 2002 as part of the initial post-Taliban return movement. One of his sons, a minor, then left Afghanistan in 2014, at a time of growing insecurity during the transition from international to national security forces. His son sought asylum as a minor in Sweden and has been living in a camp for the past three years awaiting the outcome of his application. This family's story is a common one in Afghanistan. Like Mansour and his son, families may undertake various strategies to ease the return process and to adapt to an ever-changing economic and security context. These can include staggered repatriation (when the head of the household goes back first to check on the feasibility of return for the entire family), split families (where some family members migrate to more favorable destinations while others remain in Afghanistan or their original host country), and revolving returns.

Sources: IOM, *Return Migration: Policies and Practices in Europe* (Geneva: IOM, 2004), www.ch.iom.int/sites/default/files/fileadmin/media/pdf/publikationen/return_migration.pdf; Peggy Levitt and Ninna Nyberg-Sørensen, "The Transnational Turn in Migration Studies" (Global Migration Perspectives No. 6, Global Commission on International Migration, Geneva, October 2004), www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/policy_and_research/gcim/gmp/gmp6.pdf.

9 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Afghanistan: Opinion Survey and In-Depth Research, 2009* (Geneva: Ipsos and ICRC, 2009), www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/2011/afghanistan-opinion-survey-2009.pdf.

10 Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Afghanistan," accessed January 30, 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/.

Large-scale returns began following the fall of the Taliban, and most were initially refugees returning from Iran and Pakistan. By the end of September 2002, more than 1.5 million Afghan refugees had been repatriated from Pakistan and more than 220,000 from Iran.[11] Most of those who returned voluntarily between 2002 and 2005 were motivated by a desire to be part of the reconstruction, which they saw as offering a better opportunity than their lives in exile.

But even early on, tensions between expectations and reality emerged. The lack of concrete opportunities for a decent life and the slow arrival of donor funds for reconstruction made the transition back to life in Afghanistan difficult for many.[12] The repatriation program run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was the largest and most rapid in the agency's history,[13] and the sudden return of millions of Afghans proved difficult for the country to absorb. The funds budgeted for refugee return and reintegration activities were based on more conservative estimates for how many would return and were insufficient for the actual numbers of returnees. Moreover, the repatriation brought to light existing humanitarian and development challenges in Afghanistan resulting from decades of war and ongoing military operations. By 2007, reality had fallen far short of the expectations of many returnees.[14]

Mobility has thus, over generations, become a common response to insecurity, uncertainty, and external shocks.

A second period of heightened return began in the late 2000s. These additional returnees proved more difficult to reintegrate, and many showed an interest in continuing to move back and forth to their country of exile to secure livelihoods and provide for their basic needs. In a major shift—both for these migrants and for policymakers—this led to cyclical, cross-border movement from Afghanistan back to Iran and Pakistan, this time undertaken as unauthorized migrants rather than as refugees recognized under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Without the protection afforded by this legal framework, forced returns began to dominate return movements from these countries to Afghanistan. Deportations from Iran peaked at 393,000 in 2007, a threefold increase over the previous year.[15]

In 2014, foreign troops withdrew from Afghanistan and security was transferred in full to the Afghan military and police forces. This shift marked the beginning of a third chapter in Afghanistan's recent migration history, dubbed an Afghan exodus,[16] as the numbers of migrants fleeing insecurity in the country and searching for a better life abroad again rose. Compared to previous Afghan emigration, these migrants' journeys increasingly took them outside of the region, often to Europe. Between 2014 and 2015, the number of first-time Afghan asylum seekers quadrupled in Europe, with nearly half of their claims lodged in either Hungary or Sweden.[17]

Mobility has thus, over generations, become a common response to insecurity, uncertainty, and external shocks. Most Afghan households today have accumulated layers of migration experiences. The pervasiveness of movement as a coping strategy creates a cycle of internal and international

11 International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Afghanistan Migration Profile* (Kabul: IOM Afghanistan, 2011), 33, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mp_afghanistan_0.pdf.
12 David Turton and Peter Marsden, *Taking Refugees for a Ride? The Politics of Refugee Return to Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2002), www.refworld.org/pdfid/47c3f3cb1a.pdf.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Nassim Majidi, *Research Study on Afghan Deportees from Iran* (Geneva: UNHCR and International Labor Organization, 2008), www.unhcr.org/49ba32772.pdf.
16 Thomas Ruttig, "An 'Afghan Exodus' (1): Facts, Figures, Trends," Afghan Analyst Network, November 14, 2015, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/an-afghan-exodus-facts-figures-trends/.
17 Eurostat, "Record Number of over 1.2 Million First Time Asylum Seekers Registered in 2015: Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis: Top Citizenships" (news release, Eurostat Press Office, Luxembourg, March 4, 2016), http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7203832/3-04032016-AP-EN.pdf/.

mobility, often outside state control. For example, interviews by the author with Afghans deported from Iran suggested that one out of three plans to travel back to Iran immediately (i.e., within days of their deportation),[18] and a separate study suggested that three out of four Afghans returned from the United Kingdom intend to leave again.[19] Because migration functions as an ongoing coping mechanism for many Afghan households, the concepts of return and reintegration do not match the mobile reality in Afghanistan. For policymakers who aim to interrupt the migration-return-remigration cycle, this can put them at odds with the aspirations of Afghans as current programs fail to provide concrete opportunities and alternatives to unauthorized migration.

B. Current Return Trends

Voluntary refugee repatriation to Afghanistan has in the past decade been largely replaced by the government-led return of Afghans living elsewhere in the region or who arrived in Europe as part of mixed migration flows. These returns are occurring despite increased insecurity in the country and attacks that target civilians.[20] In 2016, an estimated 1 million people were forcibly returned to Afghanistan.[21] Many of these returns occurred in the latter half of the year; according to government figures, more than 410,000 Afghans were returned from Iran between July and December 2016.[22] Added to these are an estimated 253,000 Afghan refugees forcibly returned from Pakistan in 2016.[23] The United Nations estimates that an additional 1 million returns are to be expected from Pakistan and Iran over the course of 2017, in addition to those from Europe.[24]

The subsections that follow explore two interrelated trends: returns to Afghanistan are occurring from an increasing number of countries, and the diversity of returning populations has grown. These shifts mean that Afghanistan is now taking in more migrants with more diverse reintegration needs,[25] all while its capacity to do so is limited by reductions in funding, increasing insecurity, and a broader mismatch between government capacity and the needs of the overall population.

1. Returns Occurring from an Increasing Number of Countries

Both Iran and Pakistan have been longstanding hosts of Afghan refugees experiencing protracted displacement. However, the governments of both countries have put continuous pressure on Afghans to return home. In Pakistan, pressures include harassment and intimidation by local authorities and, most threateningly, repeated announcements that Afghan refugees face imminent deportation (the Pakistani government most recently set the end of 2017 as the deadline for refugees to return).[26] This risk of removal threatens approximately 3 million Afghans living in Pakistan, half of whom are unregistered.

18 Majidi, *Research Study on Afghan Deportees from Iran*

19 Nassim Majidi, "A Longitudinal Study of Returnees and Reintegration from the UK" (unpublished paper, Social Science Research Council, New York, 2011).

20 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Afghanistan Midyear Report 2016: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* (Kabul: UNAMA and United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016), http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_midyear_report_2016_final.pdf.

21 Opening remarks by Alema Alema, Afghan Deputy Minister of Refugees and Repatriation, to the Vienna Migration Conference 2016 entitled European Migration and Refugee Policies: The Way Ahead, Vienna, November 14, 2016.

22 National Unity Government of Afghanistan, "Policy Framework for Returnees and IDPs" (unpublished framework, December 27, 2016).

23 IOM, "Return of Undocumented Afghans" (Weekly Situation Report for January 15–21, 2017, IOM Kabul, January 2017), www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation_reports/file/IOM_Return_of_Undocumented_Afghans_Weekly_Situation_Report_15_21_January_2017.pdf.

24 TOLOnews, "Report Indicates over One Million Refugees to Return Home in 2017," TOLOnews, January 21, 2017, www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/report-indicates-over-1million-refugees-return-home-2017.

25 Rod Nordland, "Afghanistan Itself Is Now Taking in the Most Afghan Migrants," *New York Times*, November 4, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/11/05/world/asia/afghanistan-migrants.html.

26 Asad Hashim, "Afghan Refugees' Status Extended Until End of Year," Al Jazeera, February 7, 2017, www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/afghan-refugees-status-extended-year-170207180402885.html.

By far the greatest numbers of forced returns are, however, occurring from Iran. Afghan deportees from Iran are largely unassisted and their stories untold. In 2016 alone, a total of 444,000 Afghans returned from Iran, most of whom were deportees; a similar number have returned each year since 2008.[27] Deportees from Iran include single adult male workers, unaccompanied minors[28] and separated children, and family units. Most are deported through two main border crossing points, one to Afghanistan's Herat province and the other to insecure Nimroz province. Once at the border, deportees who fit specific vulnerability criteria receive minimal basic assistance, then return home or to an urban center with or without further assistance. Unaccompanied minors are cared for by IOM under guardianship arrangements, and families are given a transportation stipend to reach their home village, town, or city.

A deportee from Iran, a refugee returnee from Pakistan, and a failed asylum seeker returning from Europe will all have different experiences and support needs.

Returns from Europe are also on the rise. The Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) estimates that around 10,000 Afghans returned from Europe in 2016.[29] Of these, 6,900 returned voluntarily through IOM, and 1,100 received reintegration assistance through IOM's AVRR program in 2016.[30] This is compared to the 1,400 returns facilitated by IOM in 2015.[31]

The fact that returns are occurring from a number of countries renders the challenge of responding to them more complex. Returnee profiles differ considerably: a deportee from Iran, a refugee returnee from Pakistan, and a failed asylum seeker returning from Europe will all have different experiences and support needs. These vary both in terms of their urgency, from emergency to more long term, and in type, including economic, social, and psychosocial. The diversity and multidimensional needs of this population thus require careful long-term planning.

2. Returnees are Increasingly Diverse

While previous forced returns of Afghans, especially from Iran, were dominated by male youth and adults, children now make up a notable share of returnees, including unaccompanied and separated minors as well as families.[32] This is due in part to the mixture of forced and voluntary returns. Voluntary returns have increased; between 2015 and 2016, the number of Afghans under the age of 18 who were assisted in their return from Europe by the IOM-run AVRR program rose eightfold, from 252 minors in 2015 to 2,101 in 2016.[33] These new returnees have additional vulnerabilities that require a more tailored support framework.

27 IOM, "Return of Undocumented Afghans," 2.
28 The term "unaccompanied minors" is used both by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and by UNHCR to refer to persons who under the age of 18 or under a country's legal age of majority, are separated from both parents, and are not with and being cared for by a guardian or other adult who by law or custom is responsible for them. This includes minors who are without any adult care, minors who are entirely on their own, minors who are with minor siblings but who, as a group, are unsupported by any adult responsible for them, and minors who are with informal foster families.
29 Opening remarks by Alema, November 14, 2016.
30 IOM, "Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration" (quarterly statistical report, IOM Afghanistan, Kabul, March 2016), https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/default/files/Reports/quarterly_report_-_jan_-_mar_2016.pdf.
31 Ibid.
32 Liz Fekete, "The Deportation Machine: Europe, Asylum and Human Rights," *Race & Class* 47, no. 1 (2005): 64–78, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0306396805055083.
33 IOM, "Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration."

Data collected on deportees reflect this greater diversity of needs. Three subgroups can be identified, each with different needs:

- ***Minors and youth.*** It is estimated that about ten to fifteen percent of deportees from Iran were minors at the time of their forced return. Of these, most are youth between the ages of 15 and 17, but others are as young as 10 years old. Increasing numbers of unaccompanied minors and youth have migrated to work in Iran, as well as in Pakistan, Europe, and urban areas within Afghanistan; most use the services of smugglers to reach their destinations. International conventions protect these minors from return to situations where they would be at risk, even if they are not recognized as refugees. These children have experienced autonomy and isolation at a very young age and are thus in need of particular types of assistance, notably education and psychological services.

- ***Families.*** Family units with no legal right to remain in their countries of exile are also subject to deportation; one out of ten deportees interviewed in Herat province and one out of three interviewed in Nimroz province in 2017 were with family. Media reports suggest that families are being returned from Europe as well.[34] Deported families need transportation, cash, and counselling. Although many of those met at border points preferred to be left on their own to cope with their return, others accepted the support of international organizations and were transported to transit shelters where they were given food and non-food items, before being escorted back to their provinces of origin.

- ***Single adult men.*** Among forced returnees, the majority remain men who migrated seeking work. Detention, family separation, and loss of resources cause many to return in a state of shock. Most have no source of support immediately after return, and thus need immediate assistance in acquiring staples such as food, water, clothing, and cash.

III. Managing Returns from Europe

European governments show a growing focus on returning Afghan migrants and asylum seekers to Afghanistan. Indeed, for many this has become an explicit priority in their cooperation with the Afghan government. The circumstances under which migrants and refugees return from Europe can be broken down into three categories, as defined by IOM:

- voluntary without compulsion, including the repatriation of migrants;

- voluntary under compulsion, when persons are at the end of their temporary protected status, rejected for asylum, or unable to stay and choose to return of their own volition; and

- involuntary, as a result of the issuance of a deportation order by the authorities of the host state.

While initial efforts focused on voluntary return, more recent cooperation programs with the Afghan government include removal programs. In October 2016, the National Unity Government (NUG) of Afghanistan and the European Union signed a migration agreement, called the Joint Way Forward (JWF), that aims to "establish a rapid, effective, and manageable process for a smooth, dignified, and orderly return of Afghan nationals who do not fulfill the conditions in force for entry to, presence in, or residence on the

34 Nordland, "Afghanistan Itself Is Now Taking in the Most Afghan Migrants."

territory of the European Union, and to facilitate their reintegration in Afghanistan."[35] The JWF stipulates that migrants who have no legal basis to remain in Europe can choose to return voluntarily, before they are removed by force.[36] The agreement allowed for up to 50 forced returns to Afghanistan per flight for a period of six months between October 2016 and April 2017. It also described the possibility of creating a dedicated airport terminal in Kabul to facilitate returns, reflecting a longer-term effort to sustain such returns to Afghanistan.

While the Afghan government has been increasingly vocal about the inability to guarantee the safety of returned minors, the forced return of unaccompanied children continues.

The JWF is not the first attempt by European governments to put together a common framework on returns to Afghanistan. The European Return Platform for Unaccompanied Minors (ERPUM), a pilot program launched in 2011 under the leadership of Scandinavian countries, sought to return unaccompanied minors to Afghanistan and support their reintegration at "home." ERPUM ended in 2014 after facing three main challenges: (1) the inability to verify that care arrangements for minors were sufficient, including tracing and identifying family members; (2) the risk that reception facilities in Afghanistan were turning into permanent centers; and (3) the lack of capacity on the part of the government of Afghanistan to implement ERPUM in partnership with European governments.[37] But while the Afghan government has been increasingly vocal about the inability to guarantee the safety of returned minors, the forced return of unaccompanied children continues.

Returns from Europe also happen outside the framework of this agreement. In 2016, Germany began using charter flights to conduct returns: 125 Afghans agreed to return on the first flight in February 2016, and in December 2016, 34 men were forcibly returned.[38] Following the May 2017 attack that killed more than 150 people in Kabul, the German Interior and Foreign Ministries reported that refugees would only be deported to Afghanistan on an exceptional basis,[39] though deportations resumed a few months later in September 2017.[40] A number of other European countries (including Norway, Denmark, and Finland) are also returning Afghans. Norway has conducted the highest number of forced returns; between January and November 2016, Norway returned 442 Afghan nationals, of whom 278 were forcibly returned.[41]

35 European Union and the National Unity Government of Afghanistan, "Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues between Afghanistan and the EU" (cooperation agreement, October 4, 2016), 10, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu_afghanistan_joint_way_forward_on_migration_issues.pdf.

36 There are protections for unaccompanied minors, who are not to be returned unless family members have been successfully traced and without adequate reception and care-taking arrangements in place in Afghanistan." See ibid., 3.

37 Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, "The Rise and Fall of the ERPUM Pilot: Tracing the European Policy Drive to Deport Unaccompanied Minors" (working paper no. 108, Refugees Study Centre, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, March 2015), www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/publications/working-paper-series/wp-108-erpum-pilot.pdf/.

38 IOM, "125 Afghan Nationals Voluntarily Return Home from Germany with IOM Support" (press release, IOM, Berlin and Kabul, February 24, 2016), www.iom.int/news/125-afghan-nationals-voluntarily-return-home-germany-iom-support; Sandra Petersmann, "Afghanistan: Sent back to a War Zone," Deutsche Welle, April 31, 2017, www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-sent-back-to-a-war-zone/a-39055955.

39 Deutsche Presse-Agentur and the Local, "Germany to Deport Afghan Refugees Only in Exceptional Cases: Report," The Local, August, 9, 2017, www.thelocal.de/20170809/germany-to-deport-afghan-refugees-only-in-exceptional-cases-report.

40 Agence France-Presse, "Germany Resumes Afghan Deportations Months after Kabul Truck Bomb," The Local, September 13, 2017, www.thelocal.de/20170913/germany-resumes-afghan-deportations-months-after-kabul-truck-bomb.

41 This was the highest number of forced returns from a single European country in 2016. See Nordland, "Afghanistan Itself Is Now Taking in the Most Afghan Migrants."

Despite growing interest and investment in both voluntary and forced return programs on the part of governments in Europe and elsewhere, such efforts have encountered several challenges to their implementation:

- ***The voluntariness of returns has been questioned.*** As many individuals lack viable alternatives to assisted return, some analysts and advocates have questioned whether assisted return can really be considered voluntary.[42] The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, for example, has stopped using the term "voluntary" to describe assisted returns for this reason.[43]

- ***Effective dialogue between Afghan and European partners has been difficult to achieve.*** On the Afghan side, the reorganization of the migration portfolio has rendered more complex coordination and communication between relevant partners in Afghanistan and their counterparts abroad. While in the past, MoRR engaged directly with foreign embassies in Kabul to coordinate returns, such issues are now discussed at the presidential level. As a result, MoRR is now rarely included in the planning of returns. MoRR staff members on the ground have cited difficulties obtaining full lists of deportees from the countries initiating their return, such as Germany, even after returns have been conducted. This lack of communication has made it difficult for Afghan authorities to keep an accurate count of returns and to identify and provide services to returnees from Europe.

- ***The focus is largely on returning refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), with less priority given to returns from Europe due funding and structural constraints.*** The National Policy Framework for Returnees and IDPs of March 2017 represents a positive development and promises to address the situation of "three distinct categories of vulnerable people—returnees from the region (Iran and Pakistan), returnees from Europe, and IDPs."[44] While in theory returnees from Europe are included in this framework, in reality they are generally being accounted for by international organizations rather than the government.

A more comprehensive policy to manage returns could allow the government of Afghanistan to clarify the levels of need present among returnees, to specify the legal requirements regarding what kinds of migrants can be returned, and to establish a coherent framework from which to negotiate with European partners. Until and unless this framework is used to further such discussions, returns will continue to be driven by the agendas of other states. The deprioritization of return and reintegration of migrants from Europe has also made it difficult to develop a streamlined process for managing returns and has led to confusion regarding responsibility within the government for these issues.

Though the National Policy Framework for Returnees and IDPs does not speak to the voluntariness of returns, it does acknowledge the current reality of returns and describes returnees' rights as citizens under the Afghan constitution. The document speaks of "sustainable integration" and calls for initiatives to help returnees become "productive and well-integrated members of their community."[45] The Terms of Reference of the Displacement and Returnees Executive Committee (DiREC) provide some further details. DiREC oversees coordination on returns and displacement and provides guidance to humanitarian and development programs at national and subnational levels, with a focus on improving community-based service provision.[46]

42 Ceri Oeppen and Nassim Majidi, "Can Afghans Reintegrate after Assisted Returns from Europe?" (policy brief 07, Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2015), www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=8692.
43 Gerard Taylor, "Fewer Mandatory Repatriations from Norway this Year," Norway Today, August 11, 2017, http://norwaytoday.info/news/fewer-mandatory-repatriations-norway-year/.
44 National Unity Government of Afghanistan, "Policy Framework for Returnees and IDPs," 3.
45 Ibid.
46 Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations "Terms of Reference—Displacement and Returnees Executive Committee (DiREC)" (unpublished working document, December 27, 2016).

One result of these recent policy changes, as mentioned above, is that foreign governments now coordinate directly with the chief executive and the president on returns. Discussions of how returns should be carried out are ongoing, and a number of other plans are currently circulating, making this a dynamic time for policies and programs concerning returns to and reintegration in Afghanistan.

IV. Evaluating Reintegration Needs and Support

As more and more migrants and refugees return to Afghanistan, policymakers have increasingly acknowledged to need to make sure returns are successful and sustainable, meaning individuals are able to successfully (re)integrate into Afghan society.[47] For this reason, many voluntary return programs include the possibility for returnees to receive reintegration support in the form of cash benefits, counseling, or job training.

A. Understanding the Needs of Returnees

The migrants and refugees who return to Afghanistan have varied reintegration needs, often depending on the conditions of their return. Research has shown that many individuals who are forcibly returned to Afghanistan face additional challenges and that many feel abandoned, stigmatized, and marginalized.[48] This section examines a few of the specific barriers migrants face to rebuilding a life in Afghanistan after return, as well as difficulties reintegration programs have encountered in seeking to meet these needs.

1. No Home to Return to: "I Am Afghan, but I Am Not Actually from Afghanistan"

Return policies usually seek to return migrants to their country of nationality. Yet for Afghans, decades of migration and displacement have complicated, and sometimes eroded, ties to their "home" country. In many cases, there is a clear distinction between one's homeland and one's home. Afghans who migrate to Europe may be travelling not from Afghanistan, but from another country of long-term residence.[49] In interviews with Afghan migrants in France,[50] for example, many had travelled to Europe after years of living as refugees or migrants in Iran. Those who are returned from Europe to Afghanistan may thus have few connections or networks in the country. Unaccompanied minors who grew up in Iran or elsewhere but are returned to Afghanistan are particularly at risk as they may never have lived in their "home" country. Without the proper support system, the return of these minors and young adults to Afghanistan is unsustainable.

For those who are unable to establish themselves after return to Afghanistan, migrating again becomes the logical next step. Interviews with returnees support this narrative:

> *I was deported two years ago…The rest of our family is in Iran, while one of my brothers is in Holland, where he was deported to because that is where he had his first fingerprints taken. But we also have another brother who succeeded to get his case approved, he lives in London. We will try to go back to him and attempt to submit a new case. He will help us when we arrive there. I can stay with him before I find a situation of my own.*[51]

47 Richard Black and Saskia Gent, "Sustainable Return in Post-Conflict Contexts," *International Migration* 44, no. 3 (August 2006): 15–38, http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/1732/1/Sustainable_return_in_post_conflict_contexts.pdf.
48 Liza Schuster and Nassim Majidi, "Deportation Stigma and Re-Migration," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 4 (2015): 635–52.
49 Liza Schuster and Nassim Majidi, "What Happens Post-Deportation? The Experience of Deported Afghans," *Migration Studies* 1, no. 2 (2013): 221–40.
50 Author interviews with unaccompanied Afghan minors in Paris, 2010–14.
51 Schuster and Majidi, "What Happens Post-Deportation?"

But leaving requires financial means. Mahdi, a 19-year old deportee from Europe, explain that he grew up in Iran, but was returned to Afghanistan. Without any friends or family in Afghanistan, he hopes to reunite with those he left behind in Europe. This will ultimately depend on whether he can secure the means to do so.[52]

For young adults like Mahdi, who have little knowledge of the Afghan economy and labor market, connections to employers in the countries from which they were returned can also provide an incentive to remigrate. Previous research suggests that employers in Iran frequently seek Afghans to work without authorization in the construction and agricultural sectors.[53] Some employers who had a good working relationship with their Afghan workers even keep in touch after workers are deported, at times informing them of new employment opportunities in Iran. With demand for labor high and border crossing relatively easy, those who choose to move back to Iran are usually able to quickly repay any debt they may incur to return, making remigration an appealing option.[54]

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Even for returnees with family in Afghanistan, social stigma can prevent refugees from benefiting from these networks. Deportees from Iran and Europe, for example, felt they had lost face by being deported and are thus reluctant to contact their family or return to their home cities. This reflects the fact that migration is often a whole-family economic strategy, a collective investment that requires repayment. Some returnees thus see remigration as the only viable option and attempt to raise the funds to leave again, restarting the cycle.[55]

2. Divided Families

For some Afghan returnees, separation from family and the psychological costs it incurs are also a major challenge. Interviews with individuals forcibly returned from the United Kingdom suggest that many left relatives, friends, or romantic partners behind.[56] These close personal ties can pull migrants to return to the country from which they were deported, though financial support sent by family abroad can provide an important lifeline in the meantime, as one returned migrant highlighted:

> *I am not going to stay here for long; I fear for my life. We are four brothers, three of us have been deported, but one remains in the United Kingdom. He has been able to get his papers. He sends us money to help us live while we find a solution.*[57]

In other cases, financial support from family may be used to further the returnees' remigration goals:

> *I arrived two months ago and I am planning to go back since my fiancée is in the United Kingdom. She is there waiting for me. She sends me money here so that I don't have to work. Now I want to go back soon. What is there for me to do here?*[58]

52 Nassim Majidi, "Afghan Refugees: Conversations along the Migration Trail," Refugees Deeply, October 6, 2016, www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2016/10/06/afghan-refugees-conversations-along-the-migration-trail.
53 Majidi, *Research Study on Afghan Deportees from Iran.*
54 Ibid.
55 Schuster and Majidi, "What Happens Post-Deportation?"
56 Majidi, "A Longitudinal Study of Returnees and Reintegration from the UK."
57 Schuster and Majidi, "What Happens Post-Deportation?"
58 Ibid.

In some of the most difficult instances, deportation has led to the separation of nuclear families, with wives and children left behind. Referring to cases lodged in the United Kingdom, interviews with migrants suggest that a removal order is sometimes sent for the head of household, not for the entire family. One individual interviewed in Kabul in 2011 initially expressed disbelief that he had been separated from his wife and children, then frustration at his lack of options for reuniting with them:

> *They must have made a mistake and they will rectify it themselves. It has to be a mistake. And if it is not, they did it on purpose so that I would bring back my family myself. But I cannot. I neither have the money nor the will. I do not want my children to grow up in Afghanistan; it is unsafe for them here. They will get a better education there.*[59]

Some migrants see these family separations as a part of a deliberate split-return strategy employed by governments: deporting one member of the family in the hopes that the rest would follow suit. Migrants separated from family by deportation face a difficult decision between remaining apart indefinitely or attempting to bring their family back to a country where they have limited prospects for safety and economic stability. Instead of accomplishing the goal of encouraging other family members to return, first-person accounts from migrants returned to Afghanistan suggest that the division of families in this manner is more likely to nurture remigration through increasingly dangerous and irregular means.

3. Returned Youth: A Particularly Vulnerable Population

Opportunities for youth in Afghanistan are limited, even as more and more young people are being forced to return. Every year, about 400,000 youth enter the labor market, most in urban centers; the majority have limited skills.[60] The lack of job options and prospects for economic security creates a strong push to leave, and many youth face a fight or flight dichotomy that is common in conflict settings.

For those forcibly deported, the stigma of return can lead to social and psychological stress, limiting reintegration.

For those who do find work, employment is often precarious. A survey conducted among Afghan youth in Kabul[61] showed that most are either self-employed or working for a single individual. Their income—and thus their ability to contribute to the financial stability of their families—depended largely on their migration experience. While nonmigrants in the survey earned the most (U.S. $133 per month) and refugee returnees the second most (U.S. $121), this number was lowest for migrants who had been deported (U.S. $114). Those forced to return also expressed lower levels of job satisfaction, with 60 percent of deportees expressing satisfaction as opposed to 85 percent of nonmigrants who held a job when interviewed. One of the main causes of dissatisfaction was a mismatch of skills: 74 percent of deportees perceived their current work to be a poor match for their skills, compared to 29 percent of nonmigrants.

Beyond the economic conditions encountered upon return, the same study described significant mental-health needs among the Afghan youth population. For those forcibly deported, the stigma of return can lead to social and psychological stress, limiting reintegration. Similarly, a 2016 study that examined the mental health of urban displaced youth found that 70 percent of youth, regardless of their migration status, had experienced trauma and that few had support in dealing with it.[62] In focus group discussions, the majority reported signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In addition, stress due

59 Ibid.
60 Samuel Hall, *Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul, Part Two: Education, Jobs and Skills* (Kabul: Samuel Hall, forthcoming).
61 Ibid.
62 Samuel Hall, *Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul, Part One: Mental Health Matters* (Kabul: Samuel Hall, 2016), http://samuelhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/UDY-Chapter-1-Mental-Health.pdf.

to socioeconomic problems, insecurity in Afghanistan, and the inability to pursue further education were very common among respondents in a longitudinal migration assessment conducted in 2016.[63]

Yet despite this clear need, programs for children and youth remain difficult to implement as such efforts require coordination between social workers, child protection specialists, health-care providers, educators, and job trainers. The complexity of working with children and youth—including the high standards for establishing ethical practices that hold as central the best interest of the child—means that return programs have largely focused on parents or on the immediate, basic needs of children and youth. This dearth of more extensive programs for young returnees is part of a broader lack of youth-focused assistance programs in Afghanistan.[64]

Mental-health support, though in demand, is particularly lacking. Many young returnees lack familial connections and support in Afghanistan (40 percent) and express a desire to receive psychological care.[65] According to a 2016 study, young deportees were more than 50 percent more likely than nonmigrant youth to be deprived of basic access to health care; these youth also had more limited access than IDPs and migrants who voluntary returned.[66] One in five respondents stated the need for psychological or psychosocial support, with female youth more likely to express this need more openly (one in three) than male youth (one in ten)—a difference reflective of the sensitive nature of such conversations in Afghanistan, particularly among men.

Mental-health support, though in demand, is particularly lacking.

In short, there is a pressing need for health services, recreational activities, and social groups that provide opportunities for returnees—and particularly youth—to build connections with one another as well as with the rest of the population.

B. Providing Assistance for Reintegration

While many of the European countries that return migrants to Afghanistan provide reintegration assistance, the level and types of support vary considerably. The majority include some type of microbusiness set-up assistance, while education and training were covered by only two out of the 1,094 packages provided by IOM in 2016.[67] Medical assistance is even more limited, benefiting just one returnee in 2016. Harmonization of services and a needs-based approach that goes beyond the basic economics of return are therefore a critical concern and their absence, a constraint on effective return policies.

Efforts to refine and standardize the varied content of return and reintegration packages are ongoing. In 2009, the UK government provided, through IOM, a relocation cash grant of GBP 500 to voluntary returnees at the airport before their departure from the United Kingdom. Upon arrival in Afghanistan, this was complemented by a business set-up option (where returnees could benefit from GBP 2,000 in assistance, spread across six months), a job placement, or vocational training fees covered for two months, with subsistence, material, and travel allowances. The average unit cost per individual was GBP

63 Majidi, "Afghan Refugees: Conversations along the Migration Trail."
64 Samuel Hall, *Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul, Part One: Mental Health Matters.*
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 IOM Afghanistan, "Overview of Voluntary Returns in 2016" (fact sheet, IOM Afghanistan, Kabul, 30 March 2017), https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/default/files/Reports/iom_afghanistan_overview_of_assisted_voluntary_returns_in_2016_revised_mar_17.pdf.

5,000, compared to GBP 11,000 for forced returnees, who were also eligible for assistance.[68] Similarly, returnees from Germany in 2016 received payment for travel costs, additional financial assistance for onward travel in Afghanistan, and initial start-up cash to support income generating activities. And in 2017, the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development pledged to look into the situation of returnees from Germany to evaluate potential measures to assist their reintegration through its Returning to New Opportunities program.[69]

The AVRR program run by IOM, which remains the longest-standing voluntary return program to Afghanistan,[70] also provides travel information and assistance as well as reintegration support to migrants and asylum seekers who choose to return. Migrants can request reintegration assistance through AVRR at any time during the return process, and returns are only carried out to countries certified as safe by UNHCR and IOM. In 2017, the types of support offered through AVRR are being revised to increase the focus on individuals, communities, and structural levels of integration, with the aim of making reintegration more sustainable. Through its integrated approach to reintegration, IOM is working to enhance protection of returnees while ensuring that their economic, social, and psychosocial needs are holistically addressed in reintegration programs. This is a step in the right direction; it puts forward an approach that learns from past lessons, is people-centered, and addresses return as a multidimensional issue. Policymakers, both in Europe and in Afghanistan, should encourage such efforts that look beyond economic reintegration.

C. Assessing the Effectiveness of Reintegration Support

The lack of sustainable return and reintegration programs in Afghanistan has been widely documented. While some initiatives that provide immediate postarrival and humanitarian assistance have demonstrated strong results, an evaluation of IOM return activities across a five-year period (2008–13) has shown that many programs do not translate into long-term livelihoods and reliable shelter.[71] Similarly, in a 2009 evaluation conducted for the UK Department for International Development[72] the majority of returnees (63 percent) claimed that the assistance provided to them after return from the United Kingdom fell short of providing the tools and opportunities needed to make their return to Afghanistan permanent. As a result, 74 percent of returnees expressed a willingness to leave again, a number that was higher among deportees (80 percent) than among voluntary returnees (68 percent). The limited impact of reintegration programs is illustrated by the short lifespan of most postreturn business start-ups, which often are no longer operational when monitoring checks are carried out months after return. A more direct approach to matching returning migrants and refugees with suitable employment opportunities is a key requirement, as reintegration packages currently fail to adequately bridge the gap between the skills returnees hold and those in-demand in the local market. Doing so could unlock one of the central elements of reintegration and mitigate a common reason for remigrating: livelihoods.

Another common shortfall among return programs is a general lack of standards and benchmarks for measuring impact. This is particularly the case when migrants and refugees return to a country

68 This program has since been discontinued. See United Kingdom National Audit Office, *Returning Failed Asylum Applicants* (London: The Stationery Office, 2005), www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2005/07/050676.pdf.

69 German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Encouraging People to Return Voluntarily, with Support from the Returning to New Opportunities Programme," accessed November 22, 2017, www.bmz.de/en/issues/Sonderinitiative-Fluchtursachen-bekaempfen-Fluechtlinge-reintegrieren/deutsche_politik/aktionsfeld_4/index.jsp.

70 IOM, "Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration," accessed January 24, 2017, www.iom.int/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration.

71 Samuel Hall, *Evaluating IOM's Return and Reintegration Activities for Returnees and Other Displaced Populations: Afghanistan* (Kabul: IOM, 2014), https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/default/files/migrated_files/2013/04/Evaluating-IOMs-Return-and-Reintegration-Activities-for-Returnees-and-Other-Displaced-Populations-in-Afghanistan_Full-Report.pdf.

72 Altai Consulting, *Understanding the Return and Reintegration Process of Afghan Returnees from the UK* (London: United Kingdom Department for International Development, 2009).

experiencing ongoing conflict or to a recent postconflict setting. There are no international standards for what constitutes successful reintegration after return, though international standards for humanitarian response (e.g., Sphere[73] and the companion standards) can in some respects be applied. The main reference to a reintegration framework can be found in UNHCR policy statements and a reintegration handbook issued by the organization, which focus more narrowly on the situation of refugee returns. The *UNHCR Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities* defines refugee reintegration as "a process that should result in the disappearance of differences in legal rights and duties between returnees and their compatriots and the equal access of returnees to services, productive assets, and opportunities."[74] Such a process should lead to "a sustainable return—in other words, the ability of returning refugees to secure the political, economic, [legal], and social conditions needed to maintain life, livelihood, and dignity" in the country to which they are returned.[75] Similarly, in 2017 IOM published an integrated approach to reintegration in the context of returns, defining reintegration as "sustainable when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity."[76] This definition could set a new standard on reintegration, upholding voluntariness at the center of returns and recognizing the multidimensional needs of migrants upon return (economic, social, and psychosocial).

In the absence of internationally agreed upon standards for what constitutes successful return, states have enjoyed considerable flexibility to pursue return programs closely aligned with national political agendas. The development of common standards could both drive a more rights-based approach and lead to more reliable monitoring and evaluation of postreturn outcomes.

1. Gaps in Current Reintegration Support Efforts

Perhaps most problematic, current reintegration programs in Afghanistan generally do not employ—and in many cases, do not have the capacity to integrate—a range of best practices, including the adaptation of solutions to the skills and needs of individual returnees, follow-up or protection monitoring elements, and creative solutions (such as peer-to-peer support and use of SMS-based technologies). A specialized, rather than blanket, approach to return and reintegration is needed. By involving urban planners, mental-health and labor-market specialists, and other local stakeholders, a network could be built to contribute to various aspects an individual's wellbeing within the first month after return—a critical time in which returnees assess their capacity to stay or to leave again.

For many returnees, the aim upon return is not restricted to finding a job but often includes a search for social inclusion and protection. A multidimensional approach that takes these other aspirations into account is needed, as is a recognition that these goals are often not fulfilled by cash grants or business start-ups alone.

Even within employment-focused supports, there is room for improvement that could boost job stability and fulfillment. While finding a job quickly may be important for returnees' ability to provide for themselves, more attention needs to be paid to the skills and work experience they have amassed before, during, and after migration. This may include exploring ways to better match returnee skills with the local labor market and helping them receive certification for their skills. Upon return, many

73 The Sphere Handbook is designed for planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation during humanitarian response. See the Sphere Project, "Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response," accessed November 6, 2017, www.spherehandbook.org/en.

74 UNHCR, *Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2004), 5, www.unhcr.org/en-us/partners/guides/411786694/handbook-repatriation-reintegration-activities-emcomplete-handbookem.html.

75 Ibid.

76 IOM, *Towards an Integrated Approach to Reintegration in the Context of Return* (Geneva: IOM, 2017), 3, www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/DMM/AVRR/Towards-an-Integrated-Approach-to-Reintegration.pdf.

Afghans have questions about whether they can continue in the same sectors and jobs they had abroad (including IT and catering), whether those jobs provide a stable income, and whether training certifications acquired abroad will be recognized and valued in Afghanistan. If the countries that initiate return were to provide information on these and similar concerns, migrants would be able to better prepare for their life after return. Yet prereturn counseling and assistance is, at best, limited to logistical and financial issues and at worse, nonexistent.

Quality of life concerns also need to be critically analyzed with a disaggregated view of specific demographic groups. Current assistance programs are either designed for heads of households (typically men) or for family units. A gendered perspective on return is lacking, with little support available to female returnees. Amid increasingly diverse return migration, the needs of Afghan women in displacement and their ability to adapt to life in Afghanistan after return remain key unaddressed challenges. According to the IOM, much-needed mental-health and psychosocial support, including programming designed specifically for female returnees, is so far lacking.[77]

Prereturn counseling and assistance is, at best, limited to logistical and financial issues and at worse, nonexistent.

2. Improving Reintegration Support

The success and sustainability of returns—both to Afghanistan and to other countries—could be improved in several ways. First, efforts to measure the success of reintegration should integrate a broader range of metrics by allowing returnees to express their aspirations, expectations, and (dis)satisfaction with factors that go beyond livelihoods and work. As described in previous sections, reintegration packages frequently stop at cash assistance, transportation, business start-up, or training programs; very rarely is support provided for other aspects of reintegration, such as the need to find accommodations or education for children. Without more holistic support, programs limit their own ability to encourage lasting reintegration.

Second, a baseline mapping of the social, economic, and security situation for residents in different localities is needed. This baseline would be useful for migrants and refugees planning for life after return as it would inform more realistic expectations; such information would also be useful for the organizations involved in implementing return and reintegration programming, enabling them to improve their own preparations.

One example of good practice is the Multi-Dimensional Integration Index (MDI) developed for the Reintegration Working Group (now the Durable Solutions Working Group) in Afghanistan, which is co-chaired by UNHCR and MoRR. It is a standardized framework for understanding and mapping the integration of displaced and returnee populations, and is the first attempt at a consolidated data collection system on integration and reintegration in the country. The index includes the following features:

- baseline data on the integration of displaced and returnee groups to inform and measure the impact of programming;
- data gathering complies with global standards (e.g., those set by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, IASC);

77 Statement by the head of IOM cited in Samuel Hall, *Urban Displaced Youth in Kabul, Part One: Mental Health Matters*.

- database attempts to combine objective and subjective indicators; and
- data gathered based on practitioner assessment tools already in place.

These elements combine a baseline mapping of the situation in local and host communities, based on a mix of both objective and subjective indicators, making it possible to assess whether returnees or other displaced groups are faring better, worse, or are on par with local standards. This type of approach ensures continuity and coordination between humanitarian and development actors, the Afghan government, and international actors. It also makes possible the implementation of solutions that are evidence-based and adapted to the locality context, reducing the risk that interventions transplanted from elsewhere may not suit returnees in Afghanistan. It can also be used as a monitoring tool that will help organizations assess whether their programs are having any impact on reintegration after return.

V. Conclusions and the Road Ahead

When migration and return are so widespread as to be experienced by one in four citizens of a country, as in Afghanistan, proper assessment of return and sustainable reintegration are essential for policy and program planning. If not managed in a sustainable and people-centered way, returns can lead to greater disorder and insecurity at both individual and collective levels.[78]

Three facts have made successful return and reintegration interventions in Afghanistan particularly challenging:

First, Afghanistan is marked by unprecedented levels of forced returns and deportations from a number of countries and of all types of migrants, including particularly vulnerable groups, such as families and children. This is occurring alongside record levels of civilian casualties and attacks in the country in 2017—the highest since 2009.[79] As a result, there is little incentive for those returned to Afghanistan to remain there.

If not managed in a sustainable and people-centered way, returns can lead to greater disorder and insecurity at both individual and collective levels.

Second, a unidirectional view of return is ill-suited to the reality of returns to Afghanistan, and policies based on it can put the population in harm's way. Afghans have historically relied on mobility as a coping strategy in times of instability. As violence and poor economic conditions persist, a migration-return-remigration cycle remains common, rendering return programs ineffective in accomplishing their stated aims of facilitating long-term integration and reducing further emigration.

Third, return and reintegration programs suffer from a lack of monitoring and insufficient dialogue between key stakeholders. Improved coordination is needed to set standards of return and

78 Majidi and Hart, "Return and Reintegration to Afghanistan"; National Unity Government of Afghanistan, "Policy Framework for Returnees and IDPs."
79 UNAMA, *Afghanistan Midyear Report 2016*, 1.

reintegration, to harmonize prereturn practices, to allow for monitoring postreturn, and to ensure returns are conducted transparently and in accordance with returnees' rights. This dialogue will need to include returnees themselves, representatives of the Afghan government, and civil-society actors. It will also be important to foster an understanding of monitoring as a responsibility of all governments involved.

Unsuccessful returns that leave migrants with few options except to migrate again are in no one's interest. The following recommendations offer steps governments can take to interrupt the migration-return-remigration cycle in a way that also supports the long-term wellbeing of the migrants returned.

A. Put People at the Center of Return Programs

Globally, much has gone into finding ways to reconceptualize return and reintegration programs. The IOM, for example, is setting up a Global Reintegration Working Group to take stock of standards and practices in the field of voluntary returns. In the Horn of Africa, IOM is working on a new reintegration strategy and the European Union has developed a Trust Fund for Africa, which includes projects covering returns and reintegration that are notable in their integration of a protection perspective.

In Afghanistan, UNHCR, the Durable Solutions Working Group chaired by the government of Afghanistan, and Samuel Hall are leading the effort to develop the Multi-Dimensional Integration Index (MDI) described in Section IV.C., with the goal of making it replicable and transferrable to other contexts. This is the first initiative in Afghanistan, after 15 years of returns, to establish a standard tool to assess the reintegration of returning migrants and refugees, including those who have never lived in Afghanistan or whose homes have been devastated by conflict.

A framework to track the protection needs of returnees and to create links between protection and long-term resilience would also be valuable. Such a framework would assess people's protection needs upon return and track their progress over time, effectively putting people back at the center of future decisions about return assistance.

Common to all these programs—and key to the most successful ones—are initiatives that recognize the diversity of individuals' needs, focusing on the specific situations of men, women, children, and youth.

B. Have an Open and Continuous Dialogue on Returns

Stopping the culture of secrecy that currently surrounds returns is essential to improving reintegration. Neither the government of Iran nor those in Europe share full information on return plans with Afghan authorities. More dialogue between stakeholders is needed to provide the level of predeparture counseling and orientation that has proven effective, and to support a more holistic postreturn reintegration process. Transparency is needed if government agencies, researchers, social workers, and counselors are to consistently identify and serve returnee populations. In addition, the creation of common standards and support packages would smooth bilateral negotiations and ensure that the impact of state funding for returns can be measured—including in terms of factors that lead to remigration.

Predeparture counseling and orientation, for example, has been shown to lead to more coordinated returns and, in many cases, to better reintegration outcomes. But such efforts have long been controversial. While seen by some states as a pull factor, this has not been borne out by the evidence as Afghan migrants must themselves spend between U.S. $5,000 and U.S. $20,000 to reach Europe. Beyond the individual level, predeparture planning is also necessary for organizations that implement returns and provide reintegration support. At the moment, such opportunities are limited. Individual skills

assessments, updated labor-market assessments, and baseline mapping of areas of return would make it possible for organizations such as IOM to undertake more meaningful reintegration interventions.

C. End Forced Returns to Countries in Conflict and Open Legal Pathways for Migration

Currently, Afghans are spending considerable funds to migrate and remigrate, often relying on smugglers and other irregular means of travel that nurture an informal and unregulated economy that puts migrants at great risk. Amid instability and limited economic opportunity, migration remains a key safety valve for Afghans. Where there is no legal way out and no sustainable way back in, other options deserve careful consideration.

Since 2002, very little has been done to create legal pathways for Afghans to find safety and opportunity through migration, whether through labor migration corridors or humanitarian visas. Tripartite meetings are being held between the governments of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan to ensure that the status of Afghan migrants can be secured in first-asylum countries,[80] allowing access to basic services. But more needs to be done given the number of unregistered Afghans living in both countries.

Where there is no legal way out and no sustainable way back in, other options deserve careful consideration.

Some efforts to facilitate legal migration have emerged. The National Labor Migration Strategy, launched by the Afghan government in December 2016, aims to facilitate regular and "well-governed" migration as a legal alternative.[81] But to prevent migrants from facing harmful situations while on the move or at destination, the strategy will need to ensure ethical recruitment and migration procedures are established. For European governments, efforts to slow unauthorized arrivals should consider the benefits of opening legal pathways for some Afghans to provide concrete alternatives to unsafe migration.

Taken together, these strategies hold the potential to ensure that migration can occur in a managed way that safeguards the wellbeing of those traveling in search of protection and stability, while also supporting the long-term and comprehensive reintegration of those who choose to return to Afghanistan. Evidence from Afghanistan suggests that forced returns negatively impact the wellbeing of migrants and do not achieve the intended policy outcomes, with remigration being the main response. Particularly for those who do not choose to return, those who are under-age, or where monitoring is not feasible, policymakers should consider whether returns are the appropriate avenue to achieve their policy objectives.

80 Elizabeth Collett, Paul Clewett, and Susan Fratzke, *No Way Out? Making Additional Migration Channels Work for Refugees* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2016), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/no-way-out-making-additional-migration-channels-work-refugees.

81 Presentation by Khair Mohammed Niru, Director General to the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs, and Disabled, *Presentation on the National Labor Migration Strategy*, Kabul, December 13, 2016.

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The Migration Policy Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic and thoughtful responses to the challenges and opportunities that large-scale migration, whether voluntary or forced, presents to communities and institutions in an increasingly integrated world.

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