Migration from Afghanistan under the Taliban
Implications and strategies in the neighbourhood and Europe

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Foreword

In 2021, the drivers of outward migration from Afghanistan have been manifold: Fierce fighting between Taliban insurgents and security forces of the Islamic Republic, a devastating drought, economic dispair and poverty, and the collapse of private and public sector employment in the wake of the government's implosion in August.

In the weeks before the Taliban takeover, tens of thousands crossed Afghanistan's borders every week, in October, experts estimated that as many as 12,000 people left the country per day. Many more are determined to leave Afghanistan behind, despite worsening weather conditions and dangerous passages. Should the economic crisis continue or even worsen, there is little to no reason to believe that migration will slow down any time soon.

This report analyzes the ramifications of this development for Afghanistan's neighborhood and Europe, by evaluating existing patterns of cooperation between the EU and key transit and destination states (Iran, Pakistan, Turkey) as well as unilateral and bilateral efforts to stem the migration challenge. As many times before, Afghanistan's neighbours are likely to carry the largest burden of this new crisis – many of them having already declared that their capacity has reached a limit or facing tremendous pressure by an increasingly hostile public. Moreover, recent dynamics in Afghan displacement have raised concerns in European capitals over a repeat of the 2015 "migration crisis", a scenario that policy makers had pledged to prevent repeatedly in the past years. Hence, unilateral, bilateral and multilateral conflict mitigation and migration management with regards to Afghanistan will remain on top of the agenda in the European Union's and their member states' relations with Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, but – as the recent crisis with Belarus has shown – also closer neighbors.

FES is grateful to the authors of this report— Dr. Karolína Augustová and Hameed Hakimi. In a truly unique approach, they follow the footsteps of Afghan migrants from their homeland to the EU, connecting research and policy discussions on migration in Afghanistan's immediate neighborhood with indepth understanding of the situation in Turkey and Southeastern and Eastern Europe. A thread throughout the report is the observation that while the EU appears to have stepped up engagement and policy activism on nearly every step of the migratory route, patterns of "externalization" especially in tandem with securitization and militarization of migration management raise questions about the efficiency and implications for human security of vulnerable persons.

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Executive Summary

The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the government which was propped up by the US-led Western intervention, coincided with the Taliban's advances across the country in the summer of 2021. The Taliban's return to power, exacerbated by the complete military withdrawal of American and NATO troops from Afghanistan between May and August 2021, has profound consequences for Afghans. A humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding, with millions of ordinary Afghans facing the risks of starvation during the harsh winter months. For all the possible implications of this exceptionally difficult situation in Afghanistan, what is not contested are the unprecedented displacements and outward migrations accelerated by multiple crises.

Since the 1970s, most Afghan refugees[1] have continued to reside in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. However, demographic, economic, political, and societal shifts in these countries mean that further large-scale settlement of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran is improbable. In particular, both neighbours have invested in physical, technological, legal, and security barriers against a possible influx of Afghan refugees into their borders and cities during the past decade.[2] Hostile migration management systems coupled with negative societal and economic environments have confronted Afghans seeking to enter Iran and Pakistan. Increasingly, for Afghans, the formerly welcoming neighbours have become transit countries, particularly Iran.

Similarly, states in Afghanistan's wider neighbourhood have enforced more restricted migration and border policies. Turkey has shifted towards mass deportations and *push-backs* of Afghans, preventing them from seeking protection within its borders. In addition, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia have been absorbing unofficial and violent management of the EU's frontier when receiving large numbers of pushed back refugees - people who were denied asylum procedures and often physically abused by EU state authorities, namely in Croatia and Hungary. These rigid border policies alongside the EU's border closures are officially justified as enforcement to "fight human smugglers" and "save refugees' lives". However, paradoxically, these measures deepen refugees' reliance on smugglers and push them towards more dangerous cross-border movement.

In the shadows of rising right-wing populism and xenophobia coupled with the multiple crises in public health, economic and political spheres deteriorated by COVID-19 across Europe, there have been calls for "robust responses" to Afghan refugees (France), "closing gateways" to the EU (Greece) and "building deportation centres in the region neighbouring Afghanistan" (Austria)[3]. To prevent any wide-scale migratory movement to Europe, President of the European Council Charles Michel suggested that "cooperation with countries in the region will be key in supporting the safety and proper living conditions of Afghans fleeing their country."[4] These comments and the newly proposed Action Plan by the Council of the EU suggest that the management of Afghan migration, besides targeting the root causes of migration in Afghanistan, is about to be further outsourced to states, such as Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and the countries situated in South-Eastern Europe.[5] However, these states already bear a significant share of

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[1] In reference to Afghans, throughout this report, we use the term "refugee" to refer to any Afghan who is seeking – or have sought – asylum and protection outside Afghanistan, and who may or may not have been granted protection/asylum. We are aware of the different legal definitions of such terms as "refugee", "migrant" and "asylum seeker", but have opted to utilise "refugee" to underline the violence, insecurities and persecution that force Afghans to leave their country.

[2] For instance, Pakistan began fencing its international boundary with Afghanistan along the Durand Line in 2017.

[3] Bennhold, K. & Erlanger, S. (2021). 'Why Europe's leaders say they won't welcome more Afghan refugees'. The New York Times, 18 August 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/world/europe/afghanistan-refugees-europe-migration-asylum.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pg-type=Article

[4] Official Twitter account of Charles Michel, tweet posted on 24 August 2021, https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1430220686174347275

[5] Council of the European Union (2021). 'Draft Action Plan Responding the Events in Afghanistan', https://www.statewatch.org/media/2726/eu-council-afghanistan-com-draft-action-plan-migration-10472-1-21-rev1.pdf

responsibility to host Afghan refugees and other people on the move stranded in their territories since the 2015 "humanitarian and border crisis".

Drawing on existing research and the authors' extensive expertise and networks, this report focuses on the most recent developments in Afghanistan contributing to outward migration. Several questions define the remit of the paper: first, is there a regional solution for the rise in migration from Afghanistan after the Taliban's return to power? What policy options are available for the EU which would not deepen Afghans' existing multiple humanitarian crises? How can policymakers learn lessons from the ineffectiveness of measures within the EU and transit countries' borders adopted since 2015? How can EU policy interventions ensure the principles of "do no harm" to the refugees and prevent the instrumentalization of migration by states for political aims? How can we make sense of the realities on the ground when the intersecting challenges of a lack of information (as the media landscape shrinks in reaction to the Taliban's return to power) and disinformation (because of contradictory narratives promoted on social media) blur our view? And finally, how can practical policies be formulated in responding to the Afghan migration while aiming for sustainable solutions?

To critically explore these issues, the report begins by setting out the current context and the background to conditions in Afghanistan, focusing on mobility, displacements and the humanitarian aspects of Afghan journeys. We examine the dynamics of a Taliban-led Afghan regime confronting multiple challenges. The report considers the possible policy landscape on Afghanistan in its close neighbourhood, Iran and Pakistan and the willingness of these neighbours to host more Afghan refugees. We also scrutinize EU policies and approaches, including, among others, an analysis of the post-2015 international migration cooperation, officially run by the EU's external border efforts, though dictated by the local context of each transit and destination state. To do so, we use the case studies of Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina that have been the EU's key external partners in (Afghan) migration responses. By doing so, the report considers official unilateral and bilateral agreements and unofficial - often violent - migration management measures on the ground. The report concludes by setting out recommendations primarily targeted at EU policymakers on ways forward for policy options in response to outward migration from Afghanistan. Crucially, the report aims to situate policy options that can be sustainable and within a framework of international cooperation that avoids extraordinary and harmful fixes.

Afghanistan: context and background

Since 1979, Afghanistan has been one of the top source countries for the global refugee population and has experienced at least four large-scale waves of outward migration triggered by regime change and associated violence: 1979, 1992, 2001, and 2021.

As a landlocked country, Afghanistan is situated at the periphery of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia. Two of its immediate neighbours, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, are also landlocked.[6] The contemporary understanding of mobility originating from Afghanistan is mainly perceived in the context of refugees and forced migration. However, migratory movements within and from these regions have been a fact of ordinary lives, dictated at times by climate conditions, people-to-people relations, trade and religious rituals, but also by political upheavals and wars. Recent analysis has referred to this historical phenomenon as the longue durée of people-to-people connections and movement across Eurasia[7] and the *Islamicate*[8] - including today's Afghanistan.[9] Arguably, the notion of borders in these regions has always been understood in relation to their porous nature; upheavals and conflicts have often reinforced this porosity as populations have moved within the region seeking safety or better livelihoods. Missing the historical picture while trying to make sense of the contemporary context of Afghans' outward migration impedes efforts to think about policy solutions. It also misrepresents outward migration in the language of crisis, or crises, whereas the phenomenon is not necessarily viewed as such in Afghanistan.

Out of the nearly 420,000 first time asylum applicants in the EU in 2020, Afghans constituted the second-highest number (after Syrians) at just over 44,000 applicants - nearly 11 per cent of the total number.[10]

However, these figures predate the currently unfolding set of multiple crises in Afghanistan, culminating with the Taliban's return to power on 15 August 2021. Recent data on monthly asylum applications in the EU indicates that Afghans constituted the largest group of first-time applicants for asylum in September 2021, overtaking Syrians.[11] Given the situation in Afghanistan, it is highly likely that applications for asylum in the EU by Afghans will continue to remain high.

Despite a relative spike in the number of Afghan applicants for asylum in the EU, Afghanistan's neighbours – Iran and Pakistan - have hosted millions of Afghan refugees for decades. It is important to underline that the high numbers in both countries problematize the notion of a "refugee crisis" or "migration crisis" in the EU. There is a need to ascertain whether the "crisis" occurred within the European system (e.g., migration is a political and bureaucratic crisis for Europe) and whose "crisis" are we truthfully underlining (e.g., migrants vs Europeans). Asking such fundamental questions would help formulate innovative responses and avoid any repetitive thinking that has not yielded results.

Projections by the United Nations of a potential mass outward migration also predate the circumstances and events associated with the return of the Taliban to the Presidential Palace in Kabul, the seat of power in Afghanistan. The harrowing images of Afghan youth desperately clinging on to departing American military planes from Kabul airport would undoubtedly continue to haunt many worldwide. It also inevitably raises the question of whether Afghans are at a new crisis-driven phase of outward migratory mobility and internal displacements.

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[6] Uzbekistan is a 'double' landlocked country, one of the two such countries in the world. The second double-landlocked country is Liechtenstein.

[7] Quie, M. and Hakimi, H (2020) 'The EU and the Politics of Migration Management in Afghanistan', Research Paper, Chatham House https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/eu-and-politics-migration-management-afghanistan

[8] The term Islamicate refers to the cultures shaped and influenced jointly by Muslim and non-Muslim peoples in the regions stretching between the Nile and the Oxus.

[9] Hodgson, M. (1970) 'The role of Islam in world history', International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 1, 91–123.

[10] Asylum statistics (2021), Eurostat https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum_statistics#Citizenship_of_first-time_applicants:_largest_numbers_from_Syria.2C_Afghanistan_and_Venezuela

[11] European Asylum Support Office (2021) 'Latest asylum trends – September 2021', https://easo.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends

Like Afghanistan today, the war in Syria, and the subsequent exodus of millions of Syrians over the past decade, was also painfully captured in the death-by-drowning of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi in September 2015. The image of his lifeless body lying dead, face down, on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in Turkey stirred global reaction. It was argued that this was the watershed moment for the global conscience to wake up to the unfolding tragedy in Syria.[12] Donations, especially from ordinary citizens in the Western world, shot up noticeably in the same month in support of humanitarian campaigns to help Syrian refugees.

A similar global reaction to the images of US-led evacuations from Kabul airport was evident in the outcry across the world, as Taliban fighters captured the capital city. However, the horrific scenes at Kabul airport in August represented only the tip of the iceberg compared to the overall picture of Afghans' internal displacement and outward migration. In many ways, the story of Afghan refugees is as old as the conflict in Afghanistan. The millions of migratory journeys by Afghan refugees often take place by foot, through treacherous routes with no certainty about safe destinations. Can the momentum of humanitarian solidarity for Afghan refugees go beyond the frenzy of evacuations?

As the Taliban tighten their grip on Afghanistan, the international media spotlight has moved on to other issues and places in the world. Most of the formerly vibrant domestic media landscape has collapsed. Access to information, data collection and substantiating evidence generated by the few remaining humanitarian actors (such as the United Nations agencies) in Afghanistan present a significant challenge for analysts and policy decision-makers.

Nonetheless, shortly before the collapse of Kabul to the Taliban, officials at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) suggested that at least 1.5 million Afghans were likely to flee Afghanistan by the end of 2021.[13] An absolute majority of this number was expected to represent Afghans fleeing westward into Iran. While it is inconceivable that most of those Afghans who flee into Iran would want to enter Europe, some certainly do take that tumultuous route via Turkey.

Between January 2021 and September 2021, at least 677,000 Afghans were displaced internally due to the conflict and related violence, figures by the United Nations indicate.[14] Children under the age of 18 represent nearly 60 per cent of this number. Separately, in July this year, UNHCR warned that the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan had reached over 3.5 million people.[15]

Some reports suggested that at least 120,000 people moved to Kabul for safety to live with relatives and communities in recent months.[16] For those with no family or community support, the few remaining public parks in Kabul provided sanctuary. Brutal conditions confront the IDPs as children and women struggle to access shelter and healthcare.

> **Can the momentum of humanitarian solidarity for Afghan refugees go beyond the frenzy of evacuations?**

[12] For example, see: Slovic, P., et al (2017) 'Iconic photographs and the ebb and flow of empathic response to humanitarian disasters, Inaugural Article, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA (PNAS)', DOI: https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/114/4/640.full.pdf

[13] Bezhan, F. (2021) "We Don't Have A Choice': Thousands Of Afghans Fleeing Abroad Daily As Taliban Violence Soars', Gandhara – RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-refugees-taliban-violence/31378092.html

[14] UN-OCHA, 'Afghanistan: Conflict Induced Displacements between 1 January and 13 September 2021', https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/idps

[15] UNHCR (2021) 'UNHCR warns of imminent humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan', 13 July 2021, https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2021/7/60ed-3ba34/unhcr-warns-imminent-humanitarian-crisis-afghanistan.html

[16] Hakimi, H. (2021) 'Taliban must transform from an insurgency to govern', Expert Comment – Chatham House, 17 August 2021, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/08/taliban-must-transform-insurgency-govern

Taliban return to government

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Western-supported state in Afghanistan, collapsed on 15 August this year after former President Ashraf Ghani left the country with close aides, and the Taliban captured Kabul on the same day. Initial slim optimism for some kind of political inclusivity under the Taliban rule was crushed swiftly. The Taliban returned as victors, the former republic's structures and personnel disappeared overnight, and any international leverage – or engagement – to ensure an inclusive new government did not materialize. On 7 September, the Taliban reinstated their "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" by announcing a new interim cabinet that rewarded key posts to hardliners. Mullah Hassan Akhund heads the Taliban leadership-governing council, *Riyaasatul-Wuzaraa*, granting him de facto prime ministerial powers.[17] He is aided by two deputies – Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Maulawi Abdul Salam Hanafi – who were earlier based in the Taliban's Doha office. The acting interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is a leader of the much-feared Haqqani Network and has been on the FBI's most-wanted list for years. The Taliban regime has appointed no women to any positions in the government.

There are clear signs that the Taliban struggle to transform from an insurgency to a government. Reports of disagreements in Kabul surfaced in September: a reported brawl in the presidential palace between loyalists to the Haqqani Network and those who support the Taliban's political figures such as Baradar.[18] Amidst all these developments, while it is helpful to monitor media headlines on Taliban attitudes, it is imperative for policymakers in Europe to look at more tangible challenges in Afghanistan. We argue that the Taliban regime faces three distinct challenges immediately, which have severe consequences for international actors such as the EU. They are discussed as follows.

Filling multiple voids: economy, governance, security

The Taliban regime, if it succeeds to become fully functional, replaces the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which relied on foreign aid for up to 75 per cent of its spending. The collapse of the former government has created political, security and economic voids, which the Taliban have yet to fill.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the new Afghan government emerged as the country's biggest employer. In addition to the civilian sector, the government was also providing jobs for hundreds of thousands of security forces. Establishing the exact numbers is difficult, but "estimates put the number of government school teachers at approximately 220,000, and approximately 450,000 people worked directly as government employees across different departments, with more than 20 per cent women".[19] In a recent BBC interview, former Afghan finance minister, Omar Zakhilwal, said that the government employed over 1.5 million people directly and indirectly.[20] Arguably, up to 10 million Afghans relied on the state for their livelihood.[21]

As the Taliban regime remains unrecognized by the international community, the United States govermnent has barred the Taliban from accessing Afghanistan's Central Bank (DAB) assets – which include reserves of over US$ 9 billion – held in the US.[22] As a result, banks

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[17] BBC (2021) 'Hardliners get key posts in new Taliban government', 7 September 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58479750

[18] BBC (2021) 'Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say', 15 September 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58560923

[19] Hakimi 2021

[20] BBC Pashto (2021) Interview with former minister and politician, Omar Zakhilwal [Pashto language], BBC Pashto Facebook page, 22 October 2021, https://www.facebook.com/bbcnewspashto/videos/4355267697920764

[21] In most cases in Afghanistan, a single salaried family member supports immediate and extended families.

[22] UNDP Afghanistan (2021) 'Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan after August 15: A Rapid Appraisal', 09 September 2021

> **The collapse of the former government has created political, security and economic voids, which the Taliban have yet to fill.**

have been forced to severely restrict services to customers, and there is an economic meltdown as government-led commercial activity has almost entirely halted. While the donors reconsider engagement with the Taliban, the World Bank has terminated financial support and financial aid on behalf of donor countries.[23] Between August and the end of November 2021, *Afghani*, the national currency, fell nearly 20 per cent against the dollar, contributing to higher inflation and a considerable increase in prices of essential food items.[24]

In recent years, Afghanistan has occupied an unenviable place among the world's most dangerous and least secure countries, home to the world's deadliest conflicts. A spate of horrific attacks in the past year alone, among others, targeted a school in Kabul (May 2021), killing more than 60, primarily girls; Kabul University (November 2020) killing more than 35 primarily students of social sciences; an Afghan maternity ward (May 2020) run by *Médecins Sans Frontières* killing 24 women, children and new-born babies. Reports by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) on the figures for civilian casualties point to palpable levels of violence in recent

years, covering the country beyond the capital, Kabul.[25] In December 2020, the International Crisis Group ranked the war in Afghanistan as the number one "conflict to watch" in 2021.[26]

With the Taliban at the helm of power, violence associated with their insurgency has largely ceased. However, reports of extrajudicial and revenge killings by Taliban fighters have been widely circulating on social media and reported by mainstream outlets. The Taliban continue to struggle with forming a fully-fledged functioning state, hence failing to deliver the most minimum functionality of governance so far. Taliban fighters who are now expected to police the streets of the cities are lamenting the loss of opportunity to pursue fighting a Jihad and die in suicide bombings.[27]

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K), the regional affiliate of the Islamic State group and a staunch Taliban opponent, has carried out several gruesome attacks since August. Nearly 350 civilians were killed in these attacks between late August and late October.[28] The attacks have targeted minority Shia Muslims and ethnic Hazara Shia communities. Despite some suggestions of cooperation and collaboration among IS-K and Taliban elements, the IS-K consider the Taliban to have abandoned the true cause of Jihad, especially after the latter's agreement with the United States.[29] The violence undermines the Taliban's claim of absolute control over Afghanistan and erodes confidence in their ability to ensure peace – even if that means only the absence of violence. The trajectory of violent attacks by the IS-K indicates that they are capable of undermining the Taliban regime, especially if views that the former is allegedly supported by external intelligence agencies are substantiated.[30] Senior Pentagon officials

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23 Ibid

24 Market Insider, 'US-Dollar – Afghani', https://markets.businessinsider.com/currencies/usd-afn [accessed 30 November 2021]

25 UNAMA figures indicate a steady rise in civilian casualties since 2009; for example, see this midyear update: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2021_26_july.pdf

26 International Crisis Group, '10 Conflicts to Watch in 2021', December 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2021

27 George, S. (2021) 'After 20 years of waging religious guerrilla warfare, Taliban fighters in Kabul say they miss the battle', The Washington Post, 19 September 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/19/afghanistan-taliban-fighters/

28 Sky News (2021) 'Afghanistan: Flurry of Islamic State Khorasan attacks could be sign of group's growing strength', Sky News Data and Forensic Unit, 29 October 2021, https://news.sky.com/story/is-islamic-state-on-the-rise-in-afghanistan-12444945

29 Gardner, F. (2021) 'Afghanistan: Who are Islamic State Khorasan Province militants?', BBC News, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58333533

assess that IS-K could potentially carry out attacks in the United States within six months and that the Taliban's capacity to contain the threat is unknown so far.[31]

Among other factors, loss of optimism about the country's future is a crucial driver of outward migrations. Recent evidence-based research,[32] utilizing high-resolution satellite imagery, argued that shortly before the Taliban took over Kabul, nearly 450 vehicles – carrying up to 10,000 people – were leaving Zaranj city in Nimroz province every day destined for Iran.[33] This number has reportedly increased "exponentially"[34] after the Taliban's return to power has caused fear, particularly among the former government's security forces.

Even before the Taliban captured Kabul, formal border crossings between Pakistan and Afghanistan remained restricted to only those who held the required documentation, typically a passport and visa. A similar situation prevailed on Iran's formal border crossings with Afghanistan, although returns to Afghanistan by Afghans were largely possible. Journeys toward Iran via Nimroz have continued through the porous informal crossing points.

An unfolding humanitarian catastrophe

The World Food Programme (WFP) delivered the starkest warning so far of the harsh months ahead for Afghan civilians. Over half the population, nearly 23 million people, are likely to face "acute food insecurity from November [2021]."[35] Of this total figure, 3.2 million are children, with 1 million children facing the risk of "dying from severe acute malnutrition without immediate life-saving treatment".[36]

The WFP report states that "the combined impacts of drought, conflict, COVID-19 and the economic crisis, have severely affected lives, livelihoods, and people's access to food."[37] For the first time, hunger in urban areas is experienced similar to the rural parts of the country. In late October, WFP's country director for Afghanistan, Mary Ellen McGroarty, said there was "a tsunami of destitution, incredible suffering and hunger spiralling out of control across Afghanistan, pushing millions [of Afghans] in every corner of the country to the brink of survival."[38]

Loss of donor support for the government also translates into a substantial fall in cross-border trade with Afghanistan's neighbours, in turn leading to diminished tax revenues on imports and exports.

In September, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Afghanistan argued that a "10-13 per cent reduction in GDP could, in the worst-case scenario, bring Afghanistan to the precipice of near-universal poverty – a 97 per cent poverty rate by mid-2022."[39] Alarmingly, in late October, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that Afghanistan's economy "will contract by 30 per cent"[40] in 2021, which will push

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[30] For example, see: Kazmin, A. (2021) 'Isis-K insurgency jeopardises Taliban's grip on Afghanistan', Financial Times, 26 October 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/a6cb70ba-dabd-4734-940a-63f4172c291f

[31] The Guardian (2021) 'Islamic State in Afghanistan could have capacity to strike US next year', 26 October 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/26/islamic-state-afghanistan-capacity-strike-us-next-year-al-qaida

[32] Mansfield, D., (2021) 'People smuggling is booming in Afghanistan', Alcis, https://www.alcis.org/post/people-smuggling-is-booming-in-afghanistan

[33] Bezhan (2021)

[34] Mansfield (2021)

[35] World Food Programme (2021) 'Half of Afghanistan's population face acute hunger as humanitarian needs grow to record levels', 25 October 2021

[36] Ibid

[37] Ibid

[38] Official Twitter account of UN Geneva, tweet posted on 26 October 2021, https://twitter.com/UNGeneva/status/1453027389282398210

[39] UNDP (2021) 'Economic Instability and Uncertainty in Afghanistan after August 15', UNDP Afghanistan, 09 September 2021

[40] BBC News (2021) 'IMF warns Afghanistan's economic slump will impact neighbours', 20 October 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-58950560

millions into poverty and lead to a considerable spike in outward migration.

These ominous projections affirm that a humanitarian crisis is underway. Neither the Taliban nor the donors have the luxury of time to avert a humanitarian disaster; the catastrophe is already unfolding for most of the population in Afghanistan.

International non-recognition

Many countries – including all Western and major donor nations – have vacated their diplomatic missions in Afghanistan. Some diplomatic staff have been relocated to regional countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Other countries such as Pakistan, Iran, China, Turkey, and Russia maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul but have not yet formally recognized the Taliban regime.

Taliban efforts to reach out and seemingly reassure nervous neighbours – and an anxious region - have not yielded results, keeping the regime firmly in international isolation.[41] Nonetheless, the Taliban have hosted high-level delegations from Qatar, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and – among others – representatives of Western countries such as the United Kingdom. In late August, amidst frantic evacuations from Kabul airport, it was reported that CIA Director, William Burns, visited Kabul to meet with senior Taliban leaders, including Mullah Baradar.[42]

> These ominous projections affirm that a humanitarian crisis is underway. Neither the Taliban nor the donors have the luxury of time to avert a humanitarian disaster; the catastrophe is already unfolding for most of the population in Afghanistan.

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[41] Taliban's acting deputy prime minister, Mullah Baradar, met with China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, in Qatar in late October. Further meetings in Doha again in November with Western diplomats have not produced a clear roadmap for engagement with the Taliban.

[42] Hudson, J., (2021) 'CIA Director William Burns held secret meeting in Kabul with Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar', The Washington Post, 24 August 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/burns-afghanistan-baradar-biden/2021/08/24/c96bee5c-04ba-11ec-ba15-9c4f59a60478_story.html

Complicated neighbours: Iran and Pakistan

Pakistan and Iran remain host to the largest number of Afghan refugees in the world, some of whom have never lived in Afghanistan. Their parents or grandparents left Afghanistan during the past 42 years of conflict. By contrast, historically, Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - have not hosted any significant numbers of Afghans fleeing conflict in the past decades. This is highly unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

Pakistan hosts nearly 1.45 million registered Afghan refugees as of August 2021.[43] Unverified figures, presented by the Pakistani authorities and media, maintain that at least 770,000 undocumented Afghans live in the country as well.[44] Iran, meanwhile, hosts 780,000 registered Afghan refugees.[45] UNHCR data suggests 2.25 million undocumented Afghans are residing in the country. Additionally, Afghan passport holders (including those with student visas) in Iran number at least 586,000; ostensibly, this group can reside in Iran depending on the duration of the visas granted to them. Overall, these figures represent an extraordinary legacy and dwarf the numbers of Afghans who have sought safety in Europe. Recent estimates indicate that the total number of Afghans in Europe is approximately 500,000.[46]

As part of its focus on tackling the root causes of migration from Afghanistan, the EU has supported regional migration management initiatives, including with Pakistan and Iran, in recent years. Inspired by the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) was established in 2019 by Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan with a shared objective to support host countries "to build a protective environment for refugees" that "alleviates pressure on local systems and strengthens refugees' eventual prospects for return and reintegration at home".[47]

The Taliban regime is not yet part of the SSAR, while it remains internationally unrecognized. The EU and regional partnership structure built into the SSAR platform is in jeopardy as Afghanistan's de facto government is an unrecognized regime.

With the collapse of the republic in Afghanistan, it has been argued that Pakistan may be the real winner of America's longest war due to its long-term support for the Taliban.[48] Imran Khan, Pakistan's Prime Minister, was the first world leader who publicly expressed admiration for the Taliban's return to power, saying they were "breaking the chains of slavery".[49] A Gallup Pakistan opinion poll on 14 September 2021 found that "55 per cent of the Pakistanis are happy with the Taliban rule in Afghanistan; support found to be the highest in KP [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province neighbouring Afghanistan] among males, urban areas, and older people."[50]

The chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan, coupled with domestic resentment in Pakistan toward the US policies of "war on terror", has given credibility to the

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[43] UNHCR's Operational Data Portal, 'Overview of Pakistan Operations: Registered Afghan Refugees in Pakistan', https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/pak

[44] Rana, S. (2021) 'Hosting 700k Afghans will cost $2.2 b for 3 years', The Express Tribune, 18 July 2021, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2311234/hosting-700k-afghans-will-cost-22-b-for-3-years

[45] UNHCR - Iran (2021) 'Refugees in Iran', https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/

[46] Cordaid (2021) 'Diaspora Engagement in Afghanistan', Policy Paper, April 2021, https://www.cordaid.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2021/04/210330-Policy-Brief-Diaspora-Sustainable-Development-Afghanistan.pdf

[47] SSAR Support Platform (2021), https://ssar-platform.org/support-platform/

[48] For example, see: Lake, E., (2021) 'How Pakistan Won the War in Afghanistan', Bloomberg Opinion, 09 September 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-09-09/america-s-longest-war-how-pakistan-won-in-afghanistan?sref=gAQr8Hwd

[49] Muzaffar, M., (2021) 'Taliban have broken 'the shackles of slavery,' says Pakistan PM Imran Khan', INDEPENDENT, 17 August 2021, https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/taliban-pakistan-imran-khan-afghanistan-b1903821.html

[50] Gallup Pakistan (2021) Daily Polls, https://gallup.com.pk/post/32195

position taken by Khan.[51] Others have argued that a Taliban return to power and the reinstatement of their Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan mark the moment of "buyer's remorse" for Pakistan.[52] Pakistan long hoped for attracting extensive Western foreign direct investment to resuscitate the country's ailing economy. However, an internationally isolated Taliban Emirate at the doorstep of Pakistan with rising concerns over IS-K is not conducive for an investment-friendly environment.

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> Meanwhile, domestic economic troubles and widespread anti-immigrant attitudes in Iranian society are major hurdles for the Iranian government to allow more Afghan refugees into the country.
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As for Pakistan-Taliban relations, critics argue that Pakistani influence over the Taliban was exaggerated and that Pakistan's security establishment did not necessarily support an exclusive grip of the Taliban to power in Kabul.[53] Despite Pakistan's amicable relations with and lobbying for the Taliban, it is doubtful whether a formal recognition of the regime in Kabul is imminent.

Shortly before the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Pakistani officials touted the idea of hosting up to 700,000 new Afghan refugees for a cost of US$ 2.2 billion for three years; seemingly Islamabad favoured that funding would be secured under an international appeal through a trilateral agreement between Afghanistan, Pakistan and UNHCR. However, the policy was deferred after a meeting on the matter with UN agencies that did not secure a commitment for the provision of sustainable funds. If pursued, under the proposals, this new group of Afghan arrivals would be categorized as "externally displaced Afghans (EDAs)" instead of refugees.[54] In late August, Pakistan's national security adviser, Moeed Yusuf, emphasized his government's position on a potentially new wave of migrations from Afghanistan.[55] He said:

> "Even if there is going to be a refugee issue, the international community should work together to create internal secure zones in Afghanistan, so that the Afghans do not have to leave the country until the situation stabilizes… We need an international plan immediately. Pakistan will support wherever we can, but please do not see us as the only country that somehow has to do this… We do not have the capacity. Our people cannot deal with this. We can barely deal with our own education and hospital requirements. We are willing to support, but the world has to take this responsibility." [56]

Iran's position, similar to that of Pakistan's, has not shifted in favour of formal recognition of the Taliban regime. Tehran emphasizes its security concerns emanating from the IS-K threats in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, domestic economic troubles and widespread anti-immigrant attitudes in Iranian society are major hurdles for the Iranian government to allow more Afghan refugees into the country.

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[51] Findlay, S., (2021) "A win for Pakistan': Imran Khan gambles on Taliban ties', FINANCIAL TIMES, 30 September 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/257853d9-acb6-432b-92d4-a1b45335a388

[52] Weinstein, A. (2021) 'Get the Generals out of Pakistani-U.S. Relations', Foreign Policy, 30 September 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/30/pakistan-us-afghanistan-relations-withdrawal/

[53] For example, see this analysis published days before Taliban takeover of Kabul: Gannon, K., (2021) 'Some Afghans blame neighbouring Pakistan for Taliban gains', AP, 12 August 2021, https://apnews.com/article/religion-pakistan-taliban-b6308923395cd6942b698a748728d11d

[54] Rana, S. (2021) 'Hosting 700k Afghans will cost $2.2 b for 3 years', The Express Tribune, 18 July 2021, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2311234/hosting-700k-afghans-will-cost-22-b-for-3-years

[55] Policy Exchange (2021) 'Keynote Address by Dr Moeed W. Yusuf', 26 August 2021, https://policyexchange.org.uk/pxevents/keynote-address-by-dr-moeed-w-yusuf/

[56] Ibid

Amidst a spiralling economy in Iran, compounded by the pandemic and US sanctions, a record 860,000 Afghans returned to Afghanistan in 2020; a third of these returnees were deported from Iran, according to the IOM figures.[57] Figures for Afghan returnees from Pakistan for the same period are significantly lower at 8000.

Immediately after the Taliban returned to Kabul, Iran set up temporary camps to receive Afghans fleeing recent events. However, officials also said that those who enter Iran would be repatriated once conditions improve.[58] As discussed later, Iran's role is pivotal for Afghans who aim to enter Turkey either as a final-destination or transit-destination country.

Misinformation and disinformation about mobility into Iran and Pakistan pose a serious challenge, not least for those Afghans who are considering leaving the country. Social media is riddled with accounts of Iranian border guards allowing former Afghan soldiers and military personnel who allegedly were allowed to enter Iran with only their ID cards issued by the former republic. However, verification of such claims is practically impossible.

Against this challenging background, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of information campaigns targeting prospective Afghan refugees to dissuade them from embarking on migratory journeys. Nonetheless, it is intriguing to observe the EU's recent statement affirming support for "targeted information campaigns… to combat narratives used by smugglers, including in the online environment, which encourage people to embark on dangerous and illegal journeys towards Europe".[59] It should be noted that there is no indication yet of existing cooperation between the EU and Iran, or EU and Pakistan, on delivering such information campaigns. However, there is an urgent need to attune policy aspirations to the realities on the ground where, in a precarious context, tens of millions of Afghans are on the brink of multiple unfolding catastrophes.

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[57] Mehrdad, E. (2021) 'As deportations soar, Afghan returnees struggle on home soil', The New Humanitarian, 26 January 2021, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/01/26/iran-afghanistan-migrant-returns-refugees-conflict-coronavirus-economy

[58] Reidy, E. (2021) 'The shrinking options for Afghans escaping Taliban rule', The New Humanitarian, 30 August 2021, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/8/30/Afghan-refugees-escape-Taliban-rule

[59] Council of the EU (2021) 'Statement on the situation in Afghanistan', 31 August 2021, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/08/31/statement-on-the-situation-in-afghanistan/#

Entering Turkey: a host country no more?

Turkey has been critical to the EU's external migration efforts as the country hosting the largest refugee population worldwide and a transit point for Afghan refugees to Europe since the Afghan-Soviet War.[60] Afghans constitute the third largest group of displaced people in Turkey, after Syrian refugees (3.6 million[61]) and internally displaced Kurds (1 million[62]). According to the Turkish authorities[63], there are 182,000 registered Afghan nationals in Turkey and up to an estimated 120,000 unregistered ones. Since Turkey retains geographical limitation to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, Afghans are not entitled to seek asylum in Turkey (granted only to European nationals) nor to claim the special status of "temporary protection" given to Syrian refugees since 2014.[64] Instead, Afghans are entitled to seek international protection (IP). If their claim is approved by Turkish authorities, they ought to be resettled by a third state. However, due to the limited opportunities for resettlement, UN-registered Afghan refugees report having been waiting between five to ten years in Turkey – with only one year of access to public medical care and no access to work permits or financial support from the government.[65]

Due to the fear that more Afghans would overstay, Turkey has toughened up its migration approach since 2018.[66] The Government of Turkey centralized its migration

management when UNHCR re-delegated its responsibility to examine IP procedures onto the Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMM) under the Turkish Ministry of Interior.

This change had a tremendous impact on Afghans coming to Turkey to seek IP when there was a 92.5 per cent decline in the number of positive IP results from 2018 to 2019.[67] Moreover, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection changed in 2019 that shortened the period within which people can appeal their deportation from 15 to 7 days; meanwhile, the management of accommodation centres was transferred from the governorates to PDMMs.

Turkey's efforts to tackle (Afghan) migration were supported by EU funds – FRIT (EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey) and IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance). The funds allowed Turkish authorities to increase the number of removal centres from ten to 26 and to refurbish old centres, with a total capacity of 16,108 people.[68] Although these funds helped improve the material conditions of the buildings,[69] Afghan refugees point in interviews to rapid IP procedures (only a few days) and no access to legal counselling when they are held in removal centres, leading to fast deportations. This is also visible in the increase of deported people from Turkey to

60 However, the volume of migratory movement by Afghans through/into Turkey in the preceding decades does not come close to the current significant numbers.

61 UNHCR (2021) 'Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Turkey', https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey.

62 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2020) 'Turkey: Displacement associated with conflict and violence', https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/GRID%202020%20%E2%80%93%20Conflict%20Figure%20Analysis%20%E2%80%93%20TURKEY_1.pdf

63 Daily Sabah (2021). '162 irregular migrants held across Turkey', 26 August 2021, Available at https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/eu-affairs/162-irregular-migrants-held-across-turkey

64 DGMM (2021) 'Temporary protection in Turkey'. https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection-in-turkey

65 Interviews with refugees in Van (Eastern Turkey), February – August 2021.

66 Interviews with aid providers in Turkey, January – August 2021.

67 Augustová, K. (2021). 'Impacts of EU-Turkey cooperation on migration along the Iran-Turkey border'. IPC-Mercator Policy Brief, May 2021, https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKeditorImages/20210503-21054423.pdf

68 European Commission (2021). 'Commission Staff Working Document: Turkey 2021 Report'. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/turkey-report-2021_en

69 Interviews with EU officials, January – August 2021.

70 Afghanistan Analysts Network (2020) 'Afghan Exodus: Migrants in Turkey left to fend for themselves', https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/migration/afghan-exodus-migrant-in-turkey-left-to-fend-for-themselves/

Afghanistan from 10,000 in 2017 to 40,000 in 2019.[70] During interviews for this research, Afghan refugees also spoke about how they witnessed people were being taken from the removal centre in Van, transported to the eastern border and pushed back by Turkish security forces to Iran.[71] Finally, interviews with EU officials, aid providers in Turkey as well as Afghan refugees suggest a blurry line between voluntary returns and deportations to Afghanistan. This was the case due to detainees' lack of understanding of legal information, pressure by staff in removal centres to sign voluntary return forms, and lack of monitoring over these procedures by independent organizations and NGOs (e.g., UNHCR). The case of Turkey reflects the EU's expectations of their external partners to push towards more returns and deportations. This is a broader strategy that aims to prevent migrants' arrivals in the EU from diverse transit states, yet it also results in illegal practices of forced returns.

While repatriations and deportations are officially halted due to security reasons amid the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, around 7,500 Afghans remain stranded in removal centres around Turkey.[72]

Turkish-Afghan negotiations about possible deportations to Afghanistan are ongoing. During a recent visit to Ankara, a Taliban delegation said that they would try their best to provide support if Afghan migrants wanted to return from Turkey to Afghanistan.[73] However, the safety of deportees is questionable as the Taliban's spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, warned that deported people would be taken to court upon their return in Afghanistan that would decide how to proceed with them.[74]

Although Turkey's western borders dominated policy negotiations between the EU and Turkey (i.e., prevention of more arrivals in Greece and Bulgaria), those, including

Afghans, who most commonly attempt unauthorized border crossing from Turkey to the EU, initially enter Turkey from Iran. This explains why EU-Turkey cooperation has been increasingly focusing on the securitization of Turkey's eastern border with Iran. IPA funds (2014-2020) supplied the National Coordination and Joint Risk Analysis Center with surveillance vehicles, communication and surveillance masts, thermal cameras, and hardware and software equipment and financed the training of border patrols (national police and gendarmerie) in risk analysis and risk management in Eastern Turkey. Turkish authorities also claim that the EU contributed € 110 million to build a concrete wall to seal its border with Iran.[75] Such claims contradict the recent statement by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, emphasizing that the EU "will not fund barbed wire and walls against the migrants who seek to enter the bloc".[76]

In August 2021, Turkey sent more troops to its eastern border and accelerated the construction of the wall to

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> While repatriations and deportations are officially halted due to security reasons amid the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, around 7,500 Afghans remain stranded in removal centres around Turkey.
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71 Interviews with refugees in Van (Eastern Turkey), January – August 2021.

72 Daily Sabah (2021) 'Turkish-Iran border reinforced to block migrant wave', 23 August 2021, https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkish-iran-border-reinforced-to-block-any-migrant-wave/news

73 Daily Sabah (2021) Taliban delegation visits Ankara to discuss Turkey-Afghan ties. 14 October 2021, https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/taliban-delegation-visits-ankara-to-discuss-turkey-afghanistan-ties

74 Reuters (2021) 'Taliban would take back Europe's Afghan deportees to face courts, says spokesman', 30 August 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/taliban-would-take-back-europes-afghan-deportees-face-courts-says-spokesman-2021-08-30/

75 Augustová, K. (2021)

> **Although harsh measures aim to stop the movement of Afghans, paradoxically, uncertainties and violence generated by these policies push people to move further towards Europe.**

prevent "potential migration influx" from Afghanistan. However, these measures are deployed based on the fear of mass migration rather than realities on the ground. As the Turkish Ministry of Interior reports, 48,361 Afghans entered Turkey "irregularly" who were detected so far in 2021. These are lower numbers than the previous years (201,437 in 2019 and 50,161 in 2020).[77]

However, further border militarisation, strengthened by agreements between the EU and Turkey, leads to rapid and extraordinary measures against all people crossing the border without considering their individual cases. Afghan families claim to have been violently pushed back to Iran by the Turkish gendarmerie and the Turkish Armed Forces with the use of force (e.g., beatings and destruction of personal possessions).[78]

Those pushed back to Iran further reported struggling to navigate mountains in border areas with extreme weather conditions, where dozens freeze to death each winter, as well as violence and killings by Iranian border guards.[79] Push-backs occurred in Eastern Turkey mainly in 2018, as confirmed by the Turkish gendarmerie;[80] push-backs also turned out to be the primary response to Afghan refugees after deportations to Afghanistan were halted in the summer of 2021. Although these harsh measures aim to stop the movement of Afghans, paradoxically, uncertainties and violence generated by these policies push people to move further towards Europe. At the time of writing, the Council of the European Union proposed to allocate an additional € 3 billion until 2024 to support refugees in Turkey, and its migration management capacity, including at its Eastern borders.[81] However, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that "Turkey has no duty, responsibility or obligation to be Europe's refugee warehouse".[82]

Brussels's objectives to continue externalizing migration to Turkey gives Ankara negotiation leverage in EU-Turkey talks. Turkey also hopes to show NATO its value by establishing relations with, and exerting some influence on, the Taliban regime.[83] As U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, suggested, "Turkey is an important NATO ally that plays a significant role in regional challenges".[84] This could boost Turkey's power in the region and position it as a key negotiator between the EU and other Western states with Afghanistan when working on the prevention of migration towards the West.

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76 Boffey, D. (2021) 'Ursula von der Leyen says EU will not fund 'barbed wire and walls', The Guardian, 22 October 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/22/ursula-von-der-leyen-says-eu-will-not-fund-barbed-wire-and-walls?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

77 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, Directorate General for Migration Management (2021) 'Irregular Migration', 16 September 2021, https://en.goc.gov.tr/irregular-migration

78 Interviews in Van (Eastern Turkey), August 2021.

79 Interviews in Van (Eastern Turkey), February – August 2021.

80 Interview in Istanbul, March 2021.

81 Council of the European Union (2021) 'Draft Action Plan responding to the events in Afghanistan', https://www.statewatch.org/media/2726/eu-council-afghanistan-com-draft-action-plan-migration-10472-1-21-rev1.pdf

82 Becatoros, E. (2021) 'Greek prime minister, Turkish president to discuss Afghan developments'. Stripes, 20 August 2021, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2021-08-20/greece-prime-minister-turkish-president-discuss-afghan-developments-2615222.html.

83 Levin, P. (2021). 'What might Turkey's enhanced engagement in Afghanistan mean for Ankara, NATO, and for the future of Afghanistan?', CATS Network, https://www.cats-network.eu/publications/cats-network-perspectives/turkeys-engagement-in-afghanistan.

84 Official Twitter account of Antony Blinken. Tweet posted on 22 September 2021, https://twitter.com/SecBlinken/status/1440452750047735809

"Playing the Game" from the "Balkan Route" to the EU frontier

> " Thousands of testimonies suggest that Afghans and other nationals are forced from the EU over a border by state authorities, without considering their individual circumstance and commonly denying them the opportunity to lodge asylum applications. "

Afghans who travel towards Northern and Western Europe, mostly move from Turkey to Greece or Bulgaria, and then, continue across the "Balkan Route". In 2015, hundreds of thousands of people transited the region due to open EU borders creating a "humanitarian corridor". However, border fencing and militarisation, as well as unilateral and bilateral agreements, started closing the corridor to limit migration to the EU, with the official closure in March 2016. As a result, Afghan nationals were stranded in Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. Many rerouted to Bosnia in 2018 in search of an alternative way to the EU after waiting for years in poor camp conditions, uncertainty, and police violence when trying to reach the EU but being pushed back. Afghans currently constitute the second largest displaced population along the "Balkan Route" (74,000[85]), after the 310,000 internally displaced people as a result of the 1990s wars.[86]

The route closure did not stop migration but made it more irregular, hazardous, and expensive, forcing refugees to resort to "playing the game" (*game zadan* in Dari), meaning: border crossing without authorization in the absence of legal passage. People walk for weeks across mountains, forests, mine-fields[87] and rivers, mostly with the help of mobile GPS and smugglers. Others hide under driving trains or trucks. Despite risks associated with this cross-border movement, the most common injuries were caused during the push-backs that occurred in the region since 2015.

Thousands of testimonies[88] suggest that Afghans and other nationals are forced from the EU (Hungary and Croatia) over a border (Serbia and Bosnia) by state authorities, without considering their individual circumstance and commonly denying them the opportunity to lodge asylum applications. Border crossers reported that border police harmed them with batons, kicks, punches, electronic devices, detainment in vans and closed rooms with a lack of oxygen, as well as shootings, sexual abuse, torture, and killings.[89] The youngest child injured during push-back was just three years old.[90] People also commonly described that their personal belongings were stolen or destroyed (phones, money, and clothes) by border patrols to deter their future cross-border movement; these aggressive tactics remove their resources, denying them the possibility to use mobile maps or contact smugglers. Afghans constituted 41 per cent of all cases of push-backs in the Western Balkans reported by grassroots organizations when 77 per cent of them said to have experienced violence by state authorities, mainly in Croatia by national and international (Frontex) border guards. [91]

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85   UNHCR (2021) 'South-Eastern Europe – Mixed movements by country of origin', https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/103?sv=41&geo=0

86   UNHCR (2021) 'Souht-Eastern Europe', https://www.unhcr.org/see/where-we-work

87   Border areas between Bosnia and Croatia are still un-cleared of minefields from the 1990s wars.

88   BVMN, UNHCR, Amnesty International, Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, MSF, Danish Refugee Council as well as the Croatian Ombudswoman

89   Fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina May 2018-January 2019.

90   Fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina May 2018-January 2019.

91   Border Violence Monitoring Network (2021) 'Monthly Reports', https://www.borderviolence.eu/category/monthly-report/

The EU member state Croatia is a beneficiary of over € 108 million under the EU's Asylum Migration and International Fund and has received an additional € 23.3 million in emergency assistance for migration and border management since 2017. The emergency assistance to Croatia covered in large part operational costs, including the salaries of police forces that have been repeatedly accused of push-backs.[92] Although the European Commission supports technical monitoring at the external borders,[93] it recently concluded that Croatian border management was carried out in line with the agreement with a few minor deviations. However, the monitoring lacks independence as it mainly relies on the Croatian state authorities, consists of single visits in cross-border checkpoints and excludes testimonies of refugees. Allegations of systematic push-backs are denied or labelled as misconduct by a few individual police officers.

As a consequence of being repeatedly pushed back, Afghans have been stranded in Serbia and Bosnia for years until today. This also includes people who reportedly worked for international military forces and had been fleeing the Taliban, facing grave risks in Afghanistan today. The vast majority of them remain undocumented as they either want to reach their families in the EU or struggle to seek asylum due to the difficulties of navigating administrative bureaucracy.

As EU candidates, the Western Balkan countries receive the EU pre-accession assistance (IPA) alongside additional funds for border and migration management. Bosnia-Herzegovina obtained € 552.1 million (IPA II, 2014-2020) as well as € 314.9 million to manage the increase of migration since 2018.[94] Yet, the provision of basic material aid for refugees seems to be the biggest issue in the country's refugee response. Many Afghans lived in informal makeshift camps in the northern Una-Sana Canton – dilapidated houses and structures made of wood and tarpaulins - due to the little capacity in the formal camps. People commonly reported cold, hunger and severe skin diseases, and respiratory infections were common to encounter in the camps due to poor sanitation.[95] They also said to obtain only little medical attention from NGOs[96] as many doctors in hospitals refused to treat undocumented people due to "limited finances". Aid has been organized by local NGOs and volunteers since no state authorities nor UN agencies[97] materially supported people in makeshift camps[98]. Alternative housing along the Balkan Route has been, however, subjected to police raids, evictions and destructions, and formal accommodation was not always provided.

The UN agencies (i.e., IOM) in Bosnia had focused mainly on assisted voluntary returns to Afghanistan and other countries. Later on, EU funds enabled the opening of more formal camps for families initially[99], and then followed by the IOM-run camps for men[100]. However, men-dominated accommodations have been short term solutions. They are not different from makeshift shelters and many have closed down. EU funds also helped to open formal camps in Serbia and refurbish the existing ones as well as to hire additional social workers for unaccompanied minors.[101]

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[92] Amnesty International (2020) 'EU: Inquire into European Complicity in Croatian border violence against migrants and refugees 'significant'.' Press Release, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/11/eu-inquiry-into-european-complicity-in-croatian-border-violence-against-migrants-and-refugees-significant/

[93] Controls of the border police activity, revision/development of standard operating procedures, specialised training and awareness raising for border police officers, cooperation activities/training by NGOs and international organisations.

[94] European Commission (2021) 'European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations: Bosnia-Herzegovina, IPA II', https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/bosnia-and-herzegovina-financial_en

[95] Fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina May 2018-January 2019.

[96] Mainly MSF

[97] IOM, UNHCR

[98] Formal and regular aid was banned within a 30 km radius of the Croatian border, which affected support in makeshift camps that lied close to Croatia.

[99] Salakovac, Hotel Sedra

[100] Miral, Bira, Vucjak and Lipa camps

[101] Augustová, K.; Carrapico, H.; Obradovic-Wochnik, J. (2021) 'Becoming a Smuggler: Migration and Violence at EU External Borders'. Geopolitics

On the one hand, the government's struggle to coordinate migration and limited chain of responsibility in south-eastern European countries, namely Bosnia, can be explained by the remaining post-war dysfunctionality.[102] On the other hand, Brussels favours most support to the UN agencies due to the lack of trust in the government, which often fails to consider the local context and thus contributes to further weakening of the state.[103] The local post-war context affects international cooperation and circumscribes border controls at the Bosnian-Croatian border. Afghans and other displaced people said that their Muslim identities were stressed by Croatian border guards when attacking them, ostensibly as the revenge of the Yugoslav Wars when they fought against (Bosnian) Muslims.[104]

Those stranded in the region for years are now accompanied by Afghans newly evacuated to Kosovo, Albania, and Northern Macedonia, waiting to be resettled to the U.S. Kosovo, mainly, hosts Afghan nationals whose security checks by U.S. authorities have failed. As more Afghans arrive, they struggle to navigate their ways forward and remain in a "waiting" limbo, with limited access to asylum, material aid, and protection from police violence.

> **Those stranded in the region for years are now accompanied by Afghans newly evacuated to Kosovo, Albania, and Northern Macedonia, waiting to be resettled to the United States.**

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[102] For example, Republika Srbska and Croat-majority cantons refuse to host reception centres.

[103] Ahmetašević, N., & Mlinarević, G. (2018) 'People on the Move in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018: Stuck in the Corridors to the EU'. Sarajevo: Heinrich Boll Stiftung

[104] Interviews with refugees in Bosnia-Herzegovina, May 2018-January 2019.

Locating synergies: migratory locations and their management

Moving between externalization and internal border crisis

Two significant aspects should be highlighted when drawing synergies of migration management across states stretching from Afghanistan to EU borders. First, the externalization of migration and border controls to the EU's wider neighbourhood coupled with the closure of EU's borders and enforced by push-backs. This approach tries to stop migration *outside* the EU for the sake of not having to manage it *inside* the EU.[105] Specifically, the EU manages migration in "far-away" non-EU zones (Iran, Pakistan) mainly through "development and humanitarian aid" tools (integration, access to essential services, livelihood, and markets opportunities) and simultaneously strengthens its external border surveillance (Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia among other states). This mix of humanitarian and security strategies aims to deter further migrants' movement to the EU.

Second, official agreements with non-EU states (i.e., March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement) have been celebrated by the European Commission (2021) for reducing "irregular arrivals" in the EU and supporting education, health and labour projects for refugees (i.e., Syrians in Turkey). Yet, externalization did not stop migration but only pushed it to more hazardous routes of irregular border crossing (i.e., "playing the games" along the Balkans), which the states counter by harsh responses. As a result, unofficial and violent measures – push-backs - by individual EU member states, Frontex and their partners (Turkey) are behind the decrease of irregular arrivals in the EU rather than any effective official bilateral agreements. Thus, externalization does not generate long-term solutions via humanitarian aid in external states but triggers short-term security emergencies marked by violence against Afghans and other people on the move along the EU's wider borders.

Many Afghan refugees experience multiple displacements throughout their lives. Their movement in transit is also forcibly pushed from one state to another due to the denial of asylum procedures within the EU, compounded by police violence. Deportations to Afghanistan are on hold due to security reasons, and push-backs are perceived by many transit states as a "solution". As discussed, Afghanistan's immediate and regional neighbours (i.e., Iran, Pakistan, Turkey) resist hosting more arriving and returned refugees. Nevertheless, the Council of Europe has proposed deporting Afghan nationals from EU member states to third states.[106] As the political bargaining is heated, external partners tend to commonly instrumentalize migration for their financial, political and security objectives.

Instrumentalization of migration by third states

Countries with long-term experience hosting refugees and/or guarding EU external borders have developed extensive systems, bureaucracies and capacities to extract funding from Western donors. In recent years, these donors have been primarily the European Commission and EU member states. Both the Commission and member states struggle to independently verify whether their external partners spend EU funds in line with bilateral agreements. These agreements require that partners provide refugee services and control borders with respect to refugee law and human rights. Third states also commonly use migration as a weapon to demand financial and political rewards for deterring migration to the EU. The most prominent example took place in February 2020 when Turkish authorities announced to

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[105] Kriesi, H.; Altiparmakis, A.; Bojar, A.; Oana, I. (2021) 'Debordering and re-bordering in the refugee crisis: a case of 'defensive integration'. Journal of European Public Policy, 28(30), 331-349.

[106] Council of the European Union (2021) 'Draft Action Plan responding to the events in Afghanistan', https://www.statewatch.org/media/2726/eu-council-afghanistan-com-draft-action-plan-migration-10472-1-21-rev1.pdf

[107] Léonard, S. & Kaunert, C. (2021) 'De-centring the Securitisation of Asylum and Migration in the European Union: Securitisation, Vulnerability and the Role of Turkey', Geopolitics, 1-23.

> Countries with long-term experience hosting refugees and/or guarding EU external borders have developed extensive systems, bureaucracies and capacities to extract funding from Western donors.

open the western border and let refugees pass to Greece. The move was aimed to pressure European countries, the EU, and NATO into supporting Turkish military activities in Syria (i.e., "Spring Shield' operation).[107]

Similar patterns have been observed along the EU's borders with Belarus: an authoritarian country that benefited from its migration cooperation with Frontex and received EU financial support for its border management.[108] President Lukashenko recently weaponized migration to respond against EU sanctions. At the time of writing, Belarus granted visas to people on the move, and facilitated their transportation to the EU borders, but prevented them to return where EU states deny them entry. At least eleven people died at the Belarus border and others, including Afghans, remained stranded in the woods and border zone with no access to resources, medical aid and asylum procedures. In response, EU neighbours, Poland and Lithuania, deployed extra border guards, established a

state of emergency, and used force to push migrants to Belarus. Dozens of people reported injuries, theft and abuse by authorities on both – EU and non-EU - sides of the border.[109]

President von der Leyen considered the situation at the EU's border with Belarus a "crisis" of refugee instrumentalization and "hybrid attack" against the EU. As a solution, she extended sanctions against Lukashenko's regime. Further, she also negotiated with the states of origin to prevent their nationals from travelling to Belarus,[110] and imposed temporary and legal measures at the EU-Belarus borders.[111] However, in reality, Afghans and other migrants are not "weapons" but "victims" of political bargaining. The UN aptly criticized EU states for failing to respect human rights law and refugee law, including the right to asylum procedures.[112]

Arguably, due to the lack of access to asylum procedures outside the EU boundaries, all persons trapped at the Belarusian-EU border were by default labelled as "illegal". This in turn made it possible for President Lukashenko to threaten member states with "illegal migration".

Third states also use EU support for the militarisation of their borders. This often goes hand in hand with their domestic and national security objectives and, in some cases, strengthen their authoritarian tendencies. For instance, Turkey's fight against terrorism is the utmost priority for the government along eastern land borders. Turkish authorities commonly view all illegal cross-border activities as run or regulated by PKK terrorism.[113] This approach resulted in local residents and refugees also

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[107] Léonard, S. & Kaunert, C. (2021) 'De-centring the Securitisation of Asylum and Migration in the European Union: Securitisation, Vulnerability and the Role of Turkey', Geopolitics, 1-23.

[108] Akkerman, M. (2018) 'Expanding the Fortress. Transnational Institute', https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/expanding_the_fortress_-_1.6_may_11.pdf

[109] Gall, L. (2021) 'Stuck in Limbo Between Poland and Belarus'. In Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/12/stuck-limbo-between-poland-and-belarus

[110] Von der Leyen, U. (2021) 'Statement by President von der Leyen on the situation at the border between Poland and Belarus', https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_5867

[111] The European Commission (2021) 'Asylum and return: Commission proposes temporary legal and practical measures to address the emergency situation at the EU's external border with Belarus'. 1 December 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6447.

[112] Brachelet, M. (2021) 'Comment by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Belarus-Poland border situation' https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27791&LangID=E

being targeted by anti-terror operations (such as arbitrary arrests, torture, killings). The European Commission criticized Turkey's broad anti-terror measures, leading to severe human rights violations in the south-east. However, the externalization of border controls means that the Commission ignores developments in Eastern Turkey where a strong military presence has built up in the region and human rights violations take place. This approach risks entrenching authoritarianism in Turkey and moves Turkey away from its synchronization with the EU's Copenhagen Criteria: democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protecting minorities.

Finally, countries in close proximity to Afghanistan also know how to use migration for their national interests and domestic agenda. For example, Iran attempted to instrumentalize Afghan refugees during its negotiations with the U.S. and the EU. Iranian Deputy Minister said in May 2019 that Iran could no longer host Afghan refugees if the U.S. was going to continue applying sanctions against Iran, and withdrawing from the nuclear deal.[114] By doing so, Iran stressed its role in preventing migration movements and smuggling to Europe in exchange for obtaining political gains and avoiding further economic pressure.

> **Iran stressed its role in preventing migration movements and smuggling to Europe in exchange for obtaining political gains and avoiding further economic pressure.**

Fight against smuggling resulting in more reliance on smugglers

Costly, short-term and tough border measures (e.g., wall constructions, surveillance, border militarisation, push-backs) along the EU's internal and external borders are commonly justified on the grounds of fighting cross-border crimes: irregular migration, human smuggling and trafficking. Smugglers and traffickers are also commonly blamed for human rights violations against refugees and deaths en route. However, "irregular migration" and human smuggling and trafficking go hand in hand with the lack of legal and secure pathways to safety. Ordinary Afghans who fled their country or plan to flee lack access to evacuation flights, regularised and legal border-crossing, visas, family reunifications and other authorized journeys. This pushes people to move without authorization (illegal/irregular migration) and rely on human smugglers to navigate foreign and dangerous terrains in Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and the Balkan Route. However, moving through clandestine channels exposes Afghan refugees to transport accidents and deaths, further abuses by state authorities (push-backs, torture, extrajudicial killing), and smugglers (kidnappings, extortion, trafficking, sexual violence, and labour slavery). However, extensive research shows that the more difficult and dangerous a border is to cross, the more migrants rely on smugglers, enabling illicit and smuggling networks to expand their profits.[115]

Increased border security often targets migrants rather than smugglers . The military operations that aim to destroy smuggler's vessels instead, result in the blocking of legal pathways for migration and asylum claims.[116] This vicious cycle can be broken only by diminishing the demand for smuggling by providing alternative legal options for cross-border movement.

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[113] Genç, D. (2015) 'An Analysis of Turkey's Bordering Processes: Why and Against Whom?'. Turkish Studies, 16(4), 527-553.

[114] Al-Monitor (2019) 'Amid US pressure, Iran warns Europe of another 'wave' of refugees', 9 May 2019, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/05/iran-nuclear-deal-ultimatum-europe-afghan-refugees-drugs.html

[115] Augustová, K.; Carrapico, H.; Obradovic-Wochnik, J. (2021). Mandić, D. (2017) 'Trafficking and Syrian refugee smuggling: Evidence from the Balkan route'. Social Inclusion 5(2), 28–38.

[116] Garelli, G., and M. Tazzioli. (2018) 'The humanitarian war against migrant smugglers at sea'. Antipode 50 (3), 685–703

Enclosure in transit and reliance on non-state actors

Afghans commonly remain enclosed for months or years in diverse transit states, camps, and border zones across the entire migratory route. Even if they wish to stay, they have often limited access to legal protection, and therefore no permit to work or study. The states discussed in this report struggle to respond to the newly arriving refugees. They fail to address refugees' most basic needs due to complex obstacles: bearing significant responsibilities over refugees, having limited finances, economically and politically recovering from wars, and/ or navigating corruption. Poor responses to migration are specific to the states lying near the EU's physical borders in South-eastern Europe, which turns them to transit locations.

Those stranded in transit places commonly rely on solidarities by municipalities, civil society actors, grassroots organizations, and local NGOs to navigate life on the edge of state-provided aid or outside of it. These actors supply Afghans with food, shelter, clothes, hygiene products, medical assistance, and cash support. They are key in ensuring refugees' survival in makeshift camps. They also play a central role in community inclusion when helping Afghans with social, political and economic adaption to new conditions in transit. Yet, local actors obtain no or little EU support, in contrast to the UN agencies (i.e., UNHCR, IOM) and ministries. These local actors use their own resources and rely on private donations to function. Paradoxically, the entities and actors with experience of supporting refugees on a daily basis, and that understand the complex needs of refugees, are limited in their capacity to provide support and aid to the refugees.

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Ways forward: moving from fast and harmful fixes to sustainable solutions

I. EU interventions should ensure the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is not deepened.

Afghanistan is in the midst of a severe humanitarian crisis, one of the multiple unfolding crises (economic, political, security, COVID-19, international sanctions). EU interventions – including engagement or lack of engagement with the Taliban – must ensure the situation does not become more harmful for Afghans. The Taliban have been assuring various neighbouring and international stakeholders about their capacity to govern Afghanistan. This is despite growing evidence that the Taliban struggle to politically organize themselves and transform from an insurgency to a governing force. It is highly unlikely that the Taliban can prevent Afghans from leaving the country without deploying dangerous and heavy-handed preventative measures (e.g., violence against prospective migrants, detention and aggressive border closures). EU and individual European states must ensure their funding is not used inside or beyond Afghanistan in the region to increase existing levels of violence, coercion, and brutality that Afghans on the move are already facing.

II. Humanitarian aid is not a substitute for long-term developmental intervention.

With all its shortcomings and problems, the state-building efforts that began after 2001 in Afghanistan led to the emergence of some institutional functionality that provided a means for international actors to engage with the Afghan state. The Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), among others, was an essential counterpart for the EU in pursuing a migration agenda in Afghanistan. With the collapse of the republic, the Taliban cannot propel the machinery of institutions in the same way both in bilateral and multilateral engagements. Therefore, any EU funding towards humanitarian assistance will remain disconnected from the more comprehensive developmental interventions that Afghanistan needs, and which it was ostensibly receiving towards institutional capacity. Policymakers should be realistic about the prospects of successfully pursuing a migration agenda on Afghanistan in a context where the only conceivable engagement with the Taliban can happen only within the framework of delivering humanitarian assistance through the United Nations, and other humanitarian actors. While delivering humanitarian assistance is an absolute necessity to prevent further deterioration on the ground, there is a need to think clearly about the extent that the assistance can also contribute to sustaining institutional capacity in Afghanistan, even if it is under a Taliban regime.

III. "Regional solutions" is a questionable policy aim if the regional countries do not allow more Afghan refugees into their borders.

The EU's emphasis on finding regional solutions for the envisaged new wave of Afghan refugees is understandable. However, "regional solutions" is a misnomer where Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours have all declared their firm stance about not allowing more Afghans to seek protection inside their borders. Furthermore, European policymakers need to appreciate the extent of anti-migrant sentiments that prevail against Afghans in their neighbourhood. In some cases, the offer of financial assistance to the region for accepting more Afghan refugees may not be workable due to the negative domestic mood (e.g., in Iran and Pakistan) on migration from Afghanistan. The EU, its members and international organizations need to consider the policy implications of a "regional solutions" agenda when no solutions in the region may be available to Afghans seeking safety and protection outside their country. For example, in late 2020, Iran proposed new legislation that would make undocumented migrants, namely Afghans, trying to reside in or transit the country, liable to prison terms up to 25 years.[117]

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[117] Bezhan, F. (2020) 'Afghan Migrants Could Face 'Shocking' Punishments in Iran Under Draft Law', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 01 December 2020, https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-migrants-shocking-punishments-iran-draft-law/30978559.htm

Similarly, for the implementation of SSAR and other regional policy initiatives, joint partnerships were key, requiring the participation of the Afghan state. With the collapse of the republic, and the Taliban remaining unrecognized by the international community in the foreseeable future, regional initiatives on migration have effectively fragmented.

IV. Effective fight against "irregular migration" and human smuggling cannot succeed without the availability of legal migration pathways for Afghans seeking safety and protection.

Smuggling operations can be addressed only by providing alternative legal migration to countries where refugees' rights and safety are secured (not pressuring further irregular migration), and resettlements do not aggravate the already enormous refugee burden (i.e., Iran, Pakistan and Turkey). To decrease refugees' needs to move irregularly and use smuggling networks, we suggest the European Commission and EU member states cooperate with Afghanistan's neighbourhood and key transit locations (i.e., Turkey and South-Eastern Europe) on more resettlement efforts. Only the increased provision of legal and safe pathways for Afghan refugees would decrease pressure on border controls and, therefore, provide more balance between humanitarian and security migration factors that are currently in a clash. Creating more legal pathways would also decrease the burden in Afghanistan's neighbourhood and Turkey, and would release pressure on these states to deploy harmful measures against refugees. Whilst there have been some efforts to call for more resettlements – a High-level Resettlement Forum by Commissioner Ylva Johansson (September 2021) – member states ought to show more initiative to host Afghan refugees and increase their resettlement quotas. This is the case especially for the Visegrad Group (Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) that have not pledged any commitments to resettle refugees in 2020.

V. Prevent human rights violations of Afghans along EU's internal and external borders

For the EU to credibly promote, proclaim its commitment to, human rights universally, it must extend that commitment to Afghans and other people on the move seeking safety and protection. There is an urgent need to address the persistent allegations of serious human rights violations (instances of killings, torture, physical and psychological violence, sexual abuse) and illegal push-backs (denial of asylum procedures and collective expulsions) of Afghans on the move within the EU member states (Croatia, Slovenia, Greece) and their key partners (Turkey). To achieve this, it is vital to develop effective means of monitoring to ensure that member states and EU candidates spend EU funds in line with international and EU laws (prohibition of torture and the right to international protection). Monitoring systems should be independent rather than solely relying on state authorities themselves (i.e., Croatia and its Ministry of Interior). To this end, single visits by EU and national authorities at border checkpoints should be accompanied by systematic mechanisms of monitoring formal and makeshift camps with the cooperation of NGOs and grassroots organizations and the broader civil society. Most importantly, monitoring should consider refugees' experiences at the EU's borders. This monitoring should also be established in non-EU zones that benefit from EU funds.

This is even more important for special-needs persons who require protection and assistance, such as children and minors. Although the Commission indicated that states need to effectively identify case-by-case basis vulnerabilities of the newly arriving people to provide assistance and protection through asylum and migration procedures, this continues to be violated.

VI. Cooperation on migration management should not lead to states weaponizing refugees.

Migration cooperation between the EU and its wider neighbourhood and Afghanistan is fundamental to promote peace and security and protect the lives of refugees en route. However, the European Commission, EU agencies, and member states should pay close attention to their key partners' authoritarian tendencies and internal security concerns when striking migration deals with them. We suggest carefully considering local contexts (i.e., broad anti-terror measures in Eastern Turkey) in non-EU states where border tools are outsourced, assessing potential behaviour of key partners with poor democratic records, and expanding independent monitoring of whether EU funds are spent in compliance

with international human rights. Notably, the EU should not diverge from conflict-sensitive approaches when negotiating migration and border management. Support and funds for border militarisation in "military zones" and places of local conflicts should be halted as they can backfire, leading to more insecurities and human rights violations and risk pushing residents to flee, besides refugees. Further cooperation between Turkey and the EU should also be pursued under the demand for AKP to change national laws (anti-terror laws) that result in arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings. These proposed measures are crucial to avoid entrenching criminalization in third states and prevent destructive side-effects of externalization policies on refugees as well as local communities.

VII. Preventing migration instrumentalization by moving from push-backs to legal status determination

The instrumentalization of migration by third states usually becomes possible due to the EU's negligence of migration protection within its borders. By denying migrants asylum procedures in EU states and using push-backs against them (i.e., in Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary), European leaders give their external partners leverage to weaponize "illegal" migration. This approach leads to serious long-term consequences along the EU's external borders and in third states that go against the EU's broader enlargement and peace objectives, beyond migration management. We suggest the European Commission and EU agencies find more legal migration solutions in EU entry states, rather than illegally pushing people back. Particularly, Afghans should be granted access to asylum applications when entering the EU, under the refugee law. This process would determine migrants' legal status and protect them from turning into an exploitation tool of "illegal" and "unregulated" migration in international diplomacy.

VIII. Support for municipalities and civil society aiding Afghan refugees should be prioritized.

There is a need for financial and logistical support for actors who enforce solidarities and provide aid to Afghans on the ground - local NGOs and civic society movements rather than mere support for international actors and ministries. Local and non-governmental actors are on the frontline of providing services, functioning as a pivotal bridge between needs-based assessments, integration and implementation of policies. Their support brings unique capacities to understanding the backgrounds of Afghans and articulating their needs to the authorities. Unlike international actors and largescale state ministries, the overheads involved in operating NGOs and running local authorities do not incur hefty financial commitments to the donors. The localized access that local NGOs, civil society movements and municipalities enjoy also means that they are better positioned to achieve successful targeted delivery of services and assistance to the Afghans on the ground. This financial and logistical aid should be accompanied by legal and political support for grassroots organizations that increasingly face criminalization of their solidarities (i.e., sea rescue operations).

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. The foundation is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany. FES has been working in Afghanistan, in cooperation with local organizations, since 2002. Its programmes aim at strengthening democratic institutions, from the local to the national levels, increasing the political participation of youths, enhancing women's empowerment and gender equality and promoting free and professional media, social justice in the formal and informal economy and regional cooperation for peace and development.

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