

From Austria to Afghanistan

Forced return and a new migration cycle

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Basic issues: discussion papers on development policies, international cooperation and south-north cultural exchange, as well as anti-racist campaigning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study was commissioned by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) and carried out by the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC), in partnership with its Afghan research partner, the Afghanistan Development and Peace Research Organization (ADPRO). Between March and September 2020, ADPRO conducted semi-structured interviews with Afghan men who were returned from Austria to Afghanistan between 2015 and 2020. The study attempts to investigate what happened to these returnees when they returned to Afghanistan and what could potentially trigger their re-migration? The broader term ‘migration’ is used when referring to the movement of all the respondents. For the majority of the respondents, however, the migration is not voluntary, but forced by the threat of violence and serious harm.

Information on what happens to Afghans who returned to Afghanistan from Austria, especially since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015,¹ is sparse and scattered. In particular, no research has been conducted, except for some scattered media reports, on the return of Afghans by Austria to Afghanistan and, thus, to danger. While there are a scarcity of data on returnees in general, data on female returnees are even harder to obtain. During the research for this study, various sources in Afghanistan and Austria provided contacts of potential returnees. However, the returnees were all male. No female returnee from Austria could be identified. The attempt to recruit female returnees was unsuccessful due to the ‘hidden’ nature of this population. For this study, a total of 16 semi-structured interviews were carried out with the Afghan males who lived in Austria for a number of years, and were returned to Afghanistan either ‘voluntarily’ (three of the interviewees) or through forceful removal (13 of the interviewees).

The results of semi-structured interviews illustrate the risks and challenges that Afghan returnees face in Afghanistan upon their return. The results indicate that personal safety and security remains the top challenge

for returnees, regardless of the nature of their return. The returnees were fearful of being a target of random suicide bombing, Taliban raids or being kidnapped by a criminal gang. They were also worried about becoming a subject of a targeted assassination, a phenomenon that increased throughout 2020.

Economically, many of the respondents were situated in a worse situation than prior to their flight to Austria. They were unable to establish themselves economically in Austria, due to the restricted work rights during the lengthy asylum procedure. They were, thus, forced to return empty-handed. The findings of the interviews reveal that, in their absence, the returnees lost their social network and their local communities completely changed. Stigmatization was also the most difficult social and psychological phenomenon among returnees. They were labelled as ‘losers’, ‘criminals’ or ‘Westernized’. Life in Austria damaged the relationships between the returnees and their local communities. The latter being suspicious of the returnees’ return and accusing them of bringing a foreign culture, of converting to Christianity and of attempting to convert people to Christianity.

In addition to the difficulties faced by the returnees in Afghanistan, the nature of their return can impact their potential re-migration. George Gmelch defined the term voluntary ‘return migration’ as referring to “the movement of emigrants back to their homeland to resettle”.² Voluntary return, therefore, is seen by migration scholars as the final stage of a migration process.³ However, return could also be a stage in the migration cycle. This is particularly the case if the return is against the returnee’s will – that is, the return is involuntary. Many migrants are forced to return to their country of origin involuntarily, without necessarily being forcefully expelled. This is often the case where the decision to return is coerced, or not based on a free and informed choice. Consequently, there are various debates on whether involuntary return is a ‘durable solution’.

1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), (2015). 2015: The year of Europe’s refugee crisis. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2015/12/56ec1ebde/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis.html> [Accessed 31 December 2020].

2 Gmelch, George, (1980). “Return Migration”. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 9(1), pp.135-159, p.136.

3 Ruben, Ruerd, van Houte, Marieke, and Davids, Tina, (2009). What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants? Rethinking the Role of Pre- and Post-Return Assistance. *International Migration Review*, 43(4), pp.908-937.

According to Gmelch (1980), involuntary returnees are ill-prepared for their return. The 'home' reality for such returnees is complex and their communities of origin have changed dramatically in their absence.⁴ The returnees and home communities no longer share many of the basic notions that underlie their traditional culture.⁵ The returnees' friends and relatives do not share the same interests and have developed new friendships in their absence.⁶ This is the case for many

of involuntary Afghan returnees from Austria. The situation is greatly exacerbated where the 'returnees' were not born or did not grow up in Afghanistan, but, for instance, in Iran or Pakistan. Consequently, in cases of involuntary return, return migration does not mean 'going home'.⁷ These and other factors, such as worries about security and safety, are likely to force returnees to leave the country again. More than half of the respondents had already attempted to re-migrate.

4 Gmelch 1980 p.143.

5 Ibid.; Ruben et al. 2009 p.912.

6 Gmelch 1980 p.143.

7 Ibid.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on desk research and semi-structured interviews with 16 male Afghans who returned to Afghanistan between 2016 and 2020. ADPRO conducted the interviews between March and September 2020. Of the 16 returnees, 11 were interviewed in person and five through WhatsApp and telephone, due to the increasing risk and restrictions of Covid-19. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to over one hour.

The respondents were recruited using various techniques. In the pre-research phase, Afghans who were returned to Afghanistan, either voluntary or involuntary, were identified through a number of Afghan diaspora organizations in Vienna and Graz, and by some members of the Afghan diaspora community in Austria. The research partner in Kabul, ADPRO, was also provided some valuable contact links by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and by utilizing their personal networks. The study attempted to identify and recruit female respondents that were returned to Afghanistan from Austria. However, the attempt was unsuccessful due to the 'hidden' nature of this population. To protect the identity of respondents, all names used in this study are pseudonyms, and details such as province and district names are intentionally unspecified.

Nine of the interviewees arrived in Austria during the 2015 'refugee-crisis', four in 2014, one in 2013 and one in 2010. Their return took place between January 2016 and March 2020. The ages of the interviewees, ranged between 22 and 40 years old. Of the respondents, there were seven Tajiks, five Pashtuns, and four Hazaras from eleven different provinces. Their education, social and professional background differ greatly. In the group, for instance, there were a police officer, a soldier in the special forces, a painter, an artist and a volleyball player. Some of the returnees interviewed were refugees that had either been born or grew up from a young age in Iran or Pakistan. They never saw or remembered Afghanistan and, consequently, knew very little about it. Additionally, few of the Hazara respondents had any remaining relatives in Afghanistan.

Three respondents were assisted by IOM to return 'voluntarily' to Afghanistan and the remaining 13 were forcibly returned. The nature of the return for all interviewees was involuntary. Two of the interviewees had already left the country again (both were interviewed over WhatsApp); one left for Iran four weeks after return and the other made his way to Turkey hoping to again reach Europe.

3. BACKGROUND

The April communist coup of 1978 was a turning point in Afghanistan's displacement history. The coup and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets in 1979 forced millions of Afghans out of their home country and dispersed them around the world.⁸ By the early 1980s, there were some three million Afghan refugees, mainly in Pakistan and Iran. This number reached its peak of 6.22 million in 1990.⁹ Today, Afghanistan is the third largest producer of refugees after Syria and Venezuela, with 2.7 million people living outside the country's national borders.¹⁰ These statistics include only documented refugees registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Undocumented refugee numbers are far higher. According to Afghanistan's MoRR, more than 6.5 million Afghans (both registered and unregistered) live in the neighboring Iran and Pakistan, and in the countries beyond.

Since the US-led international forces pulled their combat troops out of Afghanistan at the end of 2014, the violence increased exponentially in the country. In 2015, nearly 180,000 Afghans applied for asylum in the European Union (EU) Member States,¹¹ making them the second largest refugee population in Europe. For two consecutive years (2019 and 2020), the Global Peace Index ranked Afghanistan as the least peaceful country in the world (163 out of 163)¹², despite the signing of a peace agreement between the Taliban and the US administration on 29 February 2020 in Doha, Qatar. From 1 January to 30 September 2020, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

documented 5,939 civilian casualties (2,117 killed and 3,822 injured), with the Taliban responsible for 45% of these casualties. In the midst of the worsening security situation, high civilian casualties and continued flight of Afghans out of Afghanistan, more than half of the applications for international protection by Afghan asylum seekers in the EU, and particularly in Austria, were denied, with a considerable number of Afghans forced to return to Afghanistan.¹³

The EU, as one of the largest providers of aid to Afghanistan, used humanitarian assistance packages to put political pressure on the Afghan government to readmit its citizens after their failed asylum attempts, threatening to strip the country of aid if it did not cooperate. Afghanistan's former Finance Minister, Eklil Hakimi, said to the Afghan parliament in reference to mounting pressure from the EU: *"If Afghanistan does not cooperate with the EU countries on the refugee crisis, this will negatively impact the amount of the aid allocated to Afghanistan."*¹⁴

The pressure led to the signing of the Joint Way Forward (JWF) agreement in 2016. The JWF aimed to prevent further irregular migration flows of Afghans to the EU, in return for development aid to Afghanistan.¹⁵ Since signing the JWF, the EU continued returning Afghans despite the worsening security situation. Human rights groups criticize the JWF and state that no area of the country is 'safe' for Afghans to be returned. Austria, however, was delighted with Afghanistan readmitting failed asylum seekers since the signing of the

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- 8 Turton, David, and Marsden, Peter, (2002). *Taking Refugees for a Ride? The politics of refugee return to Afghanistan*. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/47c3f3cb1a.pdf> [Accessed 27 January 2021]; Monsutti, Alessandro, (2008). "Afghan migratory strategies and the Three Solutions to the Refugee Problem". *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27(1), pp.58-73, p.60.
- 9 Jazayeri, Leila, (2003). The migration-development nexus: Afghanistan case study. In: Van Hear, Nicholas, and Sorensen, Nina Nyberg (eds.), *The Migration Development Nexus*. United Nations, International Organization for Migration, p.215.
- 10 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), (2020). *Figures At A Glance*. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> [Accessed 31 December 2020].
- 11 Parusel, Bernd, (2018). *Afghan Asylum Seekers And The Common European Asylum System*. Available at: <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/277716/afghan-asylum-seekers-and-the-common-european-asylum-system> [Accessed 31 December 2020].
- 12 Global Peace Index, (2020). *Global Peace Index: Measuring Peace In A Complex World*. Available at: https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GPI_2020_web.pdf [Accessed 21 October 2020], p.18.
- 13 Bundesministerium Inneres (BMI). (2020). *Vorläufige Asylstatistik: Oktober 2020*. Available at: https://www.bmi.gv.at/301/Statistiken/files/2020/Asylstatistik_Oktober_2020.pdf [Accessed 31 December 2020].
- 14 Quie, Marissa, and Hakimi, Hameed, (2020). *The EU And The Politics Of Migration Management In Afghanistan*. Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/eu-and-politics-migration-management-afghanistan> [Accessed 31 December 2020], p.4.
- 15 Ibid.

JWF in 2016. Austria's Secretary-General for Foreign Affairs in the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, Peter Launsky-Tiefenthal, advocated to extend the JWF: "Austria would also like to thank Afghanistan for the past cooperation with regards to the EU-Afghanistan Joint Way Forward Agreement for which a follow-up agreement is currently under negotiation. A swift conclusion would be very much welcome by Austria".¹⁶ The EU and the Afghan governments have been negotiating to extend the JWF for a further two-years, beyond its expiry on 3 October 2020.¹⁷ The new deal, if agreed, is harsher than the first. For example, it states that "the scope of the notion of vulnerable groups should be limited", thus, speeding up the process of deportation for vulnerable groups, who may otherwise not have been deported.¹⁸

In pursuing the JWF and its extension, the EU ignored the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. Safety and security of returnees to a country that is plagued with war is one aspect that can negatively affect returnees' reintegration into their communities. Other factors also impact the life of Afghans after return. These include, economic losses, never-ending political uncertainty, lack of social networks and cultural stigmatization.

3.1 Afghans' displacement history to Austria

The Afghan population constitutes the tenth largest number of foreign nationals in Austria, with over 44,000 living in the country as of 1 January 2019. Nearly half of that population lives in Vienna.¹⁹ They arrived in Austria as asylum seekers at different phases of the war in Afghanistan, which began when the Soviet Union

troops invaded in 1979.²⁰ Prior to that, only a few dozen Afghans, mainly students, lived in Vienna. Only three Afghans sought asylum in Austria in 1978, when the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) conducted a coup against the first President of Afghanistan, Daod Khan.²¹

The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, between 1979 and 1989, formed the first phase of mass out-migration of Afghan people. In the first year of the war, when the Soviet troops marched into Afghanistan, 18 Afghans applied for asylum in Austria.²² Political turmoil, mass murder, serious human rights violations and drought, among other reasons, were the driving factors forcing millions of Afghans out of their country.²³ During the ten years of the Soviet invasion, a total of 631 Afghans applied for international protection just in Austria. They were young males from certain elite groups, with a good education and a background of political involvement in Afghanistan. Some left Austria in later years, migrating to the US and Canada.²⁴

Post the Soviet invasion, during the subsequent civil war and brutal Taliban regime that lasted throughout the 1990s until 2001, over 22,000 Afghans applied for asylum in Austria. The demographic of Afghan refugees during the 1990s was more diverse than that of the previous decade. They were no longer only the members of the former communist government and PDPA, but also working women, whose rights and freedom were extremely limited during the civil war and by the Taliban government. The Taliban banned women and girls from work and acquiring an education. Music and other types of entertainment were considered a crime. Violators of the Taliban's decrees faced lashing, torture, amputation and execution as routine punishments.²⁵ Minority ethnic groups, such as the Hazaras, who were oppressed and persecuted during the Taliban rule, also

16 Ahmad, Ali and Fanizadeh, Michael, (2020). *Peace Needs Women!* Available at: <https://www.vidc.org/en/detail/peace-needs-women> [Accessed 31 December 2020].

17 Council of the European Union. (2020). *Extension Of Joint Way Forward On Migration Issues Between Afghanistan And The EU*. Available at: <https://www.statewatch.org/media/1384/eu-council-joint-way-forward-afghanistan-renewal-9233-20.pdf> [Accessed 31 December 2020].

18 Ibid.

19 Österreichischer Integrationsfonds (ÖIF), (2020). *Migration Und Integration 2019*. Available at: <https://oeifb2c.wertpraesent.com/migration-und-integration-2464.html> [Accessed 31 December 2020], p.30.

20 Kohlbacher, Josef, Lehner, Marie, and Rasuly-Paleczek, Gabriele, (2020). *Afghan/Innen/En In Österreich: Perspektiven Von Integration, Inklusion Und Zusammenleben*. Available at: <https://epub.oeaw.ac.at/9783700188155> [Accessed 13 November 2020], p.58; Monsutti 2008, p.60;

Van Hout, Marieke, (2016). *Return migration to Afghanistan: Moving back or moving forward?*. Palgrave Macmillan, p.42.

21 Kohlbacher et al. 2020, p.58.

22 Ibid.

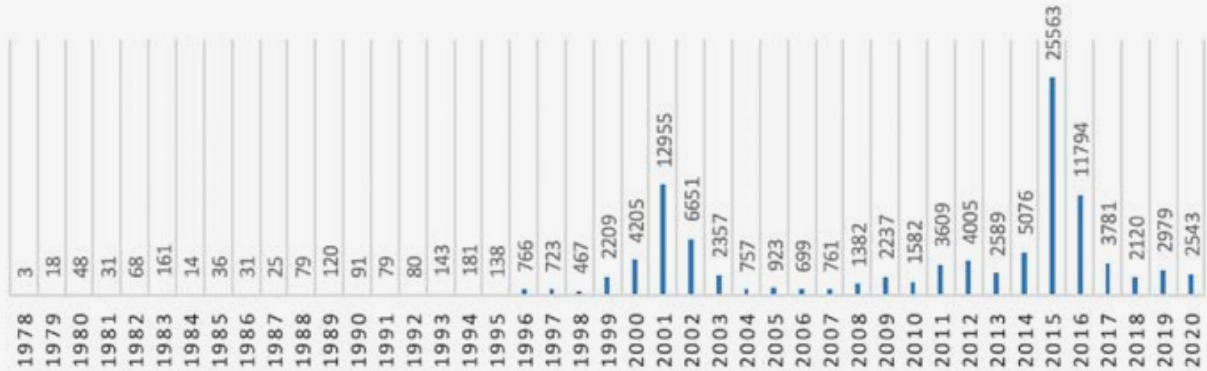
23 Jazayery 2003, p.215.

24 Kohlbacher et al. 2020, p.61.

25 Van Hout, Marieke 2016, p.45.

Figure I: Afghan asylum application in Austrian 1978

AFGHAN ASLYUM APPLICATIONS IN AUSTRIA SINCE 1978



Source: Austria Statistik, BMI, Kohlbacher, Lehner, and Rasuly Paleczek, 2020: 59-62

Note: The number for 2020 indicates only asylum application between January and October 2020.

found their way to Europe, and Austria in particular.²⁶ In 2001, Austria received a record number of 12,955 asylum applications from Afghans.²⁷

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the US-led coalition forces ousted the Taliban from power for harboring Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Hope for peace, prosperity and a new Afghanistan began to grow. Figure I indicates that in the post-2001 era, the number of Afghan asylum applications in Austria dropped from thousands to its lowest of 699 in 2006. Applications started to increase again as the Taliban took control of vast parts of Afghanistan, having regrouped and rearmed in their sanctuaries in Pakistan, with military and intelligence support from the Pakistani establishment.²⁸ As the security situation worsened with the increased presence of the Taliban, Afghans again fled the spreading violence, and the number of asylum applications by Afghans in Austria

correspondingly increased. In 2008, Afghans lodged over 1,300 asylum applications, and by 2014, more than 5000.²⁷

The US-led international forces pulled out their combat troops from Afghanistan and redefined their engagement to “assist, train and advise” the Afghan security forces. The political, economic and military transition in 2014 left behind a large economic and security vacuum. The military and economic transition also affected population movements. In 2015, during the refugee influx in Europe, nearly 180,000 Afghans applied for asylum in the EU Member States,²⁹ with Austria, as a one of the Member States, receiving over 25,000 asylum applications.³⁰ The Afghans that arrived in Austria since 2015 have a different socio-economic background to those who came during 1980s and 1990s. This time, a large number of Afghans from all ethnic and religious groups, including Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, fled Afghanistan, or left their first country of asylum (for instance,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kohlbacher et al. 2020, p.61.

²⁸ Maizland, Lindsay, and Laub, Zachary, (2020). *The Taliban in Afghanistan*. Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan> [Accessed 26 December 2020].

²⁹ Parusel 2018.

³⁰ Bundesministerium Inneres (BMI). (2020). *Vorläufige Asylstatistik: Oktober 2020*. Available at: https://www.bmi.gv.at/301/Statistiken/files/Jahresstatistiken/Asyl_Jahresstatistik_2015.pdf

[Accessed 31 December 2020].

Iran and Pakistan) where they had been born or had lived for most of their lives.³¹

Between 2016 and 2019, an additional 20,674 Afghans applied for asylum in Austria. During Covid-19, between 1 January and 31 October 2020, 2,543 Afghans filed new asylum applications in Austria. In the same period last year, 41% of applicants were granted asylum, 43.2% of applicants were rejected and the remaining 15.8% were in the category of “other”.³² This is because, in response to the influx of arrivals, the focus of Europe’s Member States shifted from providing quick and ‘short-lived’ responses of welcome and open borders to strict policies of ‘migration management’ and border control.

At the same time as deporting Afghan refugees to danger, Austria warned its citizens not to travel to Afghanistan. It has designated Afghanistan as an unsafe country. Among the many reasons for the travel ban are Afghanistan’s violent conflict, frequent terror attacks and criminality.³³

3.2 Return to Afghanistan

From the 1970s onwards, as a result of increased irregular arrivals, return migration and assisted return, in particular, gained tremendous attention both from EU policy makers and academia. After the US-led coalition forces ousted the Taliban from power, hope for peace, prosperity and a new Afghanistan began to grow, and the international community poured its political and military support into the war-ravaged country. More

than 7 million Afghans returned to Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001,³⁴ which Alessandro Monsutti described as “one of the largest repatriation campaigns in the history of the UN agency.”³⁵ Since 2005, however, the pace of the return has slowed, as the security situation again started to deteriorate.³⁶ The optimism for peace³⁷ was thus short-lived.

Since then, many Western European countries have adopted more restrictive asylum policies,³⁸ hoping to discourage people from taking the hazardous journey to Europe.³⁹ Globally, between 2005 and 2014, an average of 34,000 migrants returned home, with 70,000 returning in 2015 and more than 98,000 in 2016. Afghanistan has consistently been a key country of return.⁴⁰

Afghanistan receives voluntary and involuntary returns from neighboring Iran, Pakistan, and beyond. The flow of return to Afghanistan has fallen since 2016, but still remains high, despite brutal Taliban attacks that lead to high civilian casualties.⁴¹ Between 2015 and 2017 alone, nearly 20,000 Afghans were sent back from EU countries to Afghanistan, both ‘voluntarily’ and forcefully. EU countries returned a total of 3,290 Afghans during the peak of irregular arrivals in 2015. This number increased to 9,480 in the following year and dropped back to 6,620 in 2017.⁴² This is reflected in the data compiled by Chatham House in its November 2020 research paper on Afghan returnees from the near and wider region between 2016 and 2019.

According to data from the Austrian Ministry of Interior, the recognition rates of Afghan asylum seekers in

31 Kohlbacher et al. 2020, p.65.

32 „Other“ refers to asylum applications that were withdrawn, suspended or discontinued. This happens mainly when, due to the Dublin Regulations, another country is responsible for processing the asylum application or the asylum seeker can no longer be found in the country (BMI, (2020) https://www.bmi.gv.at/301/Statistiken/files/2020/Asylstatistik_Oktober_2020.pdf p.47).

33 Schreiber, Dominik, Reinbenwein, Michaela, Atzenhofer, Wolfgang, Holzer, Elisabeth, Schrenk, Julia, Kada, Kevin, and Zach, Katharina, (2018). “Österreich: Groß angelegte Abschiebungs – Aktion läuft”. *Kurier*. Available at: <https://kurier.at/chronik/oesterreich/oesterreich-gross-angelegte-abschiebungs-aktion-im-laufen/400016968> [Accessed 20 October 2020].

34 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, (2018). *Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation*. Available at: <https://morr.gov.af/en> [Accessed 23 October 2020].

35 Monsutti, Alessandro, (2008). Afghan migratory strategies and the Three Solutions to the Refugee Problem. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27(1), pp.58-73. (p.60)

36 Kohlbacher et al. 2020.

37 Ibid., p.65.

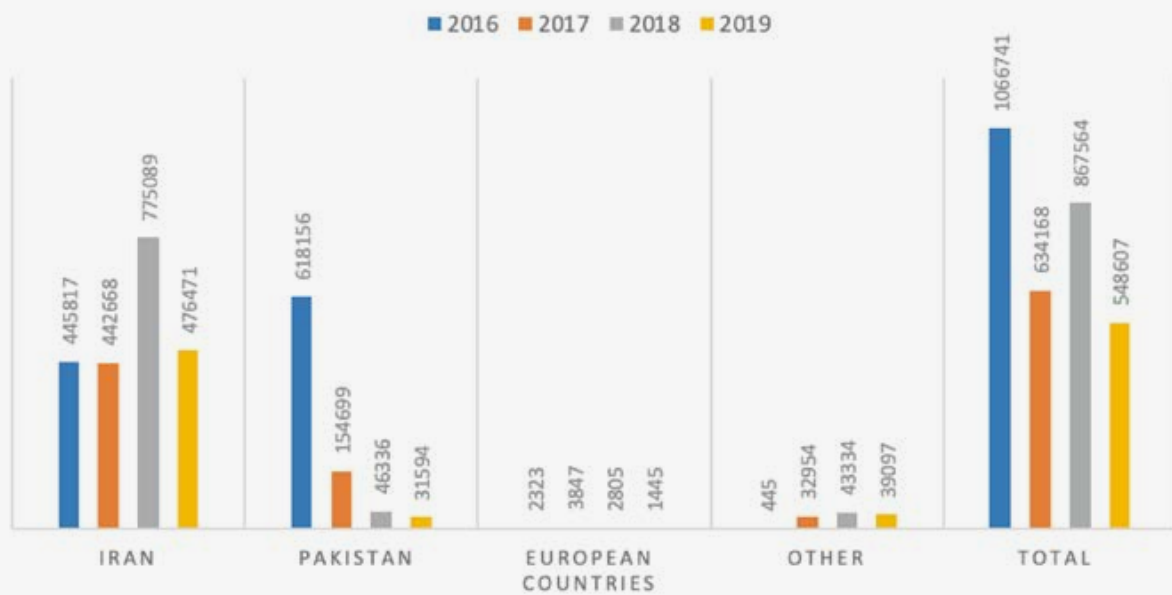
38 Ruben et al. 2009.

39 Majidi, Nassim, (2017). *From Forced Migration To Forced Returns In Afghanistan: Policy And Program Implications*. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/forced-migration-forced-returns-afghanistan> [Accessed 28 October 2020].

40 Ibid.

41 Quie and Hakimi 2020, p.11.

42 Afghanistan Human Rights Democracy Organization (AHRDO), (2019). *Deportation To Afghanistan: A Challenge To State Legitimacy And Stability?*. Available at: https://www.medico.de/fileadmin/user_upload/media/en/deportation-to-afghanistan.pdf [Accessed 7 October 2020].

Figure II: Return to Afghanistan between 2016-2019

Source: Quie and Hakimi (2020) and author's own illustration

Austria have fluctuated between 30% and 50% since 2015.⁴³ Those whose asylum applications are rejected have the right to appeal. If their appeal is unsuccessful, they have to leave the country. In that case, the return takes place either forcefully (through deportation) or on a 'voluntary' basis. Having one's application refused does not allow for the possibility of remaining in the country 'legally', consequently, it could be argued that, even where the return is 'voluntary', it is coerced and, thus, while not forced, is in fact involuntary. Where the asylum seekers refuse to leave, they are detained by the police and escorted to the airport. If the return is 'voluntary', then the returnees are supported by the IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) program and receive a reintegration package.⁴⁴

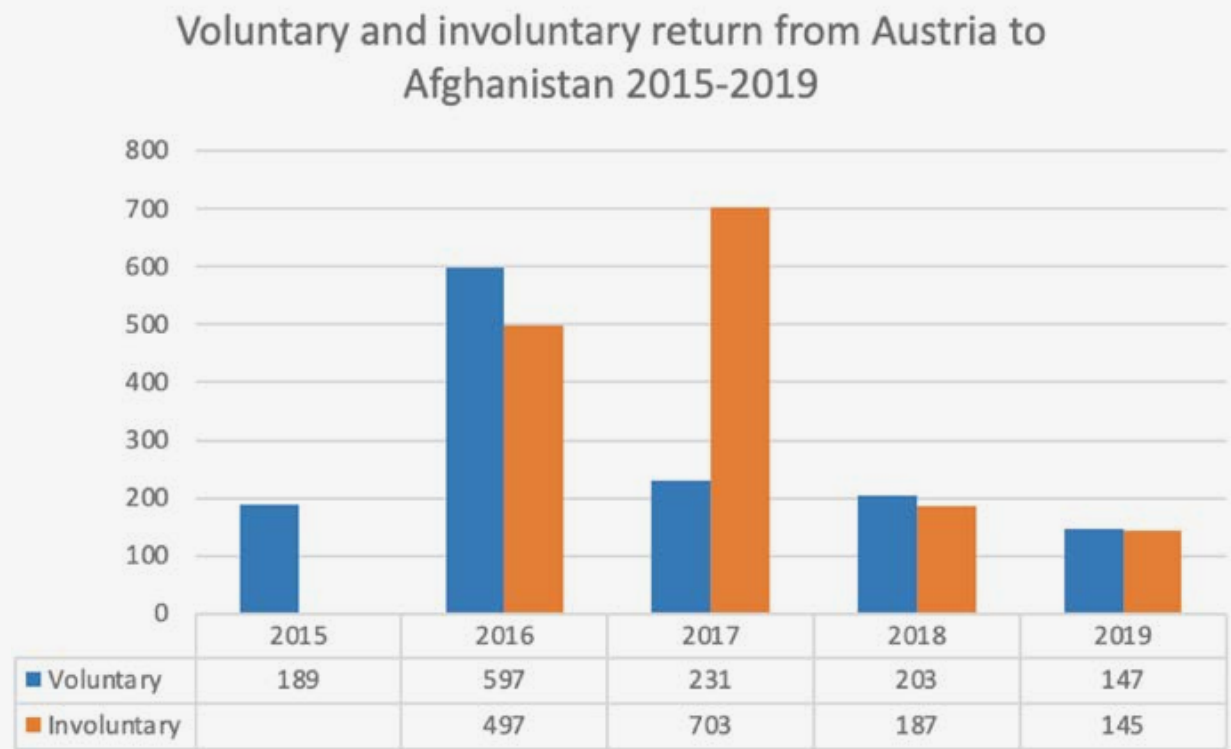
According to IOM, between 2015 and 2019, its Austrian office assisted 1,363 Afghans to return 'voluntarily' to Afghanistan. The data on how many were forcibly returned from Austria is yet to be made available. The data presented in Figure III below have been collected from the Austrian Ministry of Interior (BMI), IOM, Statista and the Austrian newspaper *Kurier*. The actual number of Afghans forcibly returned may be different.

In 2016, The Austrian newspaper, *Kurier*, reported that 1,094 Afghans were returned to Afghanistan (597 'voluntarily' and 497 forcibly). Similarly, *Kurier* also reported more than 700 deportations in 2017. Statista documented 187 forced returns of Afghans in 2018.

43 Bundesministerium Inneres (BMI). (2020). *Vorläufige Asylstatistik: Oktober 2020*. Available at: <https://www.bmi.gv.at/301/Statistiken/> [Accessed 31 December 2020].

44 Amnesty International, (2020). *Forced Back To Danger: Asylum Seekers Returned From Europe To Afghanistan*. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ASA1168662017ENGLISH.PDF> [Accessed 7 October 2020].

Figure III: Voluntary and forced returns from Austria to Afghanistan 2015-2019



Source: IOM, Kurier, BMI, Statista

Note: The number of forced returns in 2019 represent only half of the year 2019.

4. RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Afghanistan struggles with never-ending war, economic depression, ‘multi-layered poverty’, and scarcity of jobs for its general population, and for returnees in particular. The respondents fled Afghanistan or a country of first asylum due to increasing violent conflict, threats to their lives, lack of hope in the political system, increasing discrimination and lack of prospects for a future. They all took hazardous journeys to reach Austria. After years in Austria, they were coerced or forced to return to Afghanistan. Upon return, they faced physical insecurity, loss of economic opportunities through limited access to the labor market, health care and education. Forced returnees, in particular, do not benefit from effective reintegration programs. Returnees also face psycho-social pressure from the local communities in the form of shame and cultural stigma.

Section 4.2 elaborates on the post-return security risks, economic challenges, loss of social networks, and psycho-social pressure. However, in order to truly understand the effect of involuntary return (even through a voluntary return program),⁴⁵ personal accounts of returnees are an important place to start. Section 4.1 documents the experiences of ‘voluntary’ and forced return of four respondents.

4.1 Personal stories of Afghan returnees

The first two stories are of the ‘voluntary’ return of Siwash and Abbas. The second two stories are of the forced return of Dehqan and Afsar.

4.1.1. Siawash

“The more I work in Afghanistan, the more difficult it becomes. I love to work in Afghanistan, but working here is full of risks and challenges and there is no way to live in peace. The old enemies have started sending me threatening messages. I am really scared for my life.” (Siawash)

Siawash is in his late twenties. He is a returnee from eastern Afghanistan, who applied for asylum in Austria early 2011. He belongs to the Afghan elite, being part of an urban military family, whose father worked for the army. As a young man, he worked as a journalist for the local media in eastern Afghanistan. Siawash had to flee his country because of an increasing number of threats to his life as a result of his journalism. Austria granted him a one year temporary protection visa, which was extended every year until 2016. Siawash is fluent in four languages, German, English, Dari and Pashtu. While in Austria during the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, Siawash used his translation skills to help other Afghan refugees. By 2016, the Austrian authorities stopped extending his legal status. Until the end of 2018, he lived in an uncertain situation. Being undocumented meant that for two years he could not be employed in Austria. Siawash decided that *“enough is enough”* and ‘volunteered’ to return home through the IOM’s AVR program.

Siawash was not aware of any Afghan government program for the reintegration of returnees from Europe and did not benefit by any upon his return. However, Siawash’s family are members of a strong Pashtun tribe in eastern Afghanistan. He managed to use his network to secure a job in one of Afghanistan’s ministries. It was easy for him to reintegrate into his community’s social life as well as into the labor market. Not all returnees, however, enjoy the benefits of a strong tribal connection.

Upon his return, Siawash was disappointed to see that Afghanistan had become culturally more restrictive, poorer, more dangerous from a security perspective and more politically unstable. He instantly missed Austria’s peace, freedom of speech, personal security and facilities. For Siawash, economic problems were not as serious as the threat to his personal security. Having returned, Siawash receives more threats from old and new enemies than when he fled Afghanistan in the first place. In addition to the Taliban, Islamic State (IS) – a dominant force in eastern Afghanistan (also called Daesh) – continues to threaten him. He gave

⁴⁵ Majidi 2018, p.131.

three reasons for the increased threat to his personal security after his return from Austria.

“I work for the government. My position is not very high, but ... for the enemy, this is high enough to justify killing me; I have returned from Europe and have come with a different culture; and I have supposedly returned to spread a foreign culture and religion.”

As a government employee, he has to carry a gun for his personal protection. Even so, in the summer of 2020, Siawash was injured in a clash with criminal gangs near the diplomatic enclave in Kabul.

Siawash’s reintegration since his return has been solely based on his own initiative and as a result of his strong family and tribal connections. His main concern remains his personal security, and the ongoing peace talks between the Taliban negotiators and the Afghan government remain the only hope for Siawash to end the war in his country.

“I hope the current peace talks end the war in Afghanistan, so I won’t be forced to leave again.” (Siawash)

4.1.2. Abbas

“If a police or army refugee returns from Europe, and Al-Qaeda or the Taliban find out, his death will be almost certain. No-one, however, can harm me because I am always carrying weapons with me.” (Abbas)

Abbas is in his thirties and speaks five languages, Dari, Pashto, Uzbeki, German and English. After graduating from Kabul University, he joined the Afghan Special Forces in Southern Afghanistan. Coming from an economically rich family, Abbas had to leave his homeland because of increasing attacks on his and his family’s lives. As a trained soldier in the special forces, Abbas could defend himself against the Taliban attacks. However, he was concerned for his family. In order to protect them from further Taliban attacks, Abbas quit his job and left the country.

Abbas arrived in Austria as an asylum seeker in 2015 and stayed until early 2018. After a year and a half, the Austrian authorities rejected his claim for asylum. He appealed the decision, but the wait was too long. Abbas returned to Afghanistan in early 2018.

“While I was waiting for my second interview, I thought of returning to Afghanistan. I was really scared to be rejected for the second time. I thought I could not make a life in Austria if I was rejected.” (Abbas)

In the three years that he was away, Afghanistan did not change much for Abbas. His social and professional connections remained intact and helped to facilitate and speed up the process of returning him to his old job. After undergoing additional military training to refresh and update his fighting skills, he was able to obtain his old job as a soldier in the special forces. Abbas did not make use of any reintegration program by the Afghan government to reintegrate back into Afghanistan. Nor did he feel that the assistance package he received from IOM upon his return to Afghanistan helped with the process of his reintegration or of obtaining a job.

“I am happy that I have my work, my life, a good salary and respect in the society. Security has remained the main challenge and I am certain that the Afghan government and its international partners have failed us to achieve peace.” (Abbas)

Abbas admits that security and unemployment is catastrophic in Afghanistan. He has to take care of himself, in order to avoid losing his life in a Taliban attack. He is extremely wary when moving around the country. What existed in the past in terms of security and employment does not exist any longer and will not exist in the future. He empathized that other returnees with minimum skills and no social network in Afghanistan have to encounter unemployment and poverty, along with the extremely bad security situation. For Abbas, unemployment and poverty are more dangerous than the Taliban or IS. According to Abbas, both poverty and non-existence of jobs are very painful and lead to gradual death.

“You must be crazy if you return to Afghanistan with no education and no vocational training. If you return without these skills, then expect to become a drug addict, crazy or you die.” (Abbas)

Despite being a highly skilled soldier in the military, Abbas is skeptical about his country's future. He believes the international community betrayed Afghanistan by leaving it alone, especially the 'dignified exit' of the US government pulling out their remaining troops. Despite the reduction in violence since the signing of a peace deal between the US administration and the Taliban on 29 February 2020, Afghan security forces continue to lose their lives in the battlefield. Thousands of civilians have been killed or injured, yet there is no sign of de-escalation of the war. Because of his background in the special forces and cooperation with the American troops in Afghanistan, if peace talks don't succeed, Abbas intends to apply to the United States for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV).

"Austria is an extremely beautiful country and has been very kind to the Afghan refugees. Afghans who come to Austria have gone through tremendous security and migration-route risks to reach it. The Austrian authorities should reconsider their approach towards Afghan refugees. A legal status based on humanitarian grounds is the minimum that Afghans deserve to be granted." (Abbas)

4.1.3. Dehqan

"I cannot live in my home district because the Taliban control the entire territory. People refer to the Taliban in case of complaints, not to the government." (Dehqan)

A former police officer in his mid-thirties from central Afghanistan, Dehqan fled his country in 2014 due to increasing death threats from the local Taliban commander and militia in his home district. From an income perspective, he was satisfied with his earnings and would not have left Afghanistan had the Taliban commander not threatened his life. The decision to come to Austria was made along the way, due to the difficulties faced by Afghan refugees in Iran and Turkey, where he initially intended to remain before continuing his flight onwards. Dehqan believed that moving towards Europe would not only protect him from the Taliban, but allow him the opportunity to develop personally and professionally by acquiring new skills and education.

"Of course, everyone wants to have a safe life, a place where he can work, study and build a new life. Austria was in my destiny." (Dehqan)

Dehqan applied for international protection in Austria in 2015. His first asylum interview occurred a year later. However, his application for asylum was rejected. His lawyer and friends in the Afghan diaspora motivated him to stay positive and hopeful. They told him that rejection of Afghan asylum seekers in the first instance was normal. They helped him appeal the decision. This meant he had to wait for two years for his second interview, which eventually led to a similar negative decision. According to Dehqan, the reason his asylum application was rejected was because he belonged to the Pashtun tribe, who the Austrian authorities believe are not targeted by the Taliban. Dehqan argues, however, that his fellow Pashtuns are the primary targets of terror-related attacks by the Taliban.

"They [Austrian asylum authorities] told me I am a Pashtun and the Taliban don't kill fellow Pashtuns. I was so furious about such argumentation of Austrian asylum authorities." (Dehqan)

Since Dehqan's deportation in 2019, he has been living in hiding away from his home district. The driver of his flight from Afghanistan was a Taliban commander who, in Dehqan's absence, had become more powerful by expanding the territory he controls. According to Dehqan, when he fled, the Taliban was not a powerful group in his district, having to resort to 'attack and run' tactics. When he returned, the group had become a powerful force throughout his whole province.

Dehqan does not have the same social network that he used to have before his flight. Most of his friends either left Afghanistan or were killed in the war. He believes that his existing social network could not help him reintegrate into social life.

"I don't have the same social network that I used to have because many of my friends are not here in Afghanistan. They have been either killed or left Afghanistan. Afghan people have too many problems and I am one of them." (Dehqan)

In addition to security threats, Dehqan feels ‘embarrassed’ to face his relatives. For his relatives, deportation is equal to committing a crime. They ask, “*What did you do in Austria in all these years? You did not achieve anything*”. For them, Dehqan must have committed a major crime to be deported. Since his forceful return, Dehqan went to various government institutions in Kabul to apply for benefits from any reintegration program that may exist. However, he was rejected for being a ‘deportee’.

While Dehqan reflected on his situation, the Covid-19 virus spread. Despite the rapid spread of the virus, he attempted to again leave Afghanistan. However, the border to Iran was closed. Dehqan contracted the virus, but did not have money to visit a doctor or buy medicine. His Austrian friends remitted cash during his illness and he used the money to treat himself. During the summer of 2020, he started a seasonal job in an orchard in a different district. He explained that such jobs kept him busy for the time being, until he saved enough money for another attempt to reach Europe. Dehqan said that he felt disappointed and helpless since his return. All he wants is certainty in his future, a future that he can build his life upon.

“I know nothing will change in my personal life nor in the situation of this country. I can’t see a bright future either for me or for my family.” (Dehqan)

4.1.4. Afsar

Afsar is in his mid-twenties. He was born and raised as a refugee in Iran, where his parents fled to from Afghanistan during the widespread violence of the 1990s. He did not have legal status there, which meant he could not go to school. Afsar left Iran because he never felt included in the Iranian society, due to the systemic racism towards Afghan refugees. With roots in Central Afghanistan, Afsar chose Europe as his destination because he was searching for a new identity that he could associate himself with. Being ‘Afghan’ as his identity was out of the question because he was too scared to go to his parents’ homeland, Afghanistan, so had never visited.

“I did not go to Afghanistan, even though it was my parents’ country, because I had never seen it. For me, it made no difference

to move towards Europe or Afghanistan, but of course Afghanistan was not a choice because it is known for suicide attacks and the Taliban.” (Afsar)

Afsar spent two years in Greece, before making his way to Austria in late 2015. In Austria, Afsar was granted a temporary protection visa that allowed him to study German. In early 2020, Afsar was deported to Kabul. He was interviewed for this study in March 2020, almost three weeks after his arrival. Just before the forceful return to Afghanistan, Afsar cut his right-hand vein to protest against his deportation, but his self-inflicted violence did not stop the Austrian authorities from returning him. “*I cut my hand’s veins to prevent deportation*”. Afsar had never seen Afghanistan until he was forcibly ‘returned’ to that country. He knew only what he heard through the media, mostly about the war and suicide bombings.

“Anything could happen in Afghanistan. The threats are not only from the Taliban, but coming from all sides. Yes, the Taliban can attack you anytime they want but the threats of crime, suicide attacks, sticky bombs make life very difficult and unpredictable.” (Afsar)

Upon his arrival in Afghanistan, Afsar was so depressed that he attempted to commit suicide. He was terrified of being in Afghanistan for the first time in his life. He said he even searched for a pistol to shoot himself, but could not access one. He was too scared to hang himself. He also thought of injecting drugs to kill himself. He then decided to give himself some time to see how his life situation evolved in Afghanistan.

“This is my 19th day since I was deported. I have to live for some weeks here to judge how life looks like, but it already seems extremely difficult. Deportation tore my life apart.” (Afsar)

Afsar spent his first two weeks in Afghanistan at a government-run reception center, after which he was left to fend for himself. He went to the IOM office in Kabul to ask for financial assistance but was told that he was a ‘deportee’ and not a ‘voluntary’ returnee, and was therefore ineligible to any economic assistance.

Afsar had no social network, no friends or relatives to seek support from or to help him integrate into Afghanistan's social life and labor market. The injury to his hand was still visible during the interview and he said it was difficult for him to work as a result of it. Afsar planned to return to Iran where his mother and brother still live but had no money to apply for Afghanistan's identification card (tazkira) and then for a passport. Applying for a visa to Iran and renewing it every three months required cash that he did not have. He did not want to go illegally to Iran because that increased the chances of being deported. He did not want to jeopardize the status of his parents who live in Iran irregularly.

"I ask Austria not to deport Afghans. The reality of a lack of security and social life in Afghanistan is worse than what you hear in the media." (Afsar)

4.2 Risks and challenges after return to Afghanistan

The findings of the qualitative interviews are presented below according to several key themes, based on the returnees' responses regarding the challenges they faced after their return. These include threats to their safety and security, economic challenges, the loss of their social networks and psycho-social pressure from themselves, their families and the local communities.

Increasing level of violence

All respondents described personal safety and security as their major and primary challenge after their return to Afghanistan. For all 16 of the returnees, threats to their security and terror attacks were the biggest challenges since their return.

"The Taliban are around Kabul and they can kill anyone they want." (Abbas)

The overall security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated rapidly since 2014, when the international community pulled their combat troops out of Afghanistan. The worsening security situation can be measured by the increase in civilian casualties (deaths and inju-

ries). In the first nine months of 2020 alone, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan documented 2,117 civilian death and 3,822 injuries, despite the signing a peace agreement between the Taliban peace negotiators and the US administration on 29 February 2020 in Doha, Qatar.

The escalation of violence throughout Afghanistan increased the sense of threat, insecurity and fear among the returnees. All 16 of the respondents feared being killed in a random suicide bombing, a Taliban raid or being kidnapped by a criminal gang. They also feared being killed in a targeted assassination, which have increased dramatically throughout 2020.

Threats to their personal safety was the main driving factor that forced the respondents to leave in the first place. These threats restarted upon their return and came not only from the Taliban, but also through personal animosity, religious stigmatization and being perceived as too 'Westernized'. Those who returned in 2019 and 2020 were living in hiding, fearing for their personal safety.

Nadir who fled to Iran with his parents when he was just one year old, knew nothing about Afghanistan when the Austrian government forced him to return there. His knowledge of Afghanistan was based solely on media reports and his parents' stories. As he landed at Kabul airport, a sewage truck laden with explosives detonated near the German Embassy in Kabul, killing and injuring more than 500 people.⁴⁶

"I had left Afghanistan when I was just one year old and returned to it as a deportee. The deportation authorities escorted me to Kabul. As we landed at Kabul airport, the Taliban welcomed me with a huge suicide bombing, which took place in front of the German Embassy in Kabul. Over 500 people were killed and injured. I was in the state of shock and disbelief." (Nadir)

Abbas, who reentered the Afghan Special Forces upon his return, blamed the EU for failing to bring peace and stability in his beleaguered country.

"More than 40 powerful countries, including Europeans, came to secure Afghanistan. But they failed. Now it is only

⁴⁶ Rasmussen, Sune Engle, (2017). "Kabul: at least 90 killed by massive car bomb in diplomatic quarter". *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/31/huge-explosion-kabul-presidential-palace-afghanistan> [Accessed 13 November 2020].

the Americans that fight in Afghanistan. But even they are running away. The Europeans are equally responsible for the security failure. They should act responsibly and stop deporting Afghans.” (Abbas)

For *Dehqan*, who was a former police officer, security had become worse than when he had to flee Afghanistan to seek international protection in 2014. Until he managed to leave Afghanistan, the Taliban threatened *Dehqan* on multiple occasions.

“Before my flight, those Taliban commanders were always on the run, but today they have more power and control more territory than before.” (Dehqan)

According to *Siawash*, who works for the Afghan government, before leaving Afghanistan, he never had to carry a gun. Upon return and working for the government, however, he has to carry a gun for his own protection.

“There are many layers of security threats. You cannot do anything without carrying a gun. I have to have a gun to live. You can also be kidnapped for ransom or even killed if you don’t have money. Now I am scared of sticky bombs that the Taliban stick to your car.” (Siawash)

For 15 of the returnees, after spending years out of the country, Kabul looked more like a city ready for war. The presence of light and heavy weaponry on the streets of Kabul was shocking and stressful.

“After many years of living in Austria, I saw guns, tanks and security forces armed to the teeth at Kabul airport. It was shocking to see all this when you return from a peaceful country like Austria. I was horrified by these.” (Asad)

4.2.2. Economic challenges

In the last 20 years, the international community pumped billions of dollars of financial aid into Afghanistan. The economy created during these years was based on the agendas of donor countries, rather than on the real needs of Afghans.⁴⁷ Since the withdrawal of the US-led international troops from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, thousands of Afghans lost their jobs. Poverty rose, as hope for a peaceful Afghanistan faded.⁴⁸ “Growth rates that had fluctuated around 10 percent since 2005 already dropped to nearly two percent in 2013 and since 2014 have been close to zero.”⁴⁹

The majority of respondents left Afghanistan due to threats to their safety. Due to the long wait associated with the asylum procedure, they were unable to establish an economic position in Austria, before being forced to return to Afghanistan empty-handed. It must be noted that they did all receive the minimum allowance of living costs. Nonetheless, nearly a dozen of the respondents had either sold their property or borrowed money from family and relatives in order to flee. Upon return, they were under extreme pressure for failing to pay off the debts that the flight and journey to Austria cost them.

Of the respondents, 13 struggled to find a stable income and access to social services since their return, and thus faced tremendous economic difficulties. During their years in Austria, they lost their friends and most of their social network. Their social and professional status degraded compared to the pre-migration situation because they did not get the chance to undertake training or upgrade their skills in the host country. For some returnees like *Babur*, economic hardship after deportation is like “putting salt on a deep wound”.

“Economic hardship is the most difficult challenge after deportation. Whoever gets deported from Austria, Germany and other European countries, they go mad because of economic difficulties.” (Babur)

47 Ahmad, Ali, (2018). *Refugees return to poverty, unemployment and despair: Afghanistan labor market and the status of women*. Available at: https://www.vdc.org/fileadmin/michael/studien/afghanistan_s_labor_market_and_the_status_of_women-1.pdf [Accessed 31 December 2020].

48 Ibid.

49 Mielke, Katja, and Grawert, Elke, (2016). *Why Afghanistan Is Not A Safe Country Of Origin*. Available at: https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx_bicctools/policy_brief_1_2016_e_01.pdf [Accessed 26 September 2020].

The prospect of economic stability, however, was relatively better with the ‘voluntary’ returnees. The three ‘voluntary’ returnees received an assistance package of nearly 3,000 USD from IOM after their arrival in Kabul. However, their reintegration into society and the labor market was not benefited by this assistance package. Although they were in a better position, economically, it is their strong connections to the government and local politicians that helped them receive permanent jobs. These jobs, however, come with a price: the threat to their lives. While they work in three different sectors of the Afghan government, they all face daily threats from the Taliban, IS fighters and other armed groups, such as criminal gangs.

“If you work for the government of Afghanistan, the Taliban try to stop you. If they cannot stop you, they kill you. I face these challenges on a daily basis. When I leave home in the morning, I am not sure whether I will come back alive or not.”
(Siawash)

Nearly all 16 respondents complained about nepotism and corruption in the Afghan government. They all confirmed that being connected to local politicians and influential tribal elders was key to getting a job. *Asad* hoped for the establishment of a proper financial support system for deportees after their return. He also suggested that the Afghan government should have minimum involvement because of rampant corruption throughout the government system. He emphasized that aid from the Afghan government will not reach him or any other deportees.

“The Afghan government has no plan either on paper or in practice to help returnees reintegrate into society.” (Abbas)

Of the respondents, 12 claimed that they approached different governmental institutions for reintegration support in the weeks and months after their return, but were rejected instantly for being ‘deportees’, and not ‘voluntary’ returnees. The Afghan government

provided no assistance for the returnees in terms of training or job opportunities. *Abbas* was the only one who received further military training in Turkey and inside Afghanistan after he returned to his old job.

All 16 interviewees stated that the government was unable to provide security or employment for them. For at least five respondents, joining the Afghan security forces was the only option, despite the frighteningly large number of casualties among the police and army.

“The only place to get a job is the army. It is extremely dangerous because you have two options, kill or get killed.” (Zaki)

Amid deepening insecurity and economic fragility, the growing internal displacement and return in large numbers of refugees from neighboring countries and from Europe have strained the availability of limited public services and intensified the competition for scarce economic opportunities.⁵⁰ This situation affects the general population, and returnees in particular. For most of the involuntary returnees from Austria, employment with a stable source of income has multi-layer positive consequences. Engaging in the labor market (together with a more stable security situation) lowers the risk of re-migration. A stable income also helps returnees to overcome the trauma of their forceful return to a country, which in many cases, had changed significantly since they left.

4.2.3. Loss of social network

The respondents in this section fall into three categories in terms of their relationship with friends, relatives and local communities. In the first category are the three ‘voluntary’ returnees (*Abbas*, *Faryad* and *Siawash*) that kept in contact with their former colleagues, friends and relatives while in Austria. When they decided to return, their friends and relatives were fully aware, and the returnees reconstructed some of their broken ties. This category of returnees came from middle class and relatively rich families.

“After I returned to Kabul from Austria, it

⁵⁰ World Bank, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), (2019). *Living Conditions And Settlement Decisions Of Recent Afghan Returnees: Findings From A 2018 Phone Survey Of Afghan Returnees And UNHCR Data*. Available at: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/344311561017281303/living-conditions-and-settlement-decisions-of-recent-afghan-returnees-findings-from-a-2018-phone-survey-of-afghan-returnees-and-unhcr-data> [Accessed 10 November 2020], pp.7-25.

took me one month to meet friends and the relevant authorities to get my job back. I took some “Sheerini” (bribe) to the authorities with me to flatter them.” (Faryad)

In the second category are five forced returnees, four of whom, Afsar, Asad, Hamza and Nadir, were born in Iran or had fled there with their parents when they were children (as young as one year old). The fifth returnee, *Babur*, was born and raised in Pakistan. For this group of returnees, Afghanistan was a foreign country, about which they knew only through their parents and media reports. At least two of them said that they preferred to be deported to Iran, where most of their friends and contacts were. Upon return, *Nadir* stayed in Kabul for a month to prepare his travel documents, in order to make his way back to Iran.

“When I reached Kabul in 2017, my phone battery was dead. I went to the reception center where I could stay for few days. I received only a small amount for the taxi to get to the reception center. As soon as I reached there, I charged my phone battery and called my father who was in Iran. I sent him my location because I did not know anything about Kabul. My father forwarded my location to his friend from his old days in Kabul who came and picked me up from the reception center. I stayed at his home until my father came from Iran to take me with him. I got my Afghan identification card (tazkira), applied for a passport and then got a visa for Iran. After spending one month in Kabul, my father and I traveled to Iran.” (Nadir)

The remaining eight respondents fall into the third category. The reality in their districts and local communities had changed significantly in their absence. *Omar*’s home district of eastern Afghanistan was previously controlled by the Taliban. It was their death threats that forced *Omar* to flee. When he returned,

IS had replaced the Taliban. He could not even travel to his hometown, due to the presence of armed groups associated with IS. He said that moving to Kabul was not an option because it was harder to find work without knowing anybody in the city. *Mansoor* from a south-eastern province near Kabul shared a similar experience. However, he could not return to his province because of feuds with family members who were in the Taliban.

Dehqan was originally from central Afghanistan and had worked as a police officer. Upon return, he was working as a seasonal farmer in a neighboring district to his home village. He could not live in his home district or Kabul for two reasons. He escaped from cultural shame in his own district and avoided Kabul because of the high living costs and the unpredictability of Taliban or IS attacks. Additionally, almost none of the people, with whom he had a professional or personal relationship, any longer lived in Afghanistan.

“I don’t have the same social network that I used to have. Many of my friends were either killed or left the country.” (Dehqan)

4.2.4. Stigma and psycho-social pressure

The experience of stigma is probably the most difficult social and psychological issue confronting deportees.⁵¹ Since their return, all 16 of the respondents experienced stigmatization. In their interactions with various population sectors and institutional agents of the Afghan government, they have been called ‘losers’, ‘deportees’ and ‘criminals’. The stigma⁵² attached to return migration made life extremely difficult, if not impossible, for all returnees regardless of the nature of their return.

“My family does not like me because I am a deportee. It is a huge shame to be deported from Austria. My brother works in Iran and he keeps sending money to his five children and wife. But look at me! I am nothing. I am also dependent on my brother. I wish I had my own source of income.” (Babur)

51 Schuster, Liza, and Majidi, Nassim, (2015). “Deportation stigma and re-migration”. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(4), pp.635-652.

52 Stigma is defined as an ‘attribute that is deeply discrediting’ and causes the individual to be classified as different from others, from the norm, undesirable and therefore to be rejected, reducing his/her identity ‘from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one’ (Schuster and Majidi 2015, p.2).

“Since my return, I have developed a permanent headache and growing stress. My acquaintances often ask me questions. Why was I deported? They think that I must have committed a crime. For them, deportation is equal to committing a crime.” (Hamza)

“I was really scared when I landed at Kabul airport. I thought I would be killed or the government would send me to prison for running away from my job. I traveled to ... (a province in the north) where I isolated myself for 20 days. I wanted no-one to know that I was back and had been deported.” (Yosuf)

Like Yosuf, the 13 involuntary returnees found themselves facing limited choices and resources, a country that had become more insecure and poorer, and a social and professional network that, in some cases, had disappeared entirely. Where a network remained, returnees’ forced and involuntary return led to that network of family and wider communities excluding them.

“I have been devastated mentally, socially and economically since I was forced to return to a country that is not my home.” (Babur)

After security and economic challenges, 13 of interviewees spoke of the lack of understanding by their families about how much they had suffered en route to Europe and in Austria. They found it difficult to explain to their families that migration to Austria was very different than to Iran or Pakistan. Nadir’s family is in Iran and doing economically well. However, his father blames him for failing to succeed in Austria.

“I don’t think they [his family] understand what sufferings I went through. They don’t know how to make me smile.” (Nadir)

“The pressure from my family members especially my parents is very strong. My parents are in some sorts of rivalry with the other relatives. They keep asking me why the children of X and Y relatives reached Europe and succeeded in establishing

themselves, but their son failed in Austria. Why other Afghans were granted asylum and their child was rejected. My parents don’t understand what difficulties I went through.” (Asad)

Another returnee, Zelgai, shared a similar experience. His family blame him for wasting the nearly four years he spent in Austria. According to them, he was returned to a country with no future, without having earned any money or obtaining additional education or training.

Four of the returnees spoke of being accused of spreading a foreign culture and a different religion. Their neighbors and local communities believe they converted to Christianity while in Austria, and that they returned to spread it among the local population. Kaihan from northern Afghanistan, who is in his early twenties, was in a relationship with a European woman when he lived in Austria. He posted a picture of him with his girlfriend on his Facebook page. This attracted gossip among his family, neighbors and relatives. The gossip is that Kaihan was not deported, but returned on a mission to convert people to Christianity. Kaihan fears that the Christianity-related gossip would be used to justify his death, not only by the Taliban but even by his local community. Siawash, who voluntarily returned to Afghanistan, shared similar concerns to Kaihan. For the Taliban and IS fighters in eastern Afghanistan, Siawash is similarly a legitimate target.

“I work for the government of Afghanistan, I have come from Europe with a different culture and they believe I have returned to spread a foreign culture and religion.” (Siawash)

The psycho-social pressure of being returned from Austria has been enormous, and significantly exacerbates the lack of employment opportunities, rampant corruption in the Afghan government and having no *wasita* (connections) to access services. Many of the respondents acknowledged that they might be able to cope with the psycho-social pressure if they had access to a stable income.

“I will overcome the stigma, stereotypes and names, such as “loser”, in the long-run, but having no money to buy food is

more frustrating than the stigmatization.”
(Koshan)

4.3 Factors triggering re-migration

Irrespective of the original reason for the arrival in Austria, Liza Schuster and Nassim Majidi (2013) have identified three factors in triggering re-migration of involuntary returnees. These are:

“deepening economic opportunity losses and the impossibility of repaying debts incurred by the initial departure, the social existences or lack of transnational and local ties and responsibilities, and finally the social-cultural shame of failure and suspicions of the community.”⁵³

Nonetheless, the deteriorating security situation remains the main reason for leaving Afghanistan for both the forced and ‘voluntary’ returnees in the study. Eight of the respondents, including two ‘voluntary’ returnees, described their security situation as ‘grave’. Since their return to Afghanistan, they received direct threats in the form of letters, phone calls and word-of-mouth from the Taliban or IS. The threats to the returnees’ safety are real. In December 2020, while on duty, Abbas was attacked by a roadside bomb. He had to undergo surgery due to the severe and extensive injuries he received to his lower body.

“I will take this dangerous route to Europe again. I know it is very dangerous and more difficult than before, but I am waiting for my death in Afghanistan. Instead of waiting, I will take the risky route.” (Zelgai)

After security, which affects all the returnees, this study shows that the manner of return can affect potential triggers for re-migration. Even though ‘voluntary’ returnees were coerced to return by the rejection of their asylum application, they were less likely to re-migrate. This is because, during their absence, they

did not lose their social network and were thus able to return to their previous jobs or obtain new ones using their family and professional connections. Even though they came from relatively wealthy families, the ‘voluntariness’ of their return entitled them to the IOM assistance package to help alleviate the debts of their original journey. Finally, staying in touch with their social network lessened their sense of shame, but not the threat posed by stigmatization.

For the forced returnees, however, the economic loss, together with the loss of their social network and the psycho-social pressure that comes from shame and stigmatization still exists. Economic losses are a major cause of re-migration for forced returnees. Of the respondents, 11 stated that they or their parents sold land, cars, family jewelry, the houses they lived in, as well as borrowed money from friends and relatives. They hoped to repay these debts, which run into the thousands of Euros, once they settled in Europe. However, after deportation, they were unable to repay their debts. Out of the eleven indebted returnees, seven had already made multiple efforts to leave Afghanistan.⁵⁴

“We had a family shop that we sold along with my father’s car. I also borrowed money from our relatives to cover the cost of my journey. I still owe them.” (Babur)

A lack of economic and employment opportunities trigger re-migration. For Zaki, a poor economy and lack of employment opportunities pushed him to leave again in order to be able to support his parents. They sold their house to pay for his original journey to Austria, and now live with extended family. After his return, he traveled to Iran for work. However, like for millions of other Afghan refugees, there seemed no prospect for Zaki, due to the continued international pressure on Iran. He was deported back to Afghanistan from Iran before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“My life has really gotten worse after my return. I cannot wait for a miracle to

53 Schuster, Liza, and Majidi, Nasim, (2013). “What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans”. *Migration Studies*, 1(2), pp.221-240.

54 Asad and Omar moved to Iran and Turkey. Both were deported from Turkey. Faryad moved to Turkey and got permanent residence and bought a house in Istanbul and now moves between Kabul and Istanbul when security gets bad. Nadir was picked up by his father after his forceful return. Dehqan and Yosuf attempted to migrate in 2020 but the border between Afghanistan and Iran was closed due to Covid-19 restriction.

*happen to get a job and earn a living here.”
(Zaki)*

To the loss of a social network in Afghanistan, can be added the driver of a social network in Austria, which was developed over the years that the returnees spent there. A few of the returnees wanted to reunite with a girlfriend, an ‘Austrian mother’, or members of their families. *Asad* was deported multiple times (from France, Austria, Iran and Turkey), sees no future in his country. He is grateful, however, for the personal development opportunities he received in Austria. He wished to return the favor of his personal development one day, if he could make it again to Austria.

*“I wish I could return to Austria one day
and return all the good things that I learnt*

*there. I wish I could return their favor with
my art and gratitude.” (Asad)*

The power of shame and stigmatization should not be underestimated in creating additional pressure to re-migrate.⁵⁵ The ‘shaming’ endured by returnees from Austria after their return, in the form of a ‘sense of failure’ and being a ‘loser’, contributed to the re-migration process. Stigmatization, such as being considered too ‘Westernized’ or an ‘infidel’, not only affected the returnees’ psyche but also put them in danger of being targeted by the Taliban, IS or even their relatives and local community. This form of stigmatization increased the returnees’ sense of insecurity, potentially triggering them to again take the dangerous route to Europe.

55 Schuster and Majidi 2013, p.10.

5. CONCLUSION

The success of ongoing peace talks remains the best and only hope for a violence-free future for all 16 of the respondents. On 12 September 2020 in Doha, peace negotiations to end the Afghan war began with the first face-to-face meeting between the Afghan government delegation and the Taliban. After a three-week break in December, the negotiations were to restart on 6 January 2021. However, the Taliban leaders, who travelled to Pakistan during the break, had not returned.⁵⁶ *Siawash* was hopeful for the peace talks to produce some tangible results and for his country to become safe again.

“I really hope that I am not forced to leave Afghanistan again.” (Siawash)

In the recent Asia Foundation Survey, more than half of the survey respondents (54%) said that peace was achievable in Afghanistan, despite the rise in the number of attacks by the Taliban. Throughout 2020, as at 29 December, there were 18,200 insurgent attacks, for almost all of which (99%) the Taliban was said to be responsible.⁵⁷

The economy, for the Afghan people in general, and returnees in particular, might not change overnight. However, ending violence through peace negotiations is a prerequisite for a better, peaceful and more prosperous future. For *Koshan*, a poor economic situation does not matter, as long as he lives in peace and free of threats.

“I want to have a life free of fear and intimidation, even with minimum financial resources. It does not matter where. If I am to live in Afghanistan in peace, I am more than happy to stay and live in the country where I was born.” (Koshan)

The future remains uncertain for all of the interviewees. Even though a ‘voluntary’ returnee, who was able to restart his old job with a decent salary after his return to Afghanistan, *Abbas* was attacked by the Taliban in December 2020. His car struck by a roadside bomb, severely injuring his lower body. The 13 forced returnees, in addition to the extremely difficult security situation, suffered from losing their social network, a lack of job opportunities and from psycho-social pressure.

⁵⁶ Bin Javaid, Osama, (2021). Why Afghanistan-Taliban peace talks have not reached breakthrough. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/12/why-have-the-afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks-stalled> [Accessed 28 January 2021].

⁵⁷ *Ariana News*, (2020). “NDS Chief Tells Senators Taliban Behind 99 Percent Of Attacks”. Available at: <https://ariananews.af/nds-chief-tells-senators-taliban-behind-99-percent-of-attacks/> [Accessed 31 December 2020].

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

“The Austrian authorities should come and see the situation in Afghanistan with their own eyes. Until they feel the pain of deportation, they cannot understand it.”
(Asad)

In the light of semi-structured interviews’ findings, VIDC makes the following recommendations:

Afghanistan is not a safe country

The Afghan government has failed to protect its citizens throughout the years, and it continues to be unable to provide protection to returnees from Europe. The Taliban control more territory in Afghanistan than any time since they were ousted from power in 2001. Consequently, no place in Afghanistan is safe for returnees, and Austria should immediately halt the deportation of Afghans to Afghanistan, irrespective of the JWF agreement. Furthermore, the asylum decisions by the Austrian government regarding Afghan asylum seekers should reflect the reality of Afghanistan’s security situation for fleeing Afghans.

Additionally, the Austrian government should reconsider ‘returning’ to Afghanistan Afghans, who were born, or had lived all their lives, in a different country. Their personal security is even more at risk, due to their lack of knowledge of the country and an absence of a social, professional and tribal network to provide protection and access to the labor market.

Allow asylum seekers access to the labor market in Austria

Granting asylum seekers access to the labor market, educational system and socio-political life in Austria would allow Afghan returnees to utilize their skills and experience in Afghanistan. It would also minimize

the economic and psycho-social pressure on returnees. The psycho-social pressure often distances an already dwindled social network, further lowering the chances of returnees finding employment and thus triggering re-migration.

Develop a reintegration support system for returnees in Afghanistan

Currently, the Afghan government is unable to provide effective assistance to returnees in general, and from Austria in particular. International organizations target particular groups. For instance, the UNHCR supports the more than four million Internally displaced people (IDPs) in over-crowded camps in Afghanistan. While many returnees become IDPs due to their inability to return to their district of origin, they do not receive specialized support. The IOM does support returnees with an assistance package, but only those who return ‘voluntarily’. However, as this study shows, those that do so, have a social, tribal and professional network that remained intact during their absence. The IOM assistance package did not help the ‘voluntary’ returnees to reintegrate into the Afghan society or return to the labor market.

None of the deportees were assisted by IOM. However, it is those, who were returned forcefully that are most in need of reintegration support. A reintegration support system needs to be developed to assist all types of returnees to reintegrate into the Afghan labor market, thereby minimizing the chances of re-migration. This is the job for, not only the Afghan government, but also the deporting country – such as Austria, – with the assistance of international institutions and local organizations, together with the Afghan diaspora organizations in Austria.

Abbreviations

AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
BMI	Ministry of Interior, Austria
EU	European Union
IDPs	Internally displaced people
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IS	Islamic State (also called Daesh)
JWF	EU-Afghanistan Joint Way Forward on migration issues
MoRR	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, Afghanistan
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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