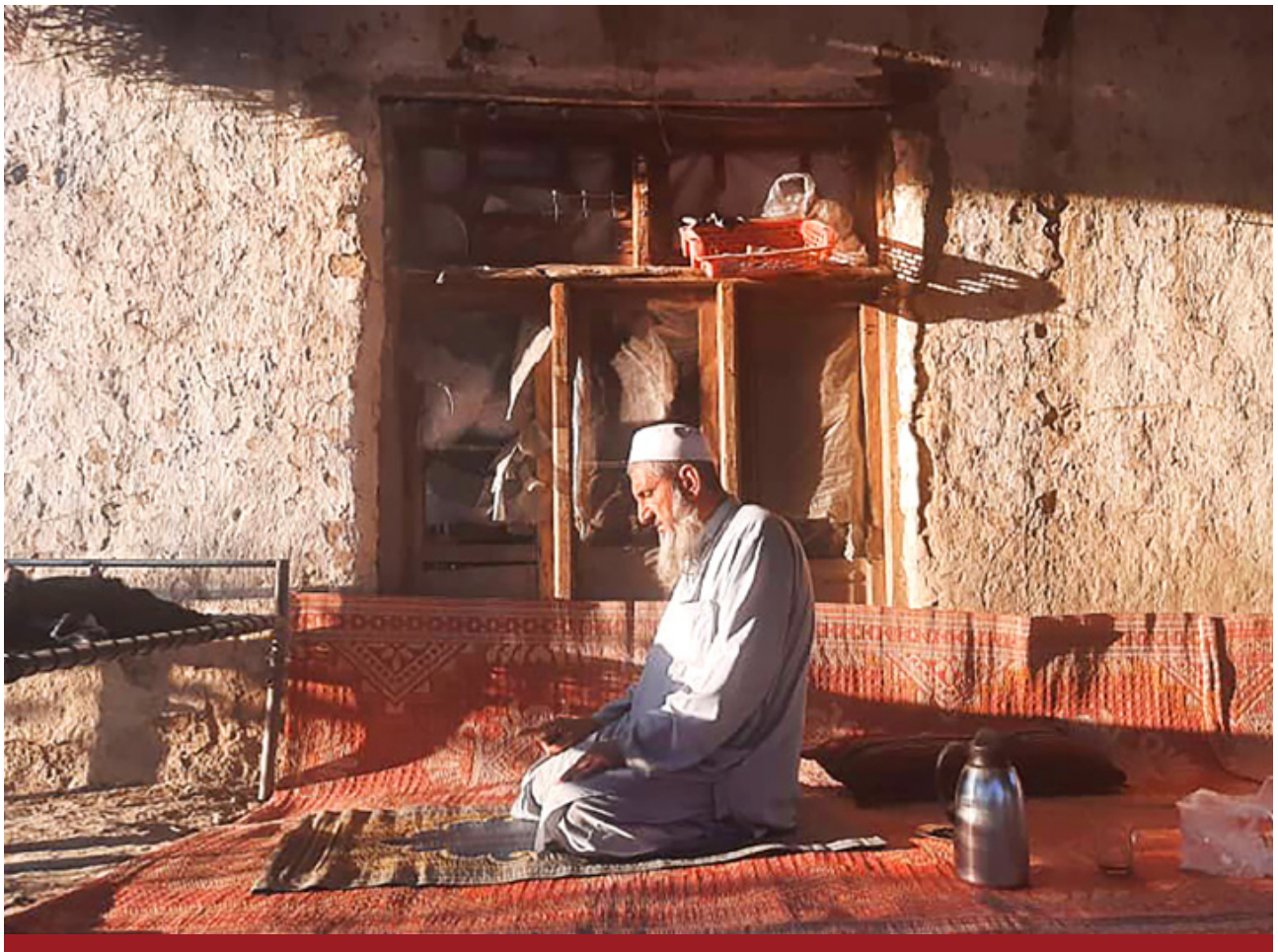


# From Pakistan to Afghanistan: Returning to 'Asli Watan' – the true homeland

Ali Ahmad

February 2022



© ADPRO

## THE AUTHOR

### Ali Ahmad

is a PhD candidate at the Department for Migration and Globalisation at the Danube University Krems (DUK). He received his Master's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies from the European Peace University (EPU). Ahmad has been working as a consultant for the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC) since 2015 and has written research papers on Afghan refugees and diaspora communities in Europe. His most recent study for VIDC, "From Austria to Afghanistan: Forced return and a new migration cycle", was published in January 2021. As a trained doctor, he has also worked in various international research and media organisations and has published extensively on political, security and social issues in Afghanistan. His research areas include migration, diaspora, labor market and non-state security actors in Afghanistan.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The study "From Pakistan to Afghanistan: Returning to 'Asli Watan' – the true homeland" is conducted under the project "'Dard Kush' II - Strengthening Livelihoods of Afghan Refugees and Pakistani Host Communities (with specific focus on women)". This project is currently implemented by Formation, Awareness & Community Empowerment Society (FACES) Pakistan in Lahore, together with Caritas Austria and Caritas St. Pölten, in partnership with VIDC and funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA).



**Caritas**  
Austria

**Caritas**  
Diözese St. Pölten

### Publisher:

Wiener Institut für Internationalen Dialog und Zusammenarbeit  
– Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC)  
Möllwaldplatz 5/9, A-1040 Vienna,  
[www.vidc.org](http://www.vidc.org)

Author: Ali Ahmad  
Editor: Michael Fanizadeh (VIDC)  
Proof reading: Margarita Fourer  
Cover Picture: @ADPRO

Published in accordance with §25 of the Media Law.

Copyright: Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation, January 2022  
(VIDC), Möllwaldplatz 5/3, A-1040 Vienna.

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

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the editor/VIDC.

# CONTENT

<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2. OBJECTIVE AND METHOD</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>3. BACKGROUND</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Flight from Afghanistan .....	8
Return to Afghanistan .....	9
<b>4. RETURNING TO ASLI WATAN: KEY FINDINGS OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Factors triggering return from Pakistan to <i>Asli Watan</i> .....	11
Reintegration assistance in <i>Asli Watan</i> .....	13
Employment and vocational training .....	13
Access to services .....	15
Life improvements observed during the second interview visit.....	16
Fragile hopes for peace talks .....	17
<b>5. CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Some useful links .....	21

## FOREWORD

The study presented by VIDC consultant Ali Ahmad investigates why Afghans decided to return to Afghanistan from Pakistan, and which professional skills gained in Pakistan have helped them to reintegrate in Afghanistan. When our Afghan project partner, the Afghanistan Development and Peace Research Organization (ADPRO), began conducting interviews for this study in late 2020, the situation in Afghanistan was entirely different. Despite the extensive economic, social and, especially, security crisis in the country, there was still hope for a better future. This hope is reflected in the statements of the interviewees. Although the women and men interviewed were not hesitant to criticize the government of the time and to point out that the government in Afghanistan did not provide any support for returnees.

The international community sent out messages that they would not simply accept the Taliban's military triumph. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2021, the newly appointed U.S. National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, informed his Afghan counterpart in a telephone conversation that the U.S. intended to review the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement signed on the 29<sup>th</sup> of February 2020 by the Trump administration. According to the transcript of the conversation released by the White House, the new U.S. administration wanted to reassess the agreement to determine "whether the Taliban was living up to its commitment to cut ties with terrorist groups to reduce violence in Afghanistan and to engage in a meaningful negotiation with the Afghan government and other stakeholders."

As we know, things turned out quite differently. The U.S. President, Joe Biden, ordered the withdrawal of U.S. troop from Afghanistan on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2021.

The allied countries, including Austria, followed suit. Following the withdrawal, the collapse of the government and the government army in Afghanistan occurred much faster than expected and predicted by intelligence agencies. Women's rights activists, (female) judges, journalists and other civil society actors were also surprised by the dynamics of events and were unable to escape to safety when the Taliban entered Kabul on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2021.

At the end of this introduction, we would like to pay tribute to Maroof Sadat, who conducted the interviews with the men for this study on behalf of ADPRO. Mr. Sadat was sadly killed by "unknown gunmen" in Jalalabad in early October 2021. We are shocked and do not know if his death was related to our research. May his soul rest in peace! Our condolences go to his family and to his colleagues at ADPRO, to whom we would like to express our gratitude for their good cooperation. We would like to especially thank ADPRO's director, Emal Haidary, for his excellent work in carrying out the interviews during the COVID-19 mobility restrictions and the security challenges in Afghanistan. The Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC) would also like to express its appreciation to Saeed Ahmad Safi, in particular, for transcribing the interviews in the quickest possible timeframe. A graduate of Business Administration from Punjab Technical University, and a researcher at the ADPRO Kabul office, Mr. Safi also provided some valuable observations from the recorded interviews. Finally, we would like to thank the author of this study, Ali Ahmad, for his excellent work and the Austrian Development Agency for its funding.

Michael Fanizadeh,  
Project Co-ordinator, VIDC

# 1. INTRODUCTION

***“Afghanistan is my ancestral land. We have a lot of hope to live in our Asli Watan and believe in its future. If Afghanistan is destroyed, then we are also destroyed. We cannot live in a foreign country our whole life. I hope my children get educated and help Afghanistan to develop.”***

**Shaheen**

Between December 2020 and March 2021, the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC), in partnership with the Afghanistan Development Peace Research Organization (ADPRO), carried out research in Afghanistan’s eastern Nangarhar province. The initial objective of the study was to explore the life of 10 families who received vocational training by the Formation, Awareness & Community Empowerment Society (FACES) Pakistan in Lahore in the years before they returned to Afghanistan. The aim was also to investigate what skills and competencies they required upon their return in order to find work in the Afghan labor market. However, due to the difficult security and economic situation in Afghanistan, the families initially selected for this study had moved back to Pakistan’s Lahore. Therefore, it was necessary to identify new returnee families. Nangarhar province was selected due to being one of the largest recipients of returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

With the help of various sources, ADPRO contacted 10 families to carry out semi-structured interviews (SSI) in Nangarhar’s capital city, Jalalabad, as well as nearby districts. The interviews were conducted with seven male household heads and three females. The aim was to meet and interview each family at least two times, with an eight-week gap between each visit. During the interviews, the returnee families provided different perspectives on their return and their reasons for remaining in Afghanistan, even though their life was not improving. The study also attempts to look into the conditions of reintegration of returnees in Afghanistan,

after their return to what they all called ‘Asli Watan’ – their true homeland.

Over the last 20 years, Pakistan supported the Taliban insurgency against the U.S.-backed government that collapsed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2021.<sup>1</sup> The families interviewed for this study had lived in Pakistan’s Punjab region as refugees during the various phases of the war in Afghanistan, which began in 1978. The 10 returnee families interviewed had returned to Afghanistan after 2017 for personal reasons, promises of support by the Afghan government, and as the result of pressure from Pakistani authorities arising from the growing political tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the years. The research participants came from different socio-economic backgrounds, had diverse working background, and lived and worked in various districts of Nangarhar. The participants included drivers, trainers, a former teacher, a traditional medicine practitioner, a lab technician, and a housewife.

*Asli Watan* motivated all of the respondents’ return to Afghanistan. For them, the concept of *Asli Watan* was based on ‘homesickness’ at every stage of the migratory experience. This included the separation from their social, cultural and tribal networks, which gave them a feeling of ‘loss’, and made it difficult to adjust to their Pakistani communities despite spending decades as refugees in Pakistan.

For some of the respondents, return from Pakistan to Afghanistan was a difficult choice to make. The peace talks to end the war between the Taliban and the former U.S.-backed government generated the only optimism for respondents; optimism that was dashed by the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Respondents expressed concern regarding the security situation, corruption, unemployment, the potential of a Taliban takeover (which became a reality in August 2021), and the lack of reintegration services.

<sup>1</sup> Kugelman, Michael, (2021). Pakistan’s friendship with the Taliban is changing. 13 September 2021. *Foreign Policy*: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/13/pakistan-taliban-ties-afghanistan/> (accessed 3 November 2021).

***“When I wanted to return to Afghanistan, all my friends told me not to go to Afghanistan because I would be killed in the war. I believe the day of death is certain, and I can’t change it. Some of those people who warned me against returning have passed away due to illness. But look at me, I am still alive and working in a war-ravaged country.”***

**Hamid**

The research findings demonstrate some significant insights into the gaps in the reintegration programs, which the former Afghan government failed to address. For all the interviewees, unemployment was a key concern and prevalent as a result of the restricted mobility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdowns. The interviewees viewed “having a regular income” as more important than security.

***“The government should create employment opportunities for the returnees. Doctors, farmers, engineers and every sector should have employment opportunities. This is the job of the government to expand its labor force and integrate returnees. Employment prevents people joining the insurgents. Jobs help reduce the violence. So make good investment in employment opportunities. Unemployment is the biggest challenge. People spend thousands and thousands of dollars to migrate overseas, if they do half of that hard work in their own country, they will have a better life here along with their families. We always say that Afghanistan has 5000 years history, but unfortunately, we have done nothing to help this country.”***

**Mia Mohammad Agha**

The respondents confirmed that they had access to education and healthcare services in their areas of residence. However, respondents were concerned about the low quality of education and the prohibitive cost of healthcare services and medicine. Only the interviewees who lived in Jalalabad city and Kama district<sup>2</sup> had better access to healthcare facilities. The remainder found the distance of health centers prohibitive.

<sup>2</sup> Kama district is at the eastern part of Jalalabad city.



## 2. OBJECTIVE AND METHOD

This study aims to gain a better insight into the life of returning families from Pakistan to Afghanistan. The initial objective was to interview 10 families who returned from the Punjab region of Pakistan to Afghanistan after undergoing vocational training provided by FACES Pakistan in Lahore. The lack of security, employment opportunities, reintegration programs, and economic downfall forced these returnees to move back to Pakistan after several months.

The provincial authorities of Refugees and Repatriation Ministry (MORR) in Nangarhar provided a potential list of returnees from Punjab with their contact details. From this list, ADPRO contacted 10 families who returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan between 2017 and 2018 and now lived in Jalalabad and several districts around Jalalabad. Of the 10 families in this study, over half had lived in Pakistan for a few decades, while the remainder were born as refugees and/or had spent their entire lives in Pakistan. They, however, maintained their local tribal network with their places of origin in Afghanistan and at times visited it. The change in the initial target group resulted in a change of the exploratory questions of this study. Consequently, the objective of this study is to investigate what factors triggered the return of Afghan refugee families to Afghanistan; to explore what compels the Afghan returnee families to stay in Afghanistan after their return, despite the worsening security, political and economic situation; and to explore the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of research participants about their return to a country they all called their *Asli Watan* – their true homeland.

Returnees from Punjab province in Pakistan were chosen because FACES Pakistan provides training and life-saving assistance to Afghan refugees in Lahore, as well as in other places in the Sindh and Islamabad regions. Nangarhar province was chosen because, in addition to hosting internally displaced persons (IDPs), it hosts the highest population of returnees from Pakistan. Nangarhar is home to 14 percent (524,093) of Afghanistan's returnees.<sup>3</sup> According to IOM Data Tracking Matrix (DTM), a large number of returnees and IDPs live

in different settlements across Nangarhar. Based on the data provided by DTM, nearly 40 percent of the returnees and IDPs are settled across 40 settlements, with almost half (19 of 40) of the settlements located in the Behsud district of Nangarhar.<sup>4</sup>

For the study, a qualitative research method was undertaken. Each family were met for semi-structured interview (SSIs) two times, with an eight-week gap between each visit. All the interviews were conducted between December 2020 and March 2021. All interviews undertaken in Pashto, recorded, transcribed and translated into English. Seven male heads of the families and three females were interviewed. To interview women, the researchers had to talk to their male companions to ask for their permission to allow the three women to speak to ADPRO's female interviewer.

The field research was carried out at a time that the security situation was at its worst. The field research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown that restricted mobility and was completed only a number of months before the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. The translation and analysis of the recorded interviews were completed over the summer of 2021. As a research team, we cannot verify whether the respondents are still in Afghanistan, or whether they escaped back to Pakistan like thousands of other Afghans who fled the Taliban takeover. It is no longer possible to contact the respondents due to the fact that "unknown gunmen" killed ADPRO local researcher, Maroof Sadat, in Jalalabad city in early October. Mr. Sadat was the main contact point for the male research participants.

***"If the U.S. withdrawal leads to peace, then it is a great news. But if U.S. troops leave and the Taliban think that they can rule by force again, then there will a continuation of this war. The government is preparing for war and so are the Taliban. But the people will pay the price for this war."***

**Habib-ur Rahman**

<sup>3</sup> IOM, (2020). Basement Mobility Assessment. International Organization for Migration. [https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/IOM-Afghanistan-Baseline-Mobility-Assessment-Summary-Results-June-2020-English\\_0.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=10057](https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/IOM-Afghanistan-Baseline-Mobility-Assessment-Summary-Results-June-2020-English_0.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=10057) (accessed 8 August 2021). P.4

<sup>4</sup> ibid

## 3. BACKGROUND

### Flight from Afghanistan

For over forty years, Afghanistan has produced one of the largest refugee populations in the world. Overall, one third of the population has been a refugee at least once during their lifetime.<sup>5</sup> Invasions, persecution and human rights violations, multiplied by environmental factors, have forced millions of Afghans to flee their country and seek international protection. The mass exodus of Afghans began when the Soviet-backed communist regime took power in a bloody coup in 1978, which was followed by a Soviet military intervention in December 1979.<sup>6</sup> The Soviet invasion forced 3.3 million people to flee to Pakistan and a further 2.9 million to Iran.<sup>7</sup> The departure of the Soviet army from Afghanistan in 1989 did not end the violent conflict.<sup>8</sup> Immediately after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, a new phase of the war erupted between the resistance force known as '*Mujahideen*' and the Soviet-backed government. The subsequent civil war and the rise of the Taliban, until its fall in 2001, forced different waves of Afghans to leave their country for safety.

Until August 2021, the Taliban carried out 20 years of brutal insurgency, backed by Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> For four decades, Pakistan played a critical and often a destructive role in Afghanistan's conflict, including by supporting the Taliban.<sup>10</sup> Pakistan views Afghanistan as central to

its national security and despite providing shelter to millions of Afghans over the past four decades, some Afghans have been forced to return to Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took over the U.S. and NATO backed Afghan government. The takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban has triggered a new wave of displacement.<sup>12</sup>

Currently, there are 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees worldwide, making them the third largest group of displaced persons after Syrians (6.7 million) and Venezuelans (4.0 million).<sup>13</sup> The statistics on Afghan refugees refer to the number of people that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has registered as 'forcibly displaced people' by June 2021. The number of both registered and unregistered Afghan displaced population worldwide, though, exceeds five million.<sup>14</sup> Since 1978, neighboring Iran and Pakistan have hosted 90% of the documented and undocumented (unregistered) Afghan refugees.<sup>15</sup> Out of 2.6 million documented Afghan refugees under the UNHCR mandate worldwide, Pakistan hosts 1.4 million documented Afghan refugees, a number that is likely to increase with the regime change in Afghanistan in the coming months and years. The majority of refugees come from Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan, Kunduz in the north and from Kabul.<sup>16</sup> From 1.4 million, 56 percent are male, and 44 percent are female.<sup>17</sup> The

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

6 Alimia, Sana, (2019). Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.

7 Blitz, Sales and Marzano, (2005). Non-voluntary return? The politics of return to Afghanistan. Political Studies, vol. 53. pp. 182-200 - p. 186

8 Alimia, Sana, (2019).

9 Schwartz, Jared, and Biberman, Yelena, (2020). A divided Taliban could unleash a new proxy war in Afghanistan. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-divided-taliban-could-unleash-a-new-proxy-war-in-afghanistan/> (accessed 6 November 2021).

10 Schwartz, Jared, and Biberman, Yelena, (2020).

11 Sayed, Nasrat, Sadat, Fahim and Khan, Hamyun, (2021). Will the Taliban's takeover lead to a new refugee crisis from Afghanistan? OCHA. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/will-taliban-s-takeover-lead-new-refugee-crisis-afghanistan> (accessed 3 November 2021).

12 Sayed, Nasrat, Sadat, Fahim and Khan, Hamyun, (2021).

13 UNHCR, (2021). Figures at a Glance. <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> (accessed 29 May 2021)

14 Ahmad, Ali, (2018). Refugees return to poverty, unemployment and despair: Afghanistan labor market and the status of women. VIDC. [https://www.vidc.org/fileadmin/michael/studien/afghanistan\\_s\\_labor\\_market\\_and\\_the\\_status\\_of\\_women-1.pdf](https://www.vidc.org/fileadmin/michael/studien/afghanistan_s_labor_market_and_the_status_of_women-1.pdf) (accessed 31 December 2020).

15 The Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees: a Partnership for Solidarity and Resilience. [https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/support-platform-solutions-strategy-afghan-refugees-partnership-solidarity-and?gclid=CjwKCAiAhreNBhAYEiwAFGGKPGhDxEuFh7dNwmnB\\_X0KhwP6wwi8CA8uTRq5WN4fzCZBW25oL0K6WRoCXCUQAvD\\_BwE](https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/support-platform-solutions-strategy-afghan-refugees-partnership-solidarity-and?gclid=CjwKCAiAhreNBhAYEiwAFGGKPGhDxEuFh7dNwmnB_X0KhwP6wwi8CA8uTRq5WN4fzCZBW25oL0K6WRoCXCUQAvD_BwE) (accessed 6 November 2021); Alimia, Sana, (2019).

16 EASO, (2020). Pakistan: Situation of Afghan refugees. European Asylum Support Office. <https://easo.europa.eu/news-events/easo-publish-es-coi-report-situation-afghan-refugees-pakistan> (accessed 24 July 2021), p. 21.

17 Alimia, Sana, (2019). p.9.



majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan live in Khyber Pashtunkhwa (58 percent) and Balochistan (22 percent) provinces along the border with Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Another significant number live in Punjab (12 percent), Sindh (5 percent) and Islamabad (2 percent).

In April 2021, President Joe Biden announced that the U.S. would end the 'forever war' in Afghanistan and bring all its troops back home by the end of August 2021. The unconditional departure of the U.S. army and its allies after 20 years of occupation has emboldened the Taliban to make massive territorial gains and finally take over Afghanistan in just over 10 days in August 2021.<sup>19</sup> With the Taliban fully in control of Afghanistan, many civil society activists, journalists, human and women's rights defenders and members of the former government, amongst other groups, have found routes out of the country to seek international protection. Even so, Pakistan has made it clear after the takeover that it cannot take any more Afghan refugees.<sup>20</sup>

The former Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz warned the European Union of a new wave of migration from Afghanistan towards Europe and stated that Austria would not take Afghan refugees like it did in 2015.<sup>21</sup> Up until the collapse of the former government, Kurz believed that there were still safe spots in Afghanistan where his country could deport Afghans to, a claim that could be contested by the realities in Afghanistan. After the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, UNHCR is-

sued a non-return advisory, "calling for a bar on forced returns of Afghan nationals, including asylum seekers who have had their claims rejected."<sup>22</sup>

## Return to Afghanistan

Like the forced displacement of Afghans, waves of return migration have also taken place with varying pace and intensity. It has been argued that the changes of regimes in Afghanistan during the different phases of the war paved the ground for the different waves of return of Afghan refugees mainly from Iran and Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989 generated a lot of optimism that the departure of the Russian Army would mean the end of the "refugee cycle" – both the end of violent resistance and the return of refugees.<sup>24</sup> After the withdrawal of the Russians and the fall of the communist regime in Kabul, two million Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> The then government, however, survived only until 1992.<sup>26</sup> Its downfall was followed by a bloody civil war amongst the so-called 'liberating resistance force' – the *Mujahideen*, which later led to the emergence of Taliban in 1994. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until they were toppled by the U.S.-led international forces for harboring Al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden,<sup>27</sup> who was later found and killed in the Pakistani garrison city of Abbottabad in 2011.<sup>28</sup> The fall of the Tal-

18 Ahmad, Ali, (2018); Alimia, Sana, (2019); EASO, 2020.

19 Kraus, Joseph, (2021). Taliban take over Afghanistan: What we know and what's next? Associated Press. <https://apnews.com/article/taliban-takeover-afghanistan-what-to-know-1a74c9cd866866f196c478aba21b60b6> (accessed 21 August 2021).

20 Landale, James. (2021). What rise of Taliban means for Pakistan. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58443839> (accessed 7 November 2021).

21 Ronzheimer, Paul, (2021). "Ich will diese kranke Ideologie nicht in Europa". 25 September 2021, Bild. <https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/sebastian-kurz-exklusiv-ich-will-diese-kranke-ideologie-nicht-in-europa-77190376.bild.html> (accessed 28 July 2021).

22 UNHCR (2021). UNHCR issues a non-return advisory for Afghanistan. <https://www.unhcr.org/ph/24195-unhcr-issues-non-return-advisory-afghanistan.html> (accessed 6 November 2021).

23 Blitz, Sales and Marzano, (2005), p.186.

24 Koser, Koser, and Black, Richard, (1999). The End of Refugee Cycle?. In: K. Koser and R. Black, ed., *The End of Refugee Cycle? Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp.2-18.

and Mardsen, Peter. (1999). Repatriation and Reconstruction: The case of Afghanistan. In: Richard. Black and Khalid. Koser, ed., *The end of the refugee cycle?*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp.56-68.

25 SIGAR (2015). Afghan Refugees and Returnees: Corruption and Lack of Afghan Ministerial Capacity Have Prevented Implementation of a Long-term Refugee Strategy. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR-15-83-AR.pdf> (accessed 18 July).

26 Jazayery, 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.

27 Pakistan had long denied the presence of the Al-Qaeda leader on its soil since he crossed the border to seek refuge in Pakistan in 2001. The U.S. elite team of Navy SEAL found and killed him who was living in close proximity to Pakistan's Military Academy in Abbottabad, near Islamabad. Sourced (Fous, Joshua, (2011). Osama bin Laden's Death and its Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy. 4

May 2011. PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/five-things/osama-bin-ladens-death-and-its-impact-on-u-s-foreign-policy/9057/>

28 Haqqani, Husain, (2021). What Pakistan Knew About the Bin Laden Raid. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/13/what-pakistan-knew-about-the-bin-laden-raid-seymour-hersh/> (Accessed 18 July 2021).

iban in 2001 injected new hope for a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. Just like outmigration, return to Afghanistan continued until Taliban insurgents once again swept into power on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2021.

From the fall of the Taliban in 2001 until January 2020, over 5.2 million Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> The return was facilitated and supported by UNHCR, international donors and the Afghan government established in 2001, immediately after the Taliban were ousted from power.<sup>30</sup> During the early 2000s, the mass return of refugees from Iran and Pakistan was described as “the largest repatriation campaigns in the history of the UN agency.”<sup>31</sup> In the following years, the pace and intensity of return slowed, as the security situation in Afghanistan worsened<sup>32</sup> and the Taliban started to regroup, rearm and train across the disputed Durand Line inside Pakistan’s territory. Between January and September 2021, a total number of 866,889 Afghans have returned from neighboring Iran and Pakistan alone.<sup>33</sup>

---

29 UNHCR (2020). Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration: A synopsis. January 2020

30 EASO (2020).

31 Monsutti, Alessandro, (2008) Afghan migratory strategies and the Three Solutions to the Refugee Problem. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27(1), pp.58-73, p.60; Bjelica, Jelena, (2016). Caught up between regional tensions? The mass return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/migration/caught-up-in-regional-tensions-the-mass-return-of-afghan-refugees-from-pakistan/>

32 Monsutti, Alessandro, (2008).

33 IOM (2021). Return of undocumented migrants. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/return-undocumented-afghans-weekly-situation-report-03-09-sep-2021-enpsdari> (accessed 7 November 2021).

## 4. RETURNING TO ASLI WATAN: KEY FINDINGS OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

### Factors triggering return from Pakistan to Asli Watan

Among the drivers of return, such as mistreatment and extortion, *Asli Watan* was cited as a significant factor for all 10 families. Homesickness, nostalgia and the feeling of longing for one's home country was aggregated by the feeling of not belonging, prejudice and discrimination based on stereotypes, lack of employment opportunities and, at times, the deteriorating political relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan as the true homeland, was linked to the sense of 'belonging', the comfort of living in *Asli Watan* and brining honor to one's family.

***"The only thing Pakistan can give us is continued lack of disrespect and sense of loss of identity. Afghanistan is my Asli Watan. Afghanistan gives me a sense of belonging and respect. I request other Afghan refugees to return to our true homeland."***

**Bashir**

Noorullah said he loves Afghanistan as much as he loves his parents. The day he returned to Afghanistan was the happiest day of his life. He decided he would never migrate back to Pakistan under any circumstances.

***"I want to die in Afghanistan but will never go to Pakistan where I was humiliated day in and day out. The Pakistanis called me 'refugee'. This is my country and I do not care how much worse the situation gets. I will not go anywhere."***

**Noorullah**

***"I do not think I would migrate to Pakistan again. I have gone through really tough times in Pakistan's Punjab. It was too hot in the summer and it hardly rained. When it rained, our entire home became flooded. I still remember I spent one whole night on the bed because everything else was under water because of the heavy rain. I will not leave Afghanistan again even in the most difficult circumstances."***

**Habib-ur Rahman**

While living as refugees in Pakistan, the three female research participants were dependent on their male relatives in the decision making process, particularly regarding their return to Afghanistan. Iqra and Sara were engaged in carpet weaving industry in Pakistan while Mangela's family relied on her children's irregular income as well as charity. For Iqra and Sara, however, returning to Afghanistan was a dream come true, but they lost some of their personal freedom that they enjoyed in Pakistan. They had to wear a burqa in Afghanistan, but both working women said that they did not want to exchange their freedom for the love for *Asli Watan*. Contrary to Iqra and Sara, Mangela regretted returning to her homeland with nine children. She described her life as being 'better' in Pakistan than in Afghanistan. She would not have returned to Nangarhar if the authorities in Pakistan did not force her family to leave.

***"I am happy to be in Afghanistan because this is my ancestor's homeland, and it is like my mother. I want to serve this country by any opportunity that I get as a woman. This country is beautiful and I am very happy to be here."***

**Sara**

The respondents developed sentimental ties towards *Asli Watan* during their time in Pakistan, where they experienced a sense of not belonging to Pakistani society. Respondents felt that they were deprived of their ba-

sic rights and were treated as inferior to the dominant Punjabi host communities. Respondents said that people in Pakistan called them '*mahajer*' (refugee), which gave them the feeling of not being permanent residents and needing to leave Pakistan.

***"I don't remember anything good from Pakistan but prejudice. I was called a 'mahajer' and 'son of a Hindu'<sup>34</sup> all the time."***

**Noorullah**

***"We were always reminded by Pakistanis that we were refugees and passengers who had to go to our Watan one day. They also reminded us that Pakistan belonged to Pakistanis, not to us. We had to work like slaves."***

**Bashir**

***"Afghans in Pakistan used to be called 'mahajir' (refugees), but now they are called 'haraami' (bastards). Pakistanis say that the people of Kabul have forgotten the welcome and assistance that the Pakistanis offered to Afghans since the Soviet invasion. People run away from Afghanistan because there is no work, no employment opportunities and no security. The Afghan government is corrupt and steals people's money. I tell my cousins to come back to Afghanistan, but they argue that there is no security or work in Afghanistan."***

**Shaheen**

The families who were forced to move to Pakistan in the early 1980s reported a gradual change in the behavior of the Pakistani government and its people towards Afghan refugees. Once welcomed warmly in Pakistan, in recent years, Afghans face routine police harassment and extortion. The male respondents believed that the fatigue of hosting generations of Afghan refugees for forty years was the main reason for the behavioral change towards refugees. Mia Mohammad Agha distinguishes between the behavior of Pakistani people and the government of Pakistan. He said that the government of Pakistan exploited the Afghan refugees for four decades by training and arming them to destroy their *Asli Watan*. He argued that in the last forty years

Pakistan has benefited financially and politically from Afghanistan's displacement crises. He was suspicious of Pakistan's commitment to distributing the international aid that it has received to host the Afghan refugee population. He has seen little assistance from Pakistan for Afghan refugees.

***"The Punjab police was the main reason that we decided to return. They harassed us all the time. We were going to madrasa and to work. We did not engage in any destructive or illegal activities. But the police did not want us to live in peace. They extorted money from us. My father said that he could not spend any more time there. Police created too many problems for us and this was the main reason that we decided to return."***

**Bashir**

In recent years, the respondents felt disrespected by the behavior of the Pakistani host communities, particularly at a time of a worsening political relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the time of the interviews, Afghanistan had accused Pakistan of providing sanctuaries to the Taliban leadership in the form of military and logistical assistance. Only Mangela, who was dependent on her children's decision whether to stay in Pakistan or return to Afghanistan, retained fond memories from Pakistan.

The most common challenge after return for all 10 families was the insecurity and the routine bomb blasts in eastern Nangarhar province as well as in the rest of the country. All the respondents expressed the wish that they were not ever forced again to move to Pakistan where they had experienced the psychological torture that the authorities inflicted on them. However, they also said that only peace can end the cycle of Afghan refugees. At the time all respondents remained hopeful for the fragile peace negotiations to succeed to end the 'forever war' in Afghanistan (discussed in the '*fragile hopes for peace talks*' subsection below). (Despite their hopes, the peace negotiations failed and the Taliban took over of Afghanistan on 15 August.)

<sup>34</sup> 'Son of a Hindu' is an insult that all male respondents recalled being used against them by the Pakistani authorities. Despite the vast majority of Afghans being Muslim, the term was often used to insult the respondents by suggesting that they are following the Hindu religions and therefore are not Muslim.

***“In Afghanistan, there are too many bomb explosions, insecurity and suicide attacks but we don’t know who is doing it. It is a chaos here. Your investment has no guarantee but it is your own Watan and whatever happens, let it happen because this is our Asli Watan.”***

**Hamid**

## **Reintegration assistance in Asli Watan**

The decision to return to Afghanistan while it was plagued with war and corruption was a difficult one to make. The situation in Afghanistan was difficult at best. However, the promise of reintegration services by the Afghan government was one of the motivations for return. Upon the respondents’ return after 2017, Afghanistan was suffering from a deteriorating security situation, rampant corruption, the rise of Islamic State (Daesh in Eastern Afghanistan), and growing unemployment throughout the country, but particularly in the Nangarhar province.

***“There is no real reintegration program for returnees. This might be just on paper but there is nothing in practice. When we crossed the Torkham border, we were assisted with some food items. My son was promised that he would be given a piece of land, but nothing has happened so far. The government makes only promises, nothing else.”***

**Habib-ur Rahman**

Upon crossing the Torkham border in 2018, six male respondents said that they received food and cash assistance from MORR, UNHCR or other international organizations, but were not sure from which one.<sup>35</sup> They also said that they received some aid when they settled in their communities. Two of the female respondents could not confirm whether their families received any assistance because it was the male members of their family who might have received it. The female respondents said that they expected to get access to other essential services, and diversified livelihood opportunities, but they complained that the local government

authorities had denied them those services. In both interviews, Mangela said that she and her family did not receive anything from anyone since her return to Afghanistan. None of the returnees said that they received long-term assistance.

Mia Mohammad Agha and Mangela shared similar views over the lack of reintegration programs in Afghanistan. They experienced a sense of betrayal and non-acceptance by the government of Afghanistan. Lack of employment opportunities, housing, and rampant corruption in the Afghan government discourage Afghan refugees in Pakistan to return, both Agha and Mangela stated.

***“From my experience, there is nothing motivating refugees to return to this country. Nothing can motivate you to return if you are a refugee. If a refugee wants to return, it must be his/her own decision to return otherwise there is nothing to return for. My request from the government is to help the potential returnees with a job, employment and shelter. The refugees will come and will honestly serve this country. Many youths have graduated from universities, but there are no job opportunities for them. I have worked for many years as a teacher, but there is no value for teachers in this country.”***

**Mia Mohammad Agha**

***“My biggest wish is peace in Afghanistan. I want the Afghan government to help us build a house where we can have our own house. Winter is coming and we don’t have any shelter. We don’t have food and we need help.”***

**Noorullah**

## **Employment and vocational training**

The 10 research respondents cited security and economic difficulties as the main challenges facing them after their return. They reported that life in Afghanistan was unpredictably dangerous. They repeatedly compared their lives in Pakistan, where they were mis-

<sup>35</sup> The respondents did not know who provided them the post-arrival food and cash assistance. They all said it was the authorities from the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR). Some of them thought it was UNHCR or IOM or another international organizations.

treated and discriminated against, with circumstances in Afghanistan. They said they had similar problems in both countries, but in Afghanistan they faced enormous challenges to find work while risking their lives. Several of them stated that they would accept the risks of living in Afghanistan if they had better employment opportunities.

***“Employment is the most important factor that helps us with reintegration. Our main demand from the government is to create more job opportunities. My brothers work for the government and I also have this laboratory to make a living, but this is not enough and we need more support, systematic support.”***

**Bashir**

Having work and a stable income was a priority for some (above even the security situation), if they were to remain in Afghanistan. According to Bashir, the “*bad economic situation*” in Nangarhar is forcing him to move back to Pakistan. According to him, some Afghan refugees in Pakistan return home while suffering from unemployment, but realize the same unemployment that forced them to return is an even bigger problem in Afghanistan. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Bashir retained his job at a laboratory, but was not earning enough money to live on.

***“Economic difficulties in Nangarhar are bigger than the security situation. For us, unemployment is a bigger threat than security. ... We have needs in this country. Our needs are legitimate and our basic rights, but we cannot meet our needs in Afghanistan. The government cannot provide us with basic services. Yesterday, I earned only 160 rupees.<sup>36</sup> Can you believe it? You compare earning 2000 rupees in Pakistan and 160 rupees here. You tell me. What should I do with these 160 rupees? Should I pay the rent for my lab? Should I buy food? Should I pay the electricity bill? If there is some work opportunity here and we could meet our basic needs, then we don't need to leave this country and live in a foreign country.”***

**Bashir**

The COVID-19 pandemic restricted the interviewees' access to the labor market. In the time between the two interviews undertaken by this study, at least five of the male respondents lost their irregular jobs due to restrictions on mobility and pandemic related lockdowns.

***“My life in Pakistan was better economically. I had a small business in Pakistan. Then I sold everything and returned to my Watan hoping to start a new life and to work here. The first days were ok, but things started to get worse as time passed by.”***

**Habib-ur Rahman**

For a couple of respondent, economic hardship has made them either consider joining or actually joining the Afghan army (prior to the August 2021 Taliban defeat of it).

***“After I returned from Pakistan in 2018, I did military service. I went on missions to Helmand's Sangin, Baghlan, Sherin Tagab, Faryab, Andkhoi and I have gone through some difficult times. I even got injured in the fighting. It was essential to make a living. I have taken part in so much fighting. I was advised by my family not to go to fighting anymore but we had nothing to eat, no food and no clothes. I chose [the army] to feed myself and my family. I am hoping to find other work soon.”***

**Noorullah**

Overall, the male returnees highlighted access to regular employment, income and the labour market as both the biggest hurdles of integration (followed by security) and as crucial elements in staying in Afghanistan. They all said that they have to find jobs that bring an income to their families. A regular income would support them, even at times of bad security situations, in accessing better healthcare, education and housing for their families. They stated that they approached various provincial government institutions for assistance as well as for potential vocational training programs, but the government bodies did not support them with their request. They all emphasized that they had no one to guide or advise them on employment opportunities and/or further training programs provided for returnees by the government or NGOs.

<sup>36</sup> Rupees is Pakistani currency and is more common in eastern Nangarhar than Afghanistan's currency, Afghani. 1 USD = 197 Pakistani Rupees as of 30 October 2021



Of the women interviewed, Sara was the only one who retained her job as a trainer of carpet weaving. Iqra got a home-based job, peeling pine nuts, but only during the first interview visit, she was unemployed when the interviewer returned. Mangela was not employed, formally or informally. The three female interviewees had shared views regarding staying in Afghanistan regardless of what might happen. For Sara and Iqra, job opportunities were key to reintegration into their ancestral home province. Sara said that despite having completed her bachelor in pedagogy, she is engaged in the informal labor force, in the carpet weaving industry. During the interview, Sara was disappointed that people, like herself and her cousin, who have degrees, do not have formal work. Her university graduate cousin drives rickshaw in the city of Jalalabad.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, Sara was able to utilize her carpet weaving skills that she learned in Pakistan's Punjab province when she returned to Afghanistan. She set up a registered training center in her house to train the women in her district not only in carpet weaving but also in embroidery and tailoring. At the time of the interviews, nearly 100 female trainees above the age of 18 attend the vocational training in two shifts.

***“My work has given me respect in my community. It makes me feel good to work and help other women. It has changed my life and certainly the lives of women in my community. Women who graduated from my carpet weaving center are training other women. This is a great source of income for us.”***

**Sara**

The word 'wasita' (connections) was used by all returnees to illustrate the level of nepotism and corruption in the Afghan government. According to Bashir, returnees could reintegrate well if they were either rich or had *wasita* in the local government.

***“If you have wasita, it can help you in joining carpet weaving trainings, technical and vocational training programs. No wasita, no benefits,”***

**Bashir**

***“I don't have any particular problem in Afghanistan except for protecting and feeding my family. Joblessness, lack of investment and business and lack of stable income is the main problem.”***

**Habib-ur Rahman**

## Access to services

***“The most important need is the education of children. It is important that schools for children remain open, so that they can study and become educated. The second need is food. My husband leaves home in the morning and comes back in the evening. We don't have enough money but my husband is trying a lot to make a living. The other most important need is shelter. I wish we could earn enough to make a house for ourselves.”***

**Iqra**

Respondents were asked accessing which of the services posed major challenges after return. In addition to employment (discussed above) and security (discussed below), all 10 families discussed access to education, healthcare, drinking water, electricity and shelter. Corruption was also a topic associated with services mentioned by the respondents. The interviewees compared the services in Afghanistan available to returnees, to services they had access to in Pakistan.

Several families were happy for their children to grow up in *Asli Watan* and receive an education. All returnee families said that their children did have access to primary and high school education, regardless of the Nangarhar district in which they lived, and that they were content that their children were able to go to school. Some, however, expressed concern about the quality of education services provided in Afghanistan.

<sup>37</sup> The situation for the three women must have changed dramatically since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August. The local researcher/journalist, Sayed Maroof Sadat who had conducted interviews with male respondents was killed by unknown gunmen in the provincial capital, Jalalabad on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October. Source: <https://8am.af/eng/three-killed-in-the-city-of-jalalabad-including-a-journalist/> (accessed 13 November 2021).

***“In Afghanistan, the teachers do not try hard enough – neither in public nor in private schools. But the teachers in Pakistan try very hard to help the children and youngsters. The teachers in Pakistan have at least a Masters degrees. But this is not the case in Afghanistan.”***

**Hamid**

***“My sons go to high school. Unfortunately, there is no discipline at the school. The teachers hardly come to school. I know some of the teachers and asked them why they do not go to school to teach, even though they are paid. They told me that they cannot beat the children at school because the government will then put them in prison. I am so disappointed to hear they can even think about beating children.”***

**Shaheen**

The respondents reported having access to healthcare in public hospitals and local clinics. Only three families living in the city of Jalalabad and the families living in Kama district have easy access to a public hospital. The rest of families that live in other districts have limited access to health centres due to long distances. Bakht Mohammad lives at least three kilometers from the nearest clinic in Kot district. Traveling to the clinic during the daytime is easy, but this journey becomes dangerous at night. If somebody in his family were to fall sick at night, the family would have to wait until the next day. The bigger challenge for Bakht Mohammad and the rest of respondents is the inability to buy medicine or, at times, pay the doctors' fees. The interviewees also said that they could not afford to buy medicine. Sara, however, was surprised by the number of clinics and public and private hospitals in her district. She said there were almost none when she had fled to Pakistan with her family.

The respondents acknowledged that they had access to water, sanitation and shelter, but that this was not sufficient. They did not discuss it further, though some respondents stated that drinking water was less of a topic in Pakistan when they lived there as refugees, while it turned to be one of the main challenges, after employment and security, in Nangarhar. Bakht Mohammad's family fetch water from a local community hand-pump well, shared by 16 families.

All the respondents, however, were furious about the level of corruption and nepotism in the national and provincial governments. They believed corruption hin-

dered access to some of the services that the returnees expect to receive, and that those services were distributed unfairly to those with *wasita*. Mangela complained that the authorities would come and take photos with the returnees and then leave without doing anything.

***“The government officials and parliamentarians help their own people get employed. They do not help the poor people. Look at us! We are drinking dirty river water. We are Muslims but do not care about each other. The government officials live in nice buildings, have money and a good life, but they have forgotten us. We do not have water, food or shelter. We do not even have a hand-pumped well.”***

**Mangela**

## **Life improvements observed during the second interview visit**

The observational data documented by ADPRO researchers suggested a variation in how the lives of the returnees changed or did not change in the two months between two interview visits. The lack of security, unemployment, persistent poverty, spread of COVID-19 and uncertainty around peace negotiations between the ex-Afghan government and the Taliban were the dominant concerns for all respondents during both visits. The peace negotiation was the only point of optimism that the respondents had for their future (dashed by the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2021 collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban takeover).

The objective of the second visit was to evaluate how much life had changed for the 10 families from a social and employment perspective. During the second visits, all male participants discussed their fear of the peace talks failing and the war continuing.

***“Well, there has been no change since we met last time. Life is going on with all its challenges. Life is not only difficult for me but for all Afghans. Allah help us overcome this situation. There is no value in the democracy. There has to be a government like the Taliban government to control things. If people break the law, a dictator government like the Taliban must hit violators on their heads. In this so-called democratic system, people break the laws, kill and rob. Yet, there is no accountability and rule of law. We Afghans all face this difficult period in our life and hope that peace prevails.”***

**Shaheen**

Bashir, who was trained as clinical laboratory technician in Pakistan, lost many of his clients as a result of the spread of COVID-19. Due to the loss of income because of the pandemic, Bashir thought of joining the Afghan army. However, in the two months between the two interview visits, two of his cousins were killed in the fight against the Taliban. During the second interview he reported that the war and the death his two cousins scared him from joining the army. His family was then reconsidering whether to continue living in Afghanistan or to move back to Pakistan, to join one of his brothers, who had returned to Pakistan after a failed reintegration attempt in Nangarhar.

***“Our family economy is moving downwards since you visited me last time. We came to our own country hoping that our government would fulfill its promises. My own private lab is going nowhere in terms of business. It forces me to migrate again to Pakistan to find work there. Our economy is really weak and we don't earn anything.”***

**Shaheen**

Two of the female research participants, Mangela and Iqra, reported that their family economic situation has worsened since the first interview visit, while it remained the same for Sara. Mangela lives in a tent in poverty. Her situation did not improve between the two interview visits. Iqra said that she was engaged in peeling pine nuts until February 2021, but lost her unstable income due to the pandemic.

***“We barely have enough food to eat, especially my children. We were peeling pine nuts for some time, but that is also over now. It is a difficult life in Afghanistan but we are happy to be in our own country. I hope peace comes so that my children can go to school.”***

**Iqra**

COVID-19 had a serious impact on many families living in Nangarhar. The province lies on the Afghan side of the disputed Durand Line, which separates Pashtuns by dividing Afghanistan and Pakistan. During the first interview in January 2021, Hamid ran a traditional medicine shop in Jalalabad. However, he was barely able to sell any traditional medicine because of very strict COVID-related lockdowns and the closure of the border crossing along the Durand Line. During the second interview visit, the border crossing point between Afghanistan and Pakistan had reopened, once again allowing mobility between the two countries.

***“When you came last time, the border was closed due to COVID-19. The market was poor and people were not commuting between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Now the border is open and the market is also better. It is of course better than two months ago and I am happy we can make a living out of this traditional medicine shop.”***

**Hamid**

## **Fragile hopes for peace talks**

***“If you have economic hardship and difficulty, you try to adjust yourself with that. But if the security is bad, there is nothing we can do about it. It impacts you and your family. It impacts the way you think about your country. The security incidents in this province are non-stop and take place every day.”***

**Habibu-ur Rahman**

During the second interview visit, all 10 of the returnee families discussed their fear and hopes about the peace talks that were going on between the Taliban and the Afghan government. According to Sara, the former government of Ashraf Ghani was a better option, particularly for working women. A fragile government of

Ashraf Ghani was better than the Taliban seizing power by force.

***“My main concern is the collapse of the government. If the current government is abolished, it will be a big blow for all the people of Afghanistan especially for women. If the Taliban come to power, they will stop women from education and work. I fear such a situation a lot. Taliban rule will affect everyone especially those who work for the government. ... I prefer the current government to stay. Under Taliban rule, women lose a lot. We don't want the Taliban to come to the government. I don't want an interim government either. Whoever becomes the ruler, he will bring his relatives to the government. It is much better if the current peace talks succeed and produce some tangible results. It would be best if the current peace talks succeed and a political settlement is achieved. It would be much better than abolishing the government and starting all over again. I think whoever wants to become president, should reach out to people and ask for their votes. Without elections, it is not fair to take power by force.”***

**Sara**

The direct peace negotiation between the Taliban and the U.S.-backed government was stipulated in the peace deal that was signed by the Taliban negotiators and Trump administration on the 29<sup>th</sup> of February 2020 in Doha and was intended to end the U.S.'s longest war in Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> There was little hope for any success that could emerge from the deal because the U.S. had set May 2021 as the date for all their forces to be out of Afghanistan. The collapse of the Afghan government became certain when Joe Biden announced the departure of the U.S. troops and its allies from Afghanistan in mid-April. The Taliban took over Afghanistan on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August after the former president Ashraf Ghani fled the country.<sup>39</sup>

***“Our biggest fear is the failure of the peace talks. This is not only my fear but everybody's fear in this province. We wonder why these peace talks have stalled. The security situation has become very bad. No one can go out when it gets dark. If you have a mobile or money in your pocket, criminals attack you with knives or pistols.”***

**Bashir**

The intra-Afghan peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government delegation failed to provide a breakthrough since the start of face-to-face talks in September 2020. None of the negotiating sides trusted each other as each accused the other of not being honest during the peace process. The Afghan returnees, however, believed that both sides of the peace talks were more committed to foreign interests than the interests of the Afghan people. Shaheen stated that Taliban are puppets of Pakistan, while the Afghan government peace delegation was only minimally interested in Afghanistan, and were committed more to the Americans and Europeans than to the Afghan people. For Shaheen, the peace process became a source of income for the participants, and he questioned the honesty and commitment to Afghanistan of the Afghan government's peace delegation.

***“None of the negotiating sides are honest. The Taliban are not good people. They are working for Pakistan, while the government of Afghanistan is a puppet of Europe and America. ... How can they bring us peace if their own families don't live in Afghanistan?”***

**Shaheen**

Despite their experience as refugees in Pakistan and the trauma of war, all 10 families expressed their aspiration for peace. They all said that the peace talks remained the only hope for a peaceful Afghanistan. None of the families supported the extension of the U.S invasion.

38 Agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the United States of America (2020). <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> (accessed 12 October 2021).

39 Al Jazeera (2021). Afghan President Ghani flees country as Taliban enters Kabul. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/15/afghan-president-ghani-flees-country-as-taliban-surrounds-kabul> (accessed 13 October 2021).

***“I want the U.S. troops out of my country. They have brought nothing but poverty, misery and destruction to this country. In their presence, we are dying everyday from bombs but will die from hunger when they leave.”***

**Mangela**

***“We Afghans have a lot of expectation and wishes. Our biggest desire is for Afghans, especially for Pashtuns, is to see and feel peace. We have had 40 years of war. Afghans need peace like humans needs water and food. It has turned into a life-saving need. We are hopeful for a peaceful Afghanistan and hope the current peace talks succeed. So far, the peace talks have not been successful. The foreign actors have all benefited from them, but Afghans themselves have not. It is several months now that the Afghan peace delegation is in Doha, but there is no progress.”***

**Sara**

All 10 interviewees supported a political settlement through peace negotiations. For them, peace negotiation was the only option to end the Afghan war. Despite of rampant corruption in the Afghan government, they still believed that Ashraf Ghani’s government was better than the brutal Taliban rule. Therefore, they expressed their optimism to achieve peace through peace talks. Despite the three female interviewees coming from conservative families, they said that they will be the first to lose their minimum freedom of mobility and work. Mia Mohammad Agha warned if the Afghan peace talks fail, the risks of spreading Talibanization to the neighboring country, Pakistan, would become a reality.

***“The failure of the peace talks means our scholars, educated men and women will become refugees and this time in big numbers. Bigger problems will await Afghanistan if these talks fail.”***

**Mia Mohammad Agha**

## 5. CONCLUSION

In recent years, forced displacement and return migration have taken place simultaneously due to a rise in the level of violence across Afghanistan. The return of refugees to Afghanistan has attracted less international attention than their forced out-migration. This study was conducted at a time when security situation was at its worst, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Taliban were making territorial gains and the U.S. troops started to withdraw from the country in the months following the interviews. The interviews with 10 families revealed that a number of political and social factors triggered their return to the country they all called *Asli Watan*, their true homeland. The former government had the support of the international community, but corruption and nepotism at the local and national levels undermined any legitimacy. The respondents had some fragile hopes for the peace negotiations that eventually failed, resulting in the Taliban takeover on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2021.

Nangarhar, as one of the hubs for returnees and IDPs in eastern Afghanistan, accommodates the largest return population in the country. The province, however, has limited resources to offer to the returnees, due to its large population of IDPs and returnees, particularly from Pakistan. The respondents were largely concerned about unemployment, lack of a regular income, security and access to other essential services such as health-care and education.

Contrary to the male research participants, the three female respondents relied on their male family members to make decisions about returning to Afghanistan and whether the female respondent could pursue an ambition to work.

The fieldwork, which was undertaken in Nangarhar, was concluded in March. The August takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban changed the entire situation with regards to all returnees, but in particular, the returnees interviewed for this study. However, there has been no information on the research participants – whether they stayed or moved back to Pakistan with the regime change. A large chunk of the population fled the Taliban's harsh and undemocratic rule, while some of the Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan continue to return voluntarily or involuntarily. During the two decades of insurgency in Afghanistan, Pakistan provid-

ed safe havens for the Taliban leadership, their fighters and their families. Since August 2021, a large number of the Taliban and their families have returned to and settled in Afghanistan.

The country is facing a humanitarian catastrophe and in urgent need of assistance. The topic of return will continue to generate interests not only among states and policy makers, but also among international organizations on migration. Further research is required to explore the livelihood conditions and reintegration challenges of Afghans that continue to return to Afghanistan. Further research will reveal how Afghanistan copes with the humanitarian crisis that it is facing after the departure of international community and the fall of the former government.



## SOME USEFUL LINKS

Afghanistan Analysts Network:

**<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/>**

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit:

**<https://areu.org.af/>**

Caritas Austria: **<https://www.caritas-austria.at/>**

Caritas St. Pölten: **<https://www.caritas-stpoelten.at/>**

FACES Pakistan: **<https://www.facespakistan.com/>**

Tolo News: **<https://tolonews.com/>**

Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and  
Cooperation (VIDC): **[www.vidc.org](http://www.vidc.org)**

[www.vidc.org](http://www.vidc.org)