

Migration in the case of the Afghan crisis

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENT N. 15

Jan 2022



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"This background document has been realized in the framework of the project, to spread data and information based on a scientific analysis. If you want to know more about this project and be part of its activities, please feel free to contact the leading partner Diaconia in Czech Republic (email: nozinoval@diakoniespolu.cz), as well as Focsiv in Italy (email: f.novella@focsiv.it)."

¹ This background paper has been realised in the framework of the "Faces of Migration" project (Migrant and SDGs, contract number CSO-LA/2018/401-798), co-financed by the European Union. The paper has been elaborated by Aurora Ianni e Mattia Giampaolo with the coordination of Andrea Stocchiero (Focsiv). This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

1. INTRODUCTION

While people migrate for a variety of reasons, political instability, economic crises, and conflicts are still among the main push factors of migration¹. War, violent discrimination, and persecution are all causes that make people fleeing from countries of origin to safer ones².

Addressing the drivers of migration is a core commitment of the international community. Indeed, the **Global Compact on Migration** calls to **minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin (Objective 2)** by “establishing or strengthening mechanisms to monitor and anticipate the development of risks and threats that might trigger migration movements”³; “investing in programmes that accelerate States’ fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals with the aim of eliminating the adverse drivers”⁴; “accounting for migrants in national emergency preparedness and response”, among the others.

In addition, the **2030 Agenda** stresses the importance of promoting safe pathways for migration. With its objective **10.7**, the agenda calls for “**facilitating orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies**”, such as resettlements and humanitarian corridors, and calls for peaceful and inclusive societies (**objective 16**) for sustainable development that should reduce violent conflicts and social tensions provoking displacements and refugees⁵.



Ph. Pakistani soldiers guard the border with Afghanistan
- it.euronews.com



Ph. The European response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan
- openmigration.org

¹ On push and pull factors of Migration see Mattia Giampaolo and Aurora Ianni, Migration and Development, background paper n.6, Faces of Migration, Focsiv, May 2020, <https://gcap.global/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Background-Document-Migration-and-development-Focsiv-n.-6-ENG-12.05.2020.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ The Global compact on Migration, Objective 2, (c). See https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/73/195

⁴ Ibid. target b

⁵ See A. Ianni, M. Giampaolo, Migration and Conflict: the case of Libya. <https://gcap.global/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Background-Document-n.-7-ENG-13.11.2020.pdf>



Ph. Global Goals for Sustainable Development



However, as the most recent Afghan crisis shows, much work still needs to be done to achieve these objectives.

In August 2021, indeed, a “new era” began for Afghanistan, with the Taliban taking power after the withdrawal of US troops from the country. As an immediate outcome, many people poured into the airport of Kabul as well as at the borders, trying to flee from possible tragic consequences. The reaction of international actors has been fragmented, to some extent inadequate.

As of December 2021, the future of Afghanistan remains uncertain, as well as that of the people trying to leave the country or willing to stay.



Ph. Senior Airman Brennen Lege/U.S. Air Force via AP
- linkiesta.it

2. THE AFGHAN CONTEXT: AN OVERVIEW

After more than 40 years of conflict, Afghans are among the largest refugee population worldwide. According to UNHCR estimates, there are 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees mainly based in Pakistan and Iran, and another 3.5 million internally displaced persons⁶. With recent developments, these numbers are sure to increase. The Taliban's seizure of power has generated a veritable exodus of the civilian population, thanks also to the help of evacuation flights by international powers. According to the data, after the Taliban takeover, the United States took around 123,000⁷ Afghans out of the country while the EU welcomed around 22,000 of them⁸.

The long war and the presence of insurgent groups such as the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have made Afghanistan one of the most violent countries in the world. According to the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), for the sixth consecutive year, more than 10,000 civilians have died because of widespread violence, most of them killed by anti-government armed groups⁹.

According to data from UNAMA (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan), the Taliban were responsible for 45% of civilian casualties in 2020, while government troops accounted for 23%. The US-led international forces were responsible for 2%¹⁰. The inability of the central state to control the entire territory has in fact left a free hand to extremist groups linked to radical Islamism.

While on the one hand the country's institutions guarantee, at least on paper, the political and individual freedoms of Afghan citizens, on the other, even the most basic rights are violated in the areas controlled by parastatal groups. In particular, women's rights are violated. Since the Taliban seized power in 1996, women have experienced a setback in terms of civil and individual rights. The radical interpretation of the Koran has deprived Afghan women of all fundamental rights, such as access to education and work, and they are, in most cases, disadvantaged within the judicial system.

The status of women has not improved as much as expected after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, with rape, abduction and forced marriage still common, particularly outside Kabul.



Ph. Afghanistan, imminent humanitarian crisis with the collapse of the economy - investireoggi.it

⁶ See <https://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan.html>

⁷ <https://abcnews.go.com/International/historic-afghanistan-evacuation-wraps-fate-left-uncertain/story?id=79745211>

⁸ <https://www.euronews.com/2021/10/07/un-chief-asked-eu-states-to-take-in-more-than-40-000-afghan-refugees>

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25594>

¹⁰ <https://unama.unmissions.org/surge-civilian-casualties-following-afghanistan-peace-negotiations-start-un-report>

Of particular concern is widespread domestic violence. According to the Afghan Ministry of Health, in the last twenty years, 51% of Afghan women have experienced violence, and, in many cases, complaints have been resolved not through regular trials, but through traditional mediation processes (such as shotgun marriages in cases of sexual violence). Although guaranteed, during the US occupation, women's political participation in elections is often limited by pressure and threats.

In 2021, The Taliban's seizure of power brought with it the worsening of women's conditions in the country. In addition to their absence in the political decision-making process, what is of concern is women's rights in everyday life: from access to education to participation in social life. It is undeniable that the sum of the lack of human rights and the ongoing wave of violence in the country -even before the Taliban seized power- will increase huge flows of migrants. To make matters worse, the deep economic crisis and climate shocks such as drought, challenge the already dire conditions of the Afghan people. As winter approaches, the World Food Program-

me estimates that "a total 22.8 million people -more than half the population- face acute hunger as temperatures plummet below zero"¹¹.

As the "humanitarian catastrophe looms"¹², people might have to choose between starving and leaving the country.

Looking at the figures, we can assume that most of the people leaving Afghanistan are finding shelter in neighbouring countries which have hosted Afghans over the last 20 years -Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan-, even if episodes of violence and opposition were also reported. Indeed, at the end of August, crowds of migrants gathered at the border of Pakistan triggering the violent reaction of the border guards who killed some of them¹³.

Also, Uzbekistan has expressed its willingness to host no more than 100,000 refugees, while Turkmenistan has outlined that it will not host any refugees.

As of UNHCR data, only in December 2021 the number of internally displaced persons reached a peak of half a million, while the number of refugees, mainly in Iran and Pakistan, is about 2.9 million.

Tab 1 - Newly arrived (Jan-Dec 2021) Afghans in need of international protection in neighbouring countries

Location name	Source	Date	%	Population
Pakistan (Islamic Republic of)	UNHCR	27 Dec 2021	60,9%	78,500
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	UNHCR	31 Dec 2021	24.5%	31,570
Uzbekistan	Government	30 Nov 2021	10.1%	13,020
Tajikistan	UNHCR	31 Dec 2021	4.4%	5,710

Source: UNHCR¹⁴

¹¹ See <https://www.wfp.org/stories/afghanistan-world-food-programme-calls-funds-children-face-hunger-and-starvation>

¹² See the Statement made by UN Secretary General on Afghanistan in August 31. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm20874.doc.htm>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58283177>

¹⁴ See <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan> visited on January 7, 2022.

3. THE RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS: THE ROLE OF THE EU

With the recent upheaval, the EU's immediate response consisted in supporting evacuations. According to the EC report on Migration and Asylum¹⁵, these operations included all local EU staff with dependents, as well as a significant number of those Afghans with close contacts with the EU or Member States. Meanwhile, a series of high-level meetings have put new actions at the core of the EU Agenda.

On 31st August 2021, the European Council issued a nine-point statement on the situation in Afghanistan¹⁶. The main issues were, beside those related to the abovementioned evacuation, the implementation of a plan for managing possible migration flows from Afghanistan. The statement stressed the necessity to have a strict relation with neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan and Iran, and to support them in receiving people and preventing illegal migration flows to other countries. In addition, it was clear in terms of the securitization of the country, it was necessary to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a new core of international terrorism and a threat to EU citizens.

Box. 1: European Statement on the situation in Afghanistan -31st august 2021¹⁷: main commitments

- **Evacuation** of EU citizens and to the Afghan nationals who have cooperated with the EU, its Member States, and their families, has been conducted as a **matter of priority** and will be continued

- **Coordination with international partners**, particularly the UN and its agencies, will be continued, for the stabilization of the region and to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches vulnerable populations in Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries. To this end, the EU and its Member States will step up financial support to relevant international organizations.

- **Support** to third countries will be strengthened, particularly **to neighbouring and transit countries**. The EU will cooperate with them also for preventing illegal migration, smuggling, and trafficking in human beings and reinforcing border management capacity. Support could also be provided in the form of resettlement on a voluntary basis

- Joint action between the EU and its Member States **to prevent uncontrolled large-scale illegal migration** faced in the past, by preparing a coordinated and orderly response. Targeted information campaigns should be launched to combat the narratives used by smugglers

- **Ensure that the Taliban regime ceases all ties and practices with international terrorism** and that Afghanistan does not become once again a sanctuary for terrorists and organized crime groups. The exchange of information and intelligence, also with third countries, and the sharing of regular threat assessments, are of utmost importance.

¹⁵ See <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/report-migration-asylum.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/08/31/statement-on-the-situation-in-afghanistan/>

¹⁷ The points are summarized from <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/08/31/statement-on-the-situation-in-afghanistan/>

- The EU and its Member States, with the support of Frontex, remain determined to effectively protect the EU external borders, prevent unauthorized entries and assist the most affected Member States. Security checks should be carried out, including through full use of relevant EU databases, as well as registration in Eurodac. Furthermore, third-country national clauses in the readmission agreements between the EU and certain transit countries should be used where the legal requirements are met.
- The Council will respond to attempts to instrumentalize illegal migration for political purposes

At the end of September 2021, the European Council conclusions set a series of priorities committed to **peace and stability** in the country and to **support the Afghan people**¹⁸, underlining that “all operational engagement will be calibrated to the policy and actions of the Taliban-appointed cabinet”¹⁹ without legitimising it and depending on the fulfilment of five benchmarks agreed by EU ministers of foreign affairs. During an informal meeting held in Slovenia at the beginning of September, indeed, the EU engagement with the power-holders in the country has been established on the basis of the Taliban commitment to 1) prevent Afghanistan from becoming a base for terrorism; 2) respect

for human rights and the rule of law; 3) establish an inclusive transitional government; 4) free access to humanitarian aid; 5) allow the departure of foreign nationals and Afghans at risk who want to leave the country²⁰.

Also, in the September Council conclusions, the EU made it a priority to initiate a regional platform to cooperate with neighbouring Afghan countries supporting the economic resilience, protection needs and regional economic cooperation²¹.

On 7 October, in addition, the **High-level resettlement forum on Afghanistan**, organised by the EU, focused on providing protection to Afghans at risk through safe pathways to Europe²². On that occasion, UNHCR underlined that 85,000 people will need protection in the next five years and the EU said it could resettle half of them, but Member State pledges are made voluntarily²³. According to the latest updates, 15 EU Member States have agreed to help almost 40,000 Afghans reach the EU safely through resettlement and humanitarian admissions²⁴.

Also, within the emergency summit on Afghanistan held in October 2021, **the G20 group** agreed to avoid further humanitarian disasters in the country, with the EU pledging **one billion euros** for humanitarian needs and to assist neighbouring countries²⁵ in preventing negative *spill-over* effects.

¹⁸ See https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/pdf_27.pdf

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For the five benchmarks in detail, see <https://slovenian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/eu-foreign-ministers-at-brdo-focused-on-the-union-s-efforts-in-afghanistan/>

²¹ See Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions on the Report on Migration and Asylum. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/report-migration-asylum.pdf>

²² See <https://ecre.org/eu-afghanistan-response-one-billion-euro-in-aid-pledged-un-human-rights-council-adopts-eu-led-resolution-on-human-rights-situation-high-level-forum-on-resettlement/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/johansson/blog/efforts-member-states-help-afghans-ne-ed-shows-migration-eu-action_en

²⁵ See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/13/g20-agrees-aid-to-avert-afghanistan-humanitarian-crisis>

All these actions and commitments lead to some considerations.

As already mentioned in previous papers, the roadmap set out in the New Pact on Migration was basically aimed at providing a “fresh start” for migration, to address possible new crises, among others. With the outbreak of the Afghan crisis in August, however, things have not gone so differently compared to the migration approach of the past. Besides the commitments to avoid a humanitarian disaster, support for vulnerable people and neighbouring Afghan countries, the main approach of the EU followed the pattern of the external management of migration. Indeed, the theme of protecting the borders is always recalled, while there is little opening to legal channels to reach the EU.

In this framework, a fundamental issue remains the nature of the relations between the EU and the countries neighbouring the crisis context. Along with protecting its strategic interests, the EU needs to further stress human rights and democracy, by linking its support for counterparts with respect for the rule of law and individual freedoms. Indeed, a more coherent approach is needed between preserving the EU “security”, economic and political relations, and its core values.

On the other hand, the most recent statements to help in the resettlement and humanitarian admission of nearly 40,000 Afghans, are certainly in line with the promises of increasing legal pathways to the EU, even considering the low number of beneficiaries. But what strikes the attention is that only 15 EU Member States have agreed on the measure.

One year after the New Pact, it seems that solidarity between Member States and migrants “in need” remains a matter of concern.

However, it should be underlined that even when evacuation or resettlements in the EU, support to neighbouring countries, and humanitarian actions on the ground are provided, these actions just buffer the Afghan crisis, they do not resolve it. Without political stability, the risk is “having a pause to the war, not an end to it”²⁶.

Active involvement of the international community -including the EU- is needed towards holding the Taliban committed to the duties and responsibilities that ruling a country implies in terms of respect for both human rights and international law, and towards the engagement of the Afghans in building sustainable peace, to avoid a humanitarian disaster like the one still underway in Syria and Yemen and a migrant crisis even worse than that of 2015.



Ph. Aintersos.org

²⁶ See Freshta Karim intervention to the November 17, 2021, Security Council meeting <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14706.doc.htm>²⁰ For the five benchmarks in detail, see <https://slovenian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/eu-foreign-ministers-at-brdo-focused-on-the-union-s-efforts-in-afghanistan/>

²⁷ See <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14706.doc.htm>

4. CONCLUSION

20 years of war have caused instability in Afghanistan. All State institutions, once rebuilt after American and Western intervention, collapsed easily. The spread of violence soon created flows of vulnerable people either abandoning the country or displacing internally.

In this framework, Western responsibilities are undeniable, and the EU cannot turn away. But looking at the EU response in the last few months, it seems that the focus remains that of securing the borders and managing migration in third countries, except for some openings towards legal migration channels to the EU.

Further measures are required to provide protection and safe pathways for migration for Afghans in need, such as an increase in the number of beneficiaries of humanitarian admissions and further commitment in resettlements, putting in practice some of the files under the New Pact on migration.

Besides, the core of the EU political approach towards Afghanistan needs to encourage respect for the rule of law in the country, as well as peace and stability, also adopting a more coherent policy for investing in sustainable development and humanitarian cooperation while asking those in power to be inclusive and to fulfil human rights standards.



Ph. today.it



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This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Focsiv and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

This document is part of the SDGs and Migration – Multipliers project and Journalists Addressing Decision Makers and Citizens project funded by the European Union's Development Education and Awareness Raising (DEAR) programme