

GLOBAL MIGRATION  
RESEARCH PAPER  
N°17 | 2016

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# Afghans on the Move: Seeking Protection and Refuge in Europe

“In this journey I died several times;  
In Afghanistan you only die once”

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## **ABSTRACT**

During the last three decades Afghans have consistently constituted one of the single largest groups of asylum seekers in European countries. To ensure that UNHCR's protection strategies are coherent and informed by a sound understanding of the sociological reality, UNHCR commissioned the authors of the present report to carry out a study in six countries – Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary and Sweden. This report presents the main findings of the research. It highlights the profiles and trajectories, motivations and aspirations, decision-making process and strategies of Afghans in connection to their journey to Europe and their experience of the EU asylum system. Illustrated by ethnographic vignettes drawn from interviews and observations, the report follows Afghans from their departure point to their entry in the EU, through what they consider as transit countries, up to their preferred destinations. It begins with a section putting the Afghan crisis in perspective, then highlights the main profiles of the Afghans coming to Europe, describes their journey and their encounter with the EU external borders, the existing mobility patterns within the EU, the variety of asylum procedures and integration policies, and the role of media and social media in shaping migration aspirations. A final section identifies key findings and themes for further discussion.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to thank all those who gave of their time and experience in allowing them to better understand the complexity of the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe: our partners at the UNHCR Bureau for Europe in Geneva, their colleagues, the asylum authorities and members of civil society organisations in the various countries we visited, and last but not least the Afghans on the move who accepted to spend some time with us. This report is published with the agreement of UNHCR.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the last three decades Afghans have consistently constituted one of the single largest groups of asylum seekers in European countries. One of the main reasons for such uninterrupted arrivals is the continuing volatile security situation and the limited success of the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan since the international intervention and the fall of the Taliban regime in the autumn of 2001. In addition, there is a substantial secondary movement of Afghans, triggered by the adverse protection environment and the gloomy economic situation in first countries of asylum, in particular Pakistan and Iran.

To ensure that UNHCR's responses are coherent and informed by a thorough analysis of the movement and its causes, an internal UNHCR Task Force was asked to develop a global protection strategy, which takes into account the developments in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran as well as in Turkey and in countries further afield, including in the European Union (EU). As a contribution to the work of the Task Force, in November and December 2013 the Bureau for Europe undertook a review of existing public and internal documents on Afghans on the move. This review showed that most existing policy papers focused on the situation of internally displaced persons or returnees in Afghanistan or protection challenges in neighbouring host countries. A detailed analysis of the situation of Afghans in Europe, including differences in recognition practices and possible protection gaps was lacking.

To contribute to filling this gap and develop protection strategies that are based on a sound understanding of the sociological reality, UNHCR commissioned the authors of the present report to carry out a study in six countries – Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary and Sweden. The study builds on the previous expertise of the team on Afghanistan and refugee issues. The team conducted a preliminary desk review followed by country visits between September 2014 and April 2015. The goal was not to document the intricacies of each national context but rather to situate the perspectives and circulation patterns of Afghans in a larger context. The research team spent an average of ten days in each country. Interviews were conducted with three types of stakeholders: state authorities and international organizations; representatives of civil society organisations; and Afghans – refugees, asylum seekers or rejected asylum seekers, including families with children and unaccompanied minors. The team visited the offices of asylum services, reception centres, informal settlements and



private accommodations, as well as public spaces such as parks and squares where Afghans meet and exchange experiences and information.

An earlier draft of this report was discussed at a Steering Committee meeting convened by UNHCR in June 2015 and attended by government representatives of the countries visited, as well as Austria, Germany and Turkey, IOM and UNHCR staff from the aforementioned countries and Headquarters. Useful comments were made and helped the authors to refine their analysis. This report presents the main findings of the research. It highlights the profiles and trajectories, motivations and aspirations, decision-making process and strategies of Afghans in connection to their journey to Europe and their experience of the EU asylum system. Illustrated by ethnographic vignettes drawn from interviews and observations, the report follows Afghans from their departure point to their entry in the EU, through what they consider as transit countries, up to their preferred destinations. It begins with a section putting the Afghan crisis in perspective, then highlights the main profiles of the Afghans coming to Europe, describes their journey and their encounter with the EU external borders, the existing mobility patterns within the EU, the variety of asylum procedures and integration policies, and the role of media and social media in shaping migration aspirations. A final section identifies key findings and themes for further discussion.

## **2. BACKGROUND: THE AFGHAN CRISIS IN PERSPECTIVE**

In their scale and duration, the series of conflicts that have been tearing Afghanistan apart since the Communist coup in April 1978 and the Soviet invasion in December 1979 have provoked one of the largest forced displacements of population and protracted refugee situations since World War II. At the beginning of the 1990s Afghans constituted with 6.22 million – more than a third of the country's population – the largest group of displaced persons in the world under the responsibility of the UNHCR, accounting for 40 % of the total. Large numbers of refugees returned to Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal (1989) and the capture of Kabul by resistance forces (1992). But over the following years this trend was reversed as more outward flows accompanied new outbreaks of fighting.

The US-led intervention that followed the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington D.C. brought about the defeat of the Taliban and the installation in Kabul of a government supported by the international community and subsequently legitimized by a democratic process. But hopes of achieving stability rapidly vanished.

Rampant corruption reduced the state's credibility, while the Taliban reorganized in their southern bastions by capitalizing on the discontent of large segments of the population. The Afghan government has a limited capacity to protect its citizens across the national territory, while the insurgents have been able to target anybody anywhere, carrying out attacks even in the heart of the capital. The partial pull-out of the international coalition forces in late 2014 brought further uncertainty. According to the Global Peace Index, during the last five years Afghanistan was invariably ranked among the four least peaceful countries in the world.<sup>1</sup> The number of Afghans outside their country of origin is still considerable<sup>2</sup> and the current political situation in Afghanistan, but also developments in the first countries of asylum – Pakistan and Iran – prompt new departures, mostly towards Europe.

The third presidential election, which took place in 2014, did not bring any stability. The current government is divided along factional lines and on the defensive. The most recent security reports are worrying. Insurgent groups are intensifying their offensive in rural areas and in some urban centres. Some reports evoke the emergence of armed groups claiming to be affiliated to Daesh and fighting against the Taliban. Although Afghanistan has a long history of militant groups shifting allegiances and there is little evidence of fighters travelling from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan, there seems to be no escape from the endless process of political fragmentation. Despite huge investments in education, health and infrastructure there have been only modest gains in the daily living conditions of most Afghans. Conflict and insecurity have continued to spread and the number of affected civilians to increase. Because of the absence of rule of law, weak governance, abuse of power, re-emergence of warlordism and generalized unpredictability, large segments of the population, in particular minorities and women face increased risks and threats to their lives and livelihoods.

While current policy debates and media attention in Europe focus on the Syrian conflict and the Mediterranean boat people crisis, the relevance of the Afghan caseload cannot be overstated. Afghans have been arriving in Europe for years, where they constitute one of the largest groups of asylum seekers and refugees. The number of

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<sup>1</sup> The GPI evaluates peace and conflict using three themes: the level of safety and security in society, the extent of domestic or international conflict, and the degree of militarization. It ranks countries according to 22 qualitative and quantitative indicators. For instance, Afghanistan was ranked in 2014 161 out of 162 (just before Syria but after South Sudan, Iraq and Somalia). See <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/#/page/indexes/global-peace-index>.

<sup>2</sup> In a recent statement, Afghanistan's Consul General in Mashhad, Iran, said for instance that "some seven million Afghan refugees are living in various countries round the globe" (<http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81646334/>, consulted on 15 June 2015).

Afghans lodging an asylum application in EU countries gradually grew in the 1990s reaching a peak of 48,000 in 2001. The international intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001 and the prospects of peace and reconstruction prompted a decrease in applications. But in recent years, this trend was again reversed. Since 2009, with more than 20,000 new cases per year, Afghans were regularly among the largest groups applying for asylum – along with Syrians, Eritreans and Iraqis. In 2014 more than 41,000 Afghan refugees constituted the highest number of new arrivals in Greece, one of the main entry points into the EU.

Considering overall levels of violence, the lack of the rule of law and the dearth of mechanisms of protection and redress from these threats – exacerbated by additional problems such as demographic pressure<sup>3</sup> and the shrinking job market resulting from the withdrawal of many private companies, international and nongovernmental organisations following the departure of the bulk of foreign troops –, there is no reason to assume that the number of Afghans leaving the region will significantly decrease in the coming years.

### **3. AFGHANS ARRIVING IN EUROPE: TOWARD A MORAL ECONOMY OF MIGRATION**

After more than thirty-five years of conflict, no segment of the Afghan population – men and women, children and adults, rural people and city dwellers, Sunnis and Shia, Pashtuns and Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks, rich and poor – has been spared the experience of displacement in one form or another. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the overwhelming majority of Afghan refugees went to Pakistan or Iran. For them, exile was neither definitive nor temporary, it was more appropriate to speak of recurrent multidirectional movements. Few Afghan refugees never returned to their place of origin at least once for a brief visit after their initial flight and most households in Afghanistan have at least one family member in a neighbouring country. Displacement and exile neither resulted in integration in another country nor in a definitive return to Afghanistan. Our past studies have shown that by maintaining a certain dispersion and level of circulation of family members, Afghans mitigated their risks associated with insecurity and an unfavourable protection environment.

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<sup>3</sup> Between 2010 and 2050, the population of Afghanistan is projected to increase by 150 % or more, with a median age that will remain below 25 years (*World population to exceed 9 billion by 2050*, UN Population Division/DESA, 11 March 2009).

However, the context has dramatically changed since the end of the Cold War and both Pakistan and Iran no longer offer an unrestricted open-door policy to Afghans fleeing violence or fear of persecution. Options for finding refuge are significantly more limited today than they were during the anti-Soviet jihad years. The collapse of the possibility for Afghans to look for protection in neighbouring countries coupled with forced returns (from Iran) and camp closures (in Pakistan) prompt a redirection of movements to other regions, especially Europe.

Apart from a few exceptions, Afghans started arriving in Europe in the late 1980s. Until the mid-1990s, it was mostly members of the urban elite who came; many went first to Eastern Europe – where they had developed ties during the Communist period – and then to Germany or the UK. They were easily granted protection in the country where they lodged their claim. By contrast in the early 2000s, with a growing number of Afghan asylum seekers, it became more and more difficult and lengthy to be granted protection in Europe. Today, while reaching Europe entails embarking on a long, dangerous and irregular journey, recognition rates have decreased and vary enormously across EU countries.

Indeed, new generations of Afghan refugees are forced to move due to similar factors as their parents, but they are compelled to seek protection in more distant places and resort to even riskier routes. Young men are overrepresented among those arriving in Europe. Many refer to the tremendous social pressure they feel from their relatives left in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran. For such a category of persons, success is understood as getting an official form of protection, an education and a job, and eventually marrying a girl from home and bringing her to Europe to build a family. Failure is not an option. Being returned signifies that the money that was collected for the journey has been lost. In addition to the serious repercussions of an individual's repatriation on his or her security, it is a blow to the domestic economy and would be experienced as a social shame by the whole family.

Many of our interlocutors – Afghans or officials associated with the asylum system in the various countries where research was conducted – pointed out that they see an increasing number of families on the move. Single females are the exception – although we did meet some middle-aged women who were travelling on their own (and had access to more expensive and trustworthy smuggler networks) or with their children. There is a large percentage of Hazaras, both rural and urbanized, in the flow of Afghans, including some that have spent considerable time in either Pakistan or Iran

(sometimes in both countries). There are also relatively high numbers of rural Pashtuns from the Southwest and West of the country who are fleeing recruitment or threats by the Taliban. Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens from the northern and north-eastern provinces are comparatively less represented.

Overall, it seems that the profile of asylum seekers who manage to reach Europe is becoming more diversified across the demographic and economic spectrum, indicating that Afghans no longer see neighbouring countries as safe havens. However, three categories of people on the move, situated at the opposite ends of the sociological spectrum, were particularly noteworthy: Hazara male unaccompanied minors or young adults, many but not all arriving from Iran; young men from the southern and eastern countryside, who are caught between the government and the insurgency; urban families who feel threatened after the scaling down of the foreign military and humanitarian presence in Afghanistan.

### ***Unaccompanied minors and young adults***

Large numbers of unaccompanied minors and young adults face considerable risks in order to travel to Europe. Many are second-generation refugees with little or no connection to Afghanistan. Most of them are Hazaras who were born in Iran or arrived there very young. Having no residence permit and facing expulsion, most of the time they leave with the consent of their families. Data already collected during past ethnographic fieldwork clearly shows that Hazaras no longer see Iran as a friendly Shiite state that offers protection and assistance. Some of the informants met during this research came from Quetta (Pakistan), where Hazaras form a numerous and ancient community. While the city had long been a safe haven for Hazaras fleeing violence, they are increasingly the target of attacks by Sunni extremist groups. Some others come from Afghanistan and express their lack of trust in the Afghan government. They have often transited through Pakistan or Iran, where they might have stayed for a couple of years to work and save some money, then Turkey. The boundaries between these three categories is therefore often blurred, all of them are united by the same experience of violence and social exclusion and what they perceive as an absence of prospects in Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries.

Unaccompanied minors will in all likelihood continue to represent a significant proportion of new arrivals, triggering a wide range of serious protection concerns. On the one hand, they know that their chances of recognition are better than for other sociological categories. On the other, the huge number of underage boys trying their

chance to reach Europe mirrors the fate of a generation without future, in quest for meaning in life. Many do not seem to have relatives in Europe. Penniless, socially isolated and often ill informed, they constitute a particularly vulnerable population. We collected many stories that show the threats including physical violence, sexual and other forms of exploitation faced by these young people during their journey. Their levels of trauma are compounded by their expectations and the pressure not to disappoint their families back home, who have often entered into considerable debt in order to finance their trip.

The Greek city of Patras represents a migration hub for these unaccompanied minors. They stay in abandoned factories close the port facilities or in dilapidated farm sheds outside the town. Their living conditions are appalling. Only those with some means contact smugglers and manage to stay in apartments, waiting for their passage to Italy. “What was your hope? What were your expectations?” *Zendegi-ye tâza* – “A new life!” (literally “A fresh life!”) – says a young man from Quetta, whose brother was killed the previous year in a sectarian ambush. They mention simple but fundamental things: not being insulted in the street because you are from Afghanistan, not fearing for your life because you are a Shiite, access to education, the possibility of having a family... When asked if it is what they got, they shake their heads with empty eyes. “It is not how we imagined Europe, for sure!” But at the end of this terrible journey, they hope to get access to opportunities they could not dream of in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran; they imagine marrying a young girl from their village of origin, bringing her and possibly their aging parents to Europe. Their trajectory will be quoted to the younger generation as an example of success.

That was the case of Abdullah, a young man from Panjshir who arrived in Sweden three years before we interviewed him. He received support for children, including psychological care, and was quickly granted refugee status. He found a part time job and is renting a spacious apartment in Boden. He got married in Pakistan with a girl from his valley, whom he was able to bring to Sweden. Their unborn child will be one of the first to acquire Swedish nationality at birth, according to a new law. When Abdullah recalls the risks and difficulties of the long travel that led him to Northern Europe, it is like he was speaking of another life, as if the child that managed to survive but almost lost himself and the man that was welcoming his guests in his bright house were two different persons. It is with pride and relief that he tells the story of his journey smiling, like he was recalling an adventure movie, now that the hardship belongs to the past.

This sense of despondency contrasts with the vibrant enthusiasm of young Hazara teenagers met in a drop-in centre in Rome who had just succeeded, after repeated attempts, to cross the Adriatic Sea. They were trading stories about how they crossed from Greece: “I travelled in style on a couch in a truck full of furniture.” “I did better: I was on a truck carrying cars and I was sitting in a Maserati.” “In the port of Patras I spotted a car that was pulling a boat covered by a tarpaulin and slipped inside. I figured it was waiting to board the ferry. The owners were very surprised when I climbed out of their boat at a rest stop on the motorway.” They were comparing notes about possible destinations and surfing the web: “Oh, look, Finland looks great. Lakes and forests.” “No, Germany is better!”

There is a divide between the minors (*zer-e sin*) and the young adults (*bâlâ-ye sin*), who might be just a couple of years older. This distinction is much more fluid in Afghanistan than in the West. The dates of birth are not recorded by parents or the state; age is defined in social terms considering maturity (mental and physical) and capability. By contrast, the difference becomes crucial in Europe, as minors and young adults do not have access to the same services. While some try their best to be labelled as minors to be eligible for assistance, some prefer to pass as adults to keep more freedom of movement. There are benefits and costs to protection and autonomy, two values that are described as partly contradictory by several young Afghans. The minors met in Patras, for instance, joke and say that the big boss of the factory is from Afghanistan and is 22 years old. The young man presented as the elder replies saying that these boys grew up in Iran and that they were just immature kids and needed to be guided. He adds more seriously, with a hint of jealousy, that due to their age, they could get a protection status more easily.

These adolescents and young adults have a lot of strength, accept taking risks and are willing to repay – economically and socially – their families who have sold property to finance their flight. For them there is no doubt: success means reaching Sweden or Norway. For them finding protection goes along with social, economic and political empowerment. For some young interviewees who had “made it” to Italy and who knew that they would not be sent back to another country, there was a sense of pride and adventure in how they told their stories and how they aspired to continue to northern Europe. Peer pressure, the sense of obligation not to let down the family back home, especially when they were sent as a “scout” that will allow others to come later, conspire to transform a difficult and potentially traumatic journey in a kind of rite of passage enabling them to demonstrate their masculinity and become adults.

But the question remains: why are so many Hazara unaccompanied minors leaving, especially those living in Iran? Only partial responses can be proposed. They know about the possibility of family reunification. The absence of prospects in Iran, the increasing violence in Pakistan, the shade of the past and the lack of trust in the current government in Afghanistan as well as fear of the Taliban and the deteriorating security situation are all factors that play a role. But to understand their choices, we need to mobilise a quest for meaning in their life and social recognition. The mobility factor is part and parcel of a subtle mix of competition and moral economy. On the one hand, trying to find protection in Europe is conceived as a school of life where only the fittest will succeed. On the other, mobility and dispersion are seen as a means to spread risk; it represents a kind of social, economic and political insurance. These unaccompanied minors and young adults are invested in the double mission to prove their individual value and prepare a better future for their community.

### ***Urban families***

A relatively new phenomenon is urban families, who often travel in groups. These are generally members of the emerging middle class, whose life style was linked to the international military or aid presence in Afghanistan. With the departure or reduced activity of many aid organisations, as well as the myriad contractors supporting the international military presence, thousands of people have not only lost their relative economic stability but are now also faced with increased security threats by the Taliban. In order to leave, they have sold or mortgaged their property and some travel with tens of thousands of euros in their pockets. Although they have more means at their disposal than unaccompanied minors and young adults, this mere fact puts them at risk of being robbed and abused along their route. We were able to interview and observe several families and groups of families. They tend to be educated (some speak English), urban, usually Dari-speaking even if sometimes of Pashtun origin. They seem to be well aware of the risks entailed by the voyage and of the necessary connections they need to minimize these risks. In a reception centre in Hungary, two families from Kabul had just arrived. They were Dari-speaking, clearly middle class and both husbands spoke some English. They had travelled as an organized group with other families. Although they had been fingerprinted in Hungary, they had no intention of staying there. Germany, where they had family and contacts was their objective. “We have good connections there. We’ll find a way of staying.” They reckoned that families with young kids were unlikely to be deported.



Reasons given for leaving vary. Many refer to insecurity, to the generally volatile environment and threats received from the Taliban or the security forces (or both), to local feuds over land and other property. Some mention issues of sexual orientation or discrimination. A few cases of conversion to Christianity have been noted. The extent to which asylum seekers tell stories that others, often smugglers, have advised them to concoct, which are sometimes less credible than their actual fears of persecution, is difficult to gauge.

In Athens, we met a disabled man. As a child, he had lost a leg to a land mine. He was from Kabul, where he had a home and a tailor shop. One of his brothers went to Bulgaria during the Communist regime (1980s). Years later he came back to Afghanistan as a translator for the Bulgarian army, which had sent a contingent of a few hundred soldiers as part of ISAF. As he had another brother in Germany, his family was considered as associated with the foreigners. After he received threats, his wife decided to leave immediately and go to Europe. He stayed behind to mortgage their house and sell his tailor shop while she travelled with their four children. They disappeared without a trace somewhere on the Turkish coast when they were about to cross the sea to Greece.

He was travelling with two relatives and their families. They disclosed in confidence that they had several tens of thousands of dollars with them. Travelling in a group of a dozen persons, they had been in Greece for two months trying to explore the various routes towards Germany, where they had kith and kin. According to the information they were able to collect, smugglers would charge EUR 25,000 to send five people by plane to Hungary. The land route through Macedonia and Serbia would apparently only cost EUR 3,500 but was considered much longer and arduous. An option they contemplated was to split the family, send the women and children by plane, with men following by land.

In Athens, we met two single-mother families with children ranging from five to seventeen. They were brought to abandoned buildings, also frequented by drug addicts, by the smugglers who helped them cross the border into the EU. They remained elusive on the fate of their husbands. The youngest woman had used her savings to send her 7-year old daughter to Finland. Referring explicitly to gender and generation considerations, she hoped that a girl of such a young age would be accepted quickly and then be able to apply for family reunification. The mother strokes the hair of her 12-year old son, who is sitting on the floor next to her: "He is a good

footballer.” Her dream is to be able to support him to become a professional player, “the new Zlatan [Ibrahimović].” The older woman looks at her with mild irritation: “She has money, she can make projects. We have lost the bag with all our valuable belongings in the sea; we don’t know what to do now.”

Taher runs a nice mobile phone shop on Acharnon Avenue in Athens. He arrived in Greece in 2002 and applied for asylum. He withdrew from the asylum procedure two years later but was nevertheless able to get a residence visa and working permit. Unlike asylum seekers and refugees, he is now able to visit Afghanistan and got married there. Family reunification, according to him, is an extremely cumbersome process. While it is easy to provide the marriage contract (a common document in Afghanistan, which is called *nikâh*), getting a birth certificate (a document that almost no Afghan has) is another story. To avoid endless bureaucratic problems and unpredictable delays, his wife came irregularly to Greece. After two years, while pregnant, she travelled to Sweden, where she applied for asylum. He visits her and their newborn child on a regular basis, discretely. After all these years, he does not want to become a Greek citizen: “People [other Afghans] would laugh at me if I did.” But he is happy with his life in Athens and does not want to go to Stockholm: “I don’t like the climate there.” When told an anecdote about an Iranian who reached Sweden in the late 1980s as asylum seeker and who was eventually able to study and is now professor at the University of Stockholm, his reaction is vehement: “That would not be possible in Greece! That’s why I sent my wife and child to Sweden. Here, my son could run a shop like me, nothing more. I want a better future for my family!” Even if most people with a residence permit whom we met expressed their interest in starting a naturalization procedure, the attitude of this interlocutor was quite illustrative of Afghans’ perception of Greece.

Indeed this example is far from an isolated case. We documented the case of several families who had split in Greece or Italy in a stratagem to minimise the costs and maximise the chances of obtaining some formal status. Sometimes, a young man considered to be more able to find his way is sent ahead; sometimes – as we have just seen with the young girl who travelled alone to Finland –, a vulnerable member of the family goes ahead with the hope that her or his chance to get asylum is higher.

The situation of families is highly diverse. Some were refugees in Pakistan and Iran. But according to several people interviewed during the country visits, more and more urban families who had a good situation and had been able to save some money

are trying to find their way to Europe. Unlike unaccompanied minors, they have some resources, they are educated and have some professional skills. Their plans are oriented by the pre-existing connections they have in European countries. Unsurprisingly, the flows tend to be oriented towards locations with already established Afghan communities.

#### **4. THE JOURNEY**

Afghans follow a variety of routes to reach Europe. Most leave by land via Pakistan and Iran after entering into contact with smuggling networks either in these countries or in their areas of origin in Afghanistan. A few manage to travel to Turkey or even Europe by air: these are usually from the middle class with connections to the more expensive smuggling networks (which can, for example, provide fake visas for Turkey). The majority put their future and sometimes their lives in the hands of a succession of intermediaries who arrange the journey or portions of the journey in exchange for cash up-front, or more recently, provide advances to cover the price of the travel in exchange for payment on arrival. Families pool resources to cover the cost of the travel and often enter into debt or have to mortgage their property in order to allow one family member, often a very young family member, to leave.

The distinctions between asylum seeker, migrant and even smuggler are fluid and may change over time. There is social continuity between these categories. Some Afghans are recruited by smugglers to guide asylum seekers across international borders and do this several times before continuing the journey when they have raised some cash. In Rome, a boy reported that he had been travelling with his father who had been tasked by smugglers to pilot a small boat full of asylum seekers from Turkey to a nearby Greek island. The father had been caught by the Greek police and accused of being a smuggler. He was now in prison and the son had continued on his own. In Sweden, a middle-aged refugee who was now well established and integrated explained that he had been living and working in Russia for years and assisted some fellow Afghans wanting to come to Europe. Eventually, as he knew the routes, he “smuggled” himself as well.

A number of Afghans described how their identities and motivations had changed during the journey. For example, many at the lower end of the socio-economic scale had to stop for extended periods in Iran or Turkey to work in order to raise more funds for the next step of the voyage. Others were residing in Iran, or had

even been born there, and had been expelled back to Afghanistan where they had little or no connections or support networks, often felt at risk, and therefore were anxious to leave again. The destination is not always fixed in advance and the actual route is a function of resources, chance and perseverance.

Access to information is key and the internet and social media play a crucial role (see below the section on the role of media and social media). We were able to visit some of the “nodes” where information is collected. Internet cafés are places where information is shared and contacts are made including with smugglers. Reception and drop-in centres fulfil similar functions. The Ostiense station in Rome, where a soup kitchen provides meals every evening for people on the move (among others) is an example of a site of exchange and planning for the next move. Smugglers are on hand to provide advice and make arrangements, for example for a car trip to Munich at 300 euros per passenger. The same happens in locations such as Victoria Square or Areos Park in Athens.

The extent to which Afghans understand the geography of Europe, the routes and the risks involved in the journey varies a great deal. A number of refugees who had travelled ten to fifteen years ago confessed that they knew very little. A refugee met in Hungary said that he had come in the mid-1990s and was put by a smuggler on a train in a small space above the toilet. He was told to wait as long as he could before getting off. He had no idea where he was going and eventually ended up in Romania. More recently, young people seem to know the geography and the potential destinations much better, but the aspiration changes as they learn about the difficulties of getting to their preferred destination vs. staying in what they consider initially as a transit country. As for the risks involved, the impression is that they are generally known, especially by young Afghans, but generally disregarded. People with more economic and cultural capital, such as urban families, use smart phones to situate themselves geographically and plan their migration route.

The very hardship of the experience renders it even more significant. It is also a way to prove one’s valour, courage and capacity to face the most demanding situations. “I have nothing to lose, I want to play with my life,” said a young Pashtun from Kandahar who fled recruitment by the Taliban. He had already been deported back once to Kabul from Turkey and had tried his luck again.

Decisions on when and where to go are taken at the individual or family level, often with very little awareness of state policies and practice in the various EU

countries except for their first-hand experience. Decisions seem to be driven by two main objectives: survival and the fulfilment of their travel project. Expectations are based on what they heard and were told about these countries before and during their travel by a range of different sources: relatives, friends, fellow travellers, media, narratives of those who are already there, blogs, etc. The main concern is precisely how to find reliable information and trustworthy sources in order to inform the next move and decrease the stress of travelling in an unpredictable and dangerous environment. Smugglers have an important role in the production creation and circulation of information.

The risks and the trauma associated with the journey are very real, however, as described in numerous and sometimes disturbing testimonies. These clearly show that during the early 2000s, changing EU migration policies and the related professionalization of smuggling networks have made the illegal journey to Europe more costly (financially and physically), more dangerous, and longer. Hazards range from risk of drowning, extremely dangerous travel conditions, prostitution to raise money to continue the journey and different types of traumatic experiences. Women traveling without an adult male relative and unaccompanied minors are especially vulnerable to physical harassment and sexual abuse. Many informants are actually survivors who have managed to overcome not only the very traumatic experiences in Afghanistan but also during the journey itself.

The risks and trauma experienced during the journey compound those they faced in Afghanistan. Only persons who dispose of sufficient resources (money, endurance, support networks) or are ready to make the most hazardous choices can succeed. But money is not sufficient as exemplified by the case of Hasan, a man met in a Serbian reception centre where he was staying with his wife and their 15-year-old daughter. In Turkey he gave all the money he had to someone who promised to bring them to the EU. Once in Serbia, he was waiting for a call but nobody phoned. He tried in vain to trace the person. Having heard similar stories in the centre, he understood that the call will never arrive. Stuck there without any money left, he was “waiting for a miracle.”

Many stop on the way, work in exploitative conditions in Iran or Turkey to repay the intermediaries or to wait for a wire transfer from home. Sometimes the entire journey to the EU borders can take a year or more. The traumas of being separated from a family member or a friend during the journey, or worse of witnessing the death

of a fellow traveller are especially disturbing. One man spoke of how he saw his friends drown when their boat capsized close to the Greek coast. A young Pashtun in a reception centre in Belgrade recalled that he was forced to abandon his friend's body on the street in Greece because the smuggler was putting pressure on him: either he left with the group or he would lose the money he had already paid to cross the Balkans. A family met in Sweden had been separated to great distress from one of their daughters in Turkey and had no news. Stories of beatings by the police, smugglers or bandits abound and in a sense are considered as part of the migration experience. A man from Ghazni interviewed in Athens was caught in 2009 by the Hellenic Coast Guard off the island of Samos. The people traveling with him panicked, fearing to be pushed back to the Turkish coast. He pierced a hole in their small inflatable dinghy making it sink quickly. They were all rescued by the Coast Guard, but he also showed a number of scars on his face, reportedly from being beaten by his saviours. After being put on trial for having threatened the lives of his fellow passengers he was sentenced to ten years in prison. Paroled after three and a half years, his future was highly uncertain and he feared being eventually deported to Afghanistan.

Afghans who reach Europe are caught in a difficult dilemma. If they do not get a protection status and remain in a bureaucratic limbo, they are considered to have failed. But if they get a good situation, they face the expectations of their families (remittances or support to newcomers) that might end up jeopardising their chances of integration. A young man met in a makeshift settlement in Patras summarised the ambivalent relationship with his family in Afghanistan. He calls home from time to time. "But it is tough! You know... what can I say to my mother?" He looks around him: "That I live on a pile of waste? That's the tough part: lying to your family. So I tell them that we have found a nice room and have good food. But it is tricky. We should not raise their expectations either... they will start asking us to send money back."

Afghans met in Sweden said that they would discourage their own young relatives from coming to Europe, because the journey had become too risky. At the same time, they stress that their relatives in Afghanistan tend not to believe them and would still want to leave, both because they are driven by necessity and suspect those who made it to Europe of wanting to keep the benefits for themselves. Alternatively, people who have succeeded in reaching a destination may be willing to enhance their prestige by giving very positive stories even if their situation is actually not so good.

Overall, if we compare data collected during this study with our research experience in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, we note that support and solidarity networks tend to weaken as the distance from home increases. In the proximity of the place of origin, networks are still strong: there are family members or friends in Peshawar and Quetta, Mashhad and Tehran that can be relied upon. The density of circulation back and forth also represents a factor of social control. But as they move to Turkey and beyond, Afghans have to increasingly rely on their own ingenuity or put their survival in the hands of unknown and potentially dangerous intermediaries. To some extent they can rely on fellow travellers and on ethnic or community bonds, but these weaken over time and distance while jealousy and competition intensify in a context where the probability of finding some form of protection is low.

## **5. THE EU BORDER**

In the 1980s and 1990s, many Afghans travelled to Europe via Russia and transiting through Eastern Europe. In the 2000s, the Eastern Mediterranean route became increasingly important. Until recently, most Afghans entered the EU in Greece and then continued their journey to Italy from the ports of Patras or Igoumenitza. The recently enhanced controls at the Turkish-Greek border have partly redirected the flows to the Turkish-Bulgarian border, overwhelming the Bulgarian asylum system at the end of 2013.<sup>4</sup> From Bulgaria, Afghans are heading to Serbia,<sup>5</sup> from where they hope to cross into Hungary. The evolving situation in Greece and the stricter controls across the Adriatic are therefore inducing more and more Afghans to take the Balkan land route and re-enter the EU at the Serbian-Hungarian border (as Croatia is not part of the Schengen area). Like Bulgaria, Serbia is therefore facing increasing arrivals of Afghans.

For Afghans, entering the EU is not a moment of relief but the most stressful and often more traumatic moment of the journey. Afghan asylum seekers try by all means to cross the border undetected so as not to be fingerprinted, in order to reach the country where they wish to lodge an asylum application. But this has become more and more difficult and costly, due to the strengthening of border controls. Countries at the external border are under increasing pressure to ensure more efficient border controls, including through FRONTEX operations, aimed at combating illegal migration

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<sup>4</sup> We heard that these controls also prompted some risky attempts to reach Italy by boat directly from Turkey.

<sup>5</sup> It is not clear why Romania is bypassed.

and identifying asylum seekers as early as possible. Thus Afghans pay ever-higher fees to agents that help them to cross the border illegally.

This often involves long periods of waiting until the agents feel confident enough to organize the crossing. For example many Afghans who want to cross into Hungary camp out in the outskirts of the Serbian town of Subotica, situated a few kilometres south of the Hungarian border. They stay in the abandoned premises of the so called “old brick factory” where the living conditions are hard and unhealthy and medical assistance is not available. According to our interviews, the local police regularly raids the factory and reportedly confiscates money and phones. Beatings and random arrests have also been reported.

Travelling hidden in trucks is more expensive and many Afghans cross the EU border on their own, mostly during the night either by boat (Aegean sea) or on foot along the “green border”, i.e. the forest and mountain areas between official checkpoints. The agents either provide the boat or refer them to local guides. Many Afghans interviewed are still scarred by the trauma of the sea journey and the border crossing. They have risked their lives or have seen fellow travellers lose theirs (often by drowning). Tragedies are frequent, especially in the Aegean sea. Afghans travel on small unseaworthy rubber boats. A Tajik young man met in Sweden mentioned with pathos how he miraculously survived when he fell into the Evros river as he was not able to swim. In a Serbian reception centre, sadness and worry were recalled for an old Afghan man travelling with his family who had a heart attack while walking in the forest toward the Hungarian border as he could not keep the pace of the smuggler. A young Hazara who arrived in Sweden mid 2000 recalled being kidnapped with his fellow travellers in Poland. They were threatened that one kidney each would be removed if they did not pay a ransom.

The much-feared encounter with the police is unpredictable. Communication is hampered by language differences. There are rumours among Afghans of numerous cases of *refoulement* at the EU borders and reported actions of deterrence performed by the police, including threats with guns. Some reported that they had been insulted and beaten. Apprehended Afghans may either be pushed-back or readmitted into Turkey under more or less formal schemes, or brought to immigration detention centres, where they can be detained for up to 18 months. Elsewhere, the police act to relieve the pressures that the asylum authorities of the border countries face within the Dublin system. Incoming Afghans may be denied access, but not apprehended or



fingerprinted and are thus able to try to cross the border again. For instance, many Afghans we interviewed were aware that since 2011 most EU countries have stopped transferring asylum seekers back to Greece under the Dublin Regulation, even persons who have been fingerprinted. Afghans in Subotica knew that if the Hungarian police caught them, most probably they would have the choice: either to apply for asylum in Hungary or to be returned to Serbia, from where they would have the chance to try the crossing again. The smuggler fee often covers the need for repeated attempts. This is the case on the Serbian-Hungarian border and, reportedly, for the trip across the Mediterranean from Greece to Italy.

The encounter with asylum authorities comes later, sometimes through the police, and often reluctantly. If Afghans can choose, they do not manifest their protection needs when they first cross the EU border as most want to continue their travel towards Western and Northern Europe. They apply for asylum only unwillingly, to secure a legal status if they do not manage to leave the country, as a way of avoiding detention or deportation, or if they consider that the consequences are limited (like in Serbia and Greece because they do not face the risk of a Dublin transfer back to these countries). Most of the Afghans we met who had applied for asylum in Bulgaria, for instance, had done so only because they were apprehended by the police. One young Afghan remained for a year in the Buzmanci detention centre and in the end applied from there because he could no longer bear incarceration. He declared to the asylum official that he had other goals, but “prison made me decide to stay.”

At this stage of their journey, Afghans are still unfamiliar with the asylum procedures and with the Dublin system. They see the asylum authorities as having the same concern as the police, that is to prevent them from continuing their travel. For this reason, in the countries situated at the external borders of the EU, Afghans tend to mistrust asylum authorities. The few NGOs present in those countries are perceived by Afghans in transit as not having much to offer as their activities are mostly focused on legal support for the asylum procedure. Afghans would rather trust the smugglers who they consider as the only ones who can help them in continuing the journey. At the external EU borders, the mistrust is often mutual: police officers, normal citizens but also asylum officials and NGO staff tend to consider that Afghans do not apply for asylum or that they leave after submitting an asylum claim, because they are not in real need of protection and just want to abuse the reception system.

Overall, it appears from the narratives collected among the Afghans we were able to meet that the strengthening of border controls does not prevent them from trying to cross illegally into the EU, but rather redirects the flows and makes the trip more risky and more costly. There is a gap between the aspirations and the protection needs of Afghans, who wish to enter into the European Union in order to apply for asylum in a country that they consider suitable to find protection, and the EU migration and asylum policies aimed at preventing illegal entries and processing asylum applications in the first country of entry. Access to asylum is hampered, because Afghans try to abscond at all costs, both from the police and from asylum authorities, without manifesting their protection needs. This situation explains why in the countries situated at the external EU border there is often a deeply uneasy relationship between asylum authorities and Afghan asylum seekers.

## **6. TRANSIT AND DESTINATION COUNTRIES WITHIN THE EU**

Before entering the EU, the final destination is often undefined. The main objective is to reach the Schengen space, where travelling to other countries becomes easier. Remaining in Serbia is not contemplated except by Afghans who run into serious difficulties (robbed and abandoned by agents) or major health problems (for instance women in an advanced stage of pregnancy). Greece, Bulgaria and Hungary, all EU countries situated at the external border, are considered by Afghans as entry points for their travel toward Western and Northern Europe. Italy is mainly seen as an intermediary step for those who cross the Adriatic from Greece. This trip is dangerous and difficult, one of the hardest passages within the Schengen space.

A young Hazara adult who made it to Italy explained: “I was in Patras trying to find a truck on which I could hide. The smuggler taught me to look for a truck with hot tyres, which meant that it had just arrived and was waiting to board the ferry [trucks coming off the ferry would have cool tyres]. I found one and I hid on top of the cabin behind the wind deflector. It was black and I had black clothes so I was difficult to spot. I crouched there for 36 hours. I couldn’t move because if I made any noise the driver could hear me. I had a small backpack with my belongings and a plastic bag so I could urinate. When we got to the Italian port, I think it was Ancona, I was very afraid that the police would see me. I knew that if they found me inside the port, I would be sent back. Finally, after many hours, the truck stopped in the courtyard of a small factory. I slid down from the cabin. The driver and the factory staff were shocked to see me. I was so dirty that they washed me down with a hose. Then a woman worker took me inside.

They gave me tea and food. By then I knew I would not be sent back so I said, it's OK if you want to call the police.”

A Pashtun man from Paghman who had come to Italy as an unaccompanied minor tells a similar story: “The trip from Greece to Italy took about forty hours. We were in a container on a truck. There was a hole in the bottom of the container through which we entered. The back of the container (where the doors are) was packed with watermelons. There were about forty people cramped into the front part of the container, mostly Afghans. It was very hot. Our clothes were completely soaked with sweat. We were all sick in the ferry. The container was opened on the Italian side and inspected, but the watermelons did the trick.” They drove out of the port and drove for a couple of hours; then as one of the guys was very ill they banged on the side of the container until the truck stopped. “We left him in a ditch on the side of the road and a few of us fled on foot. At the first village there was a small park with a fountain. We washed our clothes which were filthy and put them back on again, wet.” They were fingerprinted by the Carabinieri but let go. At the Stazione Ostiense in Rome they were advised to go to Caltanissetta in Sicily where they would have a better chance of being admitted to a reception centre.

Top destination countries have evolved over time. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the United Kingdom was the preferred destination because of the presence of relatively large Afghan communities and networks. But the establishment of stricter border controls has made access more difficult since the end of the 2000s. Germany has always been a major destination, along with Austria, and to a lesser extent Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands. In the late 2000s, Sweden has become one of the most valued destination countries within the EU according to the evidence we collected from Afghans.

Afghans who do not manage to transit undetected through border countries and those who need to find money to continue their travel often have to stop and eventually apply for asylum in countries at the external borders of the EU. This might explain why Greece, Hungary, and the Czech Republic appear among the top countries where Afghans have submitted asylum claims. The transit border countries visited share some or all of the following characteristics: 1) a precarious economic situation, 2) recent and unprecedented arrivals from Asia and Africa and xenophobic sentiments, 3) limited settled and integrated Afghan communities. The asylum systems of these countries are either newly established or recently restructured with the support of EU,

and it is too early for the moment to evaluate their impact in terms of asylum procedure, reception conditions or integration prospects. In answering our questions, it does appear that Afghans do not consider them as good places to stay. Their expectations about “Europe” often do not match with the conditions they find in these countries.

As a result, the Afghan presence that has been growing in Greece, and is emerging in Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary, is largely unintentional. Most Afghans, whether in the asylum system or underground, see their current situation as transient and wait for an opportunity to leave.<sup>6</sup> Life in such a limbo may be very difficult for people who can face long periods in detention, often survive in precarious settlements, and face hostility from parts of the local population. In Patras, unaccompanied minors live in makeshift settlements – abandoned farms or decrepit industrial buildings - while trying to cross the Adriatic to Italy. In Sofia, several Afghans were struggling to live underground while waiting to receive from relatives in Afghanistan the money to pay for the next leg of their journey.

In Greece, however, we find a peculiar situation as transfers under the Dublin Regulation are no longer enforced since the *M.S.S. v Belgium and Greece* ruling by the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>7</sup> A recurrent pattern for families who do not have the financial and physical resources to continue the travel together once they enter the EU is to split in Greece. For example, they send a member of the family to Sweden, with the hope of subsequently applying for family reunification if the person is granted refugee status. Depending on the economic and family situation, it is either the woman or a child (as the person who has the most chances of being granted protection) who leaves first. In other cases, Afghans just try to continue travelling north and westward and submit an application in a Nordic country after a period of circulation and exploration within the Schengen Area.

Two additional factors contribute to explain the move onwards. Once they have made it into the EU, Afghans do not want to stop now that the most difficult part is over. The bigger the sacrifice, the investment and the hardship endured, the further you have to go. In addition, there is social pressure to reach the most preferred destinations as a way of gaining social prestige. The journey becomes an arena to prove one’s own worth. This is especially the case for young Afghans for whom the journey becomes a

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<sup>6</sup> This is confirmed by high absconding rates and interrupted procedures registered in all these countries.

<sup>7</sup> Sweden does transfer those with residence permit according to Swedish law.

rite of passage to manhood. For them reaching what is collectively considered as one of the top destinations becomes an end in itself. Being granted protection in Sweden, for example, is a source of social recognition even for the family left behind. It means that one has taken many risks, it is a proof of courage, endurance and seen as an ultimate success.

Once inside the EU, more specific information on various locations is gathered and a gradual process of familiarization with the EU and its asylum system begins. Expectations are based on what Afghans have heard about European countries before and during their travel from a range of different sources: relatives, friends, fellow travellers, narratives of those who are there, social media, blogs, etc. Criteria for figuring out the most preferred countries include the reputation for the quality of protection, the economy and job prospects, the presence of relatives and friends or just the presence of a settled Afghan community.

Afghan asylum seekers do not have full visibility of the policy changes. Their decision-making is based on the information they gather through their entourage, and they develop a practical knowledge of how to deal with specific contexts. The smugglers have better knowledge of policies and have an important role in the production and circulation of information. Often they propose destinations, the appeal of a country being directly related to the price asked to reach it. Based on their own social, educational and financial resources, Afghans are more or less dependent on the information and the services offered by the smugglers.

Once Afghans reach the Schengen area (except Greece that does not have land borders with any other Schengen country), travelling conditions within the EU become easier as there are fewer controls.<sup>8</sup> The main objective is still to abscond and avoid fingerprinting in order to be free to choose in which country to lodge an asylum claim. For those fingerprinted, the spectre of being transferred back to Hungary or Bulgaria according to the Dublin regulation makes the travel worrisome and unpredictable. If subject to removal, many Afghans try at all costs to elude the police and wait underground until their fingerprints in the Eurodac database expire. Depending on the personal situation (hardship and financial cost endured so far, resources available to try again to reach a northern country, personal experience and social relations in the destination country, etc.), the Dublin transfer may be a traumatic

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<sup>8</sup> Although the police may prevent asylum seekers from entering the country or, on the contrary, not interrupt the journey of potential asylum seekers who want to leave their territory. This results in Afghans being bounced back and forth between Italy and France, Greece and Italy, Austria and Italy and so on.

experience. Afghans met in Bulgaria and Hungary vividly recalled the violence (verbal and physical) and humiliation of the event. Many of the transferees, including Afghans who have relatives or friends in destination countries who could support their integration, but that are not considered as family members according to the Dublin regulation, will try to leave again rather than confront, what in their view would amount to failure. A middle aged educated female Afghan legal professional – she had been involved in cases concerning imprisoned Taliban and had received threats for not using her influence to secure their release – who was travelling alone, and had been forcibly returned from Sweden to Hungary as per the Dublin rule, was tired and depressed after a 12-month ordeal. She said: “In this journey I died several times. In Afghanistan you only die once.”

Not only is the Dublin system experienced as traumatic and unfair by the Afghans interviewed for this project, but based on our data, it does not seem to create a climate of trust among EU countries while it was initially meant to enhance cooperation. The Dublin system operates exactly in the opposite direction of Afghans’ draw towards Northern and Western Europe, thwarting mobility from border countries. The preferred destinations become more difficult and costly to reach, the journey expands adding uncertainty, hardship and further delaying integration, prompting more irregular movements across Europe, and ultimately causing exactly what an integration of the asylum system at the European level was supposed to counter.

#### Top recipients of asylum applications submitted by Afghans in the EU (more than 1,000 applications)

*1990s: Germany, Netherlands, UK, Austria, Denmark*  
*1999: Germany, UK, Netherlands, Austria, Hungary*  
*2000: Germany, Netherlands, UK, Czech Republic, Hungary*  
*2001: UK, Germany, Sweden Hungary, Netherlands, Denmark*  
*2002: UK, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Greece*  
*2003: UK, Norway, Germany*  
*2004: UK, Norway*  
*2005: UK*  
*2006: UK, Greece*  
*2007: UK, Greece*  
*2008: UK, Greece, Italy, Austria, Norway*  
*2009: Norway, UK, Germany, Austria, Sweden*  
*2010: Germany, Sweden, UK, Austria, Netherlands*  
*2011: Germany, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, Netherlands*

2012: *Germany, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, Italy*

2013: *Germany, Sweden, Austria, Hungary, Italy*

2014: *Germany, Hungary, Austria, Italy*

Source: UNHCR, Trends in industrialized countries

## **7. THE ASYLUM SYSTEMS**

For Afghans, the asylum procedure is the final and decisive test. It entails crucial stakes, both from the legal and moral point of view, as well as serious psychological stress. Most Afghan asylum seekers we met mentioned a general sense of unpredictability and uncertainty regarding the process and its outcome.

Unpredictability is related first of all to the many disparities in the asylum procedures across countries. Recognition rates vary enormously. They are generally lower in entry countries. In the period 2013-2014, Bulgaria had an acceptance rate of only 19 %<sup>9</sup> and Greece of less than 1 % before a new asylum procedure became operational in June 2013. In Serbia most of the few examined applications were rejected without any evaluation of the merits of the claim, on the basis that the applicant came from a designated “safe third country.” By contrast, recognition rates for Afghans were above 90 % in Italy and around 70 % in Sweden. In fact, the national asylum authorities have very divergent attitudes toward Afghan applicants: in Bulgaria, Afghanistan is considered a safe country of origin; in Greece, the chance to get one form or another of protection depends on the province of origin; while in Italy Afghans are considered as one of the main populations in need of protection. These attitudes may be based on different interpretations of the situation in Afghanistan in the light of international refugee law but also the effect of a comparative approach to the nationalities of asylum seekers. In Bulgaria, for example, where Afghans and Syrians are the two single main nationalities among asylum seekers, priority is given to Syrians as people fleeing a situation of clear-cut conflict, while Afghans are mostly considered as “economic migrants.” By contrast in Italy, where the nationalities of asylum seekers are much more diversified and include countries not in conflict, Afghans are considered as protection priorities. In Sweden, Afghans are in a second order of priority after Syrians and Eritreans, who are almost 100 % recognized under fast track processing. The availability of internal flight alternative is a key consideration in some countries, e.g. Sweden, while it is not applied at all in others, such as in Italy.

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<sup>9</sup> Data for 2014 refer to the period: January to September 2014.

The differences also concern the modalities of adjudication in the first-instance procedure. The time devoted to each case varies enormously across EU like the number of interviews for each asylum seeker (from one up to five). The number and profile of decision-makers also range from specialized caseworkers to more heterogeneous assemblies. In Italy, local authorities, the police and UNHCR are also involved. In some countries, such as Sweden, the presence of a lawyer is mandatory and legal assistance is provided for free. Interpreters for Persian and Pashto are largely available in Italy and Sweden (most are former asylum seekers), whereas in Serbia and Bulgaria there is a lack of interpreters, a fact that impacts the length of the procedure. The requirements for documentation also vary. In Sweden, a valid identity document is crucial to open the procedure and be entitled to work. Applicants without valid ID are encouraged to request an official passport released by the Afghan Embassy, whereas in other countries a copy of the Afghan identity card may be considered as a valid document.

To understand what is expected and required from them in order to navigate the administrative procedures, Afghan asylum seekers take a pragmatic approach and develop strategies to fit with the perceived expectations of the asylum bureaucracies. These pragmatic strategies are sometimes seen with suspicion by the asylum officials, who rather adopt a moral approach based on formal principles of ascertaining the truth.

Among the requirements of the asylum procedure that Afghans may struggle to comply with, interviewees highlighted: 1) Understanding the rationale of refugee law and asylum procedure so as to present one's claim correspondingly. Afghans arriving in Europe are not familiar with the European asylum system. 2) Understanding and fitting in with the expectations of asylum officials. The mismatch between the asylum officials' expectations and those of the applicant can be particularly large in the case of young Afghans who after travelling for years actually show maturity and determination rather than vulnerability and despair. 3) Satisfying the criteria of credibility that may vary from one official to another: some officials measure declarations against documentary evidence and COI, others rather evaluate the applicant's capacity to remember details, and so on. 4) Fulfilling documentary and evidence requirements, particularly difficult to satisfy as irregular travel often implies carrying no documents.

In such a situation, Afghans strive to conform to what they believe is expected from refugees. They may adjust their stories to make them seem more credible. For example, they may claim to have always lived in their district of birth (or the district of



birth of their parents) instead of having spent long periods in Iran or Pakistan. Sometimes they may have recourse to models of stories and fake documents.

Afghans will also look for and rely on the support of gatekeepers that can help them in confronting the asylum procedure, such as smugglers, interpreters, NGO staff, settled refugees, who have information on how the procedure works at the local, national or European levels. The use of altered or constructed accounts of their flight of course in no way preclude that the real circumstances or reasons for fleeing the country would not entitle them to international protection.

Afghans have different resources to deploy in their encounter with asylum authorities, a situation that does not necessarily favour those who have the most serious protection needs. In part, this is related to the background of the individual: his/her education, level of comfort and capacity of interacting with foreigners, familiarity and ease with bureaucratic and legal settings and their requirements, ability to establish cooperative relations with civil society organizations that can help their case. In this regard, those who are educated, speak English or have previously dealt with foreigners in Afghanistan have more resources to maximize their chances of being considered as credible. They also have more chances of producing evidence that will be considered as reliable, such as pictures, videos, articles related to their previous job, etc. One informant for example mentioned that with the help of a Swedish friend, he read the protocol of his interview word by word and sent a letter to the asylum authorities listing all the mistakes he found in it, line by line. But some stressed that being educated and familiar with the system may in fact turn against the applicant, insofar as his/her ease is considered as incompatible with the image of a vulnerable victim in need of protection. They may be suspected of playing with credibility: “If you are too smart, they will suspect you!”

The asylum procedure has a strong moral dimension and impacts on the way Afghans see themselves. The administrative process transforms them. As the asylum procedure consists in identifying the “true” refugees, those who actually “deserve” what they claim, and those who do not, those who are “accepted” (as many Afghans say) and those who are not – it becomes an individual test in which the sincerity and degree of suffering of the applicant, as well as his/her legitimacy to apply for asylum are measured, assessed and publicly proclaimed. The system expresses a judgement on persons, on their credibility, sincerity and story. The country in which one is granted protection, the degree of protection s/he is granted (refugee status, subsidiary

protection, resident permit on humanitarian grounds), the length of the procedure (with or without appeals, first or subsequent applications) shape a “success rank” that reflects the value and therefore the social status of a person.

Afghans and other nationalities have no other ways of obtaining legal authorization to stay in the EU. The high legal and moral stakes of the asylum procedures foster competition among Afghans and between nationalities. We heard Pashtuns saying that Hazaras are mainly “economic migrants” and conversely Hazaras accusing Pashtuns of being Pakistanis pretending to be Afghans in order to have more chances of being granted protection. Tajiks and Hazaras consider that Pashtuns have a dominant position in Afghanistan and are therefore less in need of international protection. Pashtuns, for their part, often say that Persian speakers are not caught in the crossfire between the government and the insurgency, that they have more economic means and can therefore go faster through the asylum procedure. The same mechanism is at work between nationalities: a widespread feeling among Afghans (shared by civil society organizations in some countries) is that since the Syrian crisis, Afghans receive a comparatively second order protection. In Greece, we noticed that Syrians were seen with jealousy not only by Afghans, but also by Pakistanis and Iraqis.

As discussed, the asylum procedure varies enormously throughout the EU. Such an empirical observation contradicts the assumption underlying the Dublin system, according to which protection is granted along similar criteria throughout Europe. In the context of the current European migration policies, where the refugee status determination is the main way to obtain a residence permit, huge legal and moral stakes weigh on the asylum procedure. Pragmatic versus moral approaches contribute to a profound mistrust between asylum seekers and asylum adjudicators. The existence of different standards across EU countries compounded by the perception of these differences by Afghans heavily influences the flow of persons in and across Europe.

## **8. RECEPTION CONDITIONS AND INTEGRATION PROSPECTS**

For Afghans who lodge an asylum claim, the reception system is the first direct contact with a country and therefore becomes an important way to confirm or infirm expectations. Comparisons between standards of living (type and location of buildings, number of people sharing the same room) are frequent and considered as a mirror of the situation in a country. In border countries, the creation of new reception facilities

has been prompted by massive arrivals. But the number of beds for asylum seekers remains generally far from sufficient. This, coupled with the desire of Afghans in transit to remain invisible, explains why many Afghans in need of protection live outside the reception system and even in the open, such as in neglected buildings, parks, or the bush.

There are again important differences between EU countries when it comes to integration prospects. Most Afghans we approached consider that the economic and social situation in border countries hampers integration. For them, the situation is compounded by the policy focus on new arrivals rather than on social integration. In Hungary, many Afghans who had obtained international protection complained that the initial integration package seemed generous on paper but it rapidly decreased over time. Language was seen as a major stumbling block and employment in a context of growing xenophobia was very difficult. Several Afghans are known to forfeit the package and try their luck by travelling to Germany. Whether justified or not, such a view is an important factor that explains why many Afghans continue westward and northward, regardless of the stage of the asylum procedure. For the few who remain, more effective policies will be needed. Among the countries visited for this study, Sweden stands out for its support measures: a two-year programme aimed at language training and inclusion into the job market; integration is encouraged by the possibility of applying for family reunification. Yet even in Sweden, many Afghans pointed out that it was difficult to find private accommodation and they had to remain in the reception centres after being granted international protection, thereby further congesting the system.

A crucial challenge related to the integration of Afghan refugees concerns the length and the dangers of the travel. The long periods spent waiting underground in physically and psychologically demanding conditions, in detention, or in reception centres (most often without any activity or access to language or vocational training) considerably impact the very ability to integrate into a new society. Most Afghans tend not to invest in a country (learning the language for example) until they accept it as their final destination and obtain a residence permit. In addition, the risks and traumas of the journey are often individualizing, which hampers integration and may lead to social isolation. An Afghan who works as a social worker with unaccompanied minors in Sweden stressed the difficulties that many children face with integration because of the psychological and emotional consequences of the journey. The risk is that they will never re-establish themselves and integrate. “They don’t show it, but inside they are

destroyed,” he stated. The psychological support provided by asylum authorities may be ineffective in some cases, as honour and pride prevent many Afghans from sharing their experiences, but it represents a necessary measure to accompany asylum seekers and refugees.

Afghans in Europe are caught in a contradictory situation: they are socially condemned to succeed and redistribute their success to their relatives left behind. But too much commitment to their families in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran can have a negative impact on their resources and hinder their capacity to develop new social ties in their host country. Conversely, self-esteem and family pride prevent them from telling the truth of their situation to their parents back home. People may develop an almost schizophrenic mindset: they sometimes prefer to avoid interacting with kith and kin for fear of revealing how gloomy their situation really is.

In several cases, mobility within Europe does not stop after the asylum procedure. Recognised refugees who see no integration prospects in the country where they were granted protection, as well as Afghans whose application was rejected, tend to look for opportunities in other EU countries.

## **9. ASPIRATIONS AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

Today, there are more than thirty TV channels operating in Afghanistan, most of which are accessible via satellite for Afghans living outside the country. There are more than one hundred and forty radio stations, more than twenty newspapers, and an increasing number of periodicals. Similarly, the use of telecommunication and information technologies has become increasingly popular. Millions of Afghans throughout Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and the rest of the world have access to the Internet and use their smartphone for communication and exchange of information. They increasingly use social media to reflect and comment on current affairs in Afghanistan, but also to express their aspirations and experience: What is their ideal for the future? How do they construe wellbeing? How is leaving Afghanistan seen as a means to build a successful life?

Among the various types of social media, Afghans seem to prefer Facebook. Facebook has contributed to the creation of an open transnational space for debate among Afghans. What makes this space interesting and lively is the ability to receive comments from Afghans worldwide. The majority of Afghans who are living outside Afghanistan usually post in Persian and mainly comment on current affairs in

Afghanistan rather than their country of residence. Facebook reproduces a way of communicating through interpersonal relations, direct encounters and oral expression. It is used to keep people connected and amplify networks of communication. Neither television programmes nor the written press can play such a role.

However, the modes of communication need to be decoded. Most young people who aspire to leave do not announce their decision to leave Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran. There is usually a period of silence when they begin their journey and until they reach their destination. Usually the difficulty of making this decision and the challenges associated with it are not shared on social media. People tend to keep the sad news to themselves and tend to post happy news and success stories. Obstacles and difficulties encountered during the journey are considered too private – even shameful – to be shared; they are expressed through abstract statements on *âwârâgi*, a term that means “wandering,” “vagrancy.” As a young woman posted on her Facebook account: “*Âwârâgi* means to be born in Tehran, to be thrown away to Kabul, and to stay in Berlin; but nowhere you can live life.” A reader commented: “Let’s accept *âwârâgi* as there is death in immobility.” Before adding: “That is in the blood of our generation. Just imagine! In three decades, we have experienced the misfortunes of three centuries. Despite this, we still should stay alive.” Such a brief exchange expresses the profound ambivalence of these young Afghans. Staying behind, in Afghanistan or in Iran, is equated to a moral and social death, while seeking refuge in Europe – however distressing this might be – is conceived as an inevitable denouement of the current state of their life.

Another source contributing to shaping the aspirations of Afghans, especially the youth, in their country of origin or first asylum is represented by Bollywood films, which are more popular than US or Iranian movies. Afghans who have lived in Afghanistan and those who spent time in Pakistan can understand Urdu/Hindi, the languages spoken in most of those films. Most Bollywood films are musicals with the recurrent feature that singing and dancing are not performed in the location where the main plot is set, but in European cities and landscapes that look fancy to non-European audiences. In addition, when the story is about a rich boy falling in love with a poor girl, the boy’s family usually has a connection with a European country, generally the United Kingdom and more specifically London. Afghans consume these scenes that shape their conceptions of what a good life means. Even before they leave, they have acquired a somewhat stereotyped, polished image of Europe, organised by landmarks like Big Ben or the Bernese Alps. This underlying context is needed to understand the

behaviour of a young man: as soon as he arrived in the UK, he went to the London Eye and took a river cruise on the Thames. Even before lodging his claim for asylum, he needed to appropriate a space that was the object of his dreams.

Compared to Pakistan and Iran, the Afghan solidarity networks appear weaker in Europe. Conceptions of honour and shame, jealousy and envy, success and failure render ambivalent the relations of Afghans who reached Europe with their relatives left behind. On the one hand, the ease of communication represents a constraint; social expectation at home may result in a lack of freedom in the country of destination. On the other hand, young people in particular invest in social media as a common healing space where they can share their experience.

## **10. SUMMARY AND MAIN FINDINGS**

After almost 40 years of conflict that prompted one of the largest forced displacements since World War II, Afghanistan does not appear to be moving towards a better tomorrow. The partial withdrawal of foreign troops in 2014 is the expression of a political and military deadlock and is not the result of the success of the nation-building effort. We are far from the optimistic picture promised to Afghanistan in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001.

While every segment of the Afghan population has experienced displacement during the series of conflicts that has torn the country apart since 1978, three categories particularly stand out in the recent flows: unaccompanied minors, mostly Hazaras, and young single men; rural people from the South and East; and city-dwellers. The first group either comes from Afghanistan directly or may have spent time in Iran and Pakistan, where Afghans face a growing pressure from national authorities and hostility from local populations. They feel trapped between their country of origin, which does not offer any educational, professional and social prospect, and their country of first asylum, where they remain caught in the low-skilled labour market with little or no social recognition. A minority with a memory of oppression which over time developed a profound mistrust toward the Afghan state, Hazaras opt for sending their youth on the very risky journey to Europe but also Australia. The people from the second category are caught between the government and the insurgency. They do not want to participate in a conflict that is not theirs; they flee from violence and forced recruitment on both sides. The third group are members of the emerging middle class, whose lifestyle was linked to the international presence in Kabul, Mazar or Herat.

Working as drivers, translators or accountants for international NGOs, UN agencies, private contractors or foreign forces, they had a comfortable lifestyle by Afghan standards. Many have lost their sources of income with the scaling down of humanitarian and development programmes; moreover, they fear retaliation and reprisals from segments of the population that resented their collaboration with external actors.

As a result, Afghan society is suffering from a massive haemorrhage of young and educated people. They are obviously not the first generation of Afghans to flee hardship and persecution. However, successive generations of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees have changed their mobility patterns. While their parents had taken refuge in Pakistan and Iran, trying to reach Europe becomes a distinctive feature of the new generation.

Afghans are fleeing from violence in their country of origin and from exclusion and a lack of durable solutions in the countries of first asylum. In addition, the journey itself entails its share of suffering. It is costly in financial terms for the individual and the family back home, but also results in emotional and physical suffering and trauma. Getting to Europe is therefore very often not the relieving experience people hope for. The further they go from Afghanistan, the weaker social networks become, resulting in increased competition among Afghans and additional psychological stress.

A lack of understanding and the related mistrust towards asylum institutions, and their representatives, further exacerbates the situation of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in many European countries. Institutional debates and reforms – as illustrated in Greece – are often slow in substantially affecting the daily life of Afghans and, although they constitute very important progress, may lead to a sense of frustration vis-à-vis the authorities. A lack of alternative legal ways of obtaining residence in Europe will continue to result in a very high pressure on the national asylum systems.

Some of the main findings of this research concerning Afghan strategies and aspirations are:

- Diminishing prospects for durable solutions in Pakistan and Iran, combined with a new increase in violence in Afghanistan has resulted in a particular high number of **Afghan unaccompanied minors** leaving for Europe. This is further compounded by a growing disillusionment towards the Afghan state.

- Data collected during the research consistently indicates that the bulk of unaccompanied minors in Europe come from Afghanistan, most of whom are Hazaras. Many come from Iran, others from Afghanistan or from Pakistan. On the one hand, they feel increased pressure in Iran and consider having no chance of integrating into the host society and therefore no future. On the other, they keep the memory of the past political and economic exclusion in their country of origin and have no trust towards the Afghan state. In Pakistan, because they are Shia, they are targeted by Sunni extremist groups.
- The population of unaccompanied minors is extremely vulnerable, in part because they travel without money, in part because they are largely cut off from their social networks. The dangers and hardship encountered during their journey provoke an almost pathological disregard for alternative solutions and a unshakeable determination to succeed in reaching the best available option, which is regularly perceived to be one of the countries in the north of Europe.
- Forced conscription by all the warring factions in the southern and eastern provinces, the so-called Pashtun Belt, is also mentioned as a reason to leave Afghanistan.
- Another vulnerable group of people are **urban families**, especially from Kabul. They had a comfortable income through their links to the foreign presence (coalition troops, UN agencies, NGOs). With the massive international pull-out in 2014, many of them have lost their access to a reliable source of income while at the same time they have become a target for anti-government elements due to their collaboration with occupying forces.
- Several families often travel together to minimise risk. Unlike the unaccompanied minors, they have money (some informants mentioned amounts up to EUR 50,000 for one household). They are at risk of being victims of smugglers.
- A **moral economy of migration** for Afghans means that while protection needs and access to livelihoods, education and other social services may be the key driving factors leading to displacement, questions of prestige and status may be the decisive factors for the choices which are ultimately made by Afghans on the move.



- Unaccompanied minors and young adults in particular suffer from actual or perceived “failure to succeed”, which often leads to withdrawal from social networks and ultimately isolation. This occurs in transit situations as well as destination countries. All the children and adolescents met during the study were determined to continue their journey towards the North. For them, staying in what they consider as transit countries would be a personal failure and a shame for their family back in Iran, Pakistan or Afghanistan.
- Especially for young males, the efforts to find protection in an European country is not only a means to escape violence and persecution, but almost equally important it becomes a quest for meaning, a re-appropriation of their lives. The very hardship of the experience renders it even more significant and adds an opportunity to prove one’s valour, courage and capacity to face the most demanding situations.
- The distinction between people who are underage (*zer-e sin*) and those who have reached adulthood (*bâlâ-ye sin*) follows different criteria in Afghanistan. Dates of birth are not recorded and “age” is socially defined in terms of maturity (mental and physical) and capability. In Europe the different status of a minor or adult is decisive in almost every aspect of the asylum process. As a result, some Afghans will try their best to be labelled as minors in order to secure access to institutional assistance and services while others prefer to be qualified as adults to retain a higher level of control and freedom of movement. The benefits and costs of the two different statuses are often described as contradictory by young Afghans and contribute to a certain level mental stress and ambiguity.
- The complexity of the personal trajectories and family strategies reveals the inadequacy of the categorization on which refugee policies are constructed including the very concept of “mixed migration.”
- The continued conflict and displacement of Afghans over three generations, has resulted in the adoption of a variety of **coping strategies**, including a high level of mobility combined with a dispersion of family members, and thereby of risks, and a corresponding increase of opportunities. Even if the actual knowledge of particular situations or environments, such as European asylum systems, is often incomplete and patchy, a practical ability to adapt and a

**collective knowledge** on how to succeed allows Afghans nevertheless to overcome sometime highly adverse circumstances.

- New information and adverse conditions during their journey impact on people's objectives and aspirations, which are continuously readjusted and transformed before reaching the final destination.
- Legal, policy or economic changes are quickly integrated in the collective knowledge of people on the move and strategies and coping mechanisms are adapted accordingly. For example, considering that Dublin returns to Greece have been suspended since 2011, Afghans and other third-country nationals do not avoid being detected and fingerprinted in Greece.
- First entry countries such as Greece or Italy are places where families may split and adopt two opposite strategies: they may send forward a grown-up male family member (sometimes even before reaching the EU), considering he is the best equipped to find a way to the ideal country of destination; alternatively they send – often by air using most of their meagre resources – a member of the household who might have a better chance to go quickly through the asylum procedure, i.e. the mother or a young girl.
- In the countries situated at the external EU border there is often a deeply uneasy relationship between **asylum authorities** and Afghan asylum seekers. If Afghans can choose, they do not manifest their protection needs when they first cross the EU border as most want to continue their travel towards Western and Northern Europe. They see the asylum authorities as having the same concern as the police, that is to prevent them from continuing their travel.
- The Dublin system is often experienced as traumatic and unfair by the Afghans we were able to meet. The Dublin system operates exactly in the opposite direction of Afghans' draw toward Northern and Western Europe, thwarting mobility from border countries. The preferred destinations become more difficult and costly to reach, the journey expands adding uncertainty, hardship and further delaying integration, prompting more irregular movements across Europe, and ultimately causing exactly what an integration of the asylum system at the European level was supposed to counter.
- For Afghans the outcome of the asylum procedures is of critical importance not only from a protection point of view but also in psychological terms. Most

Afghan asylum seekers we met mentioned a general sense of unpredictability and uncertainty regarding the process and its outcome. Unpredictability is related inter alia to the different recognition rates across countries, which vary enormously and are generally lower in entry countries.

- To understand what is expected and required from them in order to navigate the administrative procedures, Afghan asylum seekers take a pragmatic approach and develop strategies to fit with the perceived expectations of the asylum bureaucracies. These pragmatic strategies are sometimes seen with suspicion by the asylum officials, who rather adopt a moral approach based on formal principles opposing truth to lie.
- A general **mistrust** of institutions, including governmental, intergovernmental (UN) or even NGOs, leads Afghans to primarily rely on their own support networks, including smugglers, for access to information.
- While social networks are key to Afghans before, during and after the journey, they are as much a forum for competition as they are one of cooperation. In general, transnational networks appear to be much looser in Europe than those existing in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.
- Afghans in Europe are caught in a contradictory situation: They are socially condemned to succeed and to redistribute the fruits of success to their relatives left behind; but too much commitment to their families in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran can have a negative impact on their integration capacity.
- High social pressure to succeed, strong moral codes, self-esteem and considerations for family reputation prevent Afghans in Europe from sharing a full account of their situation to their families back home. People may develop an almost schizophrenic mind-set: They sometimes prefer to avoid interacting with kith and kin for fear of revealing how gloomy their situation really is.
- Afghans have been coming to Europe for years. The **ranking** of potential destination countries is ever changing. It depends on the presence of an established Afghan community, the existence of social benefits, the perceived integration possibilities into the education system and labour market.
- They do not consider all countries to be equally attractive to rebuild a new life. The ranking of potential destination countries is as much influenced by the actual conditions prevalent in a certain country at a certain time as it is by the

perception of it and hence the status it accords within the wider Afghan community to those who succeed in benefiting from it. To settle in a country that does not fall within this group does not have the same symbolic value than to get to Western or Northern Europe. It would hence leave the individual at variance with the ever-important sense of personal and family honour and standing within the community and to what it means to be successful.

- Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece or Italy remain very low in the ranking of destination countries. They do not represent the Europe they dreamed of. A successful trajectory means reaching the UK or Germany in the past and increasingly a Scandinavian country today.
- Increased border controls and strengthened law enforcement are unlikely to result in a sizeable reduction of the flow of Afghans to Europe. While certain measures may lead to a redirection of routes, as has been observed on the borders between Turkey and Bulgaria and between Turkey and Greece, their main impact will in all likelihood be that asylum seekers and refugees resort to ever riskier ways to reach their destinations. EU migration policies and border management will not counterbalance the different factors leading to their departure from the countries of origin or from countries of first asylum.

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