

# Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Synthesis Paper Series



## Afghan Transnational Networks: Looking Beyond Repatriation

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in collaboration with

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## About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

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AREU was established by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, UN and multilateral organisations agencies and non-governmental organisations.

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## Glossary

<i>Afghani</i> (or <i>Afs</i> )	Afghan currency
<i>ansar</i>	helper (originally used to describe the inhabitants of Medina who welcomed the Prophet Mohammad and his companions)
<i>hawala</i>	money transfer
<i>hawaladar</i>	person who undertakes the money transfer action
<i>hijra</i>	migration (originally used to describe the migration of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina)
<i>jihad</i>	holy war
<i>kargar</i>	worker
<i>mehmanshahr</i>	refugee camp (in Iran)
<i>mohajer(in)</i>	refugee(s), migrant(s) (originally used to describe the companions of the Prophet Mohammad who fled with him to Medina)
<i>mujahid(in)</i>	holy warrior(s) fighting in <i>jihad</i>
<i>panahandegan</i>	refugees (in Iran)
<i>sarparast</i>	caretaker, representative
<i>sayed</i>	descendants of the Prophet Mohammad through his daughter Fatima
<i>toman</i>	Iranian currency; US\$1 = approx. 887.5 <i>Toman</i>
<i>wasita</i>	patronage, connections



## Acronyms

AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
BAFIA	Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (Iran)
IDP	internally displaced person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NARA	National Aliens' Registration Agency (Pakistan)
NWFP	North West Frontier Province
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office of Drugs Control
WFP	World Food Programme







## Executive Summary

This paper synthesises results that have emerged from AREU's three-country research project on Afghan transnational networks and sustainable reintegration. It draws on the findings of nine case studies — three in Afghanistan (Herat, Faryab and Jalalabad), three in Pakistan (Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta) and three in Iran (Tehran, Mashhad and Zahedan)— conducted by AREU and its research partners in 2004-05 which demonstrate that migration and the formation of transnational networks are key livelihood strategies for the people of Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> The study also highlights that migration is an ancient phenomenon in the region — it is a way of life and not only a response to war and poverty. This must be kept in mind when governments raise the need to stem its flow, recognising that more realistic policy prescriptions will involve *managing* population movements to the benefit of all involved.

Other important findings relate to the complexity of motivations behind migration and the decision to remain in host countries. Afghans have continued to make constant journeys back and forth as part of what is a dynamic process that leads to complex social adjustments. It is a cultural model, not a simple act of flight followed by integration or assimilation in the host country, or return to the country of origin. In fact, repatriation in the Afghan context does not imply the end of migratory movements, especially in more recent years. The probability of further departures, at least of some household members, is high due to the use of migration

as a strategy to secure livelihoods. Factors which induce asylum-seeking are not necessarily the same as those which perpetuate migration and discourage return to Afghanistan. Migrants have woven networks of contacts that make it easier to move between different countries. Addressing the original causes of flight does not constitute a guarantee to bring current migratory movements to an end, as the factors sustaining transnational movements of Afghans have come to form more or less stable systems.

The push factors in both Iran and Pakistan (such as more restrictive policies towards Afghans, police harassment, withdrawal of welfare facilities and closure of schools) appear less crucial in further migration choices by Afghans than the pull factors of economic opportunities and services available in those countries. Most Afghan refugees who left during the 1980s originated from rural areas, and while in Iran and Pakistan, many went through a process of urbanisation. In many cases they lost their agricultural knowledge and while acquiring other skills they developed new expectations of the level and types of services necessary for a good quality of life. For many of them, return to their village of origin is not an option. There is also evidence that attitude towards repatriation differs between genders and generations: women and youth appear less willing to return. This is related to perceptions among women that security is not good in Afghanistan and that their spatial mobility would be limited, while

<sup>1</sup> Case studies by: Collective for Social Science Research (CSSR), 2005, *Afghans in Karachi: Migration, Settlement and Social Networks*, Kabul: AREU; CSSR, 2005a, *Afghans in Peshawar: Migration, Settlement and Social Networks*, Kabul: AREU; CSSR, 2005b, *Afghans in Quetta: Settlements, Livelihoods, Support Networks and Cross-Border Linkages*, Kabul: AREU; University of Tehran, 2005a, *Return to Afghanistan? A Study of Afghans Living in Tehran*; University of Tehran, 2005b, *Return to Afghanistan? A Study of Afghans Living in Mashhad*, Kabul: AREU; University of Tehran, 2005c, *Return to Afghanistan? A Study of Afghans Living in Zahedan*, Kabul: AREU; G. Habibi, 2006, , Kabul: AREU; E. Stigter, 2004, *The Kandahar Bus Stand in Kabul: An Assessment of Travel and Labour Migration to Pakistan and Iran*, Kabul: AREU (unpublished); E. Stigter, 2005a, *Transnational Networks and Migration from Herat to Iran*, Kabul: AREU; E. Stigter, 2005b, *Transnational Networks and Migration from Faryab to Iran*, Kabul: AREU. Also see: E. Stigter and A. Monsutti, 2005, *Transnational Networks: Recognising a Regional Reality*, Kabul: AREU; I. Christoplos, 2004, *Out of Step? Agricultural Policy and Afghan Livelihoods*, Kabul: AREU; J. Grace and A. Pain, 2004, *Rethinking Rural Livelihoods in Afghanistan*. Kabul: AREU; A. Pain and S. Lautze 2002, *Addressing Livelihoods in Afghanistan*, Kabul: AREU.



for youth it relates to access to education, employment as well as diversions.

Kinship is an important source of support to Afghans in exile as well as returnees, but it does not account for all ties of solidarity. To spread risk, Afghans have developed diversification strategies in their types of cooperation, social relations, spatial residence, income-generating activities, and – very often – political affiliations.

In formulating appropriate responses to Afghan population movements, the governments of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, along with the international assistance community, should work towards:

- Establishing bilateral labour migration frameworks that provide a clear legal identity and rights for Afghan labourers in Iran and Pakistan.
- Acknowledging the reality that not all Afghans will choose to return, and making appropriate legal arrangements for these cases within their host countries.
- Implementing economic development strategies and policies which will create quality employment in urban and rural areas of Afghanistan.
- Supporting the Afghan government to invest in health and other social services.
- Improving security, and the perception of security, in Afghanistan.
- Creating a formal but flexible credit system in Afghanistan to contribute to the reconstruction of the Afghan economy.
- Increasing knowledge and awareness of the contribution, both in labour and otherwise, of Afghans to the Iranian and Pakistani economies.
- Improving access to passports and visas for Afghans.
- Continuing to uphold the refugee status and protection of the most vulnerable Afghans abroad.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research context, definitions and methodology

Afghans have found refuge in Pakistan and Iran since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the late 1970s. While initially welcomed in both countries under a notional banner of Muslim solidarity, the large numbers of Afghans arriving through the many years of conflict, competition for jobs and housing, and the extended length of residence of “refugees” have contributed to a significantly cooler welcome for Afghans in both Pakistan and Iran. The establishment of the interim government in Afghanistan in 2002 further shifted the stance of both

countries towards full repatriation of Afghans, and led to the actual and threatened closure of refugee camps in Pakistan.

It is in the context of such politically charged rhetoric about the status of Afghans in neighbouring countries that AREU conducted a study on Afghan transnational networks and their prospects for sustainable reintegration. Its aim was to inform ongoing tripartite dialogue between Afghanistan, UNHCR, Iran and Pakistan, by demonstrating the past and continuing importance of transnational migratory networks between the countries to sustainable livelihood strategies. This paper draws on the findings of nine case studies - three in Afghanistan (Herat, Faryab, Jalalabad), three in Pakistan (Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta) and three in Iran (Tehran, Mashhad and Zahedan)– conducted by AREU in 2004-05 which illustrate both the importance of migration for the people of Afghanistan, and that full repatriation is not a feasible, durable solution in the short to medium term. The results point to actions that could be taken to reduce the costs, financial and otherwise, to Afghans moving back and forth to Iran and Pakistan, while at the same time ensuring individual and state security on both sides of the border.

Migration is often explained in terms of violent conflict or the attraction of labour markets in rich countries or urban centres. Although many other factors may be at play, such as natural disasters (earthquakes, floods or prolonged drought) or particular development projects which force people from their land (dam construction, land reform or programmes to settle nomadic populations), it is political or economic causes which are usually used to distinguish between involuntary and voluntary migration respectively. It is becoming increasingly clear that this primarily causal framework cannot do justice to the complexity of today’s global migration flows, including those involving Afghans.

### Pakistan asks Afghans to go back or shift to camp

Xinhua 05/08/2006

ISLAMABAD – Pakistan has urged Afghans living near the capital in Rawalpindi city to go back or move to a refugee camp in another city by the end of May, the United Nations refugee agency said Monday.

“They have an option of assisted repatriation by the UN refugee agency, or relocation to Kot Chandna refugee camp in Mianwali, Punjab province,” a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) statement said.

According to the authorities, a total of 7,335 Afghans in Rawalpindi will be affected by this movement between May 15 and 30.

No reason is given for Afghans expulsion but Pakistan has cited security concerns for such decisions in the past.

Repatriating Afghans who had been verified by UNHCR were eligible to receive a travel grant of between four U.S. dollars and 37 dollars each, depending on the distance to their destination inside Afghanistan, plus a grant of 12 dollars each to ease reintegration once they were home, it said.

The decision to expel refugees from Rawalpindi came after Pakistan struck a deal with the UNHCR to issue identity cards to Afghan refugees, who were allowed to stay in Pakistan for three years.

Source: Moby Capital Updates, 9 May 2006



Afghans are found in a range of places, regionally and further abroad, forming networks, which are connected through the continuous circulation of people, money, goods and information. War and poverty have compelled them to leave their country, but in response many have gone on to develop socioeconomic strategies based on high levels of circulation. They are not resourceless people, and have maintained strong social relationships in spite of dispersion.

Neither the definition of “refugee” in official international texts nor the various typologies of migration offer a satisfactory analytical framework to explain and understand the migratory strategies developed by the population of Afghanistan. While many Afghan refugees fled the direct effects of war, their movements have occurred within the context of a longstanding tradition of migration and the pre-existence of transnational connections.

Massive population movements, together with the dramatic situation in Afghanistan from 1978-2001, should not mean that refugees are seen as passive victims, outside any historical, political or sociocultural context. Despite harsh living conditions, many Afghans have derived benefits from dispersion by diversifying their socioeconomic activities. They have responded with courage and ingenuity to their changed circumstances, and have proven their resilience.<sup>2</sup>

The view of migratory phenomena as movements from one social environment to another, involving a process of gradual yet profound adaptation to a new way of life, remains dependent upon a unilinear model in which migrants eventually lose contact with their place of origin. This view does not provide for an understanding of how migrants maintain an active involvement in several places. In contrast, recognising

#### Box 1. Social networks

*“Social networks” may be considered as systems of relations. They are generally not limited to a single territory and they are not based exclusively on kinship, ethnicity or residence. Links between two distant persons may be intense, while certain relations with close neighbours may be slack. Networks are a criss-crossing of the social relations potentially or actually mobilised in particular situations, rather than an integrated community with precise spatial and social boundaries.*

#### Box 2. Livelihoods

*“Livelihoods” is used to mean the capabilities, assets (both material and social resources) and activities used as a means of living – linked to survival and future wellbeing. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, and when it allows maintenance or enhancement of capabilities and assets, both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base. Afghan households use a combination of strategies to achieve sustainability in their livelihoods:*

- *accumulation strategies to increase income flows and assets;*
- *adaptive strategies to spread risk by diversifying income sources or adjusting livelihood;*
- *coping strategies to minimise the impact of shocks by seeking alternative sources of income or by altering the balance of existing assets; and*
- *survival strategies, which have the effect of depleting essential household assets and possibly undermining the future viability of the household (Pain and Lautze, 2002).*

Sources: R. Chambers, 1988, Vulnerability, Coping and Policy (editorial introduction), *IDS Bulletin* 20(2): p. 1–7; R. Chambers and G. R. Conway (1992), *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century*, Brighton: IDS, p. 296.

the coexistence of different sets of values among migrants and the broadening of their cultural repertoire allows migration to be seen as a more complex process in which individuals may become fully fledged social players in a number of different places.

<sup>2</sup> Both P. Marsden (1992, “Afghan in Pakistan: Why rations decline”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 5[3-4]:289-99) and R. Colville (1998, “Afghan refugees: Is international support draining away after two decades in exile?” *Refugee*, 17[4]:6-11) stress this capacity of many refugees to become independent of humanitarian aid.



A study focusing on transnational networks is a fruitful approach because it takes account of the rich diversity of migrant situations outside the limited framework of nation-states. It recognises the fact that migrants retain links with their country of origin; it concerns itself not only with adaptation processes and the forging of new identities but also, and above all, with the social relations that migrants develop. This goes beyond the notion that migration is a single event involving relocation.

In order to explore personal and family migratory histories, livelihood strategies, social networks and attitudes towards repatriation, the main research methods used by the three teams in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan were: social mapping and observation, structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, in-depth interviews with key informants and life histories. Interviews were held in informal groups and with individuals. The reliability of the data was established by cross-checking and comparing the collected data.

The main questions that guided the research were:

- What have been, and are, the causes and modalities of Afghan individuals' and families' migratory movements from different areas of Afghanistan to Iran and Pakistan?
- What are the social strategies and intra-household decision-making patterns with regard to these migration processes?
- What ties of solidarity exist between people dispersed throughout Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran? What kinds of social relations can Afghan refugees and migrants rely upon for different types of support?
- What transnational networks have been established by Afghans between their country, Iran and Pakistan, in relation to

border crossing, remittances, debts and savings? How do people move around? To whom do they turn to assist in crossing borders, or obtaining a passport, a visa or a residence permit? How do they find employment in Pakistan or in Iran? How do they send money or goods from one country to another? How do they keep in touch?

- What are the reasons for households to remain based in Pakistan or Iran?
- What livelihood strategies do these households have in their host country?
- What role does labour migration play in Afghan refugees' and returnees' livelihood strategies, particularly for returnees? How do livelihood strategies change upon return?
- How do Afghans in neighbouring countries see their long-term future in relation to Afghanistan?

In analysing and synthesising the results of the nine case studies, an important objective of this report is to provide insight into the appropriateness, relevance and effectiveness of current policy towards people of Afghan origin, in both Iran and in Pakistan.

## 1.2 Political context

From the time of the Communist coup d'état of April 1978 and the Soviet invasion of December 1979 until 2001, Afghanistan was torn apart by war and civil strife. The population fled *en masse* to neighbouring countries and further afield. This migration cut across ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes, and in 1990 Afghans constituted among the largest group of displaced persons in the world at 6.22 million, accounting for nearly half the total under the responsibility of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>3</sup> Large numbers returned after the Soviet withdrawal (1989) and the capture of Kabul by resistance forces (1992), but over the following years this trend was

<sup>3</sup> Colville, 1998, p. 6.



reversed as more outward flows accompanied new outbreaks of violence, especially in the Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif regions. In the 1980s the majority of the refugees were from rural areas, escaping from bombing and combat; in the 1990s they were often from urban centres, first fleeing the mujahidin internecine fighting and later the policies implemented by the Taliban regime.

The attacks of September 2001 and the subsequent intervention of an international coalition force led by American forces—bringing about the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 and the establishment of a government in Kabul backed by the international community – set the stage for a new era of hope for peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. Between 2002 and 2005, the country witnessed an unprecedented wave of repatriation: with the assistance of UNHCR, 2.7 million refugees returned from Pakistan and more than 800,000 from Iran.

The voluntary repatriation operation that facilitated some of these movements took place within the framework of tripartite agreements signed by UNHCR and the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, which emphasise that voluntary repatriation is the key durable solution to the refugee problem. During the same period (2002-05), spontaneous returns known to UNHCR amounted to almost 300,000 from Pakistan and about 570,000 from Iran.<sup>4</sup> This level of repatriation shows a degree of confidence in the nascent state, but also reflects expectations created by donor pledges to rebuild the country, and the deterioration of living conditions in the places of refuge. To some degree, it has been affected by both the Iranian and the Pakistani authorities increasingly implementing policies to encourage Afghans to return home since a government supported by the international community has been established in Kabul. The political evolution of Afghanistan since

late 2001, as well as domestic concerns in Pakistan and in Iran, have brought about a change in attitude towards people of Afghan origin in neighbouring countries.

For the government of Afghanistan, such large-scale and rapid return represents a vote of popular support, and for Pakistan and Iran, as well as the UNHCR and the donor community, it represents a reduction in the burden of hosting and supporting a large refugee population. However the sustainability of such a large return movement has been questioned by many. For instance, Turton and Marsden's<sup>5</sup> assessment of the repatriation operation, reintegration opportunities, and the role and interests of the international community is that many registered returnees may be "recyclers" – repatriating to Afghanistan, receiving the assistance package and then going back to Pakistan or Iran. Others may be seasonal migrants with no intention of staying in Afghanistan on a long-term basis. Turton and Marsden also draw attention to the difficulties returnees face in resettling (particularly during the recent years of drought), leading to a "backflow" of returnees to Iran and Pakistan, and further movement within Afghanistan.

### 1.3 Multidirectional population movements

Migratory movements follow a complex pattern within Afghanistan as well as to Iran and to Pakistan; they cannot be reduced to the notion of a flight from danger followed years later by a return to the place of origin. Return to Afghanistan does not necessarily mean the end of displacement, and it may be followed by onward passage using a pattern of multidirectional cross-border movements. Channels of pre-established transnational networks exist between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran – the movement of individuals to

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, 2005, *Afghan Repatriation Operation 2005*, Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

<sup>5</sup> Turton and Marsden, 2002.



*Box 3. Afghans living in countries of asylum are grouped into four categories by the UNHCR:*

- *those wanting to return to Afghanistan when conditions improve, who require procedures for voluntary return and to whom reintegration programmes should be targeted;*
- *those in need of international protection and assistance who require a protection regime and resettlement channels for individual cases;*
- *those who have entered temporarily for employment reasons who need to be managed through the regularisation of temporary labour; and*
- *those who had sought asylum and were economically self-reliant with strong links to their host country and wish to remain, who require advocacy in relation to an appropriate legal status, as well as development cooperation for sectors and locations impacted on by their residence.*

*Source: UNCHR 2003, 2004*

seek work, to escape drought or to flee war has been a common experience in Afghanistan.

Despite the high levels of return to Afghanistan, the number of Afghans still living abroad is considerable. Individuals continue to move primarily in search of work to support their families, and it seems unlikely that the back-and-forth movements will cease while they constitute a key livelihoods strategy. Many Afghans have been shifting from one place to the next for years – some never returning to their place of origin, others only on a temporary basis before deciding to return to Iran, Pakistan or further afield. Young men, who have not necessarily travelled before, are still choosing to leave Afghanistan – suggesting that displacement is not only caused by conflict.

Migration to Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, and the very significant sum of remittances sent home, can be seen not only as a response to war and insecurity, but also as an efficient livelihoods strategy for

households, and a key contribution to the economy of the country as a whole. A sustainable solution to the problem of large numbers of Afghans still "in refuge" in neighbouring countries should not be equated with immobility – either assimilation in the host country or the permanent return of all household members to their place of origin. The pattern of multidirectional, cross-border movements and the ongoing, cyclical nature of migration blur the boundaries between "refugee" and "voluntary migrant", and the concept of a permanent resettlement or irreversible displacement does not take into account this aspect of population movements. Through the continuous circulation of people, money and commodities, as well as information, Afghans who are spread across a range of locations remain linked. These transnational networks, constituted by people interacting and cooperating with each other across international frontiers, can make a crucial contribution to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

It is necessary to move ongoing tripartite discussions beyond the three solutions usually promoted by UNHCR (voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, integration in the host country or resettlement in a third country), which are based on the idea that solutions are found when people stop moving, and to imagine a more comprehensive solution based on a more nuanced understanding of social practices. UNHCR is aware of the limitations of its own approach in this (see box 3). The objective of this report is to extend this awareness across all stakeholders in order to make clear that migration is not only a response to war, poverty, and to lack of rule of law. It is also a planned social strategy, a way of life through which Afghans spread risk and diversify their social, economic and political assets and thus is a key means to support sustainable reintegration strategies in the short and medium terms.



## 2. Research Sites

### 2.1 Pakistan

#### Historical and political context

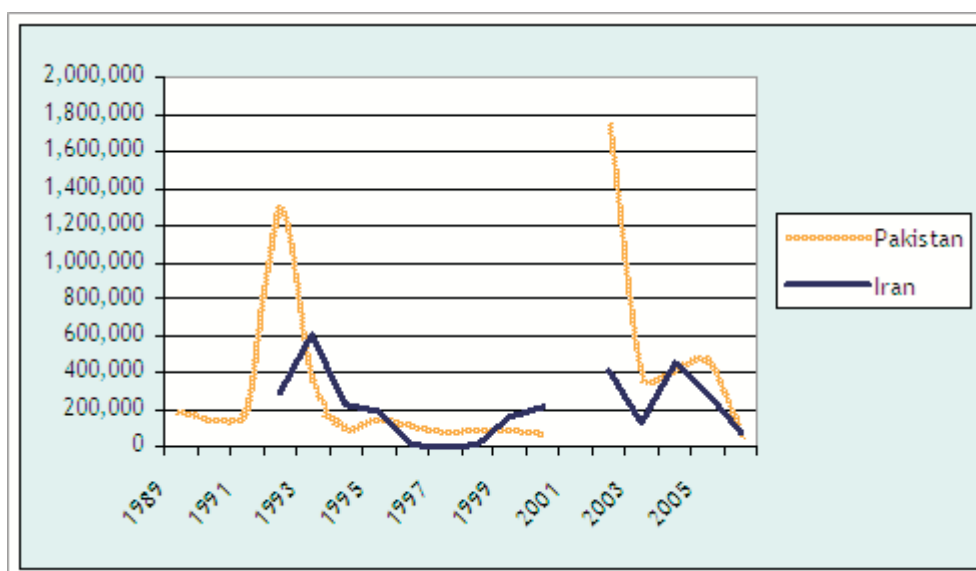
Population movements between Afghanistan and Pakistan have a long history; they did not originate with the war and political crisis in the late 1970s, even if their scale has been dramatically different in recent times. Armed conflict in Afghanistan since 1978 clearly resulted in a spectacular increase in mobility between both countries.

Pakistan, a country that has accommodated some of the largest numbers of refugees in the world in the 1980s and early 1990s, has not signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol (unlike Iran). Nevertheless, in 1981 the government undertook the task of providing assistance to Afghan refugees under an

agreement with the United Nations, and refugee camps (particularly in the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan) were established under the supervision of the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees.

There were several distinct waves of migration from Afghanistan to Pakistan. The first and by far the largest was between 1979 and 1989, during the period of Soviet occupation and Afghan resistance. Between 1989 and 1992, after the Soviet withdrawal and the fall of Najibullah's regime, a large number of refugees returned to Afghanistan. Subsequent internecine fighting among resistance factions between 1992 and 1996 caused a new wave of departures, especially urban residents of Kabul. Although some rural Pashtuns who were reassured by the improvement of security in many regions repatriated under the Taliban regime

Figure 1. Afghan refugee returns from Iran and Pakistan (assisted and spontaneous)



Source: UNHCR: Afghan Refugee Statistics ([www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm](http://www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm)); and Afghan Repatriation Operation Weekly Statistics Report (May 2006).



(1996-2001), members of the urban middle class and some ethnic minorities continued to flee from Afghanistan in the late 1990s. The American-led intervention and the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 caused a dramatic rise in repatriation.

Reacting to the political evolution of Afghanistan and domestic concerns about levels of unemployment, Pakistani authorities have in recent years changed their attitude towards people of Afghan origin. From a position of openness and facilitation of migration and refugee movements (between 1978 and 1989), in 1989-2001 Pakistani policy moved to a period of openness without facilitation. After the fall of the Taliban in December 2001, Pakistan's policy shifted markedly, taking the position that all people of Afghan origin should be registered then eventually repatriated to Afghanistan.

A series of agencies have taken responsibility for the welfare of Afghans in Pakistan, and in doing this they have defined the refugees as dependent. Nevertheless, Afghans have proven themselves capable of mobilising their own cultural resources to reorganise their social existence and relations in asylum. In Pakistan, they can be likened to three different images of the refugee.<sup>6</sup> The first of these, to which the international community primarily subscribes, draws on the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, in which the refugee is defined in terms of a victim of circumstances, in need of assistance. Second, *pashtunwali* (the tribal code of the Pashtuns) emphasises the temporary asylum that armed and organised groups must be able to find among their peers. Third, people who flee an infidel-ruled home country justify their decision on religious grounds with reference to the life of Mohammed, who fled from persecution in Mecca and went to Medina. Afghans fleeing

communist rule in the late 1970s and 1980s were known as *mohajerin* (from *hijra* or "migration"), while Pakistanis welcoming Afghan refugees were known by the term *ansar* ("helper", originally an inhabitant of Medina who welcomed the Prophet and his companions). Both these terms also make reference to the notion of the *mujahid* or fighter who wages *jihād*.

### Afghans in Karachi

Karachi is Pakistan's largest metropolis, with an estimated population of over 12 million. In comparison to other places of Afghan settlement in Pakistan (such as the North West Frontier Province or Baluchistan), the city offers many opportunities to Afghan refugees and migrants. It is the industrial and commercial hub of the national economy and offers a range of relatively remunerative jobs to new arrivals, especially in construction, wholesale and retail trade and transport. Karachi is historically a city of migrants, and the Afghans who came here found a place where the majority of the inhabitants were themselves either migrants or first- or second-generation descendants of migrants.

Karachi's labour market tends to be segmented by social group. Afghans are involved in particular types of activities, a fact which is neither atypical to the city nor surprising. They have become associated with low-wage, unskilled labour in sectors such as construction, market portering and waste collection and recycling. In addition, Afghans are thought to have some involvement in illegal economic activities such as cross-border smuggling, trading in small arms and dealing in contraband substances such as marijuana, opium and heroin.

The Pakistani government's National Aliens' Registration Agency (NARA) estimates that

<sup>6</sup> P. Centlivres, 1988, "Les trois pôles de l'identité afghane au Pakistan", *L'Homme*, 28(4):134-46. See also: I.W. Boesen, 1986, "Honour in exile: continuity and change among Afghan refugees", *Folk*, 28:109-24; and D.B. Edwards, 1986, "Marginality and migration: cultural dimensions of the Afghan refugee problem", *International Migration Review*, 20(2):313-25.



there are up to 500,000 people from Afghanistan, predominantly ethnic Pashtuns, living in Karachi, most of whom arrived in the 1980s. Afghans are concentrated in the outskirts of the city along the main Karachi-Hyderabad highway, near an older village called Sohrab Goth. The land around Sohrab Goth has been used by seasonal migrants from northern Pakistan and Afghanistan setting up camp during the winter months since well before 1978.

Some refugees who were originally placed in refugee camps made the decision to move to Karachi while the UNHCR-assisted camps were still functioning; others left when assistance dried up in the mid 1990s. The main concern for both these groups was the need to find employment. Some newcomers to Karachi did not come through UNHCR camps at all - in particular the Ismailis.<sup>7</sup> FOCUS, an Ismaili aid agency, has been instrumental in locating Ismaili Hazaras in Karachi. Groups of migrants were assembled in Kabul, and they would then be moved as a caravan to Peshawar and on to Karachi. Karachi was chosen because of the presence of a significant Ismaili community. A sense of common belonging and solidarity emerged from the shared experience of losing humanitarian assistance in the refugee camps – forging a new sense of community along alternative lines that was no longer based solely on religion, ethnic identity, tribe or kinship.

People of Afghan origin in Karachi developed a wide range of livelihood strategies, from socially marginalised activities such as begging and scavenging, to unskilled manual labour, skilled blue-collar work, owning and managing businesses and professional employment such as teaching. Many Ismailis of Metroville had access to blue-collar jobs in factories owned by Pakistani Ismailis.

## Afghans in Peshawar

Linking the Indian subcontinent with Central Asia through the Khyber Pass, Peshawar is a historically important trade centre handling exports of hand-woven carpets, precious and semi-precious stones, wood furniture and dry fruits. It is close to the Afghan border and directly connected to Kabul by road. Being on the frontline of Pakistan's support for the jihad against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978, the city evolved into a major hub of the underground arms and narcotics trade that flourished during the war.

The movement of people across the border at Peshawar has been a common phenomenon since well before 1947, as the history of the Indian subcontinent attests. The common language and culture across the Pakistani-Afghan border has been critical in attracting Afghans into Peshawar; for many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns from the eastern provinces, the city provides a cultural, linguistic and social environment very similar to their own.

After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, thousands of Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan, and by 1981, there were 292,917 refugees recorded there. A large number of Afghans remain unregistered, while the 2005 Census of Afghans in Pakistan records the Afghan presence as 3.05 million, 20 percent of whom live in Peshawar district.

As a result of the nearby situation in Afghanistan during the 1980s, the city of Peshawar was transformed, both economically and socially. First, the presence of refugees in such large numbers changed the demographics of the city. Second, a large number of international aid organisations and NGOs used Peshawar as a base for assisting refugees, while resistance parties

<sup>7</sup> FOCUS, an Ismaili aid agency, has been instrumental in locating Ismaili Hazaras in Karachi. Groups of migrants were assembled in Kabul, and they would then be moved as a caravan to Peshawar and on to Karachi. Karachi was chosen because of the presence of a significant Ismaili community.



also took up headquarters in the city. Today, with a dramatic reduction in funding for Afghan refugees and closure of some refugee camps, the city has changed once again. The large-scale repatriation of Afghans from Peshawar has had a negative impact on the city's economy, particularly in the carpet and transport sectors.

Peshawar remains a lifeline to the new Afghanistan; it is a vital source of trade and goods, and its health and education services attract people from Afghanistan who are willing to make the journey and pay the expenses for health care that is not yet available in their own country. Labourers from Peshawar, both Afghan and Pakistani, cross the border into Afghanistan to work on reconstruction and infrastructure projects there. These links form the basis of new cross-border ties that supersede those bonds forged by the business of war over the past 25 years.

The living conditions of Afghan refugees in different areas of Peshawar do not appear to be related to their length of stay or ethnic identity. Many refugees who arrived at the time of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan still live in poverty in Jalozai Camp. On the other hand, some refugees settled comfortably in Hayatabad from the time they arrived. The Afghans living in Akhtarabad left Afghanistan in the early 1980s after their livelihoods had been devastated by war; many had initially lived in camps, but as aid dried up they moved to the main city in order to take advantage of a relatively more vibrant casual labour market.

Despite war and anarchy in Afghanistan, the Afghan community in Peshawar has maintained active links with their country. Some families are divided and live on both sides of the border, visiting each other often.

Contact with relatives in Afghanistan has a significant effect on their perceptions of their homeland and features prominently in their decision-making processes on whether or not to return. For younger Afghans, in the absence of any memories of pre-war Afghanistan, these links have helped maintain some bond between them and their country of origin.

### Afghans in Quetta

Quetta is the capital of Baluchistan, Pakistan's largest but least developed province. The city has historically been at the crossroads of continental trade. Commercial routes link Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics. Cumin is brought to Quetta from Hazarajat, iron and hides from Herat, and wool and fruit from Kandahar or Ghazni. Hides are sent on to Kasur in the Punjab,<sup>8</sup> and the other goods are sold in Quetta, Peshawar, Lahore or Karachi.

There is limited official information on the general migrant population in the district of Quetta. While between the Census surveys of 1981 and 1998 the total population of Quetta district grew from 381,566 to 759,941,<sup>9</sup> the percentage distribution of migrants from other countries apparently dropped from 5.4 to 0.9 percent. The Census reports do not mention Afghan refugees in these figures, which may explain why they do not reflect the reality of Afghan presence at the time. The 2005 Census of Afghans in Pakistan reports that 11 percent of the 3.05 million Afghans in Pakistan (335,500) reside in Quetta district.

The ethnic configuration and politics of Baluchistan have been directly impacted by the arrival of Afghan refugees in the 1980s. Being majority Pashtun, their presence contributed to the marginalisation of the Baluch in the province, adding to the already significant ethnic tensions.

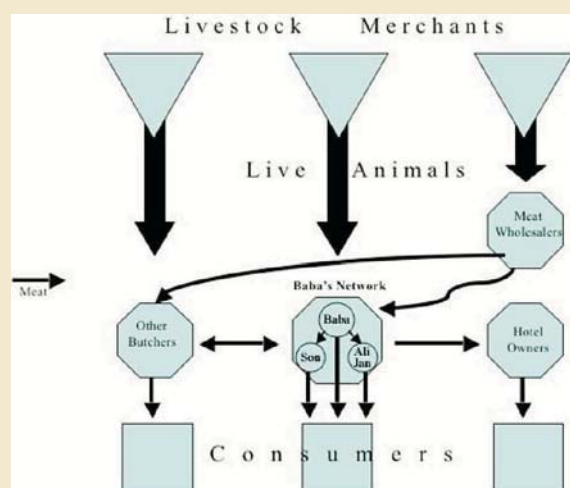
<sup>8</sup> See P. Titus, 2005, "Des vies marchandises: les réfugiés afghans dans des réseaux de réseaux", *Ethnographiques.org* 8.

<sup>9</sup> Population Census Organization, 1983, *Quetta District Census Report 1981*, Islamabad: Ministry of States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON), Government of Pakistan, p. 20; and Population Census Organization, 2001, *Quetta District Census Report 1998*, Islamabad: SAFRON, Government of Pakistan, p. 46.



#### Box 4. The network of a Tajik butcher in Quetta

Haji Baba can be viewed as the centre of a distribution network consisting of small scale wholesalers and retailers. Baba is Tajik. He came directly to Quetta when he left his home in Kunduz province in 1985. He later bought land and built his home in an area south of the city heavily populated with refugees. Baba's network consisted of both Tajik and Uzbek refugees. Live animals entered the network and their dismembered body parts flowed outward from it, both to consumers and to other business people. As a butcher, Baba required two things from his network. One was an efficient means of distributing all the meat from the animals he slaughtered, and the other was a consistent supply of meat to sell in his own stall.



The network of Haji Baba consisted of his son and a partner, Ali Jan, three other butchers, two brothers working in partnership as meat wholesalers, and five hotel owners. Haji Baba's relationships with other butchers were reciprocal because each of them shifted between needing to distribute and needing to obtain meat. A butcher who hadn't slaughtered on a given day was a major customer for a man who had, taking from a fifth to a third of the animal's meat. The group of hotel owners in Haji's network included both refugees and Pakistanis. The third party in Haji Baba's network were two Uzbek brothers who bought live animals and sold bulk meat at wholesale prices to Baba and other butchers.

The network provided flexible options through which those involved could obtain and distribute meat. Distribution could also be adjusted to accommodate circumstances. Ideally animals and meat flowed one way through Haji Baba's network and money flowed in the opposite direction. In fact there were significant delays in this flow since everyone bar consumers bought on credit. So, along with flows of flesh and cash, the network was held together by bonds of debt. The debt in a sense accompanies the animals and their body parts as they move through the network.

Source: Adapted from Titus (2005)

Ethnicity was the primary reason for many of the refugees to choose to move to Quetta from Afghanistan, particularly for Pashtuns, Baluch and Hazaras who all have host communities in the city. The vulnerability of Afghans in Quetta and its vicinity varies according to their level of acceptance within the local population. One of the main sources of harassment for refugees and migrants is the police: Afghans can be accosted and threatened with the charge of illegal entry into Pakistan, and may be forced to pay bribes to secure their release. Lack of housing ownership rights has left some vulnerable to local landowners, particularly in the areas of Jungle Bagh and Ghausabad.

For many Afghans, Quetta is a place of transit in a complex migratory itinerary. Different cities across Pakistan (particularly Karachi)

as well as Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Europe and Australia are common destinations for Afghans from Quetta. With the large number of Afghan labour migrants working in Iran, families usually have relatives there who are able to facilitate access to employment. An elaborate network of human smugglers – controlled by local Baluch – has evolved to cater for this demand.

## 2.2 Iran

### Historical and political context

The migration of people from present-day Afghanistan to Iran motivated by economic differences and political crises has occurred for centuries. Many Hazaras sought refuge in Iran at the end of the 19th century during the centralist rule of Amir Abdur Rahman



(1880–1901). More recently, in the early 1970s, widespread drought and crop failure caused the migration of many Afghans from north and northwestern Afghanistan to Iran, as did the oil price-led construction boom in Iran. The two decades of war from 1978 again precipitated the arrival in Iran of Afghans *en masse*.

Unlike Pakistan, Iran ratified the 1951 Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, with reservations regarding articles 17 (wage earning employment), 23 (public relief), 24 (labour legislation and social security) and 26 (freedom of movement). With regard to article 17, recognised refugees with residence permits would have to apply for work permits in Iran, which would, in most cases, restrict them to jobs involving manual labour (such as construction, brick making, tile making, tanneries, glass blowing and agriculture). When Iranian men went to fight against Iraq in the 1980s, Afghan labour filled a major gap in the informal labour market.

In 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan coincided with the Islamic Revolution in neighbouring Iran, a sociocultural climate in which the Islamic principle of hosting refugees and displaced people as enshrined in the Quran was particularly supported. The first refugee outflow in the 1980s received a warm welcome in Iran, where the Iranian government took pride in offering assistance to approximately 2 million Afghans who had fled the Communist regime. They were seen as fellow Muslims fleeing their own country on the grounds that they were unable to properly practise their faith, and were known by the positive term *mohajerin*. Afghans were issued with identification cards known as “blue cards”, and granted indefinite permission to stay in Iran. They were allowed to live where they found work and had access to subsidised health care and food, and free primary and secondary education. Eighty

camps or *mehmanshahr* were built, but less than 2.5 percent of the Afghan population in Iran were recorded as living in these camps in 2001.<sup>10</sup> Most Afghans settled in poor neighbourhoods on the outskirts of major cities.

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and the fall of Najibullah in 1992, many Afghans returned to their country. However this trend came to a halt with the outbreak of internecine fighting, and with the advance of the Taliban, non-Pashtuns from central and northern Afghanistan in particular sought asylum in neighbouring countries. The Iranian government had progressively withdrawn from its earlier position of formal support to Afghan refugees, and since the mid 1990s the majority of new arrivals have remained undocumented. Afghans seeking refuge were no longer categorised as *mohajerin*, but as *panahandegan* (meaning refugee, but without the religious dimension of the term *mohajerin*). While the former term is considered to be honourable, the latter has a pejorative nuance.<sup>11</sup>

Policies to encourage the repatriation of Afghans began with greater regulation and control of the labour market, exemplified by an increase in raids on work sites by Iranian security forces, and penalties given to employers hiring Afghan labourers. Since 1996, free education for all Afghan children was stopped, with only documented children allowed to continue with schooling. As a consequence, a half to one third of school-aged Afghan children started attending informal Afghan schools, with associated costs borne by Afghans themselves. After the fall of the Taliban, together with the active promotion of repatriation of Afghans under a Tripartite Agreement signed by Afghanistan, Iran and UNHCR, BAFIA<sup>12</sup> issued an order to close even these informal schools as part of

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR, 2004, *Afghanistan: Challenges to Return*, Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> B. Rajaei, 2000, “The politics of refugee policy in post-revolutionary Iran”, *The Middle East Journal*, 54(1), p. 56–58.

<sup>12</sup> The government of Iran’s refugee matters are handled by the Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs (BAFIA, under the Ministry of Interior).



an overall campaign to increase pressure on Afghans, particularly families, to repatriate.<sup>13</sup> Other measures have included restricting opportunities to access higher education and preventing access to housing, administrative services, bank accounts, interest-free loan associations and insurance. Furthermore, formal documentation that had previously granted Afghans a legal identity was withdrawn. The only Afghans who can circumvent these measures are those holding a valid passport or visa and residence permit.

The Iranian government's disincentives for Afghans to stay in Iran have been felt hardest by families, while they have impacted less on Afghan labour migrants who can generally circulate using their own networks that provide social and psychological support, credit, information on labour markets and money transfer facilities. The large majority of these single male migrants view their stay in Iran as economically necessary: they find work and save money to sustain their families in Afghanistan and to fulfil their obligation as male caretakers of their households. Despite government restrictions on Iranian employers, Afghan workers continue to be hired – they clearly fill a demand in the labour market in which their flexibility and hard work are sought after. Deportation stops a few Afghans from returning, but the majority continue to make efforts to cross the border. Many follow in the steps of others who preceded them, and in this way transnational networks are perpetuated in spite of the difficult context.

The situation for Iranian women who have married Afghan men is problematic: they lose their Iranian citizenship by marrying an

Afghan, and their children are not Iranian citizens either. Their families risk being deported to Afghanistan. It has been estimated that as many as 30,000 individuals could be affected by this.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, despite Iran's hardening of policies towards Afghans, Afghan women's exposure to Islamic Iranian practices and ideals has led them to adopt new cultural notions of women's roles, gender relations and family structure.<sup>15</sup> Women, especially widows, seem more reluctant than men to return to Afghanistan, in the short term at least.

Between 2002 and 2005, more than 800,000 Afghans returned from Iran through the UNHCR-assisted voluntary repatriation operation. Around 65 percent of Afghan returnees from Iran were men of working age. The following characteristics of Afghan returns from Iran were noted by the UNHCR:

- the majority of returnees during 2002 had left Afghanistan within the last five years;
- a much higher than expected number (around 42 percent) returned to urban destinations;
- approximately 40 percent (predominantly single, unregistered men) repatriated outside the official UNHCR-assisted voluntary return process; and
- compared with the percentage of Hazaras (predominantly Shia) in Iran, far fewer than other ethnic groups such as Tajiks and Pashtuns returned.<sup>16</sup>

In July 2005, it was estimated that a little over 850,000 documented Afghans remained in Iran, including 93,385 single Afghans.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, as many as 500,000

<sup>13</sup> H. Hoodfar, 2005, *Returning to a Home Never Seen: Afghan Youth Facing the Trials and Tribulation of Repatriation*, Montreal: Concordia University (unpublished).

<sup>14</sup> A. Strand, A. Suhrke and K.B. Harpviken, 2004, *Afghan Refugees in Iran: From Refugee Emergency to Migration Management*, Oslo: International Peace Research Institute; Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute.

<sup>15</sup> H. Hoodfar, 2004, "Families on the move: the changing role of Afghan refugee women in Iran", *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, 2(2):141-71.

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> UNHCR Iran and Population and Geographic Data Section, 2005, *Afghan population and family status in Iran as of 01/07/05, Amayesh and Repatriation database, UNHCR Statistical Summary Overview, Afghans in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Geneva: UNHCR.



undocumented labour migrants were said to be in Iran, employed mainly in the agricultural and construction sectors.<sup>18</sup> They cross repeatedly between Afghanistan and Iran in search of employment, leaving their families behind in Afghanistan.

## Afghans in Tehran

Tehran is Iran's capital and the largest metropolis with a population of up to 12 million. A heavy fog often hovers over the city, where neighbourhoods sprawl over the slopes of the Alborz Mountains, from the upper class high city, to the modest lower settlements. In July 2005, it was

estimated that a total of 224,473 registered Afghans lived in Tehran. Afghans in Tehran are clustered in the areas of Shahr-i-Rey, Kan and Nematabad.

**Shahr-i-Rey**, located to the southeast of Tehran, has a population of around 1 million including approximately 160,000 non-nationals: 10,000 Iraqis and 150,000 Afghans working mainly as labourers, farmers, tailors and stonemasons. Income and the cost of rent there are both low, and as a result, the area can be characterised as migrant-receiving, including migrants from other parts of Iran.

### Box 5. Kinship relations among the members of a work team in Tehran

*In Iranian urban centres, Afghan labourers who come without their families are moving all the time – from one building site to another, following work opportunities often as a group. A skilful and enterprising individual may end by leading a work team. Members of the team do not necessarily know each other; their relations with the team leader are the important ones. They may be diverse: people who are members of the leader's lineage; people from his mother's or wife's lineage (possibly from another village) or related to him in one way or another by marriage; people with whom he is not directly related but who are from the same hamlet or village; acquaintances met during migration. In other words, the groupings around the foreman are on the basis of patrilineage, kinship through the mother or wife (and women more generally), residential proximity and friendship.*

*An example of a work team in Tehran (2004): Yusuf, 40, is the foreman and has extensive experience migrating to Iran (he has been involved in the hawala business and in people smuggling in the past); Karim, 20, Yusuf's late brother's son; Hanif, 24, from another lineage but from the same hamlet as Yusuf; Mohammad Jan, 21, Hanif's brother, married to a paternal cousin of Yusuf; Husain Ali, 19, unmarried, from the same lineage of Hanif and Mohammad Jan (their fathers are distant paternal cousins); Habibullah, 19, unmarried, from the same lineage as Yusuf, but originating from another hamlet; Abdullah, 18, unmarried, family originates from the same district as Yusuf (but he was born in Pakistan and had never been to Afghanistan).*

*There are several sources of solidarity in this work group which partially overlap. But there is a worker who has no direct relations with the other team members: a close relative of Yusuf met Abdullah on a building site and introduced him to the group. In this way, employment structures in Iran allow young Afghans to diversify their social networks so that they are not only determined by kinship and residence in the country of origin.*

*The age differences are also interesting. The foreman is 40, while the other members of the team are in their early twenties or younger. Such work teams are led by a mature and experienced migrant who supervises younger men and adolescents. As the foreman, he is responsible for the quality of work, hiring workers as they are needed, keeping attendance lists and communicating with the Iranian boss. The boss leaves him with the freedom to manage the everyday work; he hands all the wage money over to Yusuf, which is then distributed among the members of the work team. Yusuf came to Iran for the first time about 25 years ago, for five years. He returned to Afghanistan with some savings and got married before migrating again. Nevertheless, with the passing of time, his stays abroad became sparser and shorter.*

Source: Adapted from Monsutti (2005b)

<sup>18</sup> [www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?subm=&ssm=&cid=118](http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?subm=&ssm=&cid=118) (accessed 28 January 2006).



**Kan** is located around 25 km northwest of Tehran. It hosts about 700 Afghan households, the majority Sunni Tajiks. Most Afghan residents are engaged in the construction sector, gardening and shoe mending. There is one Afghan school and one government health clinic, as well as several private health clinics.

**Nematabad** is approximately 10 km south of Tehran. There are 600–800 Afghan households in this industrial area, which features metal-turning workshops, fabric selling and tailoring. Afghans are employed in the carpentry industry, the tailoring industry and in shoemaking production workshops, or they are simple labourers and builders, hawkers or metal workers. Sixty percent of Afghans in Nematabad are Hazara, 35 percent are Tajik, and the remainder are Qizilbash, Sayed, Pashtun and Uzbek. The majority of residents are Shia. There are four Afghan community schools.

Afghan labour migrants in Tehran report substantial periods of unemployment, during which they live from their savings or borrow money from family. However, respondents stated that they remit an average of 690,000 *tomans* annually to their families in Afghanistan. Their continued cyclical migration and subsequent return trips to Iran (over half had returned to Afghanistan at least once) suggests that neither unemployment nor fear of arrest are sufficient obstacles to discourage this labour migration practice.

### Afghans in Mashhad

Mashhad, which means “burying place” (especially of a martyr), grew around the tomb of Imam Reza, and it is a holy city for Shias. It is the capital of the eastern province of Khorasan, the second-most frequented destination of Afghan families in Iran after Tehran with 31,805 households or 155,893 individuals (but only the eighth-most

frequented destination of single Afghans, with only 3,495 individuals).<sup>19</sup> Four main research sites were selected because of the significant presence of Afghans in each.

**Golshahr** lies on the northeast outskirts of Mashhad’s residential area, and is inhabited by many Afghans (local Iranians call the suburb Kabulshahr or “Kabul City”). According to informal data, 50–65 percent of the Golshahr population of 35,000–40,000 population is Afghan, primarily Shia Hazara. Facilities include municipal water, gas, electricity and some welfare services, as well as several schools. Most Afghan men work in the construction industry as builders, labourers, plasterers, stonemasons and brick layers; they also work as shopkeepers, welders and agriculturalists.

**Sakhteman** is a very old neighbourhood on the eastern outskirts of Mashhad. About 25 percent of the population of 40,000–45,000 are Afghans, both Shia and Sunni. Sakhteman has two health centres, one pharmacy, four or five health centre branches, state-run primary and secondary schools, and one independent Afghan school. The occupational structure of Sakhteman is similar to Golshahr except that there are fewer shopkeepers in the former.

**Altaymoor**, northeast of Mashhad, has a population of about 15,000, of which about a third are Afghans. Altaymoor has city facilities, but is generally less developed than other areas in Mashhad. Welfare facilities include two health centres and governmental schools (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary). The structure of occupations resembles Golshahr and Sakhteman except that the majority Afghan men in Altaymoor work in brick manufacturing.

Afghans interviewed in Mashhad as part of this study reported that they were still able to find employment and enter into tenancy

<sup>19</sup> UNHCR Iran, Amayesh and Repatriation Databases, November 2004



**Box 6. Afghan Shia Pilgrims in Iran**

*Karbala, the place in Iraq where Imam Husain was martyred, and Mashhad, the Iranian city where Imam Reza is buried, play a pivotal role in Shia pilgrimage practices. Some Afghans explained proximity to Imam Reza not in terms of making pilgrimage in the present, but in terms of burial and salvation in the hereafter. By virtue of physical association, burial in Mashhad, ideally in the cemetery of Imam Reza, renders the deceased “in the presence of” Imam Reza. In the situation of displacement, pilgrimage is an activity that helps bring about recovery from the terror of war and the violent disruption of their social relations through flight and exile. Religious practice may sustain refugees in their processes of displacement and integration into the host society, providing emotional and cognitive support, and as a vehicle for community building and group identity.*

*To follow is a description of a group of Afghans returning to Mashhad after having been to Karbala:*

The pilgrims are met at the bus terminal by a welcoming party including the local mullah, family and neighbours. Two sheep tethered nearby are later slaughtered for the shared celebratory meal. A procession goes from the place of arrival to the family's house, and tea and sweets are distributed to the members of the procession. Later, written invitations are issued to neighbours, friends and family to attend a formal celebratory dinner. Prior to the dinner, invited guests contribute an amount of several thousand *tomans* to the pilgrim. In a conspicuous display of their pilgrimage to Karbala, the entry to the family's house is hung with screenprinted “Welcome home from Karbala” banners, and shelves or racks display mementos and trinkets from the Karbala site lit up by coloured lights. Each guest may receive gifts. The respective roles and interrelationships of host and guest played out in such celebrations provide opportunity for *mohajerin* to build, strengthen and extend social attachments to their Afghan and Iranian neighbours and friends.

*In Iran, the classification “refugee” has associations of both economic and social marginalisation. The title of “Karbala” accorded to returnee pilgrims offers to Afghan Shiites an alternative status which speaks of their religiosity rather than their national identity.*

Source: Adapted from Glazebrook and Abbasi-Shavazi (2005)

arrangements with landlords, in spite of legislation restricting employment and tenancy to those who enter Iran with valid passport and hold a valid visa and valid residency permit. They participated actively in regional and local social networks that functioned as safety nets.

Data from the Mashhad case does not substantiate the hypothesis that in the event of return to Afghanistan, and for the reason of livelihood strategy, Afghan families would leave some members behind in Iran to remit money to help finance the family's reintegration. The clear majority of Mashhad respondents intended to return to Afghanistan as intact family units, however the majority of respondents did not intend to return to Afghanistan in the medium term, and planned

to remain in Iran in the medium term if they were permitted to do so.

### **Afghans in Zahedan**

Zahedan is a frontier town near Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is the capital of Sistan Baluchistan province, largely occupied by a Sunni population with strong historical and cultural cross-border ties. In July 2005, it was estimated that a total of 98,064 documented Afghans lived in the province.<sup>20</sup> Significant repatriation has occurred recently: almost 40 percent of the families and more than 10 percent of the single Afghans living in Zahedan returned to Afghanistan in 2004.<sup>21</sup> Like other regions of Iran, the majority of Afghans living in Zahedan are originally from rural areas. Shia Hazaras comprise a small

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR Iran and Population and Geographic Data Section, 2005, *Afghan population and family status in Iran as of 01/07/05, Amayesh and Repatriation database*.

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR Iran, 01/01/05, Amayesh database (Sistan Baluchistan).



minority, about 10 percent, in Zahedan, while Sunnis are present in higher numbers: Tajiks, 23.3 percent; Uzbeks, 23.3 percent; and Pashtuns, 20 percent. Most Afghans are located in the eastern, northern and western margins of the city, and mainly work in the informal economy as labourers, construction workers and grocers. Many live with the fear of arrest and deportation because they are working without proper documentation.

## 2.3 Afghanistan

### Returnees in urban Herat

Herat was once at the crossroads of civilisations on the old silk route. Until recently Afghanistan's border with Iran was nothing more than a political definition, while on the ground the 900-km line through the desert had neither fences nor border posts on the Afghanistan side. Even during Zahir Shah's reign (1933-73) the border was open, which, along with a strong Iranian currency, stimulated trade, religiously motivated visits and labour migration. Western Afghanistan has historically looked towards Iran and Central Asia for its cultural and economic influences, an outlook which is perpetuated by the relatively weak central government in Kabul.

For this study, an urban neighbourhood in Herat was selected on the basis of: a high number of returnees; the intensity of transnational links; and a mixed ethnic, religious and economic profile (even if the majority of the inhabitants consisted of Sunni Tajiks). The neighbourhood was entirely destroyed by the Soviets in 1979, and most of its inhabitants fled to Iran or elsewhere. Since this time, many families have occupied the ruins or rebuilt houses, mostly on a temporary basis. The transitory nature of the settlement is still apparent in some streets, where people do not always know their neighbours. Since 2002, former inhabitants

have increasingly been returning from Iran. Land and rent prices are rising rapidly because of the booming economy of the city. Male heads of household in the neighbourhood are daily labourers, businessmen and shopkeepers, real estate agents, NGO employees and lower-level government officials. In most cases, work, and therefore income, is irregular.

### Returnees in rural Herat

The rural research for this study was undertaken in a village in Injil district, relatively close to Herat city. The main selection criterion for this research site was the high incidence of labour migration. Of the approximately 2,000 inhabitants, the majority is Pashtun, with a large minority Tajik. The two ethnic groups are found throughout the village, and intermarriage takes place, indicating relatively stable relations between the groups. The livelihoods and coping strategies of people living in this region are traditionally diverse and well developed. The main crop is wheat, while others include rice, corn and lentils, with overall production down because of the drought of recent years.

Despite its proximity to Herat city, where there have always been labour opportunities, a large majority of men continue to go to Iran to seek work as they can earn comparatively better wages there – supporting their household in either accumulation or coping strategies.<sup>22</sup> Families and individuals have moved from this area for various reasons over the past decades: during the Soviet occupation, then the mujahidin era, and then when the Taliban were in control of western Afghanistan. Initially some families fled, but also many young men left because of forced conscription and the lack of employment opportunities. Others left when Najibullah's regime fell because of their government affiliations. The Taliban regime prompted an exodus because of harassment and

<sup>22</sup> Grace and Pain, 2004.



discrimination, along with the lack of employment opportunities. Later in the 1990s the number of outward migrants multiplied as a consequence of the drought.

Since the Soviet occupation, more than half of the male respondents in this study area have gone to Iran at least once, with almost a quarter reporting recurring movements. Those who have remained in the village either are relatively wealthy or have weak networks (and therefore no one to look after their families while they are away). Today, many young men are crossing the border to Iran for the first time in their lives – most below the age of 20, and either single or engaged. In general they migrate because of the difficulties of finding well-paid work and the need to save money for their marriage. They often express their desire to join friends and to gain some independence from their parents, and they usually spend a longer period of time in Iran compared to married men, who generally return within a year.

Many current residents experienced a different culture and better infrastructure and services when they fled to Iran during the years of conflict. This has had a profound effect on aspirations and expectations, permeating all aspects of life and providing one significant cause of ongoing migration to Iran.

### **Returnees in urban Faryab**

Maimana, the provincial capital of Faryab, was on the main caravan route between Iran, the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. During the reign of Zahir Shah (1933-73), Faryab was well known for its karakul sheep and their skins, leather, carpets, rice, wheat, grapes and raisins, pistachios and melons. However, in the 1970s it was, in comparison with other provinces, underdeveloped and received relatively little foreign aid. Thirty years later, the situation has changed little. Poor road access limits export and limited financial assistance has hindered economic development. It remains an important

overnight stop for traders and travellers between Balkh and Herat, but commercial activities are relatively minimal.

This study looked at two urban neighbourhoods in Maimana. Both were ethnically and professionally mixed: the majority of inhabitants are Uzbeks, with some Tajiks and a few Pashtuns, all from a range of occupational groups. One site was characterised by the presence of government officials and militant Junbesh youth. The other had an intricate pattern of settlement, with extended families occupying houses adjacent to each other based on the families' original connections to the leather industry.

The migration patterns of the two neighbourhoods' inhabitants were similar. During the Soviet occupation many stayed in Maimana. Some families moved elsewhere within Afghanistan for employment, while others left to work in the army, or, on the contrary, to avoid conscription. The arrival of the Taliban in 1998 caused a large-scale exodus of Uzbeks, with families fleeing the area because of attacks against them.

Wealth and professional backgrounds partially determined subsequent migration patterns. Many government officials fled to Iran, leaving their families behind under the protection of a male relative. Some young and middle-aged men first brought their families to Shibirghan, Mazar-i-Sharif or elsewhere, ensured they were looked after by a male relative, and then left for Iran, either because of fears of persecution, for work or for medical care. The presence of some family members there then prompted others to move to Iran. Upon return from Iran, onward movement occurred in some cases, while in others there was a prolonged stay in Herat before returning to Maimana, exemplifying the cyclical as well as multidirectional movement of migrants.

The displacement history shown in Table 1 illustrates the overlapping of motives for movement (conflict, work, social and family life) and the complex pattern of movement



(within Afghanistan, to Iran), which cannot be reduced to a flight from danger followed years later by a return to the place of origin.

### Returnees in rural Faryab

The rural area studied was selected primarily on the basis of a high incidence of labour migration to Iran. One Arab, one Uzbek and one Pashtun village were chosen in order to investigate inter-ethnic relations,

socioeconomic class and migration. Generally, each ethnic group lives in distinct hamlets. Local society is stratified and wealth is unequally distributed. With the arrival of the Taliban, Arabs left in large numbers, fearing harassment, looting, rape, taxation and imprisonment. After the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, Uzbeks turned against Pashtuns in yet another round in a cycle of abuses committed between ethnic groups.

*Table 1. An Uzbek man's displacement history<sup>23</sup>*

When	Where to	How long for	With whom	Reason for return or onward movement
Until the time of Najibullah	Maimana to Kabul	many years	parents, three sisters and one brother	conflict
Until the arrival of the Taliban (1987–97)	Kabul to Mazar	10 years	parents, three sisters and one brother (father and brother die; respondent and one sister get married)	Taliban attack in Mazar
Taliban period (1998–2001)	Mazar to Maimana	4 months	mother, two sisters, wife	no work
	Maimana to Shibirghan	2 years	mother, two sisters, wife and one child	no work
	Shibirghan to Iran	1 year	alone (rest of family left in Shibirghan)	respondent's brother-in-law leaving Shibirghan
	Iran to Shibirghan	2 months	alone	no work
	Shibirghan to Maimana	4 months sisters, wife and one child (one sister gets married)	mother, two	no work
Fall of Taliban	Maimana to Herat	2.5 years	mother, one sister, wife and two children	no work and house destroyed
Karzai's government	Herat to Maimana	since summer 2004	wife and three children	increasing rental price in Herat, other Uzbek families leaving, family in Maimana

<sup>23</sup> From Stigter, 2005b, p. 9.



Since 1979, primarily because of lack of security and employment opportunities, a high level of migratory movements has occurred from rural Faryab. A complex pattern of dispersal has been established, featuring transnational networks between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. The level of male migration increased during the drought, which began in 1997 and caused extremely low harvests and widespread loss of sheep, goats and other animals. Though 2003 saw a major improvement with record harvests, in 2004 some localised pockets were threatened again as the result of extreme weather conditions, the loss of groundwater, diminished snow packs and less rainfall. Migration to Iran has become one strategy for temporarily mitigating the impact of natural events. Even with the agricultural situation appearing to improve, the need to find work elsewhere is likely to continue because of the pressures of population growth.

Many families in Faryab have at least one young or middle-aged relative working in Iran, clearly indicating the continuing need of family members to find employment elsewhere. It also suggests that migration has become an established social strategy, making it easier for young men to depart for the first time, and increasing the likelihood of returning to Iran for those with previous migratory experience.

### Returnees in Jalalabad

Located in eastern Afghanistan, the province of Nangarhar shares a border with Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP). The majority of the population in both Nangarhar and NWFP are Pashtun and, on both sides of the international border,<sup>24</sup> Created by the British in 1893, the Durand Line separated Afghanistan from British India, in effect dividing the Pashtuns who lived on both sides of the border. In some locations, especially

in the tribal territories to the west of NWFP, this border is still not recognised by the local population. Most people share a similar tribal structure, language and religion, along with many cultural traditions. Nangarhar's capital city, Jalalabad, lies on an ancient trade route leading from Kabul via the Khyber Pass to Peshawar and the Indian subcontinent. The close ties to NWFP socially, culturally and economically made Peshawar a logical location for resettlement for residents of Nangarhar fleeing conflict, drought and other crises. There has been, and continues to be, a significant presence in or near the city of Peshawar of Afghan refugees who left Nangarhar (mostly from the city of Jalalabad or its surrounds) as family units at different stages following the Soviet invasion in 1979. This study focused on the lives of households in Jalalabad in both peri-urban areas and more distant villages, who lived as refugees in Pakistan, in both camp and city, and have returned to their home province in recent years largely as intact family units. In both Pakistan and on return, the study found that they have been surrounded by relatives (khpilwan) and kinspeople (qawm) who have provided much social support. Their transnational networks have never been extensive: only a minority have relatives still in Pakistan, and just a few receive intermittent remittances from abroad.

Regional migratory networks from Jalalabad are clearly orientated towards Pakistan; not one respondent interviewed as part of this study had ever been to another country. Such a result is explained by the proximity of the Pakistani border, the existing cultural ties, and the long history of cross-border relations. Trade and movements of people (such as nomads moving north in summer and south in winter, labourers looking for seasonal work in the lowlands, and smugglers) were deeply entrenched well before 1978.

<sup>24</sup> Created by the British in 1893, the Durand Line separated Afghanistan from British India, in effect dividing the Pashtuns who lived on both sides of the border. In some locations, especially in the tribal territories to the west of NWFP, this border is still not recognised by the local population.



The Nangarhar case is notable in that there was a substantial group among the respondents who reported an increase in economic status since return. This group was more likely to have owned land and a home prior to departing Afghanistan, in comparison to those reporting no change or a decline in economic status. One other reason why the economic situation of many returnees

participating in the study improved was a change in employment status. A significant share moved away from dependence on daily wage work and into business. This movement may reflect the greater market connections “at home” and the ability to own business and property – which Afghans are not permitted to do in Pakistan.



### 3. The Causes and Motivations of Migration

#### 3.1 War and migration

Although based on ancient patterns of mobility, the first significant migration of Afghans in recent times occurred in the 1970s, at the time of a severe drought in Afghanistan and the oil boom in Iran. A dramatic increase in outward movements followed the Communist coup of 1978 and the Soviet intervention of 1979, while pressures related to population growth contributed to the need to seek employment outside Afghanistan.

Not surprisingly, for most respondents in this study of Afghans living in Iran and Pakistan, the original reason for their migration was to flee from the war. Other secondary causes related to war were also mentioned, such as escape from military service, deterioration of living standards, lack of security and their worsening economic situation. While the predominant causes of Afghans' movement into Pakistan and Iran were often directly related to the physical violence associated with war, the decrease in livelihood opportunities brought by it was also an important determinant of migration. Many respondents reported that the Soviets had burned their farms and, more significantly, had destroyed their irrigation channels. Furthermore, with the destruction of transport infrastructure, seed availability decreased. The breakdown of traditional agricultural practices forced migration across the border in search of welfare and livelihood opportunities.

One of the main attractions to Pakistan was the existence of refugee camps close enough to facilitate male participation in the *jihad*. This seems to have continued beyond the era of the Soviet invasion and well into the Taliban times. Similarly, the presence of UN agencies,

NGOs (providing donor-subsidised health and educational facilities) and even political agents of Afghan leaders also attracted refugees. Refugee camps in Iran accommodated relatively few Afghans and international assistance was not as important – instead it was the labour market that allowed refugees to earn their livelihood and maintain a certain degree of autonomy.

#### 3.2 Mixed motivations

Each wave of migration can be differentiated on the basis of the existing and potential threats faced by people at that time, while correlations can be made between ethnic identity, gender and age. Although generally Afghans fled from war, their reasons for migration and the actual dynamics of this movement are much more complex. The physical effects of war may be seen as a separate issue to the disruption of traditional livelihoods, the political and ethnic repercussions of war and the economic fallout caused by war.

The work of Connor<sup>25</sup> on “self-settled refugees” in Peshawar starts from the assumption that the choice of residence is influenced by the refugee's past history and cultural framework, including geographical and ethnic origin, social position (educational level, occupational experience) and political involvement (membership of a resistance movement), time of departure from Afghanistan and reasons for the decision. She seeks to close the gap between studies of voluntary migrants and refugees and to move beyond the idea that the route taken by the latter is always “forced, chaotic, generally terror-stricken”.<sup>26</sup> She proposes a causal typology and considers that different “vintages” of refugees share a number of

<sup>25</sup> K.M. Connor, 1987, “Rationales for the movement of Afghan refugees to Peshawar”, in G.M. Farr and J. G. Merriam (eds), *Afghan Resistance: The Politics of Survival*, p. 151-90, Boulder and London: Westview Press; K.M. Connor, 1989, “Factors in the residential choices of self-settled Afghans refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan”, *International Migration Review* 23(1):904-32.

<sup>26</sup> Connor, 1987, p. 152.



*Box 7: Reasons for leaving Afghanistan in the 1980s*

After analysing the responses of 771 heads of families, Connor identifies ten reasons for the decision to leave Afghanistan:

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Bombing/fighting: fear for life</i>	112	14.53
<i>Bombing/fighting: obstruct livelihood</i>	76	9.86
<i>Avoid military</i>	181	23.48
<i>Anti-communism</i>	93	12.06
<i>Prison</i>	68	8.82
<i>Fear of arrest</i>	52	6.74
<i>Suspect family member</i>	29	3.76
<i>Harassment</i>	23	2.98
<i>Already in Pakistan</i>	7	0.91
<i>Other</i>	14	1.82
<i>Total</i>	771	100

Source: Adapted from Connor (1987)

distinct characteristics. She shows that Afghans left their country after events related in some way to their own particular sociology – they did not flee *en masse*.

It is not surprising that bombing and fighting, together with general pressure from the Soviet army and the Communist government, were the main reasons driving Afghans into exile in the 1980s (rural populations were more likely to suffer bombings and massacres, whereas citydwellers had more to fear from wrongful arrest). However the percentages given do not take into account the inevitable overlap in motives. Back and forth movements are not covered. Categorisation by “date of departure” does not allow the details of medium- to long-term strategies to be drawn out. In seeking to group refugees by “vintage” and by sociocultural status and ethnic factors, the planned multilocation of families and kinship groups is neglected, as well as the complementarity of places of residence and occupations.

Motivations and causes overlap. People may leave Afghanistan for protection-related reasons, but seek work in Iran or Pakistan. While abroad, they have the chance to improve their income and access comparatively better medical facilities, and in this time they redefine their priorities. The motivation to support the household is often combined with more personal reasons such as, for young men, the urge to seek new experiences or earn money to show that they can fulfil their marital responsibilities.

Migration is also a way of spreading risk within a household (with more than one son) or between households (of various brothers). It is a coping strategy to cover basic needs and repay debts through remittances. The migration of individual members of a household may allow for their family to stay in their area of origin. For single migrant workers the availability of pre-established transnational networks facilitates the migration and influences the place of

<sup>25</sup> K.M. Connor, 1987, “Rationales for the movement of Afghan refugees to Peshawar”, in G.M. Farr and J. G. Merriam (eds), *Afghan Resistance: The Politics of Survival*, p. 151-90, Boulder and London: Westview Press; K.M. Connor, 1989, “Factors in the residential choices of self-settled Afghans refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan”, *International Migration Review* 23(1):904-32.



destination. Most labour migrants in Iran have brothers living with their parents in Afghanistan, and they see their migration as a coping strategy that allows their family to receive remittances to pay for daily needs, and to accumulate capital for investment in land and housing.

Migration studies have shown that the factors which induce population movements cannot be reduced to the explicit motivations of social actors. Furthermore, they are not necessarily the same as those which perpetuate it. Migrants weave networks of contacts that make it easier to move between different countries, and the gap between demand (the number of people wishing to enter an economically developed country) and supply (the number of visas available) creates a lucrative niche. A black market of people smugglers establishes itself to work around controls in the destination country, while NGOs justify their existence by defending migrants and refugees from state repression and providing them with legal forms of assistance. In short, addressing the causes of migration does not constitute a guarantee to bring it to an end, as the factors sustaining migratory flows come to form more or less stable systems.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.3 Population growth

The population of Afghanistan is thought to have almost doubled since the Communist coup of 1978. It was estimated in the late 1970s at about 15 million, while in 2004 the UN quoted a figure of 29,863,000. It estimates that by 2050 Afghanistan's population will have more than tripled to 97,324,000.<sup>28</sup> Despite the years of war and the extensive Afghan diaspora, Afghanistan's population has clearly increased dramatically over the past 25 years, with a high proportion of young

people (currently 44.7 percent between 0 and 14 years). This growth is apparent in rural areas as well as in cities and towns. In some regions like Behsud, the population density when recalculated on the basis of cultivable land is greater than that of Bangladesh.<sup>29</sup> The size of land parcels owned by individuals continues to decrease with each generation because of inheritance customs that stipulate the division of property among the sons of a family. At the same time, there has been insufficient economic growth in urban centres to absorb the increased number of Afghans migrating from rural to urban locations in search of work. Many IDPs (internally displaced persons) and returnees are forced to settle in urban locations such as the large cities of Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat, but also in smaller towns like Maimana, Ghazni or Pul-i-Khumri. They tend to stay together in neighbourhoods which are not always able to cope with such a dramatic increase of population. This has resulted in shifts in wealth, as some well-off families lose their primary income source (agricultural land and livestock) while other enterprising people set up new businesses to capitalise on the changing circumstances. In general, long-term residents in urban centres tend to have more physical and social assets than the new arrivals.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.4 Drought

Rural Afghan families, both those with and without land and livestock, have had to adapt their livelihoods strategies to deal with the impact of drought. In particular, male out-migration emerged as a coping strategy in response to the effects of drought in the 1970s and again in the late 1990s. Though 2003 saw major agricultural improvements with good rain and record harvests, in 2004 at least 17 provinces were again faced with the

<sup>27</sup> D.S. Massey, J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, A. Pellegrino and J.E. Taylor, 1993, "Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal", *Population and Development Review*, 19(3):431-66.

<sup>28</sup> <http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp> (accessed 16 January 2006).

<sup>29</sup> C. Johnson, 2000, *Hazarajat Baseline Study: Interim Report*, Islamabad: UN Coordinator's Office, p. 46.

<sup>30</sup> S. Schütte, 2006a, Poor, Poorer, Poorest: Urban Livelihoods and Vulnerability in Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul: AREU; S. Schütte, 2006b, Dwindling Industry, Growing Poverty: Urban Livelihoods in Pul-e Khumri, Kabul: AREU.



effects of ongoing drought, loss of ground-water, diminished snow packs and less rainfall. Aside from lack of water – exacerbated by the fact that many irrigation facilities were destroyed during conflict through military aggression and neglect – plant diseases and low-quality seeds have further decreased yields. The situation has prompted many men from rural areas, as well as former tenants, sharecroppers and small landowners from semi-urban areas, to leave their place of origin in search of work.

### 3.5 Uneven economic development

Inequitable economic growth seriously undermines Afghanistan's development, as trade opportunities tend to be monopolised by the rich and powerful.<sup>31</sup> The informal economy accounts for a large proportion of the Afghan economy, while the booming drugs trade is controlled by some commanders who keep farmers under pressure to produce opium poppy.<sup>32</sup> Even with some economic growth taking place in major cities since the end of the Taliban regime, large-scale investments and national emergency and development programmes have reached different regions in Afghanistan unevenly.

In western Afghanistan, Herat is thriving because of its trade with Iran, and the related customs income has allowed for major investment in the city's infrastructure. Although employment opportunities remain irregular and often insecure, most people (including returnees) with connections (*wasita*) have generally been able to find work. A few kilometres outside of the city's boundaries, however, overall employment opportunities remain limited because of the years of drought, relatively small landholdings and population growth, and the fact that

only a few industries have been established. Across socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups, many men from Herat continue to seek work in Iran.

In contrast, in a small provincial capital such as Maimana in the northwestern province of Faryab there is a lack of regular work for skilled and unskilled labourers in industry, construction and trade. Those with traditional skills in small local industries like leather production face difficulties obtaining credit and selling their produce because of poor infrastructure and the impact of the global economy. Not even being able to cover the needs of its own inhabitants, provincial towns like Maimana have little hope providing opportunities for migrants from its surrounding rural areas.

### 3.6 Limited rule of law

More than two decades of fighting not only devastated Afghanistan's infrastructure, it also weakened government institutions and resulted in limited rule of law in many parts of the country. Along with challenging socioeconomic conditions, Afghans of all ethnic groups continue to experience insecurity due to political instability.

At present, migration to Afghanistan's neighbouring countries is prompted by persecution and security-related concerns in only a minority of cases. However, the levels of protection-related departures are still significant in some areas (as has been reported, for instance, in Faryab). While migration is primarily economically driven, motivations may overlap and many men still flee their villages because of factional tensions, and, particularly in northern Afghanistan, to avoid taxation and racketeering by some local commanders.

<sup>31</sup> S. Lister and A. Pain, 2004, *Trading in Power: The Politics of "Free" Markets in Afghanistan*, Kabul: AREU.

<sup>32</sup> In 2004, Afghanistan produced 4,200 metric tons of opium, which represents more than 80 percent of the global opium production (UNODC, 2005, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2005*, Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, p. 5).



### 3.7 Migration as a way of life

For many Afghans from both sedentary farming families and nomadic groups, migration has become a way of life. Even before the war, the economic differential between Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries has long led Afghans to migrate to find work and enjoy the benefit of higher incomes. In the 1960s and 70s, with industrialisation in Afghanistan negligible, there were insufficient employment opportunities for the newly educated and the growing rural populations. The oil boom encouraged many Afghans to go to Iran, and remittances to Afghanistan from abroad rose. Just prior to the Soviet occupation, several hundred thousand Afghans were working in Iran. Today, higher wages, as well as the pursuit of welfare, continue to prompt Afghan men to cross the border, despite the difficulties they experience in Iran.

Links between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been intense because of the cultural and linguistic ties of the Pashtun populations living on both sides of the Durand Line. Nomads used to cross the border every year; they were not only herdsman but also traders selling hides, wool and dairy products in Pakistan, and bringing back manufactured goods.

For many single young men their migration (to Iran in particular) may be a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, in which they ideally return with enough savings to cover the expenses of bride price and the wedding. Their time away from relatives, often with their friends, allows them to explore a different lifestyle and prove that they can support themselves.

The spread of migrants within the region has made it increasingly viable for those who have never travelled abroad to seek work.

These recurrent movements are a consequence of transnational networks that are maintained by the transmission of people, money, goods and information. Both men and women are crucial in the process of reproducing these networks: men migrate across the border to seek work, send remittances and bring savings home, while women take care of the household – generally supported by a male relative – and ensure that news from home, including potential employment opportunities, is passed on.

In rural villages, migration to Iran, Pakistan or Gulf countries has become a social strategy that is expressed and reconfirmed by transnational networks. After men have migrated for the first time, the likelihood of them returning is greater: going a second time is made easier on the basis of the previous migration experience. Besides seeking employment and adventure, another cause of departure may be the intention to cross the border between Iran and Turkey and move onward to Western Europe.

Women seem to be less mobile than men and do not travel anywhere without a male companion. However, although they receive little public recognition, this does not mean that they do not play a role in the shaping of Afghan migratory strategies. The role of a mother in deciding whether her son migrates is not usually acknowledged in public, but it was found in many cases to be crucial. Furthermore, the reduced presence of men in their home villages may allow women to overcome the usual division of household tasks and, in many cases, to engage in otherwise forbidden agricultural labour. The simple fact that so many young men have been, and are, absent has brought social and cultural changes to the division of the tasks between genders and generations, and has allowed many rural and urban women to gain some responsibilities and a new visibility.



## 4. The Experience of Migration and Decisions about Return

Although migratory movements acquired an unprecedented scale during the war, they have existed for a long time in one form or another and have remained in the collective memory of all Afghan communities. They do not necessarily have the traumatic significance that is often attributed to them; individual mobility and the dispersion of families or mutual support groups are not always experienced as destructive phenomena. Seen through the migratory prism, the concepts of “economic migrant”, “political refugee”, “country of origin”, “host country”, “voluntary” or “forced” migration, or even “return”, appear reductionist. All these categories overlap in the Afghan context, with its unique combination of political, cultural, economic and ecological factors.

### 4.1 Border crossings, smuggling networks and deportation

Since 1978, persistent insecurity, along with the destruction of much of the country’s infrastructure, has meant that travel has been a potentially perilous undertaking. Numerous obstacles stand in the way of Afghans intending to go to Iran, Pakistan or the Arab Gulf states. Formal border crossings have often been closed for periods of time over the past 25 years, and the large majority of migrants have resorted to using smugglers to cross international borders.

Official passports, visas and other legal documents are difficult – for some virtually impossible – to obtain. In particular, for the majority of migrants from rural areas, obtaining a passport to cross the border through formal border crossings is a time-consuming and costly experience. There is a flourishing black market that reflects this and exploits potential migrants’ poverty and lack of knowledge of the official processes.

The main difficulties in acquiring passports and visas are related to the centralist policies of the Afghan administration and the fact that the system is highly bureaucratic. Most provincial administration offices are not able to issue passports, and applicants must travel to a major city such as Kabul, Mazar-i Sharif, Kandahar, Herat or Jalalabad. The official process involves showing proof of citizenship, sound financial status and non-existence of a criminal record to the local passport office, which is supposed to verify the information then provide a letter of recommendation to facilitate the process. When this has finally

#### Afghans protest against new Iranian visa regulation

Excerpt from report by Afghan Independent Radio Sahar

*[Presenter]* Hundreds of people who had applied for Iranian visas staged a protest in front of the Iranian Consulate [in Herat Province] yesterday. Protestors, who had spent several nights queuing to get a visa, are complaining about the recent announcement according to which all Afghan travellers will need a letter of invitation to cross the border.

*[Unidentified man]* The consulate does not issue visas. We are really confused. Corruption or nepotism may have caused this problem. I have been waiting here for four nights, but have not yet got a visa.

*[Presenter]* In the meantime, Najafimanesh, the Iranian consul, said that they had limits in issuing visas for citizens, adding that the number of people applying for visas had recently increased considerably and Iranian officials were unable to issue visas for all of them. He stressed that travelling to Iran with legal documents was completely free.

*[Najafimanesh]* We have limited capacity in issuing visas and our employees cannot meet the demands of the large number of people who apply for them. However, I want to assure the people not to worry as they will not face any serious problems.

Source: BBC Monitoring, 10 May 2006 (Radio Sahar, Herat, in Dari, 10 May 06)



**Box 8. Narrative of the border crossing to Iran in the 1990s**

*We got going very early in the morning. We were told it was the day to leave, that we had to set off. The smuggler brought a couple of Toyotas. It was 6am; each Toyota was crammed with 20–25 people. The roads were bad. The cars arrived at the foot of the mountain, then we continued on foot. It was close to the frontier; the mountain lies between the frontiers of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. Altogether there were a good 100 or 150 of us. Well, we went in two groups; we went with the people who had been waiting for us, and we got together around 2pm. We had a bit of bread, but there wasn't any water on the mountain; some had brought a little water, but others hadn't. Then we headed off. There are always thieves in those mountains, because the Baluch themselves know that a certain number of people will be passing through that day. They wait there quietly and then seize the migrants' watches, rings, fine clothes and shoes; they take whatever they fancy. People are left naked! Well, when we went there that day, half an hour earlier, we saw a lot of thieves waiting, but they thought we weren't going to come and left. Really, they are always posted on the road used by migrants. The road in the mountains was very long – three or four hours of walking.*

*How did we set off? There were three or four smugglers in all, surrounding the migrants on all sides, on all four sides, and ahead were the Baluch guides. They knew the situation. For example, when there was some danger, they told the people to sit down, then to start walking again, then to go faster or slower, not to make any noise, etc. So, they went on ahead. If the migrants made some noise, they beat them mercilessly, beat them with sticks. So, it was very dangerous. When we left the mountain we ran a lot. At night, when it was really dark, we slept before starting the journey again. This time we left very quickly; we came down to the frontier and arrived in Iran. It was desert; the migrants went into the undergrowth, because it was dark there and nothing could be clearly seen from outside. We stayed hidden there until the smuggler from Iran came to meet the group. The smugglers arranged to meet at such and such a place. Well, we waited, then some smugglers left to see what the traffic was like and whether there were any Iranian soldiers around. They got the picture and when it was quite dark, after nightfall, we set off. A couple of Toyotas arrived; there were a hundred and fifty of us. Fifty people left, in those two Toyotas; they set off for Zahedan... It was seven in the evening when the first migrants were taken...the rest of us waited and we stayed there until one in the morning. It was very cold, there was no water, and we were very hungry. Sometimes people stayed a whole day in the undergrowth, and some died of hunger and thirst.*

Source: Adapted from Monsutti (2005)

been obtained, the costs of travel, board and lodging in the city are an extra financial burden.

For these reasons, many Afghans continue to resort to crossing borders illegally, without formal documentation. In the Iranian case more than the Pakistan case this means relying on smuggling networks, even though the trip is made risky by the presence of bandits as well as Iranian police who can arrest and deport the newly arrived migrants. Migrants are said to have suffocated to death in their vehicles, or been shot at by Iranian police.

Some migrants are guided by a *sarparast*, often a relative, neighbour or friend who takes on that role as he is either the oldest or the most experienced when it comes to travelling to Iran. When younger men travel

for the first time to Iran, smugglers from the area of origin often provide guidance, deal with the Baluch smugglers, and hand over payment on behalf of the group. The fact that a smuggler is often closely connected to the migrants he accompanies, either from the same village, area or ethnic group, establishes a degree of trust in the transaction. The smuggler sometimes joins the group all the way to Iran, and is likely to be well connected in certain neighbourhoods in the city of destination.

The smuggler sometimes acts as a source of credit for the migrant. The money is either paid at the end of the trip, by relatives or acquaintances of the migrant in the place of destination, or the migrant is brought to an employer who is known to the smuggler to enable him to start earning money



immediately to repay the debt. The second case carries the risk of a loss of freedom, and some migrants are in this way taken into “hostage” by smugglers involved in large-scale trafficking.

In the case of refugees from Nangarhar, crossing the border was not easy, and most respondents made the initial trip through the mountains on foot, with the assistance of donkeys, camels or horses. Some households sent individual males across the border to check the situation and make contact with relatives who had previously moved to Pakistan, but most families simply departed, often in groups with other relatives or villagers. Migration in search of refuge often occurred during periods of intense fighting between the government and various mujahidin factions,<sup>33</sup> and travel was often done at night. It was especially difficult for women and children under these circumstances. Some families hired or bribed costly smugglers to assist them, while others were helped by mujahidin groups they knew or with whom they had party affiliation. Most, however, did not have any formal assistance and rather relied on fellow refugees and tribal communities along the way. On the Pakistani side of the border, tractors or cars were hired to take them to their destinations in the North West Frontier Province, where kinspeople were often anxiously waiting to receive them.

In general the experience of deportation, as well as the stories of experienced migrants about the difficulties of life abroad, fails to deter others from going. Those migrants intercepted and arrested while crossing the border or on their way to an Iranian or Pakistani city, often try to cross again. The causes of migration, as well as the high financial expectations of relatives and the fact that additional debts may have been

taken on to enable the trip, are omnipresent and tend to eclipse all other concerns.

## 4.2 Remittances and the circulation of commodities

One of the most striking aspects of migration is the flow of capital that it draws towards Afghanistan, or towards Afghans living in host countries. Money transfers themselves are a matter of interest for many reasons: they reveal the existence of social networks linking faraway places; they are economically important for the areas from which the migrants originate; they sustain migration as a strategy of domestic groups; and they stimulate and orient future movement, since migrants pass on information about opportunities in various regions.

Afghans are part of transnational social networks that function as safety nets and span not only Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also extend in some cases to Europe, Canada and Australia. These networks link relatives and neighbours, and are built on friendship and common business interests. The remittance system is an integral part of the maintenance of transnational networks, as it allows for the transmission of money and goods to reconfirm social and economic relations over a wide geographical space.

There is considerable variation in experiences related to remittances across the study sites and among different sub-groups of respondents – in terms of access, level, direction of flow and source. For example, remittances from single workers are much higher and more regular than from families, since the latter often do not have members left behind to send money to, and some poorer families who live in Pakistan or in Iran rarely have much extra money to send back to relatives in Afghanistan.

<sup>33</sup> As the resistance against the communist government grew and became more organised, seven major political parties emerged, primarily based upon geographic location, ethnicity and religious sect. Most of these parties had their headquarters in Peshawar.



Remittances from abroad were mentioned as a source of income for many higher-income families across the research sites. In Pakistan, respondents reporting that they received support from Western countries were often living in upper-income areas such as Hayatabad in Peshawar or Hazara Town in Quetta, while people from Akhtarabad in Peshawar and Jungle Bagh or Ghausabad in Quetta were not socially and economically able to maintain such wide transnational networks. Such external assistance flowing to Afghans in Pakistan may serve to reproduce pre-existing inequities.

Findings from Iran suggest a different pattern involving a contradiction between the extent of transnational networks with Western countries, and the amount of remittances Afghans receive from abroad. Over half of the Afghans interviewed there had family members living overseas, and many had direct communication with these relatives. Yet only a minority claimed that they had ever received financial assistance from their relatives living overseas. Within these networks, cash, gifts and women as brides are the main “objects” of circulation. Most respondents in Iran have maintained links with Afghanistan, however many claimed that their own household’s economic situation was too weak to support their relatives there. For instance, only one third of respondents in Mashhad and a quarter of respondents in Zahedan had sent money back, and then not as a regular remittance but rather in response to a request by relatives for a particular urgent need. This is similar to what was found in Tehran (where a little over half of the respondents interviewed had sent money to relatives in Afghanistan), but contrasts markedly with the data on single labour migrants who remit substantial and regular amounts of money to their families in Afghanistan. Those in this category described migration as a coping strategy that allowed their family to pay for daily needs, resolve debts or – in rarer cases – invest in new ventures while the former often moved with their wider family, leaving few behind in

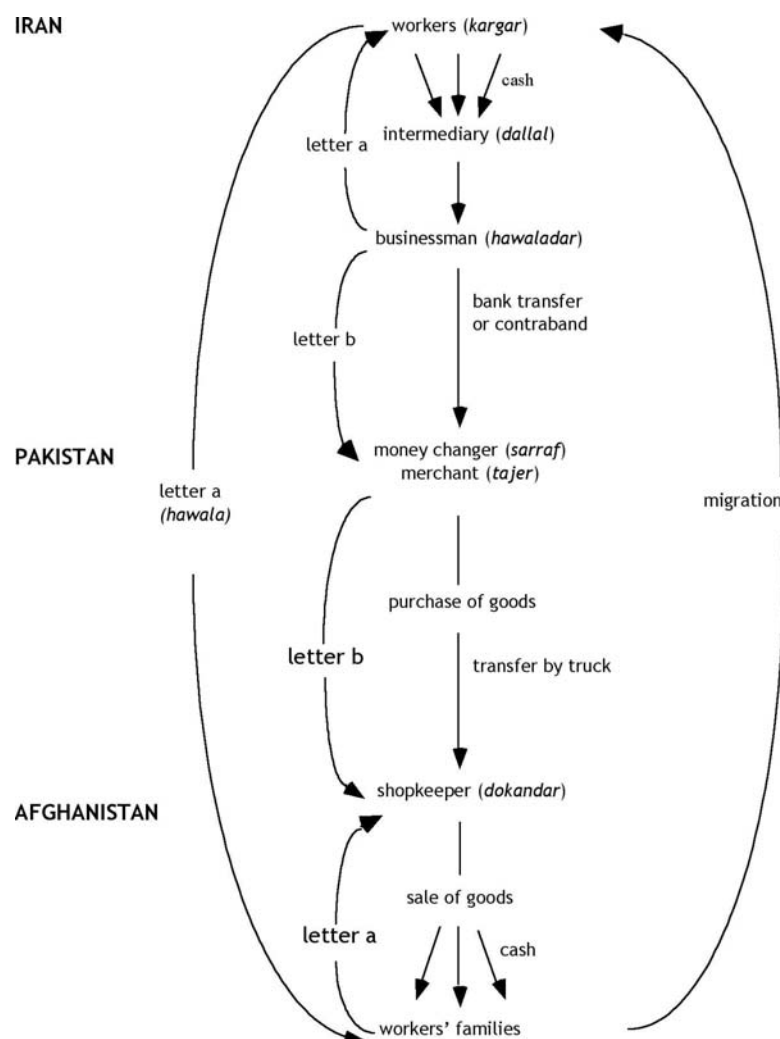
Afghanistan to support with remittances.

Those intending or needing to remit money from Pakistan and Iran, particularly labour migrants, have had to solve the logistical problem of sending their savings to relatives in Afghanistan. This problem was especially acute in the 1980s and 1990s when no banks were operational in Afghanistan. When an Afghan (*kargar*) working in Iran wished to send his savings back to his family in Afghanistan, he entrusted the money to a businessman specialising in informal remittances, known as a *hawaladar* (from *hawala*, “payment”, “transfer [of money]”, and by extension “letter of credit” or “cheque”). Both *kargar* and *hawaladar* had to belong to the same lineage or come from the same valley. If the relationship was any more distant than that, a middleman was needed. The *hawaladar* passed a letter on to his partners stating the details of the transaction (letter b in figure 2) and gave another one (letter a) to the *kargar*, which he sent to his family in Afghanistan through a friend going back home. The *hawaladar* sent the money through the official banking system to Pakistan, where one of his partners (always a close relative) retrieved the money. He may have used it to make a profit through currency exchange, or buy some goods for trading (wheat, rice, cooking oil, sugar or tea, but also shoes, clothes, cooking pots and other goods). He would send these goods by road to the family village in Afghanistan, where a third partner ran a shop. The goods were sold and the proceeds were used to reimburse the *kargar*’s family. Depending on how long the deadline for repayment was, and how close the relationship was between the migrant and the *hawaladar*, the commission charged was between 2-5 percent.

In the absence of any external guarantee from the state, an atmosphere of trust was essential to ensure that the transaction was respected, and such trust could only arise if the interaction occurred regularly and over a long period of time. Members of each social and ethnic group dealt with members of other



Figure 2. Money transfers between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan



Source: Adapted from Monsutti (2004 and 2005)

groups only when strictly necessary, such as to cross borders or travel in hostile areas. Despite the trauma of war and exile, Afghans managed in this way to take advantage of their geographic dispersion and the resulting economic diversification by developing new transnational cooperation structures. Half-merchant, half-banker, the *hawaladars*' expertise in the transfer of funds has kept money and goods flowing without interruption between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan – playing a role that, like migratory movements from Afghanistan, has a long history, but grew to unprecedented dimensions during the war. In recent years, however, with the relative improvement of security in

Afghanistan, an increasing number of people are sending money back to Afghanistan through a relative or a neighbour travelling there rather than using the *hawala* system.

Migration as a livelihoods strategy and the receipt of remittances are of crucial importance for many households in Afghanistan. In most instances, remittances cover the cost of basic needs such as food, clothes and medicine. The benefits are often perceived to be short-term, reconfirming a self-perpetuating cycle without cumulative effects. In some cases money remitted is used to purchase luxury items (cars, cameras, televisions and video recorders) or for accumulation purposes, or invested in assets to increase the wealth of the family at home (for example the construction of a house or shop). The system of remittances was an efficient coping and adaptive strategy during the years of war, but to capitalise on it further, it

should be complemented by an accessible and flexible credit system that would allow it to contribute more formally to Afghanistan's reconstruction.

As noted, besides its economic dimension, the remittance system has an important social function – allowing for the reproduction of social ties over time and geographical space. The circulation of people, money, goods and documents exemplifies these transnational connections. One striking example of the circulation of people is the transnational circulation of women through marriage. Links between the members of solidarity groups scattered throughout different countries have



been strengthened by the Afghan tradition of endogamy, which has often been maintained in spite of dispersion. Women in Afghanistan are sent as brides for Afghan men living in Iran, while Afghan women living in Iran are sent as brides for Afghan men living overseas (Europe, USA, Canada and Australia). Afghan women living in Afghanistan are said to subscribe to traditional values about gender relations and family life, and those from rural areas were considered able to tolerate hardship and difficult circumstances. Conversely, Afghan men in the West are said to prefer Afghan women living in Iran as brides, as they are considered to be more “modern” and readily able to adapt to a Western lifestyle. Such circulation of women as brides adds another dimension to the practice of transnational networks in the establishment and consolidation of relations between the respective families of the groom and bride.

### 4.3 Attitudes towards repatriation

The decision to repatriate is much more complex than the original decision to seek asylum in the first place. Section 3 illustrated that war, the associated physical violence, and the conflict’s economic repercussions were primary causes of large-scale population movements from Afghanistan. But it cannot be assumed that a simple reversal of the threats to physical safety is reason enough to prompt repatriation.

Over the years of the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, it was those originating from rural areas who constituted the majority of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran. And after over two decades in Karachi, Peshawar, Tehran or Mashhad, they have become urbanised in many ways, and are often unwilling to go back to their place of origin. Social, ethnic, religious and economic tensions played an influential role in the decision to migrate, and many of these tensions remain to this day. The rebuilding

of infrastructure – irrigation channels, roads and water supply – is necessary to attract potential returnees, but it is not sufficient in itself. While some migrants do have family members looking after the land they left behind, many do not, and they cannot be sure of whether they will have access to their own land if they go back. With insufficient income from agriculture, many poor families were engaged in seasonal migration long before the Soviet invasion, and for them the incentives to repatriate to their villages of origin are weak.

Lack of access to agricultural land in villages plays an important role in decision-making about return. This is partly explained by the fact that as families have grown larger over the last two decades, their land holdings have remained the same, and it is therefore impossible for many refugees to go back to their place of origin and rely primarily on their land for their livelihoods. The war and its displacement of populations has resulted in a sharp rise in land disputes issues across Afghanistan, which has influenced the decision of repatriated Afghans to opt for settlement in cities. Many respondents mentioned that the Afghan government should provide returnees sponsored loans or some form of land distribution. Prior home ownership appears to have some bearing on people’s intention to return to Afghanistan, as does current access to that property. People who had arranged their house to be looked after by relatives were significantly less willing to return than those who had leased their house to non-relatives.

The decision to return cannot be considered in isolation from the experiences of Afghans in Pakistan or Iran, their links with Afghanistan, and the local socioeconomic and political networks they have established. It also needs to be understood that a whole generation of Afghans has now been born and raised in Pakistan and in Iran. These young people have minimal physical connections with Afghanistan; they have very different aspirations and goals to those of their parents



and may not consider repatriation a viable option. Exposed to a less conservative social environment, and to social services including health and education, public transport, electricity and telecommunication, Afghans have experienced a standard of living almost unknown in Afghanistan.

Women and young people are particularly reluctant to go back to their villages of origin. For them, a return to Afghanistan may mean an increased workload in the home, social pressure to dress and behave in certain ways and restrictions on mobility. Iran and Pakistan offer not only household utilities, but also education and health opportunities that they would not have in Afghanistan. The closest option would be Kabul, but living costs there are high. The desire for services is particularly great for those who have spent years in Iran or Pakistan. A romanticised perception of repatriation may coexist with the need to resolve pragmatic issues, and education and health often appear as a stronger concern than security.

Male members of refugee families have usually been more mobile than women and children; they have been able to visit Afghanistan and maintain stronger physical links with the area of origin. Some women and children who have not personally had these links perceive their country of origin as undeveloped and unsafe, with no health, education and sanitation facilities. Ambivalent feelings are often present in the same person: many young people assert their commitment to reconstructing Afghanistan (often associated with yearnings for the climate, fresh air and pure water), but they are also concerned about the lack of facilities and underdevelopment.

With the development of telecommunication networks in Afghanistan, media has taken on an increasingly important role in deciding to repatriate. BBC and Voice of America broadcasts in Dari and Pashto are regularly followed as sources of immediate information about political and military events in

Afghanistan. But while Afghans are generally well informed and discuss current affairs at length, they do not fully trust the media. They depend largely on local sources of information to guide their decision-making about returning to their places of origin. Many respondents said they relied on anecdotal or highly individualised information in making their assessments regarding repatriation and its dangers. There was some evidence that Afghans doubted the media and province-based reports they received from the UN regarding conditions in Afghanistan.

The challenges faced by returning families are alleviated through support provided by their relatives and friends, who can assist in finding work, housing and employment, and by providing credit and information. Under such conditions, the repatriation of only part of a family often emerges as a pragmatic strategy. For example, rather than two brothers going back to Afghanistan to cultivate land, one may try to find work in Kabul or stay in Pakistan and support family members living there. This shows a conscious effort to risk-share within a large family, and a practical intra-household allocation of resources through the planned dispersion of members of a family. However, data from Iran and Nangarhar challenge the notion that in the event of return to Afghanistan, families would leave some members behind to remit money to help finance the family's reintegration. In both of these sites, almost all the interviewed families intended to return (Iran) or did return (Nangarhar) as intact family units to Afghanistan.

Many Afghans, while claiming allegiance to their country of origin and expressing their desire to contribute to nation building, were keen to point out some key reasons for remaining in Pakistan or Iran. First, there was a perception that the writ of the Afghan state does not extend beyond certain urban areas, limiting the protection that the state could offer its citizens. Second, respondents were of the view that warlords had not yet



been fully demilitarised. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there was a general concern about the economic opportunities offered by the labour market in Afghanistan.

In general, uneducated Afghans in Iran seem unwilling to return.<sup>34</sup> Repatriation was considered to be easier and more likely to be successful for those with capital or with education and vocational skills because of the widespread presence of UN agencies and international NGOs in Afghanistan. Some non-formally educated respondents expressed concern that work opportunities in Afghanistan would be restricted to seasonal manual labour. Even where respondents felt that jobs were available, they were worried about uneven development in Afghanistan and considered these opportunities to be limited to a few urban centres.

Those who have set up lucrative businesses (this is the case in Pakistan more than in Iran), such as carpet or hide trading, are reluctant to repatriate, but maintain high levels of commercial activity and social ties with Afghanistan. Those Afghans in Pakistan who are less well-off and who rely on the casual labour market are more likely to be optimistic about returning to Afghanistan.

Many Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, in spite of the hardship they face, have access to some social services, including education, medical facilities, water supply, electricity and gas. There is a widespread perception that such services will not be available to the same extent in Afghanistan.

Finally, some respondents seemed to be concerned about Afghanistan becoming a “westernised and un-Islamic” country. They worry that Islamic laws are no longer applicable, and that people are indulging in drinking and gambling. These concerns were

particularly pronounced among parents who were concerned that their children would “westernise” in Afghanistan.

Afghan willingness to return to their country of origin under current conditions is determined by several factors:

- duration of residency outside Afghanistan, (long-term refugees are less willing to return);
- place of domicile in Afghanistan (original rural-dwellers are less willing to return than original urban-dwellers because of hardship and insecurity in rural areas);
- gender (women were less willing to return than men);
- level of education (those with a lower educational level were less willing to return than those with a higher education) – several parents mentioned their children’s education as a reason for remaining in Iran or Pakistan; and
- occupational and economic security (those whose financial situation had improved were less willing to return than those whose situation had worsened or not changed).

#### 4.4 Transnational networks as key livelihood strategies

The migration of Afghans is neither definitive nor temporary. The various displacement histories of respondents interviewed in this research project clearly show that migratory movements are not unidirectional, but that it is more appropriate to speak of recurrent multidirectional movements. Individual members may separate from their households in search of work, making use of national and transnational networks during their period of migration; some families have always stayed in Afghanistan, while others went to

<sup>34</sup> G. Jamishidiha and Y. Ali Babaie, 2002, “Determinants of Afghan migrants in Iran: Case study Golshahr Mashhad”, [*Iranian Journal of Social Sciences* 20(1-2):71-90.



and returned from Pakistan or Iran as a unit. Some individuals and families returned regularly to Afghanistan during the years of conflict, exemplifying the recurrent movements that characterise migration patterns. The image that this conjures up is a long way from the figure of the refugee compelled to leave his or her homeland in the face of a towering threat, with the vague hope of one day being able to return. Instead, migrating Afghans have established a circulatory territory, and by maintaining a dispersion of family members they have taken advantage of spatial and economic diversification of livelihood strategies in order to diminish the risks associated with insecurity and poverty.

A broad network of social relations is vital to supporting population movements, and therefore livelihood diversification strategies, because these movements are organised along certain cooperative structures and relationships of trust which neither extended kinship nor ethnic affiliation alone can explain. Social relations must extend beyond the more typical kinship or ethnic affiliations, especially in the context of migration and insecurity where relations of trust are both more necessary and more difficult to establish and maintain than in the case of a local residence group. Along the migratory itinerary, relatives and acquaintances offer support to each other in an environment which is perceived as hostile. A distinction may be drawn between generalised reciprocity, where the social dimension of the transaction is more important than the material aspect (and the relationship is not broken if the beneficiary finds it impossible to perform a return service), and balanced reciprocity, a direct and immediate exchange of equivalent goods and services that is not without an instrumental dimension. Both generalised and balanced reciprocity practices enhance social ties: they reconfirm the transnational networks that drew the migrants to the place of destination in the first place.

In the absence of a genuine rule of law, illegal border crossings as well as successful cross-border financial transactions depend upon trust and closeness among the people involved in these activities. Many Afghan social networks with an international dimension remain compartmentalised along social, regional, religious or ethnic lines. This is the paradox of the migratory networks established by Afghans: they cover huge geographical areas yet they rest upon narrowly defined solidarity groups.

Poverty is not only related to a lack of economic assets, but also to having few or poor quality social relations (*wasita*). Lack of *wasita* limits the livelihood opportunities of Afghans in a range of ways. First of all, households with fewer social resources may be poorly placed to migrate as a unit or to send individual members away to earn money to support the remaining members, as there is no one with whom to activate informal mechanisms of solidarity. This limits the range of livelihood diversification strategies available, sustaining both conditions of poverty and existing inequalities. Most Afghans have family members or acquaintances in their neighbourhoods either in their host countries or at home, and most borrow money from, and lend money to, these contacts in times of need (such as illness, accident, funeral costs, housing bond, marriage costs and smuggling fees for relatives). A lack of such connections based on ties of kinship, tribe, ethnicity, language, religion and political affiliation means a key social safety net is missing, leading to higher risks of poverty. For returnees, employment is one of the fundamental prerequisites for a sustainable livelihood, as income is needed to cover basic needs including rent. Although employment opportunities remain irregular and often insecure, returnees with *wasita* are more likely to find work, and if social networks are weak, the need to pay intermediaries to find work becomes an additional obstacle.



Humanitarian organisations assisting Afghan refugees have not, to date, taken sufficient account of the fact that geographical dispersion is likely to be a lasting phenomenon resulting from explicit choices made at individual or household levels – often related to diversifying existing insecure livelihoods. Refugees and migrants are not resourceless victims; they are able to assess the limited range of options open to them and to choose strategies that provide increased security. Labour migration or remaining in a host country as long as possible are two such strategies. A greater focus on the strategies and cycles of migration demonstrates that mobility is not necessarily an anomaly or a trauma, and that increasingly the migration of all Afghans cannot necessarily be defined as something forced. For young men in particular, it is a means of realising personal autonomy, and plays an important role in the construction of masculinity. They often marry only after they have spent a number of years in Pakistan, Iran, the Emirates or Saudi Arabia.

Migration is a way of diversifying social and economic assets (and it is in this way a survival strategy), and it is also a kind of rite of passage to adulthood for young men.

On the basis of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the 1967 Protocol, international law distinguishes refugees and internally displaced persons from migrants. This legal approach is necessary for aid agencies and governments, but it does not correspond to the current experience of many Afghans, who, due to the protracted nature of their refugee situation, have moved from being refugees in need of substantial humanitarian support to being migrants seeking some form of legal status and secure livelihoods in their country of residence. The management of Afghans living in Pakistan and Iran could be improved by integrating a livelihoods perspective which would recognise the blurring of boundaries between these categories which has occurred over time.



## 5. Conclusion and Key Policy Implications

Policy options regarding Afghan migration have generally been framed within the “conflict-refugee” approach, which presumes that Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan or Iran in order to escape from war, and that they will return once the fighting is over. The case studies carried out in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran approach the subject more broadly, from the perspective of “transnational networks” – acknowledging the complexity of the experience for the population of Afghanistan. The reasons for large numbers of Afghans remaining in their neighbouring countries can no longer be reduced to their exposure to armed conflict. While violence and insecurity provided the backdrop from the late 1970s onward, the precise ways in which people were affected varied between individuals, families, social classes and ethnic groups. Furthermore, the decision to leave Afghanistan was not unrelated to pre-existing connections and prior economic expectations about their chosen destinations. It is common to observe complex patterns of movement of individuals and families since the late 1970s, including repeated departure and repatriation. Pre-existing social networks, which cannot be reduced to kinship or ethnicity but extend to and beyond tribe, religion or political affiliation, have been critical in protecting, facilitating and sustaining Afghans on the move. The case studies documented many examples of people travelling back and forth between their place of origin in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran, despite the fact Afghans have been, since late 2001 and the fall of the Taliban, increasingly vulnerable to police harassment in these host countries.

The reasons for returning to Afghanistan are not simply the inverse of the reasons for leaving. The decision to stay away from Afghanistan or to return is taken under a very different set of circumstances than those within which the decision to flee was made.

The political context has changed, but the experience of migration itself has transformed refugees; they have different expectations and aspirations from those that they brought with them.

The refugee perspective that informs the current policy paradigm of Iran, Pakistan and the UNHCR is too simple a framework to incorporate the multiple dimensions and complexity of the Afghan migration experience. It is unrealistic to expect that a cessation of conflict and political uncertainty within Afghanistan will automatically lead to the return of all people of Afghan origin. It would be more accurate to see migration between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran as an ongoing historical phenomenon, whose scale dramatically increased with war but which will continue, as it did before, even in the absence of military and political crises. The policies of regional governments must move away from the present-day framework and pay more attention to the actual strategies and obstacles of Afghans.

Afghan population movements blur the boundary between forced and voluntary migration, as the social strategies of people labelled as refugees and those of economic migrants are sometimes very similar. Considering the fact that ongoing migration is an efficient survival strategy for so many people, that it may be seen as a tool of reconstruction, and that it continues as a constitutive feature of Afghan livelihoods, there is a real necessity to look beyond the three solutions to the refugee problems usually recommended and promoted by UNHCR: voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, integration in the host country or resettlement in a third country. Such a legal framework is not sufficient for managing the present situation, as it is based on the idea that solutions are found when populations’ movements cease.



Based on its experience in the region, the UNHCR itself has acknowledged the need for a new approach:

*Return to Afghanistan is a much more complex challenge than previously recognised. This is attributable not only to the challenges inside Afghanistan but also to the changing nature of population movements and social and economic shifts induced by protracted exile. [...] There have been three major causes of population movements from Afghanistan – political conflict and violence, natural disasters, and economic migration. Many Afghans cross borders to look for seasonal employment, to trade, to access services, and to maintain social and family connections. These networks may have become a critical component in the livelihood systems of many Afghan families, including returnees.<sup>35</sup>*

The absorption capacity inside Afghanistan is limited, and the national economy needs the inflow of cash and commodities financed by Afghans living abroad. Full repatriation in the immediate future is neither feasible nor desirable. Implemented at all costs, it could destabilise the fragile equilibrium of the renascent Afghan state and have negative effects on neighbouring countries.

Even if the causes of migration are addressed to the greatest extent possible in Afghanistan, and the government of Afghanistan is gradually able to provide more effective, authoritative and democratic leadership, migration will undoubtedly continue because of population growth, underdevelopment, localised lack of rule of law, and potential natural disasters, as well as the corresponding demands of the Pakistani and Iranian economies.

To eliminate the costs – financial and

otherwise – to Afghan migrants who seek work in Pakistan, Iran and further beyond, while ensuring both individual and state security, the following recommendations are drawn from this three-country study:

- Implement economic development strategies and policies which create quality employment opportunities in Afghanistan. Even with the present influx of foreign money, Afghanistan's economic development has not received much focused attention or investment. Even extremely limited prospects in Iran and Pakistan are clearly considered better than those at home in Afghanistan. In order to manage the risk of further uncontrolled outflows of population and to foster sustainable reintegration, special attention should be paid to job creation and skill building, particularly in rural and urban areas with high rates of return.
- Recognise the inventiveness and dynamism of Afghanistan's population and start reconstruction programmes by surveying existing local potential instead of imposing preconceived frameworks.
- Improve security in Afghanistan. Unrest is one of the most serious constraints to economic development, and it is a motivating factor for ongoing migration. The need to reduce unrest and improve security constitute political governance issues which must be addressed in order to achieve long-term stability and to foster the conditions that support sustainable return.
- Invest in health and other social services in Afghanistan. This would reduce the need for Afghans to travel to regional countries (mainly Pakistan and India) for fairly routine health-related requirements. The establishment of schools that are able to provide quality education would increase the perception that attending school creates life opportunities and

<sup>35</sup> UNHCR, 2004.



reduce one of the reasons for families to remain in neighbouring countries – providing their children with quality education.

- Establish bilateral labour and migration agreements to *manage* rather than *prohibit* movements. A continued strengthening of bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Iran and between Afghanistan and Pakistan should include the establishment of a legal labour migration framework and an increased presence of the Afghan government (the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) in Iran and Pakistan. Such a framework should facilitate formal labour migration and provide a clear legal identity and legal rights for labourers. There should be a policy shift from limiting migration to managing migration – with governments reaping the shared benefits of greater international labour mobility and avoiding the negative effects of people smuggling and corruption.
- Increase awareness of the contribution, in labour and otherwise, of Afghans to the Iranian and Pakistani economies. This would help reduce discrimination

against Afghans in Iran and Pakistan and possibly increase interest in establishing more open labour migration policies.

- Acknowledge and manage the local integration of a certain percentage of Afghans living in Pakistan and Iran who will not choose to return. This would affirm the well-documented reality that certain groups of Afghans are well established abroad and have fewer opportunities at home.
- Improve the transparency of processes for accessing passports and visas to reduce exploitation, costs and risks to Afghans intending to travel to Iran and Pakistan.
- Create a formal but flexible credit system in Afghanistan to facilitate the contribution of remittances to the reconstruction of the Afghan economy. Accessible and flexible banking facilities would allow for the conversion of money into loan and investment funds that could be used to rebuild infrastructure and start economically productive activities.
- Ensure that the needs and interests of vulnerable Afghans remaining in Iran or Pakistan are met by upholding all means of refugee protection.



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