

MIGRATION DYNAMICS BETWEEN TURKEY AND AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamics of migration from Afghanistan to Turkey, focusing on the causes of migration, the journey through Iran, and the experiences of Afghan migrants in Turkey. The study aims to understand the factors that drive Afghans to leave their home country, the challenges they face during their journey, and how they are treated upon arrival in Turkey. The article also examines Turkey's policies towards Afghan migrants, particularly after the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The data for the study was collected from 15 Afghan migrants currently living in Turkey, and it was analyzed thematically to address the article's core objectives. The findings highlight that economic instability, high unemployment, and the fear of persecution and violence are the main factors pushing Afghans to flee their country. Many migrants choose Turkey as a transit point on their way to Europe or as a potential destination for a better future. The journey through Iran is often perilous, with migrants facing exploitation and harsh conditions. Upon arriving in Turkey, Afghan migrants encounter difficulties such as limited access to employment and housing, along with the threat of deportation. In response to the increasing flow of illegal migrants, Turkey's policy has primarily focused on deterring migrants at the Iranian border through stricter control measures, or alternatively, deporting those who have already entered the country back to Afghanistan. This policy reflects Turkey's broader approach to managing irregular migration in the region.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to understand the dynamics of migration and refugee experiences between Afghanistan and Turkey, particularly after the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The focus is on Afghan refugees and migrants in Turkey, examining their reasons for migrating, their journey to Turkey, and how they have been treated once they arrive. The study explores the primary causes of migration, which include economic instability, unemployment, and the fear of persecution under the Taliban regime. Many Afghans choose Turkey as a key transit point on

their way to Europe or as a potential destination in search of a better future. The study also looks into the personal experiences of Afghan migrants in Turkey, who often face challenges such as limited access to legal employment, inadequate living conditions, and discrimination. In response, the Turkish government has implemented policies that primarily focus on controlling illegal migration, either by deterring migrants at the Iranian border or by deporting those already in the country. The study examines how these policies have shaped the lives of Afghan migrants and the

overall migration dynamic between Afghanistan and Turkey.

After over 40 years of ongoing conflict and unrest in Afghanistan, around 23.7 million Afghans—more than half the population, including women and girls—require humanitarian aid and protection. By the end of 2023, the global count of Afghan refugees reached 6.4 million, marking one of the largest prolonged refugee crises worldwide (UNHCR, 2023). The Afghan population has endured over four decades of violence, natural calamities, chronic poverty, food shortages, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent shift in government leadership. The lead-up to the Taliban's seizure of Kabul in August 2021 exacerbated instability and violence in Afghanistan, resulting in further human suffering and displacement. Worldwide, nearly 10.9 million Afghans remained displaced, with most either within Afghanistan or in bordering nations due to conflict, violence, and poverty. As the humanitarian emergency persists, the endurance of Afghans and their host communities is being severely tested. According to the U.N., over 1.6 million Afghans have fled since August 2021, increasing the number of Afghan refugees in neighboring countries to 8.2 million. Over 300,000 Afghan refugees currently reside in Turkey (UNHCR, 2024). More than 1 million Afghans have fled their homeland since the Taliban regained power a year ago, prompting Turkish officials to make public appeals for more security assistance to deal with a growing refugee crisis.

Human Rights Watch reported that Turkey has been "systematically" pushing back thousands of Afghan refugees to Iran or sending them back to Afghanistan, "without adequately reviewing their requests for international protection." According to information from Turkish officials, HRW indicated that Turkey airlifted 44,768 Afghans to Kabul during the first eight months of 2022. The Human Rights Watch recently noted "several incidents where security forces have inflicted torture, shot at, or violently returned Afghan men they apprehended while trying to cross the border into Turkey, as well as the pressure on Afghan nationals in deportation facilities to sign forms for voluntary return prior to their swift removal to

Afghanistan." Turkish authorities classify Afghans as irregular migrants, effectively denying them the chance to apply for international protection, and deporting them in large numbers while overlooking many who have significant protection needs (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This study aims to understand the circumstances of Afghans who have migrated to Turkey and evaluate the responses of the Turkish government since 2021.

Stephen Castles et al. argue that migration reasons are diverse. Migrants who primarily seek economic betterment may also face political repression. It is challenging to separate social factors from economic, political, and cultural influences on migration. In the case of Afghan migration, the primary driver for the mass movement of Afghans has been the war and conflict in Afghanistan throughout various periods in history (Castles et al., 2005). In other words, migration has been a necessity rather than a voluntary decision. "The movements of populations in and out of Afghanistan have predominantly been due to the insecurity created by war" (Rubin, 1996).

The initial wave of mass migration from Afghanistan occurred following the Soviet invasion in 1979. Throughout the late 1980s, nearly one-third of the Afghan population was compelled to flee as refugees. Most of these refugees took refuge in Pakistan and Iran. Afghanistan has a history of continual movement and has undergone five cycles of migration and return. The second wave involved reverse migration after the Soviet Union's departure from Afghanistan in 1989, with over one to two million refugees returning home. The third migration wave emerged during the outbreak of civil war in 1992. The fourth wave occurred from 1996 to 2001 during the Taliban's rise to power in Kabul. The fifth wave began when the Taliban regained control of Kabul in August 2021, and people continue to flee in large numbers by any available route and method. "Every day, thousands of individuals are escaping the Taliban through the remaining open exits from Afghanistan" (Christoph Reuter and Julian Busch, 2022). While Turkey initially served mainly as a transit route for Afghan migrants en route to European nations,

it has increasingly become a destination in its own right.

Afghanistan has remained a low-income nation for more than a hundred years. The focus on industrial development was overlooked, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, the Afghan populace encountered a lack of adequate job opportunities. As a result, individuals in Afghanistan are compelled to abandon their homes either willingly or in exile due to financial hardships and the need for safety. Existing studies on Afghan migration primarily examine the dynamics between Afghanistan and Turkey, with a focus on the causes and experiences of refugees. Erol and Ali (2022) identify economic hardship, terrorism, and various other factors as primary drivers of Afghan migration to Turkey. These push factors are compounded by the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. İçduygu and Karadağ (2016) approach Afghan migration from a theoretical perspective, using migration system theory to explore the interconnectedness of macro, meso, and micro-level variables. They analyze how these levels, including institutions, networks, and social, political, and economic relationships, influence the migration patterns of Afghans traveling to Turkey and Europe. This framework contextualizes migration within broader historical, social, and political developments. In addition to these macro-level studies, other research delves into the lived experiences of Afghan migrants, particularly in Turkey and Iran, examining the challenges they face along the migration route and the responses of host countries. These studies highlight the often perilous journey faced by Afghans fleeing conflict and instability and shed light on the broader implications for both the migrants and the receiving countries. Overall, much of the scholarship emphasizes the complex interplay of factors that drive migration, the difficulties faced along the journey, and the varying responses of governments, with a particular focus on how Turkey has managed the influx of Afghan refugees and its policy responses. This body of work contributes to a deeper understanding of the Afghan refugee experience and the broader migration system, offering insights into the interplay of political, economic,

and social forces shaping these transnational flows.

Research Methodology

This study investigates the factors driving Afghan migration to Turkey, the migrants' journey, their experiences in Turkey, and the Turkish government's response following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Through in-depth interviews with approximately 15 Afghan migrants residing illegally in Turkey, the research examines their reasons for choosing Turkey as a destination, the challenges they faced during their migration, and their life in Turkey after arrival. Since direct access to Turkish policy on Afghan migrants post-2021 was not possible, the researcher supplemented the primary data with news reports. The collected data was analyzed thematically, focusing on the key areas of migration causes, experiences, and the Turkish response. To ensure the safety and confidentiality of the participants, their identities were protected, and the data was securely stored, safeguarding them from potential reprisals by involved governments. This approach allowed the study to shed light on the broader dynamics of Afghan migration while maintaining ethical standards in dealing with vulnerable populations.

Afghans in Turkey

This section draws on data from in-depth interviews with Afghan illegal immigrants and refugees living in Turkey, aiming to understand their experiences. The collected data was analyzed thematically, starting with an exploration of the reasons why the respondents left Afghanistan and chose Turkey as their destination. This initial part highlights factors such as economic hardship, conflict, and security concerns that motivated their migration. The second part of the analysis shifts to the respondents' lived experiences in Turkey, examining their interactions with the local environment, the challenges they face as refugees or illegal immigrants, and their perceptions of life in Turkey. It also includes personal narratives that detail their struggles, coping mechanisms, and the broader socio-political context in which they navigate their daily lives. Through this thematic approach, the section

offers valuable insights into both the push factors driving migration and the complexities of adapting to life in a foreign country.

Causes of Leaving Afghanistan

The data collected through in-depth interviews reveals that economic factors are the primary reason most Afghans leave their country. Many respondents, like Ahmed Afghan from Khost, cited severe economic crises as the driving force behind their migration. Ahmed, who left Afghanistan in 2021, expressed his frustration, stating, "I left the country due to the economic crises me and my family were facing in Afghanistan. I was in a state of crisis looking at my family living in such a miserable situation." His testimony reflects the broader struggles many Afghan families endure, where poverty, lack of opportunities, and an unstable economic environment make it nearly impossible to sustain a decent quality of life. The interviews suggest that these dire economic conditions, coupled with insecurity and lack of resources, force individuals to seek better prospects elsewhere, with Turkey emerging as a significant destination for Afghan migrants.

Najeeb Pashtun, a resident of Nooristan, left Afghanistan when the Taliban regained power, with economic hardship being the primary factor behind his decision. Reflecting on his circumstances, Najeeb shared, "I was facing unemployment for a long time. I left the country only because I wanted my family and children to live the life I always imagined in my childhood. I want to feed them properly. Our lives were miserable due to the economic situation and instability in Afghanistan." His account underscores the severe economic struggles and instability many Afghans face, where unemployment and lack of basic resources make it difficult to envision a better future. For Najeeb, the desire to provide a better life for his family—one with food security and stability—was a powerful motivator in his decision to leave. His story reflects the broader experiences of many Afghans who are forced to migrate in search of better economic opportunities and a safer environment.

Ahmed Kareem, a respondent from Kandahar, left Afghanistan driven by economic hardship and insecurity. He explained, "We left the country in a hurry, because we were in danger from poverty. I never want my children to sleep hungry. I had to bear all the hurdles here in Turkey only because I want my children to have a better life." His statement reflects the desperation many Afghan families feel when faced with extreme poverty, where basic survival needs become a constant struggle. For Ahmed, the fear of seeing his children suffer and go without food motivated him to make the difficult decision to leave his homeland. Despite the challenges he faced as a refugee in Turkey, his primary focus remained on providing a better future for his family—one that would offer safety, stability, and the chance to live without the constant threat of hunger. His story highlights the sacrifices many Afghan migrants make for the sake of their children's well-being.

For many Afghans who left the country after 2021, fear of persecution, torture, or imprisonment was another significant factor driving their migration. Muhaymin Sarwari, a resident of Paghman, is one such individual who fled Afghanistan due to the instability that followed the Taliban's takeover. As an activist advocating for peace in Afghanistan, Sarwari faced a heightened risk of being targeted by the new regime. He shared that, after the Taliban returned to power, he lived in constant fear of imprisonment or even death. The threat to his safety and the safety of those around him compelled him to leave, ultimately seeking refuge in Turkey. His story highlights the dangers faced by political activists, journalists, and others who opposed the Taliban, as they became targets of retribution. For many like Sarwari, escaping Afghanistan was a matter of survival, with Turkey providing a safer environment to continue his life away from imminent danger.

Jameel Kohkan, a resident of Kabul, fled Afghanistan after the Taliban's return to power in 2021 due to the fear of retaliation. He explained, "We were in a collective fear. I never wanted to leave my country. I was compelled by my family in Afghanistan to leave. I think I would have been killed now. They urged me to leave for Iran. I then came to Turkey." Jameel's testimony reflects

the intense atmosphere of fear and uncertainty many Afghans experienced following the Taliban's resurgence, particularly those who were at risk of retribution for their previous actions or affiliations. Despite his reluctance to leave his homeland, Jameel's family pushed him to flee to protect his life. His journey to Turkey, via Iran, was shaped by the urgency of escaping potential violence. This highlights how the threat of death or imprisonment, rather than just economic hardship, compelled many to seek safety outside Afghanistan.

Noor Ahmedi, a former official of the democratic government in Afghanistan, left the country due to the dangers he faced after the Taliban's return to power. He explained, "The people of Afghanistan were in constant fear because we were facing a debacle. When governments change, the new administrators will ultimately go after you. They will do any harm to you and your family. I left the country because I never wanted to be apprehended and killed. I had to leave the country." Noor's testimony illustrates the pervasive fear that engulfed many former government officials and their families following the collapse of the democratic regime. The risk of retaliation by the Taliban, including imprisonment, torture, or execution, made it impossible for Noor to stay. His decision to flee was driven by a survival instinct, as he feared for his life and the safety of his loved ones in a rapidly changing and dangerous political landscape.

Ahmed Nadeem, a resident of Paktika, left Afghanistan due to the fear of escalating terrorism following the Taliban's return to power. He recalled, "The situation in Afghanistan was full of fear and terror. Afghanistan is now comparatively secure from terrorism, but at that time we were in fear that we would face a hard situation after the Taliban." His statement reflects the uncertainty and anxiety many Afghans felt as the Taliban took control in 2021, fearing a resurgence of militant violence and instability. At the time, there were widespread concerns that the Taliban's rule would lead to an increase in terrorist activities and exacerbate an already volatile security environment. Ahmed's decision to leave was rooted in the anticipation of worsening conditions, as the country seemed on the brink of further

conflict. For him, the threat of terrorism was a significant factor in seeking refuge abroad, especially in a safer environment like Turkey.

For some Afghans, the decision to leave the country was driven by the perception that life in Turkey and Europe offered better opportunities and security compared to Afghanistan. Jameel Afghan, a resident of Kandahar, explained his decision succinctly, saying, "It was better in Turkey and Europe rather than living in Afghanistan." His statement reflects the broader sentiment of many Afghans who saw migration as a chance for a better life, free from the economic instability, insecurity, and political turmoil that plagued Afghanistan. For Jameel, the prospect of finding safety, employment, and a more stable environment in Turkey or Europe outweighed the risks and hardships of staying in Afghanistan. This highlights how, for some, migration is not just about escaping immediate danger, but also about seeking better prospects for the future, including improved living conditions and opportunities for themselves and their families in more stable and developed regions.

Mohsin Khan, a resident of Kabul, decided to leave Afghanistan because he saw Turkey as a more economically stable option at the time. He explained, "Turkey was an economically better option at that time. In Afghanistan, every day you face new problems and issues. To overcome those issues and have a better and stable life, I left the country." His statement reflects the daily struggles faced by many Afghans due to ongoing instability, poverty, and insecurity. The constant challenges of living in a country with a fragile economy and political turmoil pushed Mohsin to seek a better future abroad. For him, Turkey offered a more promising opportunity to escape the cycle of hardship and uncertainty that defined his life in Afghanistan. Mohsin's decision illustrates how, for many Afghans, migration is driven not just by immediate dangers but by the desire for economic stability and a chance to build a better life.

The data reveals that many Afghans fleeing their country reached Turkey via a dangerous and arduous journey through Iran. After crossing into Iran, they were smuggled through Pakistan's Balochistan region and then transported to Turkey. The conditions they endured during this journey

were dire. They were often crammed into small cars with no provisions, relying solely on food they carried in their bags. The smuggling routes took them through harsh deserts, and once they reached the Turkish-Iranian border, they were left to navigate the final leg of their journey on foot. Many faced the constant threat of gunfire from Turkish border forces. The entire trip typically took around eight days, during which they survived on little more than a single piece of bread per day. This account highlights the extreme hardship and risks that migrants faced in their pursuit of safety and a better life in Turkey.

Opting for Turkey

This section examines the reasons why many Afghan migrants chose Turkey as their destination. A common factor mentioned by most respondents was the hope of eventually reaching Europe. Many Afghans viewed Turkey as a transit point on their journey to Europe, believing it to be a stepping stone toward better opportunities and stability. However, in some rare cases, Turkey was chosen as a primary destination. For these individuals, Turkey offered a more affordable living option compared to other countries at the time. Additionally, the presence of a significant Afghan community in Turkey made it a more familiar and accessible choice for some migrants, who felt they could find support and integrate more easily. This combination of lower costs and the established Afghan diaspora in Turkey influenced the decisions of many, shaping it as both a transit hub and a final destination for others seeking a better life.

Mohsin Khan expressed that his primary aim was to reach Europe, viewing Turkey as a stepping stone on his journey: "I chose Turkey because I wanted to reach Europe. I still want to reach Europe and start my life all over again." For Mohsin, Europe represented a place of opportunity where he could rebuild his life. In contrast, Jameel Afghan's journey took a different turn after facing extreme dangers while crossing the Turkish-Iranian border. He initially had hopes of reaching Europe as well, but after encountering life-threatening conditions at the border, he abandoned this goal: "I was struggling to reach Europe. After reaching Turkey and facing the

deadly situation at the Turkish border with Iran, I left the idea to reach Europe because I would have been killed." Jameel's experience underscores the risks and unpredictability migrants face. Faced with the immediate threat of death, his survival instincts led him to reconsider his original destination and settle in Turkey, where he found safety, even if it wasn't his intended final destination.

Ahmed Nadeem expressed a clear desire to reach Europe, but unlike many migrants who resort to illegal means, he emphasized that he wanted to do so through legitimate channels. He said, "I want to reach Europe, not through illegal means. I now want to have a European visa to have a better life there." His statement reflects a shift in mindset from desperation to a more calculated approach to migration. Ahmed hopes to secure a visa, recognizing that legal entry into Europe would provide him with a more stable and secure future. This reflects the aspirations of many migrants who, after facing the dangers and uncertainties of irregular migration, seek more official and lawful ways to build a better life. Ahmed's perspective highlights the desire for both safety and long-term stability, where legal migration offers not only security but also access to rights and opportunities unavailable through illegal routes.

Noor Ahmedi shared that his primary goal in life has always been to reach Europe, a desire he still holds despite the challenges he faces. He stated, "The primary goal of my life was to reach Europe. I still want to and will go when the situation turns better." Noor's ambition reflects the hopes of many migrants who see Europe as a land of opportunity, stability, and a better future. However, he also acknowledged the significant hurdles migrants encounter on their journey, including the perilous Mediterranean route. He noted, "The people here are facing so many problems in reaching Europe. They are going through Rome or Italy, but the country is not extra active to bar people from crossing the Mediterranean Sea." This observation highlights the dangerous routes migrants take to reach Europe, often risking their lives at sea. Noor's statement also touches on the complexities of migration policies, where the lack of stringent

enforcement in some areas contrasts with the grave risks involved in reaching Europe.

Najeeb expressed his strong desire to reach Germany, viewing it as the place where he could build a better future. He said, "My dream place was Germany. I still want to reach there. It has been three years since I left my home. I am still to reach Europe." Najeeb's words reflect his ongoing pursuit of a better life despite the challenges he faces. He acknowledged the difficulties of living away from home and family, stating, "Life is not good here. How would someone live a good life if he is away from his family and home?" His longing for stability and family underscores the emotional toll of migration. Despite these hardships, Najeeb remains determined to reach Germany, where he hopes to apply for legal residence. This illustrates his desire not just for a safer, more prosperous life, but also for a sense of belonging and permanence, which he believes Germany could offer.

Sarwari shared his frustration with the situation he faces in Turkey, explaining that while his initial goal was to find safety there, the conditions have become increasingly difficult for Afghans. He said, "I left the country to be in Turkey, but the situation here is very problematic for Afghans. The Turkish forces are roaming all around to apprehend Afghans and deport them." Sarwari's statement highlights the insecurity and fear that many Afghan migrants experience in Turkey, where deportation risks are high and the presence of police forces makes daily life stressful. The challenges he faces have led him to reconsider his options, as he revealed, "I now want to cross over to Europe or even reach Russia. I can't bear these hurdles." His desire to move on reflects the harsh realities of being an undocumented migrant in Turkey, where the hope for a better life has been overshadowed by constant threats of arrest and deportation.

Afghan experiences in Turkey

This section delves into the harsh experiences faced by Afghans in Turkey, particularly those who arrive through dangerous routes and difficult conditions. One such story is that of Ahmed Afghan, who traveled from Afghanistan through Iran to reach Turkey. Upon reaching the Turkish

border, he and a group of around 300 people were instructed by a smuggler to jump into a trench that the Turkish forces had dug to prevent migrants from crossing. Ahmed recalls, "It was midnight when we were asked to reach the border. When we jumped, the Turkish forces heard the voices. They responded with heavy firing and patrols in the area." The conditions were even more perilous due to the heavy rain that night. Ahmed described the experience as "like a hell," where survival instincts took over as he had to navigate the trench to protect his life. The Turkish forces, in his view, showed no concern for the migrants' safety, responding with aggression rather than compassion. Despite the terrifying encounter, Ahmed survived the night and attempted to cross again the following night. His experience underscores the extreme dangers migrants face at the Turkish border, as well as the constant struggle to find safety and security in a foreign land.

Jamil Kohkan reached Turkey through the same border area. He was among the group who reached in a convoy from Afghanistan through Quetta. He was apprehended at the crossing. "When I was apprehended by the Turkish forces, I was expecting a humane treatment. I thought they are Muslims but when they apprehended me they responded by hitting me on my face. They carried me with my shirt and left me on the floor. After that, they punched me on my face. One of the soldiers was hitting me from above if I was an object of boxing. The other hit me with their big shoes on my face and everywhere. I was near to die. He asked me to run back to Iran. I was unable to walk but still struggled to reach the destination. I was pulled to the trench and there were some people who were hidden there. They helped me cross and other people helped me reach the tent, where we had spent about 48 hours before leaving to cross the border."

Ahmed Nadeem's experience in Turkey was marked by hardship, deprivation, and constant danger. After arriving at the border, he and his group were detained in a tent for two days and nights without proper food. He recalled, "We were given only a bread to be eaten. They gave a fried chicken to us and then captured some photos. When they captured photos, they took it away and

gave the flat to another group to be captured.” The soldiers’ cruel treatment included taking food away after photographing the migrants, further deepening their sense of dehumanization. Despite being given little to eat, they were soon told to prepare for another attempt to cross the border. During this time, they faced constant gunfire from the other side. Ahmed described how some of the migrants were injured, with bullets striking their hands and feet, forcing them to retreat. Despite these dangers, Ahmed was fortunate to survive the night and, on his second attempt, successfully crossed the Turkish border. His experience highlights the brutal conditions many migrants face, including inadequate food, physical violence, and the ever-present threat of death or injury.

Asad Safiqui vividly described the brutal conditions at the Turkish border, emphasizing the extreme dangers faced by migrants attempting to cross. He said, “They were literally killing you if you tried to cross the border.” Asad’s words reflect the terrifying reality of border crossings, where migrants were subjected to life-threatening violence. Despite the peril, Asad managed to survive the ordeal, although many others were not as fortunate. He observed that several people were injured during the crossing, and some, in his belief, “might have been killed.” The situation was chaotic, with every migrant struggling to protect their own life amidst the gunfire and hazards. Asad also noted the possibility that some individuals were abducted by thieves operating in the area, further adding to the sense of vulnerability. “We did not know each other but all of us wanted to reach Turkey,” he recalled, highlighting the shared desperation among the migrants. In these perilous conditions, survival became the primary concern, overshadowing any other considerations. Asad’s testimony underscores the extreme risks faced by migrants at the border, where reaching safety in Turkey often came at a tremendous cost in terms of both physical and emotional toll.

Mohsin’s experience crossing the border into Turkey was filled with both physical hardship and betrayal. He recalled, “When we were crossing the border, I was too cold because it was a hilly area.” The difficult terrain and harsh weather conditions made the journey even more grueling.

To make matters worse, the person who had brought them to the border area demanded all of Mohsin’s money. “He compelled me to give him all my money,” Mohsin explained, reflecting the exploitative nature of the smugglers involved in these dangerous crossings. Food was also scarce, further compounding the suffering. Once they reached the border, the smuggler used fear as a tactic, telling them to hurry because Iranian forces might imprison them. “It was a trick to terrorize us and run,” Mohsin noted, revealing the manipulative and stressful environment that smugglers created to control the migrants. Despite these challenges and the smuggler’s deceit, Mohsin was fortunate to receive help from his friends, allowing him to continue his journey. They successfully crossed the border into Turkey, though not without enduring significant physical, emotional, and financial strain along the way. His story underscores the multiple layers of exploitation and hardship that migrants face, from environmental dangers to exploitation by those they rely on for passage.

Upon crossing the Turkish border, Najeeb Pashtun and his group were confronted with yet another layer of fear and hardship. He described the experience as deeply dehumanizing, stating, “When we reached and crossed the border, we had to travel on foot. There was no arrangement for us. We were not humans to them. They were treating us like we are their sheep.” The lack of basic provisions or support meant they had to navigate through rough and unfamiliar terrain with no shelter or guidance. The constant fear of deportation was a driving force in their journey. “We had to run, always run because we were in a consistent fear that Turkish forces might apprehend us and deport us,” Najeeb recalled. The stress and exhaustion from running for survival, coupled with the harsh conditions, made their journey even more grueling. Their path through the jungle only intensified their sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. Najeeb’s account illustrates not only the physical toll of the journey but the emotional strain of living in constant fear of being apprehended, deported, or worse. This grim reality reflects the broader struggles faced by migrants who are forced to endure inhumane conditions while seeking safety and a better life.

Kohkan's account of his time in Turkey paints a picture of extreme deprivation and uncertainty. He described their daily routine as living "at the brink," constantly on edge and exhausted. "We were running during night times and waiting during the day to start the journey again," he recalled, illustrating the unpredictable and dangerous nature of their migration. During the day, they were forced to wait in cramped conditions, unsure of when or how they would continue their journey. The place where they were kept was overcrowded, with hundreds of migrants packed into a vast room. There were no arrangements for proper rest or food, leaving them in a constant state of discomfort and distress. "There was no arrangement to properly sleep, neither of food," Kohkan lamented, emphasizing the neglect and lack of basic resources for the migrants. This lack of essential provisions, combined with the constant fear of being caught, compounded the mental and physical toll of their journey. Kohkan's story highlights the stark realities faced by many migrants, who, after crossing borders, find themselves in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions with no guarantees of safety or support, pushing them to endure unimaginable hardships in their quest for a better life.

Amjad Khan, a resident of Kabul, shared his disillusionment with the reality of migration, which starkly contrasted with the expectations he and his fellow migrants had when leaving Afghanistan. "The situation was not as we have imagined in Afghanistan," he said, reflecting on the severe disappointment they faced upon arriving in Turkey. Amjad explained that they had paid agents for safe passage and basic necessities, including food, but were met with betrayal and exploitation. "We paid for everything to these agents but they were not even treating us as humans," he recalled, describing how the smugglers pocketed the money without providing the promised support. Despite having paid for food, the agents failed to meet even the most basic needs, and when Amjad and others requested food, they were met with hostility. "When we asked for food, they threatened us to be given to Turkish police," he explained, revealing the harsh and manipulative behavior of the smugglers. Instead of offering help, the smugglers used fear and

intimidation as a way to control the migrants, threatening them with deportation or arrest by the Turkish police. This experience highlights the vulnerability of migrants who, despite paying for a safer journey, are often subjected to exploitation and mistreatment by those they rely on for passage.

Akbar Khan Jagozai, a resident of Qandahar, spoke about the constant fear and uncertainty that Afghan migrants experience in Turkey due to their lack of legal documentation. He explained, "We often hear the rumors that Turkish police are roaming around for Afghans without proper documentation," highlighting the widespread anxiety among migrants who live in constant fear of being apprehended by the authorities. According to Akbar, these rumors were used as a psychological tactic by the Turkish authorities to maintain control over the migrant population, keeping them in a state of heightened alert and compliance. He also mentioned reports of Afghans being subjected to physical abuse and deportation, saying, "There were some reports that Afghans have been beaten up and deported to Afghanistan." This reality added another layer of stress for migrants who, after enduring perilous journeys, faced the risk of being sent back to dangerous conditions in Afghanistan. Akbar's statement, "I never want to waste those miseries which I had to bear only to reach Turkey," underscores the emotional and physical toll of the migration process. For many, the possibility of deportation represents the potential collapse of their hopes for safety and a better life, making their difficult journey feel even more like an endless struggle.

Afghans in Turkey often find themselves trapped in harsh, exploitative conditions, primarily working as cheap labor in Turkish cities. Mohsin shared his perspective on this grim reality, stating, "Most of the Afghans are working here in my city. They are paid less than other Turkish workers." This wage disparity reflects the vulnerability of Afghan migrants, who, due to their undocumented status or lack of legal protections, are often forced to accept lower-paying jobs with poor working conditions. Mohsin highlighted the extent of this exploitation, noting that many Afghans are easy targets for unscrupulous employers. He shared a

particularly troubling example: “One of our friends was working for a person in a nearby place. When he asked the employer about the payment, he was threatened to be handed over to the police.” This incident illustrates the brutal reality many migrants face—being threatened with deportation or arrest if they assert their rights. Such practices further perpetuate a cycle of vulnerability, where Afghan workers are coerced into accepting exploitation out of fear of being sent back to Afghanistan. The situation underscores the severe hardships faced by Afghan migrants in Turkey, where their hopes of a better life are often overshadowed by systemic abuse and a lack of recourse for justice.

Jameel Afghan highlighted the harsh reality faced by Afghan migrants in Turkey, emphasizing how their vulnerability makes them prime targets for exploitation. He observed, “People in Turkey are looking for illegal immigrants or Afghan refugees because they provide efficient and cheap labor.” Afghan migrants, often working without legal documentation, are seen as a source of cheap labor for employers looking to cut costs. Jameel pointed out that this exploitation is rooted in the fact that Afghans are more vulnerable than other workers, as they have limited rights and often live in fear of deportation. Their undocumented status leaves them with little bargaining power, making them easy prey for exploitative employers. As a result, Afghan workers are subjected to long hours, low wages, and unsafe working conditions. Jameel’s statement sheds light on the intersection of vulnerability and exploitation, where Afghan migrants’ desperation for work forces them to accept conditions they would otherwise refuse. This systemic abuse not only affects their financial well-being but also undermines their sense of security and dignity. In essence, Afghan refugees in Turkey are trapped in a cycle of exploitation, as their precarious status allows employers to take advantage of their labor without accountability or legal protection.

Sarwari expressed a mixed perspective on his life in Turkey, acknowledging both the challenges and relative improvements compared to Afghanistan. He said, “Life is not good here but better than what we had in Afghanistan.” Although the conditions in Turkey were far from ideal, he felt

that they offered a sense of stability and hope that Afghanistan could not provide. Sarwari highlighted the difficult reality of low wages and limited job opportunities, explaining that “the payment is less and employment hard.” Despite these struggles, he appreciated the fact that he was employed, stating that “we are not unemployed.” For Sarwari and many others, having a steady job, even under challenging conditions, brought a sense of security. Additionally, he noted that he had enough to eat and was able to send some money back home, offering support to his family in Afghanistan. His words reflect the resilience of migrants who, despite facing hardship, find ways to sustain themselves and their loved ones.

Ahmed highlighted the contrasting situations faced by Afghan migrants in Turkey, pointing out that those who have managed to settle in cities are generally in a better position. He explained, “Those who managed to settle in cities are in a better position because they earn some money and remit some of them to Afghanistan.” These individuals have been able to establish a more stable life, working in various sectors and sending financial support back to their families. However, Ahmed also noted that the journey is far from easy, as many others face ongoing struggles. “Some people are struggling to reach Turkey and others struggle to have legal residence in Turkey,” he said, illustrating the two primary challenges Afghan migrants face. Reaching Turkey often involves perilous journeys, and once there, obtaining legal status can be a complex and uncertain process. For many, these challenges are compounded by poverty, fear of deportation, and lack of support, making their lives even more difficult.

Turkish Response

One of the first policies enacted by the Turkish government regarding Afghan immigrants was to deport them back to Afghanistan. Many of these individuals fled their homeland due to either the fear of persecution or the economic crisis exacerbated by the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021. These deportations force Afghan refugees to return to a country where they are at risk of severe hardship, with some of them

eventually repeating the same journey, traveling through Iran, to try to reach Turkey again.

Amnesty International, in a report published on August 31, 2021, sharply criticized both Iran and Turkey for using deadly force to prevent Afghans from entering their territories. The report highlighted the use of live ammunition and physical violence by Turkish security forces to deter Afghans from crossing the border. The harsh treatment faced by these refugees has sparked international condemnation. Those who manage to enter Turkey often find themselves subjected to arbitrary detention, facing forced deportation back to Afghanistan. This process leaves many Afghan deportees in a dire situation, as they face the risk of economic collapse, human rights abuses, and possible retribution under the Taliban's regime. For those who attempt the perilous journey from Afghanistan to Turkey via Iran, the situation is no less grim. Many are intercepted at various points along the way, subjected to beatings, and sometimes shot at by border forces before even reaching Turkish territory. Once in Turkey, undocumented refugees report inhumane treatment and the constant threat of deportation. The international community has strongly condemned these actions, calling for better protection and humanitarian assistance for refugees fleeing conflict and oppression. (Paimani & Noorzai, 2023).

In 2024, Turkish authorities deported 325 Afghan migrants within a two-day period, as reported by the Taliban's Refugees and Repatriations Ministry on November 10. The deportees are set to receive financial assistance from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which will provide each individual with the equivalent of 150 euros. This financial aid is intended to assist the migrants upon their return to Afghanistan, a country grappling with severe economic and humanitarian crises. The deportations come as part of Turkey's intensified efforts to curb the rising number of Afghan migrants, many of whom are undocumented. In recent months, Turkey has conducted a series of police raids, particularly in Istanbul, targeting Afghan migrants. In September alone, around 600 Afghan nationals were detained in these raids and subsequently transferred to detention centers. These actions reflect Turkey's

growing concern over the increasing number of migrants crossing its borders and its efforts to enforce immigration policies. However, the deportations and raids have sparked criticism from human rights organizations, as many of the deported individuals face grave risks upon returning to Afghanistan, where they may encounter violence, poverty, and retribution under Taliban rule (RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, 2024).

Since Kabul fall to the Taliban in mid-August 2021, deportation became the worst nightmare for undocumented Afghan migrants. Deportation is the most difficult issue as many undocumented Afghan migrants in Turkey have not had residence permits for many years, but recently the police have started to carry out identity checks in major cities due to large number of irregular migrants and irregular migrants face the challenge of freedom of movement and, if caught, transfer to deportation centers (RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, 2024). In a report by Amnesty, out of the 35 Afghans interviewed, 21 indicated that they had been tortured during their detention, prompting the rights organization to urge the EU to ensure that its funding for migration and asylum does not lead to human rights abuses. The deportation of approximately 43,000 Afghan nationals represents a 140 percent increase compared to 2021. Nearly 33,000 Afghans were deported via 178 charter flights, while more than 10,000 were sent back to Afghanistan on commercial flights (Amnesty International, 2022).

For the Turkish government, sending Afghans back may be a strategy to reduce the number of refugees. As per a 2022 estimate, Turkey accommodates the highest number of refugees globally, with around 3.9 million individuals: 3.6 million Syrians under temporary protection and approximately 320,000 others, primarily Afghans. Similar to Tajikistan, Turkey is an important transit point for Afghan migrants aiming to reach Europe, with most entering the country by crossing its borders with Iran (Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 2024).

Another approach taken by the Turkish government in managing Afghan migrants is to apprehend them and place them in camps under a "temporary protection regime." This policy is intended to manage the influx of Afghan refugees

by either facilitating their resettlement to a third country or, in some cases, deporting them back to Afghanistan. Under this regime, Afghans are held in detention facilities or camps where they are awaiting either relocation or deportation. While in these camps, migrants face uncertainty about their future, with some hoping for resettlement in a third country, while others risk being sent back to a country where they face severe risks, including persecution, poverty, and violence. The "temporary protection" status provides limited rights and benefits to the migrants, but it does not offer a permanent solution, leaving them in a state of limbo. Critics argue that this system places Afghan refugees in precarious conditions, with little support or opportunity for a stable future, and may violate international standards for refugee protection. The Turkish government's policy of holding migrants in camps has been criticized for its lack of long-term solutions, and the refugees' fate often hinges on the decisions of other countries or the possibility of deportation (Murdock, 2021).

The Turkish government has adopted a stringent policy to bar Afghan migrants from crossing its border with Iran, aiming to prevent unauthorized entry into the country. Despite these efforts, which include the construction of a three-meter-high concrete wall, the policy faces significant challenges. The government is determined to catch and detain all migrants attempting to cross into Turkey, particularly in the country's eastern regions, which are often desolate and difficult to monitor. However, the wall is not foolproof—there are always areas too steep, rocky, or inaccessible to be effectively walled off (Marion MacGregor, 2023).

To control the influx of migrants and undocumented refugees, Turkey has been constructing a massive concrete wall along its 300-kilometer eastern border with Iran. This wall is reinforced with more than 300 watchtowers equipped with advanced thermal cameras, designed to detect and monitor anyone attempting to cross into Turkey illegally. The Turkish government justifies the wall as not only a measure to protect its own borders but also as a contribution to European security. Since many migrants view Europe as their ultimate destination,

Turkey argues that curbing their movement will prevent them from taking dangerous and often deadly routes to the European Union (EU) (RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, 2022).

The European Union has supported Turkey's efforts by providing financial assistance, including funding for the construction of the border wall and for six "removal centers" where detained migrants, including Afghans, are held. The EU has been particularly focused on reducing the number of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea in perilous conditions, and in 2015, it significantly increased financial aid to Turkey to help with its growing refugee crisis. This funding aims to discourage dangerous sea crossings and provide better conditions for migrants within Turkey. The European Commission, in its May 2022 report, acknowledged the ongoing pressure along the Turkish-Iranian border due to the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. The report also praised Turkey for its substantial efforts to host over 4 million refugees and migrants, highlighting the challenges Turkey faces as it continues to address the needs of such a large population. Despite these challenges, Turkey remains a crucial part of the EU's strategy for managing migration flows in the region (ZIA WEISE, 2024). Furthermore, determined migrants often find ways to circumvent these barriers, either by jumping over, digging underneath, or bribing truck drivers to help them sneak past border controls. These methods highlight the limitations of the physical infrastructure in preventing migration. In response to the surge in Afghan refugees following the Taliban's return to power in Kabul in August 2021, Turkey reinforced security along its border, deploying more personnel and resources to catch migrants as they entered the country. Authorities have become increasingly adept at intercepting most migrants soon after they cross the border or while they are en route to major cities like Istanbul, from where they often try to reach the western borders of Turkey. Despite these efforts, the challenge of controlling migration persists, as the human drive to escape conflict and hardship often outweighs the barriers designed to stop it (Clark, 2022).

Conclusion

This article examined the experiences of Afghan migrants in Turkey, focusing on the reasons that led to their migration, their journey, and how the Turkish government has responded to their presence, particularly after the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The main factors driving Afghans to leave their homeland are economic hardships and security concerns. On one side, Afghanistan is facing severe economic challenges, high unemployment rates, and a notable absence of opportunities, prompting many to search for better futures elsewhere. Conversely, the threat of persecution, violence, and terrorism under Taliban governance compels numerous Afghans to escape in pursuit of safety. The article points out that these migrants frequently attempt to reach Turkey via Iran, where they endure harsh conditions. The journey itself is filled with peril and hardship; many migrants find themselves vulnerable to exploitation, human trafficking, and abuse from smugglers, as well as the risk of detention or deportation by Iranian authorities. Despite these difficulties, Turkey continues to be a primary destination for Afghan migrants, mainly because it acts as a gateway to Europe or serves as a relatively safer alternative compared to Afghanistan.

Upon arrival in Turkey, Afghan migrants encounter various obstacles. They often face an unwelcoming environment characterized by limited job opportunities, inadequate housing, and rampant discrimination. Many Afghans are compelled to live in cramped and deteriorating conditions, often without any legal protections, as they typically hold irregular or undocumented status. Their experiences in Turkey are frequently marked by uncertainty since they strive to navigate a convoluted bureaucratic system while living under the persistent threat of deportation. The article also discusses how the Turkish government has addressed the increasing number of Afghan migrants. Having already accommodated a considerable number of Syrian refugees, Turkey has implemented various policies aimed at Afghan migrants, primarily concentrating on border management and deportation. The approach of the Turkish government can be viewed through two principal

strategies: one focuses on preventing migrants at the Iranian border from entering Turkey, often through enhanced border surveillance and physical barriers. The other involves deporting Afghans who have already entered the country, sending them back to Afghanistan despite the ongoing instability and danger there. This deportation policy has ignited debates both domestically and internationally, with critics contending that returning migrants to Afghanistan endangers their lives given the precarious political and security landscape.

In conclusion, the article underscores the complex nature of Afghan migration to Turkey, influenced by a mix of economic distress, security anxieties, and the harsh realities of the passage through Iran. While Turkey's approach prioritizes border management and controlling the influx of illegal migration, it raises significant ethical and humanitarian concerns regarding the treatment of vulnerable groups. The struggles faced by the migrants reflect the larger challenges confronting many nations in the region as they deal with the intricate issues of migration, border security, and international responsibility amid a worsening refugee crisis.

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