

N° 71

The “eighth phase” of Afghan displacement: Situating the top ten issues for policymakers

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This publication has been issued without formal editing by IOM.

Required citation: Iqbal M. and M. McAuliffe, 2022. *The “eighth phase” of Afghan displacement: Situating the top ten issues for policymakers*. Migration Research Series, N° 71. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva.

ISBN 978-92-9268-355-9 (PDF)

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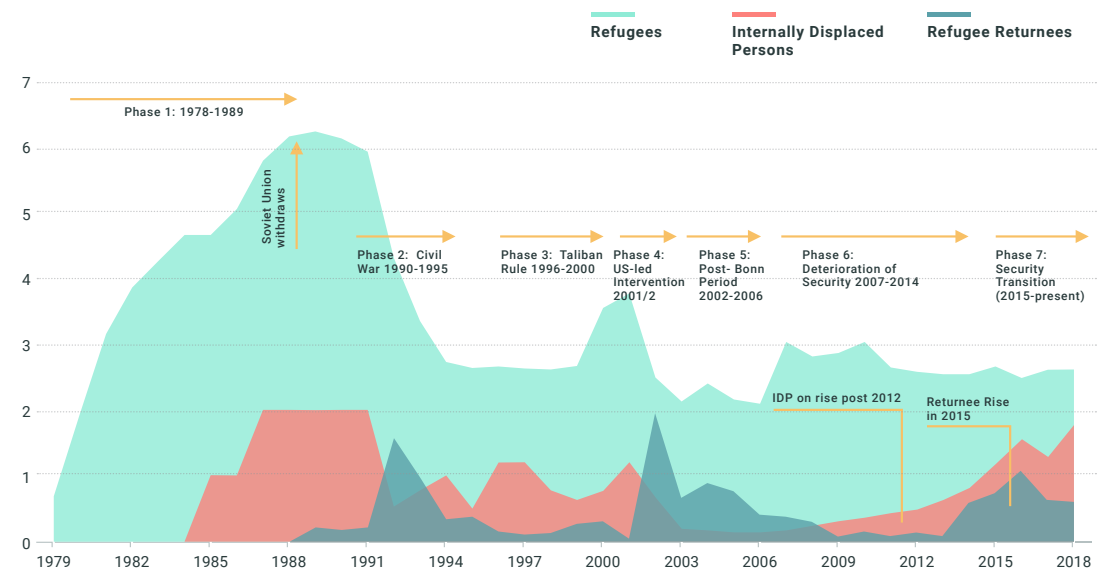
Introduction

The grim situation facing Afghans living in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan as well as further afield is a direct result of recent (geo)political events, including the withdrawal of coalition forces in August 2021, the swift fall of the Afghan Government and the equally swift Taliban takeover. However, the longer-term human (in)security, development, economic and demographic contexts underpin decades of displacement and migration of Afghans within the immediate region of West Asia as well as further afield to countries such as Germany, the United States of America, Australia, Sweden, the Netherlands and Canada. It should also be acknowledged that with recent events in Ukraine, and related mass displacement within and from the country, there is a risk that Afghanistan will once again become “forgotten” as policymakers grapple with the largest displacement in and through Europe since the Second World War. This paper, therefore, situates the challenges and urgency of Afghan displacement for policymakers in an era of increasingly unstable global order.

The rich body of research and analysis on Afghan migration and displacement informs current discussions and debates, highlighting both the extraordinary resilience of the Afghan people and the escalating humanitarian-displacement crisis. It is difficult to overstate either of these key aspects. While early research produced ethnographic accounts of the Afghan people and development of Afghan society (Bellew, 1880; Dupree, 1956), the onset of war in the country in the 1970s has meant that Afghanistan has become strongly connected to human displacement. While both internal and cross-border displacement has been prevalent, refugee movements into neighbouring countries has been the key focus of much of the research. Afghanistan was the top origin country of refugees in the world between 1981 and 2013, eclipsed only by the Syrian Arab Republic from 2014 (IOM, 2021a; UNHCR, 2015).

Afghan displacement (within and from the country) has been described as comprising seven “phases” between 1979 and 2018, stretching across decades of instability (Schmeidl, 2019; see Figure 1). The most recent escalation in displacement related to the allied troop withdrawal and Taliban takeover unfortunately adds an “eighth phase”. Recent history and current geopolitical, security and economic contexts indicate that this new phase will not be a short one, but one that is likely to stretch into future years.

Figure 1. Seven phases of displacement in and from Afghanistan, 1979 to 2018



Source: Schmeidl, 2019.

Given the long-term conflict and instability within Afghanistan, and notwithstanding significant humanitarian and development assistance, some researchers argue that these decades of conflict resulted in an open war economy in which Afghans had to adapt their livelihood strategies in order to survive, including specific forms of international movement spanning the displacement-migration spectrum (Monsutti, 2005; Rubin, 2000). Mobility strategies involving seasonal or regular movements for income-generation, health services and pilgrimage within Afghanistan as well as to and from its closest neighbours enabled communities to better manage severe instability and enhance their resilience to the impacts of war (Monsutti, 2005). However, the manifestations of these mobilities have been strongly bound in social norms, such as related to gender, resulting in particularly masculinized migration and mobility often involving unsafe routes and considerable vulnerability (McAuliffe, 2017; Monsutti, 2007).

It is within the context of a robust research literature on Afghan displacement and migration that this paper outlines the ten most critical issues facing policymakers in seeking solutions to the current or new “eighth phase” of Afghan displacement. While acknowledging the crisis is considerably larger than displacement and migration aspects, this paper draws upon a range of evidence to situate these key aspects within the broader crisis and outlines the implications for possible future displacement trajectories. The paper is organized in three sections with the next section outlining briefly the recent geopolitical events that has triggered this crisis. The paper then goes on to outline the top ten critical issues before offering some concluding remarks and policy implications.

Recent developments in Afghanistan

The Taliban military takeover of Afghanistan and establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) have caused major shifts in political and economic paradigms. The failure of the Doha peace process heralds serious adverse consequences for Afghanistan. IEA remains unrecognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and faces significant sanctions, which adds further to the significant fragility and instability of the country. IEA is also barred from representing Afghanistan in the United Nations system, which for now, comprise appointees under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan prior to August 15 (United Nations, 2021a). The international community and Afghan people demand an inclusive government, removal of limitation on women rights and true implementation of amnesty for every Afghan regardless of their current or previous associations.

This dramatic shift in the political and economic landscape of Afghanistan has set in motion new dynamics for population displacement. Afghanistan is now recognized as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis with millions of people facing immediate risk of hunger and famine (Ferguson, 2022). The highly aid-dependent Afghan economy has collapsed leading to job losses across all sectors. The Afghan Government is unable to pay the salaries of public servants previously funded through aid. In addition, Afghanistan has suffered two droughts in the last five years and political/human insecurity has increased under the Taliban. The combination of these factors has exacerbated the drivers for population movements both within the country and across its borders.

Approximately 5.5 million people had been displaced internally in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover, rising to 6.5 million for both internal and cross border displacement (IOM 2021b; ACAPS, 2021). In 2021 alone, over 660,000 people were newly displaced internally during the year due to conflict and disaster events. Afghans were the leading group of asylum seekers in Europe in the third quarter of 2021 with 28,000 first time applications (Eurostat, 2021). Over a million people have left Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover with 4,000 to 5,000 leaving the country to the Islamic Republic of Iran every day (Goldbaum et al., 2022; NRC, 2021). This does not include crossings from eastern Afghanistan to Pakistan (Siddique, 2021). The scale of further displacement will depend on the Taliban’s ability to maintain peace and order as well as the outcome of its negotiations with the international community for recognition, the removal of sanctions and the resumption of aid flows.

The top ten issues of the current Afghan displacement and migration crisis

Issue 1 – One of the world’s worst humanitarian crises

Afghanistan is recognized as one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises by the World Food Programme with 23 million people facing acute food insecurity (IPC, 2021; WFP, 2021). Recent events in Ukraine causing mass displacement within and from that country are now on par with that of Afghanistan, with the related disruption of Ukraine’s long-term status as a leading global provider of food (such as wheat and other grains) further intensifying food insecurity around the world, including in Afghanistan. Food insecurity is particularly acute and severe for those who have been displaced internally within Afghanistan as most are also in need of shelter, and many lost everything before moving internally.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports that Afghans are facing universal poverty (97% of the population) by mid-2023 (UNDP, 2021). The crisis is driven by a combination of aid cuts, effects of COVID-19 and repeated droughts (Clark, 2021). The livelihood crisis is the key driver of mass population displacement to regional countries and beyond, creating conditions that could result in a larger, regional migration and displacement crisis.

The Afghan economy, which is highly dependent on foreign development-related assistance and allied troop expenditure, experienced a significant downturn due to a cessation of both funding streams. International donors, particularly the United States and the European Union (and related countries), froze their assistance to the Afghan Government as well as ceased funding most of the development programmes. Afghan banking and financial systems face a severe liquidity crisis with limits on withdrawal from banks and money transfer in place. The United States has so far refused to release assets of the Afghan Central Bank, leaving Government, private banks and the economy in short supply of local and foreign currency (Mohsin, 2021).

Key donors pledged 1 billion dollars toward humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan as part of the September 2021 special event of the G20 economies (United Nations, 2021b). In addition, the European Union has pledged 1 billion euros for Afghanistan in response to the humanitarian and displacement crisis (European Commission, 2021a). However, sanctions in place against Afghanistan and the Taliban create barriers to aid flows to Afghanistan. The Norwegian Refugee Council reported that western government sanctions on Afghanistan were making it impossible for humanitarian organizations to transfer and withdraw funding (NRC, 2022). It also found that there was no clear guidance for international banks on what transactions were permissible under sanctions, making it difficult for non-governmental organizations to move funds into the country. The United States treasury has recently issued licenses and explanation on the sanction on Afghanistan mainly to ease aid flows to the country (US Department of the Treasury, 2022a and 2022b).

To put the humanitarian crisis in perspective, the International Rescue Committee has concluded that if left unaddressed, the current humanitarian crisis could lead to more deaths in Afghanistan than over 20 years of war (IRC, 2022).

Issue 2 – The fear of Taliban retribution

An environment of fear has taken over Afghanistan, particularly for people who worked for the Afghan Government and international troops, and are now at risk of severe Taliban retribution. Human rights organizations have reported widespread incidents of torture, summary execution, harassment and forced displacement of people from their land (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). The hard-line positions of the Taliban on many issues, particularly women’s rights, are contributing factors to many people fearing for their lives. Severe restrictions are in place for women and girls, limiting their participation in education, work and social/political life (McAuliffe and Iqbal, 2022). Women protesting for their rights have been

threatened and beaten in many cities across Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2022a, 2022b). There have also been cases involving the disappearance of women activists and alleged Taliban kidnapping (DW, 2022). Women's rights are among the most at risk given the Taliban's hard-line stance against female participation in activities outside their homes (Barr, 2021).

This environment of fear and exclusion is forcing many Afghans to leave their country for protection and better lives elsewhere. At the same time, following the historical evacuation of foreigners and Afghans at risk, many countries globally have opened regular migration options to thousands of Afghans. Most recently, the European Union announced that up to 40,000 Afghans will be resettled in Europe (Al Jazeera, 2021a). Similar pledges were made by the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. However, this represents only a small fraction of those in need of resettlement.

Issue 3 – The rise of violent extremism

Recent attacks (since August 2021) by Islamic State Province Khorasan (IS-K) in Afghanistan have raised concerns that terrorism continues despite the Taliban's return to power. The Taliban and IS-K remain irreconcilable enemies with sustained military hostilities. IS-K subscribes to Jihadi Salafism and considers the Hanafi Sunni Islam (followed by a majority of the Taliban) as severely deficient (Mir, 2021).

The group has undertaken hundreds of mass causality terrorist attacks against civilian and military targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan (CSIS, 2018). Since August 2021, IS-K has carried out attacks in Kabul, Nangarhar, Kunduz and Kandahar targeting Afghan civilian, minority groups and the Taliban. The attacks in Kunduz and Kandahar targeted civilians in Shia mosques, killing and wounding dozens of people.

The rise of the group carries significant risks of starting a new wave of long-term violent extremism, which can pave the way for the rise of Al-Qaeda and underpin further displacement. In addition, IS-K in Afghanistan could grow to become a more significant threat to countries in the region as well as beyond, including the United States and countries in Europe.

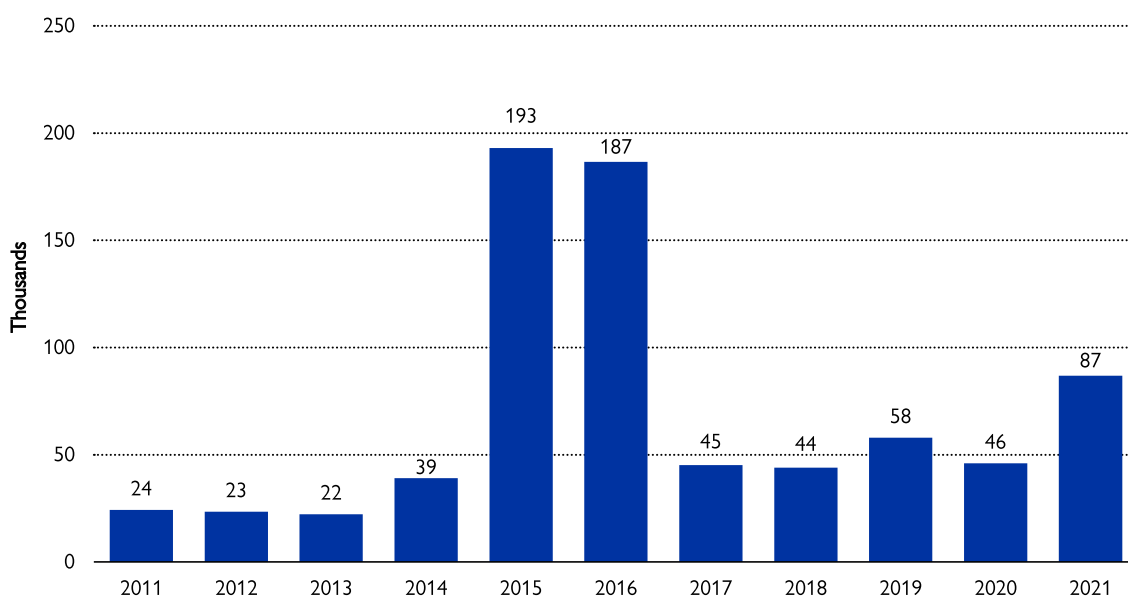
Issue 4 – From “anticipatory” to large-scale displacement: An exodus is underway

People are leaving Afghanistan in large numbers, a process that re-started in earnest with the signing of the US-Taliban peace agreement in 2019. The agreement set an 18-month timeline for a full withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan. The uncertainty stemming from the deals meant that those who could leave via regular migration pathways – or “anticipatory” displacement (Kunz, 1973) – did so well before the end-date withdrawal. Many who were able to depart are those with the qualifications, skills and experience that Afghanistan desperately needs to ensure long-term human and economic development.

The exodus accelerated with the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban and the evacuation of thousands of Afghans by the US-led international coalition. A major wave of movement is also underway with many thousands of people crossing borders to Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran in search of work and safety (NRC, 2021). Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran are already hosting millions of Afghans, some of them for over three decades, and the international community's recognition and support of host communities is an important part of the response of Afghans but also of the countries affected by cross-border displacement. In addition, Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Türkiye have all strengthened their borders to avoid large influxes of Afghans leaving the country, and potentially undertaking transit migration to other countries (Sharma et al., 2021).

A critical question for many countries beyond the region, particularly European countries, is whether the current crisis in Afghanistan could lead to a large-scale migration crisis similar to the 2015–2016 mass movements to and through Europe of mainly Syrian refugees that had been displaced to Türkiye. Despite significant barriers to irregular movement of people across many countries, Afghans are still arriving in European countries by taking long, perilous and dangerous journeys (Gross and Wright, 2021; MacGregor, 2021; OHagan, 2021). In 2020, around 46,000 first asylum applications were made by Afghans in European countries (Eurostat, 2021; see Figure 2).

Figure 2. First time asylum application by Afghans in Europe



Source: Eurostat, 2021.

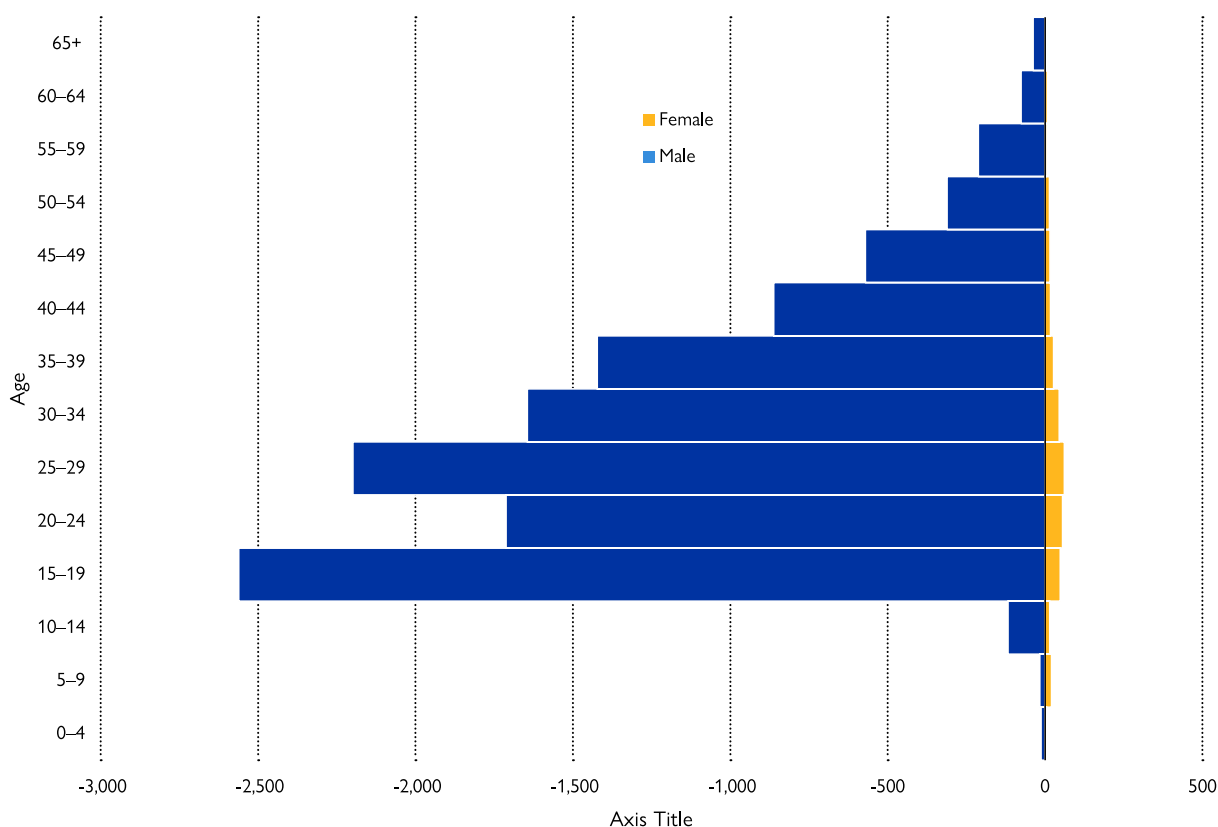
Historically, the primary reason for Afghans seeking safety and undertaking either regular or irregular international migration has been protracted conflict and violence (Akseer et al., 2019; Bauder et al., 2020; McAuliffe, 2017). However, migration is rarely driven by a single factor, often involving a range of issues. Migration from Afghanistan is closely connected to conditions at home, but is also affected by factors in host, transit and destination countries (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi, 2016; Jayasuriya and McAuliffe, 2017; McAuliffe, 2017). Decision-making of Afghans is complex and multifaceted, taking into account long-term goals for future generations as well as more pragmatic realities concerning feasibility, cost and risk (Pickering et al., 2015). The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has exacerbated push factors for a large part of the Afghan population, particularly women, ethnic minority groups, as well as those with ties to the previous government and international troops. Even prior to the Taliban takeover, the desire for migration out of Afghanistan was very high, with a gallop poll showing that 41 per cent of Afghans want to leave the country, with women expressing the desire at a significantly higher rate (47% of women compare to 35% of men) (Ray, 2019).

Issue 5 – Afghan migration is highly gendered

Migration is an important source of social and economic upward mobility in Afghanistan, and it features a high level of gender imbalance in favour of men and boys that is deeply connected to gender roles and social norms. Migration from Afghanistan to other neighbouring countries has become a masculine “rite of passage” for some communities (Monsutti, 2007) and this practice has extended beyond the immediate region to also feature in migration journeys to Europe, South-East Asia and Australia (McAuliffe, 2017). The highly uneven gender patterns in irregular

migration from Afghanistan are rooted in sociocultural and economic inequalities (see Figure 3). Most families and communities would invest in men and particularly in youth to migrate, start working and send back money (McAuliffe, 2017). They could then facilitate the migration of families including the women to join later mostly through family reunion and regular pathways. However, for many women who might be at severe risk of rights violation, social and structural discrimination and violence the opportunities to escape are limited. Some have observed, for example, that the historic evacuation of Afghans after the fall of Kabul was disproportionately used by men as an opportunity to leave the country (Sohege, 2021).

Figure 3. Afghan Hazara maritime asylum seeker population (2008–2013), by age group and sex



Source: McAuliffe, 2017.

Unaccompanied women and girls constitute a small proportion of the migration flows from Afghanistan (Hosseini and Punzi, 2021; IOM, 2019; McAuliffe, 2017). Women and girls are three times more likely to undertake the safer regular migration through family reunion and third-country resettlement compared to irregular migration (McAuliffe, 2017). First time asylum application statistics shows that an average of 25 per cent of the new applications were by females (Eurostat, 2021).

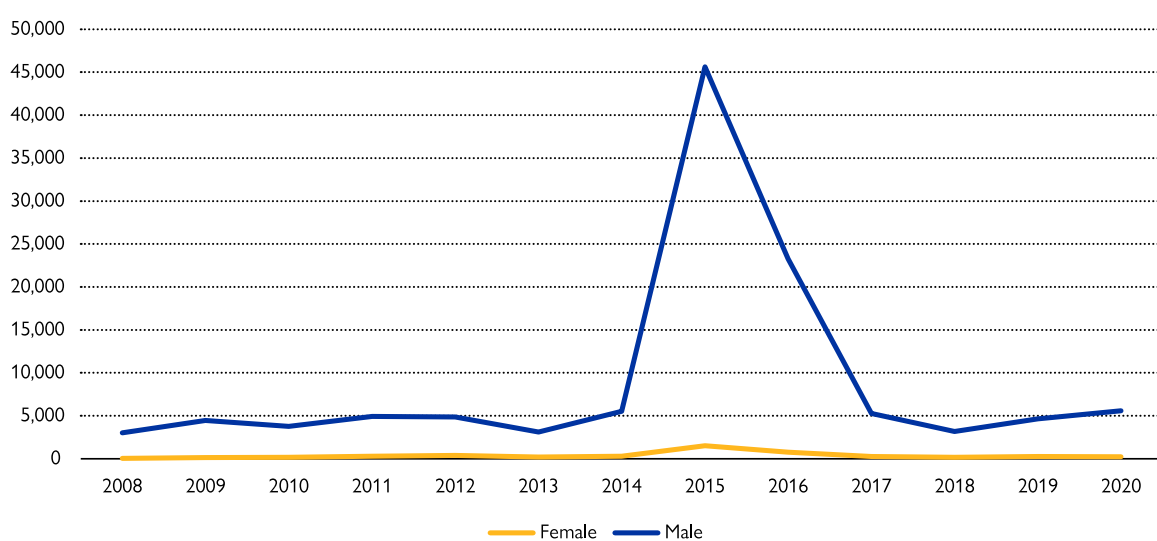
Women face many barriers in undertaking unaccompanied irregular migration. Cultural norms prohibit women and girls from travelling alone and this becomes even a greater issue when the journey involves high levels of risk. Financial barriers include both access to sufficient funds and higher costs of journeys, which lock women out of seeking safety through migration. Women are more likely to use safer and more expensive travel arrangements including the use of more professional agents, preference for air travel and using different routes than men (Donini et al., 2016; Powell et al., 2018). Not only does data indicate that a significant minority are fleeing from forced marriage or domestic violence, but they are subject to risks along the route. Most women experience some form of sexual and gender-based violence during the migration route (Powell et al., 2018). Most also do not have any access to assistance. Those who did get assistance received the support primarily from smugglers (ibid.).

Before the Taliban takeover, insecurity was the leading cause for women leaving Afghanistan at 42 per cent of women, significantly higher than men (ibid.). Lack of rights, personal and family reasons, economic factors and lack of social services were among the other reasons including fleeing from a forced marriage or domestic violence (Çakir, 2020; Powell et al., 2018). The Taliban has reinstated many discriminatory policies against women including limitations on women’s access to education and work, and to their active presence in social, economic and political spheres.

Issue 6 – Unaccompanied minors

Irregular migration from Afghanistan is dominated by unaccompanied minors, the absolute majority of whom are boys (Donini et al., 2016; Eurostat, 2021; Lonning, 2020; McAuliffe, 2017). In 2015, a quarter of Afghan asylum seekers were unaccompanied minors increasing to 40 per cent in 2016 (Lonning, 2020). Minors under the age of 18 have access to a wider set of rights in most destination countries compared with older cohorts of asylum seekers. Three quarters of all the asylum applications by Afghan unaccompanied minors are granted some category of international protection status (UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM, 2020). Afghan unaccompanied minors account for half of all the unaccompanied minor asylum applicants in Europe (EUAA, 2022). Figure 4 shows trend in Afghan unaccompanied asylum application in Europe from 2008 to 2020. Quarterly analysis by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) shows that asylum applications by Afghan minors more than doubled between May 2021 and October 2021 (ibid.).

Figure 4. Afghan unaccompanied minors asylum applications in Europe



Source: Eurostat, 2022.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the economic collapse have created deeply uncertain situations for the population in general, and for young people in particular. In addition, considering Afghanistan’s population is extremely young, the outflow of unaccompanied minors will continue to be a significant trend in the years to come. Lack of employment and meaningful opportunities in Afghanistan are likely to drive the younger generation to migrate to neighbouring countries and Europe. However, Afghans are facing more barriers to entering neighbouring transit countries (MacGregor, 2021). While delineation of age groups exists in most destination countries, minors in Afghanistan are much more likely to take on the responsibilities of adulthood at a much earlier age, including marriage and parenthood before 18 years of age. This means that many unaccompanied minors, despite their young age, leave spouses and children behind in Afghanistan (McAuliffe, 2017).

Issue 7 – Disrupted international remittance flows to Afghanistan

Migration has become an integrated part of broader household and community strategies to diversify income sources in Afghanistan, just as it has in many developing countries around the world. Families and communities pool resources to send those with the greatest potential to make the journey safely in order to find work and transfer remittances back home (McAuliffe, 2017; Savage and Harvey, 2007). The 2016–2017 Afghanistan Living Standard Survey estimates show that one in ten households receive remittances with an annual total inflow of USD 800 million (ALCS, 2018).

Remittances have a wide range of impacts on household finances, including reducing the likelihood of poverty, improving nutrition, providing better education outcomes and, importantly, provide higher resilience in the face of income shocks (Savage and Harvey, 2007). In addition, remittances also play a critical role in stimulating further migration particularly as the country undergoes a severe economic crisis and uncertainty. This makes migration an attractive livelihood strategy for young people as well as households and communities. Younger people replace the aspiration for attaining education and work with that of migration (Zewdu, 2018).

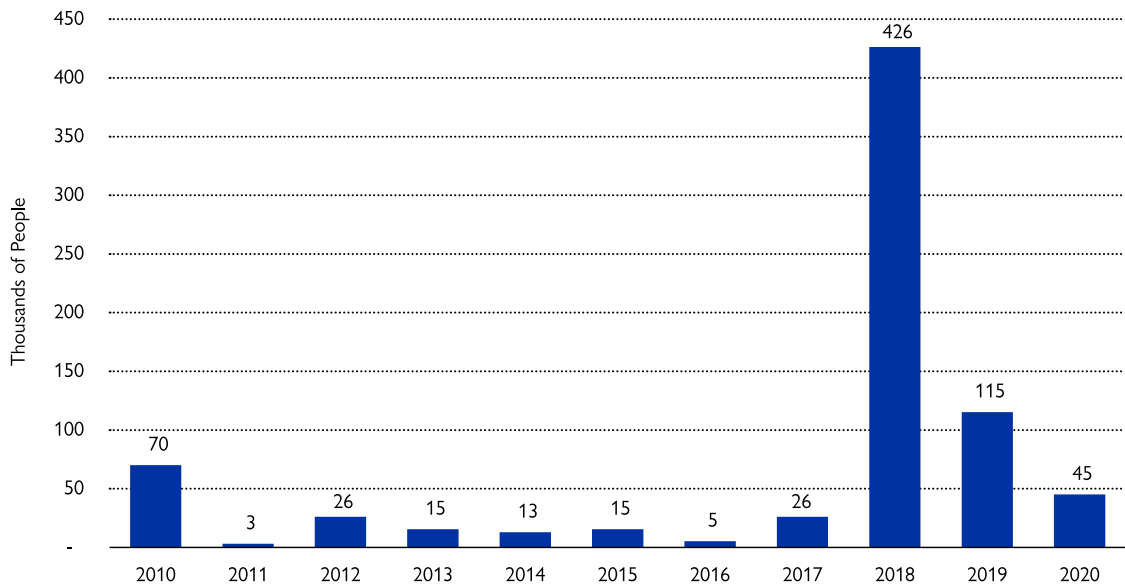
Remittance flows were disrupted right after the Taliban takeover of Kabul considering all formal financial transactions were sanctioned. Despite the availability of the informal Hawala system, the sanction on remittance transactions still had a strong negative impact on flows to Afghanistan. Western Union and MoneyGram, two of the largest global remittance providers, suspended their services as the Taliban moved to capture Kabul in August 2021, causing disruption in the flow of remittances to Afghanistan (Al Jazeera, 2021b). Therefore, the United States issued special licenses to allow remittances flow to Afghanistan (Psaedakis and Landay, 2021; US Department of the Treasury, 2021). Relaxing sanctions on remittance inflows were mainly to help address the humanitarian and economic crisis underway after the Taliban takeover of Kabul.

Issue 8 – Climate change and vulnerability

Afghanistan is among the most vulnerable countries to the adverse effects of climate change. Significant effects of climate change have already been observed and future forecasts show a grim outlook (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2021; UNEP, 2015). The country has experienced significant warming, changes in precipitation and an increase in prevalence of natural disasters (Arvin, 2021). The EM-DAT database of natural disasters shows that Afghanistan experienced six years of drought in the last two decades (EM-DAT, 2021). Comparatively, in the three decades before 2000, only two years of drought were recorded. Parts of Afghanistan fall under the definition of a climate change hotspot or areas where strong physical and ecological effects of climate change coexist with large number of vulnerable population (De Souza et al., 2015). Vulnerability in this context means that the majority of the population who depend on their environment for food and income are highly susceptible to changes in rainfall and temperature.

The rising incidents of flooding and recurring droughts in Afghanistan are an important cause of population displacements. Since 1980, natural disasters have affected 9 million people causing over 20,000 fatalities in Afghanistan (Spink, 2020). Between 2010 and 2020, over 785,000 people in Afghanistan were displaced by natural disasters with 97 per cent due to drought and floods (IDMC, 2022). The drought in 2018, displaced almost half a million people and many suffered economic hardship, food insecurity and rising poverty (ibid.).

Figure 5. Annual population displacement due to disasters



Source: IDMC, 2022.

While evidence on the impact of climate change on population displacement are mixed with varied effects across different contexts, extreme climate change events in the context of protracted armed conflict and long history of migration are important factors behind mass population movements. Climate change could also exacerbate the ongoing conflict in countries like Afghanistan even if it is not the primary cause. Resource scarcity, particularly distribution of and access to water, food and arable land, could deepen group grievances (Hsiang et al., 2013). Resource scarcity is exacerbated in Afghanistan by rapid population growth. Population in Afghanistan increased from 22 to 39 million in the past 20 years (World Bank, 2022). In addition, effects of climate change could significantly weaken governance capacities be it formal or informal (Gleditsch, 2012). Therefore, impacts of climate change could lead to conflict, which in turn exacerbate population displacement. However, the main driver of population displacement still remains armed conflict and associated generalized violence and disorder.

Issue 9 – Prevention programming – stabilization

A large array of humanitarian and development programmes were undertaken in Afghanistan aimed at improving reintegration of returnees and reducing the need for irregular migration over the past two decades. More recently, the European Union released an action plan in response to events in Afghanistan with a strong focus on addressing concerns about migration from origin and transit countries (European Commission, 2021b). The action plan provides a comprehensive way forward for the European Union's engagement in Afghanistan including addressing protection needs, the provision of humanitarian aid, support for Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries and a whole-of-route approach. The main aim of these programmes both historically and contemporaneously is to stabilize migration by addressing the root causes. Security and uncertain economic conditions are assumed to be the leading root causes of migration in Afghanistan. Root Cause Programming (ARC) is designed to address the key underlying drivers of migration and assumes that such improvements could reduce aspiration for irregular migration (Gent, 2002). Surveys of potential migrants highlighted that better job opportunities (80%), improved security (64%) and an end to conflict and violence (62%) could change respondents' migration intentions (IOM, 2019).

Examples of such programmes implemented in Afghanistan are abundant in the past two decades. Rapid impact programmes such as cash for work implemented to create jobs for returnees and build small scale infrastructure to improve agriculture outputs and market connectivity. The World Bank, the European Union, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (more commonly known as GIZ) and other donor funded programmes to create jobs and support entrepreneurship, improve livelihood and address return and resettlement needs.

Prevention programming is critical in the context of mass population displacement such as the one underway in Afghanistan. The donor community can provide humanitarian assistance to stabilize a highly volatile security and economic situation while also placing emphasis on the IEA's need to provide health and education services to the Afghan population. This could also encourage some of the internally displaced people to return home as the war and generalized violence declines.

ARC programming also draws strong criticism in the migration literature. One main such criticism of stabilization and ARC programming involves the assumption that stable and economically viable societies are sedentary. However, migration is a common historical phenomenon, and often more common in stable, middle and high income countries than it is in fragile and conflict affected countries (Malkki, 1995; Gent, 2002). Further, Michael Clemens (2014) indicates that emigration generally rises with economic development for low-income countries, such as Afghanistan, and it is only after countries reach middle-upper income levels that migration reduces.

Issue 10 – Analysing and expanding data and information on Afghanistan

In recent years many initiatives have been designed to collect regular and detailed data on migration in Afghanistan. A number of United Nations agencies including IOM and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees maintain data on internal and international population displacement. In addition, Eurostat, the Mixed Migration Centre and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre maintain annual data on specific aspects of population displacement. The data collected by these organizations include:

- (a) Statistics on internal population displacement disaggregated by conflict and disasters;
- (b) Statistics related to border crossings;
- (c) Quantitative data on intentions to migrate within and beyond Afghanistan;
- (d) Quantitative data on rights violations experienced by migrants;
- (e) Qualitative data on movements and smugglers;
- (f) Social media monitoring (such as for migrants' attitudes, experiences, migration routes and travel arrangements).

While significant amounts of data are being collected, there can be important methodological shortcomings in gathering the data, reducing its utility for analysis. For example, most intention measurement surveys are not representative of the underlying population and lack data from conflict-affected areas. Various important disaggregation of data, such as by gender, are not possible with much of the information regularly collected.

In addition, little analysis of the data on the role of technology in Afghan migration is available. Real-time social media monitoring could provide policy-relevant insights. For example, smart phones are suggested to increase migrants' mobility by providing more information and strengthening networks (Zijlstra and van Liempt, 2017). However, access to such data and the methods and capacity of undertaking large scale analysis are highly limited both in the context of Afghanistan and other high outflow countries.

In the case of Afghanistan, while data availability has improved, the depth of analysis has lagged. For instance, most of the analysis are undertaken without rigorous peer review processes. Moreover, in a majority of the cases descriptive analysis are presented without adequate statistical testing and with little use of theory-driven quantitative models. Such limitations could have policy implications considering the reliance on such results.

Conclusion

Without any doubt, we can say that Afghanistan is currently experiencing its “eighth phase” of displacement in just over four decades, with millions of people having been displaced within and from the country in recent months. The scale and complexity of this latest phase risk being subsumed within the much larger crisis enveloping the country. One that encompasses broader political/governance, economic, and security aspects that are both profound and devastating.

Further, the recent events in Ukraine risk attention being drawn away from the situation in Afghanistan and the region (including in host countries), with potentially life-threatening consequences for millions of Afghans struggling to survive. All this while the country is again up-ended by conflict while also facing environmental and climate-change effects that are on track to intensify displacement drivers and exacerbate food insecurity for millions of Afghans.

In this short paper, we have sought to highlight the top ten issues for policymakers on the current Afghan humanitarian-displacement crisis, however, it is also important to acknowledge that the longer-term consequences involving the departure of many qualified and skilled Afghans signals dire consequences for economic and human development.

While acknowledging that there are many more than these ten issues, focusing on these priorities situated within the recent decades of Afghan migration and displacement, will hopefully assist policymakers in the international community respond effectively to the “perfect storm” of dire circumstances that are placing millions of lives at risk:

- 1) Unfolding humanitarian crisis
- 2) Taliban retribution
- 3) Increased violent extremism
- 4) Large-scale exodus
- 5) Gendered migration
- 6) Unaccompanied minors
- 7) International remittance flow disruption
- 8) Climate change
- 9) Stabilization programming
- 10) Data collection and analysis

Whether the international community can urgently facilitate action across these critical domains to prevent a large-scale humanitarian catastrophe depends in part on ongoing negotiations with the Taliban as well as on the extent of the commitment of the international community to respond to those in need. The Ukraine crisis, along with humanitarian crises situations in multiple locations around the world, is placing extreme pressure on the international community at a time when the global order and multilateralism itself is being severely tested. All the while, and yet again, the extraordinary resilience of the Afghan people is also being put to test.

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