Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs
BROWN UNIVERSITY

COSTS OF WAR

Return to Afghanistan: Re-Migration and the Failed Reintegration of Millions of Afghans

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Introduction

The 2001 United States-led intervention in Afghanistan shifted the country from Taliban rule to an era of war and occupation, during which foreign governments, including the U.S., its allies, and international governing bodies such as the United Nations, seemingly focused on reconstruction and nation-building. This was, as we now know, a parenthesis that lasted two decades and a period during which conflict and insecurity continued. From the onset, the return of Afghan nationals – who had fled for protection abroad – became an integral part of the U.S.-led state-building project. Afghans returning home became a national symbol of people 'voting with their feet' in favor of international intervention and the new Afghan administration under President Hamid Karzai. But what awaited those who returned ended up being drastically different from their expectations.

This paper reflects on the human cost of war through the prism of the return and failed reintegration of Afghan nationals between 2001-2021. Today, as governments in the region such as Pakistan force unregistered migrants to return to Afghanistan, it is essential to understand the repercussions of such policies. This paper calls for urgent international attention to the non-viability of foreign governments' returning or considering returning Afghan migrants to Afghanistan under the current Taliban regime. It also highlights the need for funding to support Afghans' mobility, and for funding to meet the basic human needs of Afghans in the country.

Many of the Afghan migrants who returned in the years of U.S.-led war had spent a protracted period in exile. Some had children born overseas who returned with them. Their return was often not to a welcoming "home," for Afghan returnees experienced stigma, marginalization, and a range of multi-dimensional challenges, from economic to social and mental health challenges. Afghans' migration experiences and their lack of

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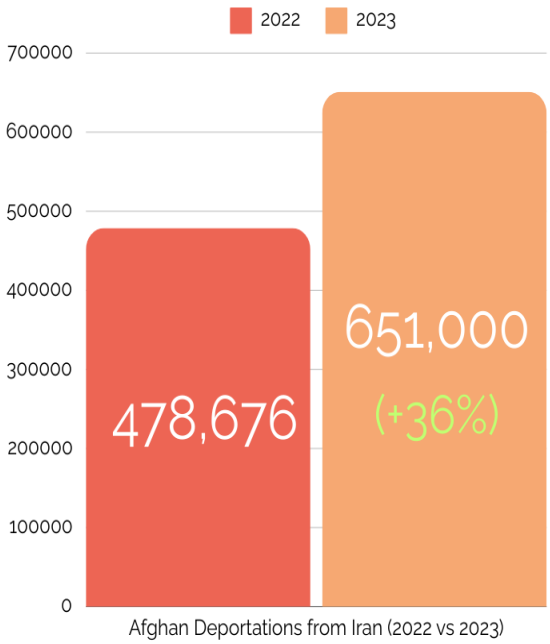
access to necessary resources, such as identification papers, shelter, and education, weakened their ability to reintegrate and led to a decline in social cohesion. Many returnees became internally-displaced people.

Under the current Taliban regime, forced returns to Afghanistan continue, despite UNHCR's non-return advisory. Various governments justify this trend of increasing returns to Afghanistan by arguing that active war has subsided since August 2021, when the U.S. withdrew.

Over a million Afghans were forcibly returned from Pakistan and Iran in 2023. That year, the Pakistani government announced its 'Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan' with a deadline of November 1 for unregistered migrants to leave the country, forcing a new deadline for Afghan nationals to return, sometimes decades or even generations later, to Afghanistan. Half a million Afghans returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan in the last quarter of 2023.[2] Also in 2023, at least 651,000 Afghans were deported from Iran – a 36% increase over 2022.[3]

Figure 1: Number of Afghans Deported from Iran, 2022-2023



In 2022, the Turkish government resumed deporting Afghans after an initial halt in forced returns in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover in 2021. Between

[2] UNICEF (2023). *Afghanistan (Outflow) Humanitarian Situation Report* No. 2: January-December 2023. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/media/153151/file/Afghanistan-(Outflow)-Humanitarian-Situation-Report-No-2-Jan-Dec-2023.pdf

[3] Danish Refugee Council (2024, May 7). *Afghans Increasingly Forced to Return from Iran: An Overlooked Population in Dire Need of Protection.* https://pro.drc.ngo/resources/news/afghans-increasingly-forced-to-return-from-iran-an-overlooked-population-in-dire-need-of-protection/.

January and July 2022, Turkey deported 59,000 irregular migrants, over half (35,728) Afghans.[4] Tajikistan also forcibly returned Afghan asylum seekers in 2022.[5]

Building on qualitative and survey research conducted since 2007 in Afghanistan, this paper documents the difficulties faced by millions of returnees as one of the many costs of war. Ultimately, the war made it impossible for Afghanistan to be a safe and sustainable place to return to, and programmatic responses by the United Nations and others mistakenly assumed return and reintegration to be the end goal, rather than supporting a historical reliance on mobility as a possible solution for Afghans' need for safety and security.

The Historical Context of Afghan Returns After 2001

The sheer size and volume of displacement since 2001 is one of the major costs of the war in Afghanistan. Given the history of conflict in Afghanistan since 1979, many Afghans have accumulated layers of displacement experiences as refugees, returnees, or internally displaced persons (IDPs). These types of experiences can be successive, sometimes circular and in other cases may overlap.

In the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion in 2001, refugee returns to Afghanistan increased dramatically, with over two million Afghans returning home in the initial 2001 – 2003 period alone.[6] Millions of Afghans had fled during the prior period of civil wars to neighboring Iran and Pakistan, where they often faced precarious living conditions and deportation.[7] The transitional government of Karzai urged for Afghan expatriates to return and rebuild Afghanistan. Initially return was couched within a reconstruction discourse – "return and rebuild" – with return presented as the best option for Afghans, their home state, and co-citizens. The prospects of a peaceful and financially sound reconstruction process, supported by the international community, convinced many to return – a better offer than their lives in exile and a chance to be part of an historical opportunity.

The U.S. spent billions on reconstruction in Afghanistan over the war years, part of which was geared towards the sustainable reintegration of refugees. Afghanistan's government received over $150 billion of non-military aid from the U.S. during the 2001-2020 period, supplemented by aid from other Western countries, which largely

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[4] Daily Sabah, (2022, July 31). *Turkey has deported over 59,000 irregular migrants in 2022 so far*. https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkey-has-deported-over-59000-irregular-migrants-in-2022-so-far/news

[5] Kumar, R. & Noori, H. (2022, September 9). *Tajikistan 'rounding up and deporting Afghan refugees'*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/09/tajikistan-rounding-up-and-deporting-afghan-refugees.

[6] U.S. Department of State. (2003). *FY2003 PRM Guidelines for NGO Projects: Emergency Relief for Afghan Refugees and Returnees*. https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/prm/rls/fs/2003/17614.htm

[7] International Organization for Migration (2014). Transition, Crisis, and Mobility in Afghanistan. Retrieved from https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/migrated_files/Country/docs/Transition-Crisis-and-Mobility-in-Afghanistan-2014.pdf

funded the healthcare and education systems, as well as governance and infrastructure.[8] In early 2002, the United Nations held a conference in Tokyo to pledge aid to rebuild Afghanistan, committing an estimated $15 billion. At the same event, ten years later in 2012, the Afghan government requested an additional $40 billion. In the minds of many Afghans, this humanitarian aid, including aid to returnees, was meant to support human rights and democracy. The approach by the foreign aid community integrated relief, reconstruction, and development, following the logic that a recovery strategy aimed at security should focus on returning refugees. With the return of Afghanistan's diaspora, its intelligentsia and its laborers, recovery efforts were planned in Afghanistan in all sectors – public and private[9]. As a result, cities grew; Kabul, which counted 500,000 inhabitants in 2001, saw a tenfold increase in population within the first decade of the intervention.

Yet, as conflict and insecurity rose and natural disasters continued, internal displacement figures rose substantially as well, with a rise in civilian casualties starting in 2007. The total population of Afghans displaced by conflict grew by 45% between 2010-2011 alone and internal displacement was further accentuated from 2012 onwards. A Samuel Hall-Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) study revealed that the number of IDPs had reached over half a million individuals in 2012.[10] Ten years later, in 2022, over four million people were counted as internally displaced in Afghanistan[11], as a result of conflict, violence, and natural disasters.

Between 2002 and 2012, more than 70,000 Afghan and Pakistani civilians are estimated to have died as a direct result of war – which increased significantly after 2012 when international troops began to withdraw and in 2017 after the U.S. military loosened its rules around airstrikes, which rapidly increased civilian casualties[12]. Furthermore, decades of war have resulted in mental health concerns, poverty, lack of basic services (i.e. healthcare, sanitation, and education), and environmental destruction.[13] These factors have produced cycles of continued and repeated displacement. Afghans returning to their country of citizenship were further displaced or forced to move – internally or beyond the borders of the country – due to conflict, security concerns, or natural disasters in their provinces and the impacts these had on local markets, access to services, and infrastructure throughout the country.

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[8] Shah, Mohammed Q. (2021, October 26). *What did billions in aid to Afghanistan accomplish? 5 questions answered*. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/what-did-billions-in-aid-to-afghanistan-accomplish-5-questions-answered-166804

[9] Helton, A. (2002, June 25*). In Afghanistan, think small*. Christian Science Monitor. http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0625/p09s02-coop.html

[10] NRC/IDMC/Samuel Hall. (2012, November 29). *Challenges of IDP Protection: Research study on the protection of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan*. Relief Web. https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/challenges-idp-protection-research-study-protection-internally-displaced-persons

[11] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. *Country Profile: Afghanistan*. https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/afghanistan/#:~:text=Nearly%206.6%20million%20people%20were,as%20a%20result%20of%20disasters

[12] Crawford, N. (2022). Cost of War, in the Costs of War series. Watson Institute, Brown University. Retrieved from https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar

[13] Savell, S. (2023, May 15). *How Death Outlives War: The Reverberating Impact of the Post-9/11 Wars on Human Health*. Costs of War, Watson Institute, Brown University. https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2023/IndirectDeaths

Phases of migration to and from Afghanistan have largely followed successive changes in leadership, as well as changes in levels of insecurity and instability within the country.[14] The events of August 2021 and the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) by the Taliban demonstrate how rapidly the need for protection can change. In such contexts, returnees may be vulnerable given their association with certain political groups, and also face more difficulty reintegrating into communities experiencing a combination of political, economic, and humanitarian crises.[15]

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a non-return advisory for Afghanistan[16] in 2021, calling for a ban on forced returns[17] of Afghan nationals, including asylum seekers, and UNHCR's latest guidance on protection needs for Afghan asylum seekers speaks of "widespread threats to human rights in the country."[18] Despite this, certain governments, including in Europe, are returning or considering the feasibility of returns for Afghan migrants. In the region, returns continue to increase from neighboring countries – with a threefold increase in inflows from the Islamic Republic of Iran into Afghanistan, estimated at 30,000 in May 2023; while returns from Pakistan increased to over 300,000 crossings back into the country in May 2023. This was followed, on September 26, 2023, by an announcement from Pakistan's Ministry of the Interior that it would further regulate the presence of foreigners in Pakistan. It, however, mainly targeted Afghan nationals in the country. As a result, half a million Afghan nationals were forced to return from Pakistan to Afghanistan in the last quarter of 2023.[19]

Yet, since 2021, very little information is available on the fate of those who have returned to Afghanistan. This report focuses on the period 2001-2021, discussing failures of reintegration in order to inform donors and decision-makers of the importance of protecting displaced persons, investing in solutions to displacement[20], and preventing further forced returns.

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[14] Anderson, Martin W. (2022). A diaspora in flux: Changing dynamics of Afghans abroad and the establishment of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. *Migration Policy Practice, 11(4) (December 2021 – April 2022).* https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-policy-practice-vol-xi-number-4-december-2021-april-2022

[15] Vera-Larrucea, C. & Lindberg, H. M. (2022), Return to Afghanistan: The perils of returning to unstable and insecure countries. *Migration Policy Practice, 11(4) (December 2021 – April 2022).*

[16] UNHCR. (2021, August 17). *UNHCR issues a non-return advisory for Afghanistan*. https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-issues-non-return-advisory-afghanistan

[17] Forced Returns in the global context, refer to the compulsory return of an individual to the country of origin, transit or third country (i.e. country of return), on the basis of an administrative or judicial act. European Migration Network (2024). *Forced Return*. EMN Asylum and Migration Glossary. European Commission. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/forced-return_en.

[18] UNHCR (2022), *Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan (Update I*). https://www.refworld.org/policy/countrypos/unhcr/2023/en/124216

[19] From 15 September 15, 2023 to January 6, 2024, 495,073 individuals have returned. *UNHCR-IOM Flash update #13.* (2024, January 10). https://pakistan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1121/files/documents/2024-01/unhcr-iom-flash-update-13-pakistan.pdf

[20] A durable solution is said to have been achieved when the displaced no longer have specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement. Three solutions are considered: return, local integration or relocation in the case of IDPs / resettlement in the case of refugees. See: Inter-Agency Standing Committee: Project on Internal Displacement. (2010, April). *Durable Solutions For Internally Displaced Persons*. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2021-

The Taliban's rise to power in August 2021 was not a move towards peace, although this was the official goal when the U.S. government began negotiating a peace deal with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and members of the Taliban group, between 2018-2020 in Doha, Qatar. While the talks between the Taliban and the U.S. aimed to create the conditions for the military and political withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan, this had the effect of casting aside the interests of the outgoing government and anti-Taliban factions and empowering the Taliban within peace discussions.[21] These discussions took place in a context where, according to the 2021 Global Peace Index, Afghanistan was the world's least peaceful country, with internal conflict on the rise since 2014.[22] The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported 5,183 civilian casualties – an "unprecedented high" – between January and June 2021.[23] In 2021, nearly 800,000 Afghans were newly displaced internally according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) – nearly 97 percent due to conflict.[24]

This paper focuses on the human costs of failed reintegration after return: millions of Afghans who were never able to fully resume economic, social, and psychosocial lives upon return to Afghanistan, but who had believed in the international community's and the Afghan government's promises of reintegration, often investing all of their economic resources in returning. This is one of the costs of war that is often left out of mainstream narratives about Afghanistan. Based on research conducted since 2007 in Afghanistan, this paper shows that Afghan returnees remained economically and socially vulnerable and isolated, suffering from displacement-related vulnerabilities, often for years after their return, and even more so in cases where they had been returned against their will. Many returnees to Afghanistan often became internally displaced, especially as many were unable to return to their communities of origin due to ongoing conflict or concerns about being associated with certain groups, or simply as they had no remaining links to their ancestral communities.

This paper's premise is that understanding the failed promises of reintegration should not only put an end to forced returns to Afghanistan, but also pave the way for greater regional and international protection and renewed investments in solutions to the Afghan displacement crisis. It draws primarily on studies carried out by the author and Samuel Hall, a social enterprise conducting research in contexts of migration and

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03/IASC%20Framework%20on%20Durable%20Solutions%20for%20Internally%20Displaced%20Persons%2C%20April%202010.pdf

[21] Mullojanov, P. (2023, April 4). *Tajikistan's Peace Process: The Role of Track 2 Diplomacy and Lessons from Afghanistan.* United States Institute of Peace. https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/tajikistans-peace-process-role-track-2-diplomacy-and-lessons-afghanistan

[22] The Institute for Economics & Peace. (2021). *Afghanistan: Conflict & Crisis.* https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Afghanistan-briefing-2021.pdf

[23] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). (2021, July 26). *Civilian Casualties Set to Hit Unprecedented Highs in 2021 Unless Urgent Action to Stem Violence – UN Report.* https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-set-hit-unprecedented-highs-2021-unless-urgent-action-stem-violence-%E2%80%93-un-report

[24] IDMC (2022), *Migration Data Portal (2023). International Displacement Data: Conflict-Related Displacement.* Retrieved from https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?focus=profile&i=intdisp_conflict&t=2023&cm49=4

displacement since 2008 (and funded by the United Nations and other donor groups). These studies include:

1. Research conducted between 2008-2013 with 100 returnees, deportees, and their families, in the provinces of Kabul, Nangarhar, and Balkh.
2. Research in 2012 on Afghan youth with three phases of interviews: 720 interviews with youth in Kabul province; 1938 interviews in 14 provinces – Nangarhar, Balkh, Bamyan, Paktia, Kandahar, Faryab, Herat, Ghazni, Badakhshan, Kunduz, Baghlan, Nimroz, Panjshir, and Parwan; and 300 interviews as part of three additional focused surveys in Kabul city on education, employment, and female reproductive health.
3. Research carried out by Samuel Hall in 2016 on mental health concerns amongst urban displaced youth in Kabul. This included 2,006 surveys with youth in Kabul (refugee returnees, return migrants, assisted voluntary return, forced returnees, IDPs, rural-urban migrants, and those without migration experience), and 30 focus-group discussions with returnee, IDP, rural-urban migrant, and non-migrant youth.
4. Research carried out by Samuel Hall for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) with 215 people consulted in 2022 on return and reintegration, focusing on key issues related to mental health, climate change, and basic services.[25]
5. Research carried out by Samuel Hall for Save the Children in 2018 and for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2023 on the situation of 57 child returnees interviewed after their return from Europe to Afghanistan and 1,200 children migrants interviewed in Afghanistan.

Narratives about State-building and Migration

Reintegration was part of a much larger state-building project in Afghanistan. This was supported by an extensive humanitarian and development agenda, aimed to transform Afghanistan and to (re-)build a failed state and subsequently, a fragile state. The U.S.-led international intervention initially focused on a military goal: to "dismantle, disrupt, and defeat" the Al Qaeda network. The second prism was political: to strengthen and build up a new Afghan government. Micro-level solutions focused on bringing people back and having men and youth contribute to reconstruction.

During the war years, Afghanistan represented the largest repatriation exercise in the history of the United Nations. After the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001, over 1.6 million Afghans returned from Iran, Pakistan, and other Central Asian states in the first year alone.[26] Altogether, the United Nations Refugee Agency assisted over six million refugees to return over the first decade of the intervention. UNHCR used the

[25] Samuel Hall / IOM. (2022, November). *IOM: Unpacking the Realities of Displacement Affected Communities in Afghanistan Since August 2021*. https://www.samuelhall.org/publications/iom-afghanistan-unpacking-the-realities-in-displacement-affected-communities-since-august-2021. Total FGDS: 31 (16 male, 15 female) (6 FGDs), Urban Migration: 31 (16 male, 15 female) (6 FGDs), Infrastructure: 33 (17 male, 16 female) (6 FGDs). Total SSIs: Mental Health: 22 (10 male, 12 female), Climate Change 15 (9 male, 6 female), Urban migration: 9 (6 male, 3 female), Infrastructure: 15 (15 male, 0 female). Total KIIs: 16

[26] UN News (2002, September 3). *Refugee returns to Afghanistan largest in 30 years, UN agency says.* https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/refugee-returns-afghanistan-largest-30-years-un-agency-says

media as a channel to communicate its frustrations over the lack of reintegration outcomes in Afghanistan, calling its work in the country the "biggest mistake UNHCR ever made."[27] In the words of its country representative in 2011, a link was made between the failure of Afghan refugees to fully reintegrate into Afghan society and the failure of the international community.

"We need to change the perception of the international community," Nicolaus (UNHCR country representative for Afghanistan) said. *"The problem in Afghanistan is not only transition and the war against the Taliban. There is another problem which is the integration of a huge number of people — we are talking about more than 10 percent of the population who need targeted international assistance — otherwise they become a risk factor."*[28]

UNHCR held a pledging conference in 2012 to raise funds – a total of $862 million was targeted – for a new vision for its reintegration program in Afghanistan. Given the economic crisis in donor countries, and the fact that the numbers of migrants from Afghanistan continued to rise, with little to show for in terms of reintegration, the requested amounts were not met positively by donors.

The Turn from Voluntary to Forced Returns

Once assisted returns started waning, and the promises of reconstruction seemed to recede, forced returns – also referred to as deportations or removals – increased.

In 2007, the European Union and UNHCR began to investigate the estimated 400,000 Afghan nationals being deported annually from Iran. UNHCR released a report which labeled these nationals as economic migrants and single adult males working irregularly, without permits, in Iran. However, the reality was more nuanced. Other NGO reports published over the next few years revealed that continued deportations included families who had lost their refugee status, as well as unaccompanied minors who had been forced to migrate to Iran to support their families' survival. Over the years, many Afghans were deported prior to being given the chance to register asylum claims.[29] Meanwhile, more women and children were fleeing Afghanistan.

As migration increased throughout the course of the war years, deportation trends continued and extended beyond Iran and Pakistan, to Europe. The European Union/Turkey deal of 2016 permitted deportation of failed asylum seekers or irregular migrants unwanted in Europe to be sent back to Afghanistan. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM),

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[27] Afghanistan Analysts Network. (2011, December 28). *UN: Afghan Refugee Strategy a 'Big Mistake'.* Retrieved from https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/recommended-reading/un-afghan-refugee-strategy-a-big-mistake/

[28] SCHULTS (2011), *Why Afghan Returnees Could Become Taliban Recruits*, Global Post, June 2011.

[29] Watson Institute (2021), "Afghan Refugees."

nearly four million Afghans returned or were deported from neighboring countries, mostly from Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, between August and November 2021 alone.[30]

During the war years, deportations happened in a context where legal migration options had been reduced for Afghans and where foreign governments' policies prevented them from seeking protection as refugees, as they had historically been able to do. The narrative of the United Nations and the U.S.-led coalition was that Afghan migrants were no longer in need of protection, given the investments being made in their home country. In this narrative, Afghan migrants should be considered as "economic migrants" as their country was otherwise turning into a democracy and thus it was no longer necessary to consider them being persecuted or at risk. Correspondingly, the European Union and UNHCR study of 2007 highlighted the conclusion that cross-border movements were considered as irregular labor migration,[31] not falling under the mandate of UNHCR.

Less discussed was the, "undeniable human cost of this irregular migration,"[32] the abusive practices that Afghans were subject to as migrants in the hands of smugglers, law enforcement, and foreign authorities who routinely detained and deported them back to Afghanistan. Gradually the safe departure of Afghans migrating from the country became harder and harder.

The Missing Voices: Policy Objectives vs. Individual Strategies

The narratives of the UN, donors, and the Afghan political elite converged. The one voice not heard by the international community was that of Afghan civilians themselves. Among the especially inaudible voices were those of child returnees. A 2018 study by Samuel Hall and Save the Children[33] showed that children did not feel safe during the process of returning to Afghanistan, and many were either returning alone or accompanied by police. Despite existing frameworks around Best Interest Determination processes for children, with strict procedural safeguards and requirements to protect children, Afghan children interviewed reported heavy police involvement. Upon return, although most families and children returning from Europe were entitled to money and travel expenses, child-specific support remained nonexistent. Their housing and economic situations were found to be insufficient to meet requirements under international conventions, and most returns were not accompanied by best interest determination processes. The study found that children in return processes were treated as migrants first, rather than being treated as children first and foremost.

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[30] Global Data Institute: Displacement Tracking Matrix. (2021). *Afghanistan - Emergency Event Tracking: 12 October – 15 November 2021.* IOM UN Migration. https://dtm.iom.int/reports/afghanistan-emergency-event-tracking-12-october-15-november-2021

[31] Farhad, M. N. (2008, December 11). *Manage Afghan labour migration to curb irregular flow to Iran, study urges.* UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/news/manage-afghan-labour-migration-curb-irregular-flow-iran-study-urges

[32] United Nation Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. (2008, December 7). *Press conference with UNAMA, UNHCR, and ILO.* https://unama.unmissions.org/press-conference-unama-unhcr-and-ilo

[33] Save the Children/Samuel Hall. (2018). *From Europe to Afghanistan: Experiences of Child Returnees*. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/sc-from_europe_to_afghanistan-screen_1610.pdf/

"When I arrived in Iran, one of our relatives helped me find work. I worked there for more than four months. One day, the police came and arrested us and took us with them. They kept us for three weeks, beat us a lot and tortured us in different ways, and asked us why we had illegally entered their country. Another time, they put us in stinky bathrooms and toilets and didn't provide us with food and water. Then, after all those tortures, they deported us to Nimroz. I didn't have a penny in my pocket as I was arrested in the workplace where I left everything."

In Afghanistan, national services were meant to integrate and include returnees. During the war years, significant – yet fragile – gains were made in enrolling more students in schools and higher education, increased access to healthcare, and progress on governance, including adopting a new constitution in 2004 and holding several elections.[34] However, the centralized government system gave the president political, fiscal, and administrative power without any parallel structures for accountability, which led to mismanagement of funds and high levels of corruption within government, at all levels.[35] Although gains were made, it was mainly an elite that benefited, as the broader Afghan population was not included in decision-making processes.[36] Within this context, Afghans who returned (voluntarily or not) struggled to reintegrate due to negative perceptions of their westernization, limited economic growth, and ongoing conflict throughout the country.

Under the current Taliban regime since the U.S. troop withdrawal in 2021, Afghan returns occur in a context of instability and lack of planning. Their situation is complicated by the lack of employment opportunities, the absence of basic services in most peri-urban areas where they generally settle, and the structural issue of landlessness. These types of recurring crises have placed more pressure on the country's limited economic, social, and institutional integration capacity, which impacts returnees' ability to reintegrate successfully.

Facing the impossibility of reintegration, Afghans continue to migrate to neighboring Iran and Pakistan, but also to Turkey and European countries, despite the risks they face of being deported or caught and sent back at border points, or in some extreme cases, shot. Afghans are acutely aware of the high risk of deportation, with many deported several times over their lives. When asked about the danger of being deported, one young man replied that he would attempt to migrate to Europe again, even if it would take him longer to pay his debts, stating, *"I cannot stay in Afghanistan –*

[34] Shah, M. Q. (2021).

[35] The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has published reports over two decades documenting the results of audits of U.S. investments, including of instances of corruption and financial mismanagement. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. *All Reports.* https://www.sigar.mil/allreports/ . Other sources include, Bak, M. (2019, April 29). *Corruption in Afghanistan and the role of development assistance*. U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre & Transparency International. https://www.u4.no/publications/corruption-in-afghanistan-and-the-role-of-development-assistance.pdf .

[36] Qadamshah, M. (2019). *Politics, Intergovernmental Relations, and Public Finance Reform in Fragile States: The Case of Afghanistan*. Dissertation, University of Washington, https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/45216.

there is no future for me there."[37] Our research has shown that many Afghans in Europe are not on their first migration attempt: they were refugees or other migrants who returned, but were not able to live their lives there and left yet again.

Afghans multiply layers of migratory experiences that further their vulnerabilities and put them in contradiction with existing policy and legal frameworks, as they may lack the national identification documents, the land or shelter, and the same levels of education that could allow them to reintegrate into Afghan society. The more the gap expands, the less cohesion can be found.

In the case of Bosnia and Kosovo, refugees have often been caught between the conflicting state-building and returns policies of major European donor countries.[38] On one hand, these states invested heavily in reconstruction and economic development, and even more heavily in policing to prevent instability and violence. On the other hand, they returned refugees and exacerbated an already dire economic situation characterized by an increasingly impoverished, desperate, and frustrated young population with a growing potential for social conflict. Other countries' desire to return refugees to Bosnia and Kosovo as quickly as possible not only put pressure on already weak public services but also meant fewer remittances and an increased danger of social unrest, undermining international efforts to stabilize these countries and limiting the impact of resources devoted to them. The same can be said of Afghanistan, where establishing conditions for return happened at the same time as the management of the return process, instead of waiting for the conditions to be met and processes for reintegration to be put in place.

Afghan Perspectives During the 2001-2021 War Period

In the interviews we conducted in Afghanistan, families expressed unhappiness about their loved ones' forced return to Afghanistan. In 2011, we interviewed 35 families who had sent one of their members abroad, to see them later return. The majority of these families did not want to welcome back the deportee. They were disappointed to have lost their initial investment, for they had funded these migrations and they would not benefit from remittances or returns on their investment. They would not be able either to hope for a path out of Afghanistan through a family reunification process. Intent on their initial decision, they often preferred to stay on the path set: re-investing in migration, planning anew for the positive outcome they had initially hoped for, and putting forward new arguments to justify further investment in their pursuit. Families shared the belief that they had been previously naïve, that the migrant was now better informed, that they could reduce some intermediaries in the process, and ensure that the migration process would be faster.

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[37] Schuster, L. & Majidi, N. (2013, June). What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 1(2,), 221-240*; Schuster, L. & Majidi, N. (2014, October 30). Deportation, stigma and re-migration*. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 41(4), 635-652.*

[38] Zaum, D. (2007). The Sovereignty Paradox: The Norms and Politics of International State Building. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

All of the 35 deportees and their families stated that the assistance provided to them upon return was inadequate – either resulting in failed ventures or being insufficient to meet the actual needs. Only four had managed to open a business but only one still had an operational business activity a few months later. As a result, reintegration assistance as planned by agencies and as funded by donors failed: without sufficient success to show for reintegration activities, the belief that migration – not assistance – mattered most resulted in rising aspirations to leave. Thirty-one of the 35 did not feel that they were able to contribute to the reconstruction of their country, whether socially, economically, or politically; and the majority also expressed their concern that their family's situation had deteriorated since their return. These fears of and visible signs of deterioration contributed to the rising aspirations to migrate.

"When we were about to be deported, the authorities told us that they had prepared the grounds for us to return and to help rebuild our country. But when I returned, I saw none of that had been done, but that there was a 6-month support through an NGO. I learned some English through courses paid by the program. But not well enough to find a job, the courses here are mostly not good enough. Now I am left without any concrete plans. I spent a total of five years in the UK and wasted a lot of time to be deported in the end"

"I was very unhappy as soon as I came back. My own family sees that as taking away from my ability to help them. They think their situation has gotten worse since I have returned. That is a very difficult reality to cope with, and has created more distance between my family and I."

It did not take long for deportees to act on rising aspirations to return to the country that had removed them, or to another European country that would welcome them. As a result, 14 out of the 35 had attempted to leave Afghanistan again. Three of them were unsuccessful and suffered from more experiences of deportation while the rest made it to Iran and Pakistan, hoping to earn enough money to pay for their migration back to Europe. Only one of them had been able to make it back to the UK. All of the remaining 21 stated that they want to leave the country again; and eight had a concrete plan to do so in the next year.

One of the common assumptions of return policies was the fact that communities would welcome returnees back into their midst. Research shows, instead, a broken bond in "communities of return" across Afghanistan. While decisions on the return of Afghans, notably from Europe, were often based on the assumption that communities of return would support returnees and welcome them back, instead many returnees experienced dislocation and rejection upon return. Returnees were unable to live up to community expectations, experienced tensions within their inner circles, and an overall lack of compassion and commitment to their process,[39] which required more time and more resources than most reintegration packages could provide for.

[39] Majidi, N. (2020, November 6). Assuming Reintegration, Experiencing Dislocation – Returns from Europe to Afghanistan. *International Migration Vol. 59 (2).*

The broken bond further expanded as Afghanistan experienced new forms of crises. Afghan community health[40] began to decline.[41] A 2022 study by Samuel Hall for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) explains how communities, post-2021, no longer have the environmental, economic and social resources to support their own, with a decline in the capacity of community members and families to sustain the wellbeing of their peers and relatives. As households' limited resources led them to focus on their own survival and mental health conditions, communities began to experience social fracturing, a process that leads to the exclusion of part of the population, in this case due to the effects of entrenched poverty.

In 2015, as Afghans made up the second-largest population of arrivals during Europe's "migration crisis," then-President Karzai renewed calls for Afghans to prevent out-migration and called on its youth to stay in the country, to work and rebuild their nation. He explained, "No country reaches to progress and prosperity without the arms of youths"[42]. His statements came at a time when increasing numbers of Afghans were leaving Afghanistan, revealing a resounding criticism of a failed nation-building agenda.

Investments by foreign governments continued to be made to counter the desire of Afghans to leave their country – aid organizations were asked to bring solutions geared towards return and reintegration, and to manage migration. This would serve to both strengthen the interventionist discourse in Afghanistan and protect borders abroad from future security threats and from unwanted migration.

Being defined as a returnee or a deportee has social and individual consequences: first, on the image that society will have of the individual; second, on the level of resources and aid given to an individual and a household; and third, on the national fiction that is being created. A country made of refugees returning is more convincing, as a project, than a country made of deportees, of men and women who fought to leave and were forced to accept returning "home."

Returning during political transitions adds even more pressure on individuals – who may already be discriminated against upon return due to their gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic background.[43] Key to the ability to reintegrate are structural factors and experiences throughout the migration cycle that impact returnees' experiences. As explored by Carling, et al., return environments with weak and corrupt institutions – the migration corruption nexus – impact the ability of people to reintegrate as well as their willingness to stay.[44] In other return environments – such

[40] Community Health: The environmental, social, and economic resources to sustain emotional and physical wellbeing among people in ways that advance their aspirations and satisfy their needs in their unique environment (WHO)

[41] IOM / Samuel Hall. (2022). Research Brief: Displacement Trends and Challenges in Afghanistan since August 2021. https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2083364.html

[42] Daily Outlook. (2015, November 18). *Afghanistan, Karzai Demands Youths to Stay, to Rebuild the Country.* http://outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=13639

[43] Kuschminder, K. (2017) Interrogating the Relationship between Remigration and Sustainable Return. *International Migration, 55(3).*

[44] Carling, J., Paasche, E., & Siegel, M. (2015, May 12). *Finding connections: The nexus between Migration and corruption.* Migration information Source. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/finding-connections-nexus-between-migration-and-corruption

as Iraqi Kurdistan – corruption was found to constrain sustainable reintegration, due to limited merit-based job opportunities and low levels of individual security due to the impunity of those within governmental institutions.[45]

Interviewees who were deported referred to the rampant corruption in Afghanistan – both within the government and within the labor market – which they felt was so severe it was not worthwhile to look for work. One return migrant interviewed in Afghanistan stated, "*I was very unhappy as soon as I came back. People live like animals here and according to rules that I disagree with; I didn't even want to work here. What is the point if you have to pay to get a job?"*[46] Another returnee stated, "*I can buy a job for myself in government if I wanted, but what would be the point? Just the other day someone called me and said that if I paid, I could have a civil servant position. But that does not interest me. If you enter the system, you become as corrupt as them."*[47]

Forced returns disrupt a migration contract that remains unfulfilled, leading to often repetitive patterns of re-migration. Our research indicates that levels of re-migration are strong amongst those who have been deported or forcibly returned. In countries and communities where the original drivers of migration remain, those who have been forced to return before they are prepared or make the choice themselves will likely migrate abroad again.[48] The very act of forcing return adds to the problems that led migrants to flee in the first place, contributing to adverse psychosocial effects that limit the possibility to resume a decent life at "home."

Forced returns make reintegration more challenging – if not impossible – in contexts like Afghanistan, where deportees incur economic opportunity losses, are often unable to pay debts, lack local support systems, or feel shame associated with deportation.[49] Forced returns increase the physical, social, and economic insecurity experienced by Afghans, and often, the necessity to migrate is only re-enforced by the obligation to fulfill the initial 'migration contract'. Migration is thus part of a collective endeavor or investment, with the migrant bound by obligations and expectations to improve their lives and the lives of their families or communities. When forced returns are experienced as a failure of this contract, the deportees face stigma, shame, and ultimately feel they are left with no other choice than to re-migrate.

The Economic and Social Isolation of a Generation of Returned Youth

A survey of 2,006 youth carried out by Samuel Hall in 2013 in Kabul[50] showed that a majority of Kabul's youth had an experience of migration as a coping strategy to flee conflict, disasters, and/or economic insecurity. Displaced young people who

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[45] Strand, A., et al. (2016). *Programmes for assisted return to Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Ethiopia and Kosovo: A comparative evaluation of effectiveness and outcomes*. CMI Report. Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen. https://www.cmi.no/publications/5801- programmes-for-assisted-return-to-afghanistan

[46] Schuster, L. & Majidi, N. (2015). Deportation Stigma and Re-migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 41(4): 635-652.*

[47] Schuster, L. & Majidi, N. (2015).

[48] Schuster, L. & Majidi, N. (2013, June). What Happens Post Deportation? The Experience of Deported Afghans. *Migration Studies 1(2): 221-240.*

[49] Schuster, L. & Majidi, N. (2013, June).

[50] Samuel Hall. (2016). *Mental Health matters*, a self-funded research study.

returned to Kabul tried to find opportunities to work through informal and insecure jobs locally, or through temporary, cyclical and seasonal jobs in Iran and Pakistan. Young returnees remained economically and socially vulnerable and isolated.

One female returnee interviewed stated, *"I am stressed over the fact that I cannot go to town when I want, [and] I feel scared going outside. There is a lot of drug trafficking and criminality here these days, and then in the city, there is always the risk of bombings."* Another expressed feeling stressed due to the economy, stating, *"It affects my ability to go to school: we need books, proper and safe transportation, clothes. These are our daily concerns. What car will I get to go home after school? I have to wait sometimes for one hour until I find a car for five Afghanis and not the 20 Afghanis most ask for this route. I have to wait in the street until I find a car. There is a risk of bombings, permanent traffic, 20 cars who stop and people who bother us…When you wait for one car, you have 20 others who come talk to you for nothing, harassing you…it is tiring."*[51]

In a second 2013 survey conducted by Samuel Hall[52] more than half of surveyed youth reported the need for psychological counseling or help: 75% in Kabul wanted such counseling while only 12% had received any. In 2006, there were 50 trained psychiatrists in Afghanistan, and only 1% of doctors' training involved mental health[53]. The health sector is still poorly equipped to deal with mental health problems, and the link between mental health issues and mobility unexplored to date.

Afghan youth returnees experienced the symptoms of a lost generation, abroad and upon return. Many wanted their experience in Afghanistan to be aligned with the reconstruction narrative of the intervention. They had hoped that Kabul city could offer them opportunities that were not available to them abroad – in terms of rights to education, work, and a decent life. Yet, upon return, the lack of investments in refugees in exile meant that they returned without marketable skills, lacking also social skills that could allow them to become actors in their new urban environment of return.

The lack of economic and social skills, paired with the difficult experiences of conflict, migration, and return, meant that youth interviewed needed psychosocial assistance that they were not receiving. Signs of anxiety, stress, and other symptoms added new challenges to their reintegration process. Social health indicators were low – with few networks, friends, social capital to rely on upon return and in displacement – and mental health is spoken about candidly as a major problem in youths' ability to manage their lives and the challenges of life upon return to Afghanistan. Returnee youth express the need for spaces of recognition, or simply a space to call their own, to be familiar and comfortable to live and work in, to interact in. The term "space of recognition" is well adapted to their struggle. Such spaces could have constituted the missing link between the outside world and the disconnected world of returnee youth. Within this group, deportees/forced returnees in the 2016 Samuel Hall survey were the

[51] Samuel Hall. (2016). *Mental Health matters*, a self-funded research study.
[52] Samuel Hall. (2013). *Afghanistan's Future in Transition: A Participatory Assessment of the Afghan Youth.* DMoYA.
[53] World Health Organization (WHO). (2006). *WHO – AIMS Report on Mental Health System in Afghanistan.* p.2.

worst off. Youth returnees struggled for recognition, which in turn hampered their societal participation and contributions.[54]

The Missing Space for Youth

Samuel Hall's research measured the social inclusion of youth in their immediate society (be it neighborhood or ethnic community). This research was conducted in 2015 and has not been replicated since that time, but it is still indicative of some important contemporary trends for young people returning to Afghanistan. We used five indicators of social inclusion: membership in organizations, ownership of a mobile phone, experiences of discrimination, identification documentation, and regular social contacts outside of the family. The data showed that for youth returnees:

- Overall memberships in organizations were scarce in Afghanistan. In relative terms, non-migrants' membership was higher compared to migrants and displaced persons. Returnee youth, especially forced migrants, had a difficult time finding local groups to fit in.
- Many had mobile phones. This shows a level of connectedness among transnationally mobile populations, pointing to the existence of transnational social networks.
- Forced returnees were the most discriminated against of all categories of youth, suffering social stigma and marginalization.[55]
- IDPs did not possess an identification document in 43.95% of the cases. This indicated that one barrier to international migration was the lack of documentation, keeping people constrained within their national boundaries.
- Social networks of friends and families were lacking most among those internally displaced, and those forcibly returned.

Over and over again, Kabul youth spoke of a lack of space for them to connect, talk, share experiences, organize themselves. Kabul youth is largely a disorganized youth as the majority does not belong to any organization (86.1%). This is true for all – men (76%) and, even more so, for women (98.5%). They explain that their space is most often their homes, which can be reduced to one room where parents, children, cousins, and uncles, mix without privacy for youth to speak and converse freely.

They have little spatial mobility. Youth were limited to their immediate physical space (their family home), or their neighborhoods where physical space to convene is limited. As a result, male youth spent time together in the street, in open spaces, viewed and watched by community members, while female youth did not have the liberty to do so. In return, much as in their displacement, their imagined freedom is restricted. Being a youth returnee in Kabul is a story of constrained social freedoms and immobility.

Among refugee returnees, the lack of ability to negotiate space disadvantaged women disproportionately. In Kabul, they were often limited to small rooms or housing that included several families or extended relatives. Privacy was limited or non-existent

[54] Fraser, N. & Honneth, A. (2003, December 11). *Redistribution or Recognition?* Verso. Kleist 2006
[55] Schuster, L. & Majidi, N. (2014, October 30). Deportation Stigma and Re-migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 41(4): 625-652.*

at home, and freedom of movement curtailed outside of their home. Kabul was seen as a dangerous place for women: even those who ventured out for training or to work, were harassed in the street or felt at risk while commuting to and from their neighborhoods to their schools or jobs.

Among migrant returnees, invisible traumas appeared with long lasting symptoms. A major concern about urban displaced youth in Kabul and Afghanistan more generally was their mental health due to the life experiences they had to go through at a young age. A large proportion of youth in our sample had been affected by one or more shocks; 70% encountered at least one life trauma. Stress due to socio-economic problems, the insecurity in Afghanistan, and the inability to pursue further education were very common among the respondents. For females, the lack of mobility is an additional stress factor, which is again part of the stress factors they face post-2021. For all interviewed, the feeling of decreased mobility, feeling contained in specific neighborhoods and geographic areas, meant a drastic change from their prior mobility. They felt trapped in undesirable circumstances. Emotionally and psychologically, they did not know how to cope with this feeling of containment and entrapment.

No Systematic Monitoring

Following the 2001 intervention, failed returns were a public embarrassment that various governments sought to hide, as they contradicted the narratives of reconstruction aid. At the same time, Afghan migrants were being returned to Afghanistan in the midst of a conflict, where monitoring is difficult or impossible: in conflict settings, local governments lack the capacity and international organizations lack the proper access. Yet, monitoring is essential in such situations.

This paper calls for more careful monitoring and evaluation of post-deportation return and reintegration measures in conflict settings like Afghanistan, to respect the rights of those being returned, under international human rights law, and to hold accountable those organizations and states conducting deportations. Yet, attempts made starting from 2016 to establish different methods to monitor reintegration – such as the "multi-dimensional reintegration index" created by Samuel Hall, initially funded by the UN – were gradually phased out or dismissed. The lack of investment in data over the last two decades is now a priority gap to be addressed.

Conclusion: The Failure of Reintegration in Afghanistan

The failed reintegration of millions of Afghans returned to their homeland over the course of a continued and prolonged period of invasion, occupation and war is a collective responsibility of the international community, and one of the least understood costs of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. The failure to reintegrate Afghans has deepened their uprootedness, leaving them in limbo between a homeland that cannot support them and foreign lands that reject them. When interventions uproot people, they must also bring with them the possibility of offering and growing new roots — whether in Afghanistan, the region, or elsewhere. This is not just a moral duty; it is about taking responsibility for the lives disrupted and for the stability that is needed in Afghanistan and the region. This requires financial means and commitment to finding, funding and monitoring solutions in Afghanistan.

The Executive Order issued by U.S. President Joe Biden in February 2022 confiscated $7 billion in Afghan foreign exchange reserves in the U.S., half of which is planned to be divided up between families who filed lawsuits against the Taliban after losing family members to the 9/11 attacks. The other half of the funds remain in the New York Federal Reserve under the "Afghan Central Bank," and transfers were authorized for anyone who will use the money "for the benefit of the Afghan people and for Afghanistan's future".[56] Western sanctions on the Afghan Central Bank and government ministries have dramatically reduced the ability of humanitarian organizations in Afghanistan to receive donations, and they have been unable to respond to the increasingly severe humanitarian needs of Afghans. Sanctions have severely limited basic functions of Afghanistan's Central Bank and have cut Afghans off from remittances from abroad, which are a lifeline for many. Reductions in funding for education, health, basic services, and infrastructure in Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover have contributed to lost incomes and a humanitarian crisis where over 90 percent of Afghans suffer from food insecurity, with many resorting to harmful coping mechanisms to survive, including child labor.[57] This has coincided with rising inflation for basic household staples as well as supplies for agriculture, which has contributed to decreases in domestic food supply.[58]

Policy Recommendations for the United Nations and other Donor Groups

Based on this paper's findings, we offer policy recommendations geared towards global donors supporting the protection of Afghan migrants:

1. *Plan for and fund inclusive "durable solutions"*

A priority is to ensure that Afghan migrants are not forcibly returned from Pakistan or elsewhere. Moreover, the protection of Afghan returnees is critical, as their forced repatriation places them at significant risk, especially in a country struggling with food insecurity, limited access to basic services, and insecurity. This is the foundation on which all other solutions must be built.

Afghans deserve to have their basic human needs met — including physical, material, and legal safety. The Afghan government and international donors must invest in security, freedom of movement, and social cohesion, along with access to housing, land, property, health, water, education, nutrition, livelihoods, documentation, and justice. Due to the lingering effects of a war that neither the Afghan government nor its people chose, Afghanistan requires and deserves international community support.

Donors should also prioritize dignified and sustainable reintegration for returnees, acknowledging their vulnerabilities and immediate needs. Any reintegration process needs to be inclusive of the voices of returnees, learning from past failures documented in this report, and inclusive of all stakeholders – including local authorities, local representatives, men, women and youth. Additionally, our research shows that there can be no durable solutions without mental health support.

[56] Human Rights Watch. (2022, August 4). *Economic Causes of Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/04/economic-causes-afghanistans-humanitarian-crisis.
[57] World Food Programme. (2022). *Afghanistan Food Security Update.*
[58] World Bank. (2022). *Afghanistan Economic Monitor.*

Communities need to be rebuilt through dialogue, consensus-building exercises, and investments in inclusive development. The latter will require closer investments in research, data, monitoring, and learning to build a common and evidence-based agenda. Interventions should ensure adequate services are accessible to all – men, women, youth, the elderly and children – in urban and rural areas.

In addition, funding in the region needs to be supported by greater investments to address the roots of migration, which increasingly in Afghanistan includes climate change, environmental degradation and natural disasters. A key area of responsibility for donors, and an area of consensus with the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan, is the need to focus on preparedness and response capacities at grassroots, national and regional levels to respond to the climate change challenge within the country and across its borders. This will require targeted research on the links between displacement and climate change in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan.

2. *Invest in pathways for cross-border mobility and regional support*

Returning Afghans to their country of origin places them at risk. The majority of Afghans have experienced displacement. They continue to rely on migration, notably to Iran and Pakistan, as a survival mechanism. Planning for their mobility will require donor and diaspora investments in Afghan communities abroad – in Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Europe, and elsewhere. The financial mechanisms are frequently UN-led, which is essential at the policy level. Additionally, there are significant opportunities for NGO consortia that are better positioned to address on-the-ground challenges. Thus, funding regional programs that support cross-border mobility is a priority.

3. *Offer international protection*

In the wake of the return of the Taliban in August 2021, some governments announced emergency pathways for visas for Afghans seeking to leave, but this number has waned in the last three years. Resettlement initiatives are still needed, given asylum seekers' – especially women's – long wait in Iran and Pakistan. Calls by scholars, governments and others for *prima facie* refugee status recognition for Afghan women and girls specifically, as a persecuted social group, should lead to formal recognition by governments who participated in the Afghan war in the last decades.[59] Additionally, countries should decriminalize migration for Afghan refugees and establish legal protection pathways. This can include actions such as granting Afghans and their families humanitarian parole,[60] and expanding family reunification programs and services, including for those Afghans who left in August 2021 and have family who remained behind.

[59] Tan, N. & Ineli-Ciger, M. (2023, July 31). Group-based protection of Afghan women and girls under the 1951 convention. *International & Comparative Law Quarterly, 72(3).*

[60] According to the U.S. citizenship and Immigration services, humanitarian parole allows for temporary lawful presence in the United States. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. *Information for Afghan Nationals on Requests to USCIS for Parole*. https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/humanitarian-parole/information-for-afghan-nationals-on-requests-to-uscis-for-parole