



bicc report

RESPONDING TO MASS RETURNS IN AFGHANISTAN

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Afghanistan and
Development

Afghanistan is experiencing one of the world's longest and most complex displacement crises, shaped by over five decades of conflict, instability and repeated cycles of forced migration.

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SUMMARY

Afghanistan is experiencing one of the world's longest and most complex displacement crises, shaped by over five decades of conflict, instability and repeated cycles of forced migration. The Taliban takeover in August 2021 ended active warfare but has not created meaningful opportunities for long-term solutions. Instead, Afghanistan faces a weak economy, declining international aid and frequent climate-related disasters—all of which restrict the ability of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and humanitarian agencies to respond effectively. Today, the crisis is compounded by mass returns and deportations from Pakistan and Iran, adding immense pressure to already strained systems.

Since 2023, both Pakistan and Iran have significantly intensified the forced return of Afghan refugees and undocumented migrants, leading to an estimated minimum of 3.9 million returns to Afghanistan as of 3 September 2025. Although some movements are officially classified as “voluntary,” returnees frequently report that they occur under duress, driven by deteriorating conditions and mounting pressure in host countries. These dynamics heighten protection risks for vulnerable groups and place additional strain on already limited humanitarian and reintegration capacities inside Afghanistan.

International and humanitarian organisations remain engaged despite shrinking aid flows and political obstacles. Key actors include the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)—all part of the Afghanistan Border Consortium—whose work

focuses on emergency health, protection and migrants' reintegration. To achieve longer-term reintegration and work towards durable solutions, the Border Consortium's May 2025 Integrated Response Plan promotes an area-based approach that links immediate relief with longer-term reintegration and development goals, designed to benefit both returnees and host communities.

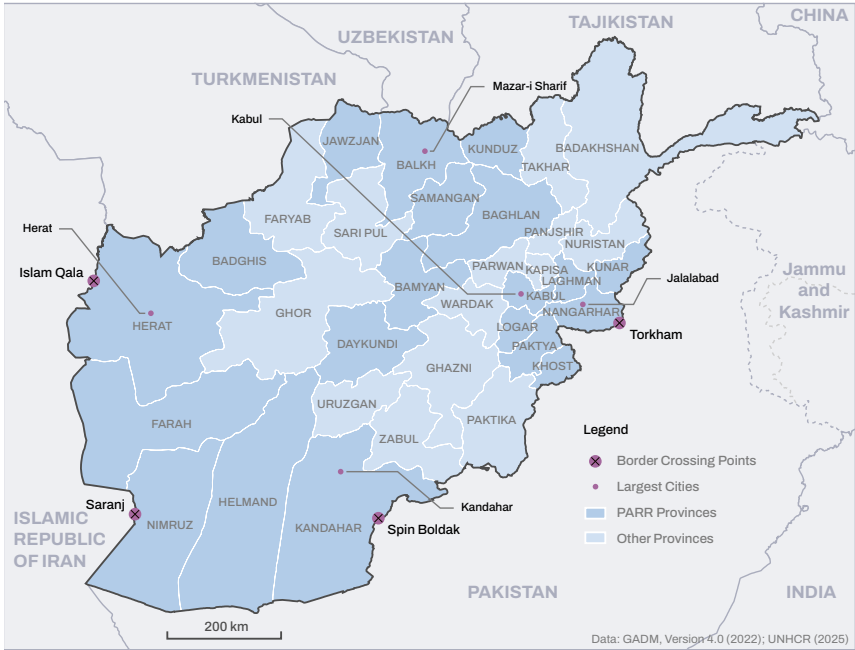
The IEA has also elevated reintegration to a national policy priority, introducing initiatives on land allocation, livelihoods, documentation and access to services. However, the overwhelming scale of returns continues to test institutional capacity. The socio-economic impacts of mass returns are severe: Afghanistan's labour market is fragile, with limited formal employment and heavy reliance on precarious informal work. Many returnees resort to daily wage labour, which remains insufficient to meet basic needs. Housing shortages intensify pressures on informal settlements, while land allocation schemes risk repeating past failures if implemented without community consultation.

Recurring natural hazards and climate change further compound current challenges, as Afghanistan is among the world's most climate-vulnerable countries.

Recurring natural hazards and climate change further compound these challenges, as Afghanistan is among the world's most climate-vulnerable countries. Vulnerable groups—particularly women, girls and the elderly—face heightened risks of exclusion, exploitation and violence, exacerbated by restrictions on women's rights and access to education. Donor governments and international organisations therefore face multiple dilemmas. They must balance emergency relief with longer-term investments, support returnees without neglecting host communities and engage pragmatically with the IEA without conferring political recognition. Additional challenges include shrinking international assistance, persistent data gaps and the danger of humanitarian aid being politicised. Failure to address these risks could lead to renewed displacement, instability, radicalisation or governance breakdown.

Drawing on primary and secondary evidence and a conflict-sensitive analytical lens, the recommendations emphasise the importance of moving beyond short-term aid towards development-oriented, people-centred approaches that strengthen coherence across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. Priorities include stronger collaboration among the IEA, UN agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector; multi-year, flexible funding that bridges humanitarian and development objectives; and context-specific approaches to service delivery, livelihoods and governance. A rethinking of aid strategies—beyond ‘business as usual’—is required to promote long-term reintegration, address structural weaknesses and strengthen resilience.

MAP 1: AFGHANISTAN'S PRIORITY AREAS OF RETURN (UNHCR'S PARR PROVINCES)



Afghanistan's displacement crisis cannot be addressed through humanitarian relief alone. Sustaining life-saving assistance while building pathways to durable solutions requires principled engagement, livelihood support grounded in economic realities and pragmatic regional cooperation. Without such measures, Afghanistan risks sliding into a new cycle of displacement and fragility—with consequences far beyond its borders.

International and humanitarian organisations remain engaged despite shrinking aid flows and political obstacles.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five decades, successive wars in Afghanistan—compounded by economic instability and environmental shocks—have triggered large-scale internal and external forced displacement (Schmeidl, 2014, 2019). Today, Afghanistan faces a critical juncture as mass deportation and refugee returns from Pakistan and Iran converge with the presence of 4.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), the majority of whom remain in protracted displacement. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than 3.9 million Afghans¹ have either returned ‘voluntarily’² or been forcibly returned from Iran and Pakistan since 2023, including over 1.5 million in 2024 (UNHCR, 2025b) and an additional 2.5 million by 3 September 2025 (UNHCR, 2025c). These mass returns have overwhelmed provincial capacities, strained limited economic resources and increased the risk of secondary displacement.

The cessation of large-scale warfare following the Taliban’s political takeover in August 2021 has not created conditions for a smooth

¹ The calculation of minimum 3.9 million returnees since 2023 until 30 August/3 September 2025 is based on the sum of returns from Pakistan (total, including deportations, cf. Figure 2) and the deportation figures for Iran (cf. Figure 3). We decided to exclude the ‘regular’ return figures from Iran for 2023–25 (marked as hatched areas in Figure 2) because they include a very high proportion of pendular mobility, e.g. as many as one million out of 1.8 million people of returnees from Iran in 2024 were regular cross-border movers, cf. UNHCR, 2025f, p. 7.

² So-called voluntary returns include any returns except deportations, i.e. assisted repatriations and self-decided returns based on mixed motives, including spontaneous returns of Afghans of all statuses such as Amayesh/PoR cardholders and the undocumented, excluding passport holders.

reintegration of returnees. Instead, the country faces overlapping crises: a weak economy, drastic reductions in international assistance and an increasing frequency of climate-induced disasters. These dynamics severely constrain the capacity of both the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and aid agencies to provide adequate support and durable solutions for returnees and IDPs.

The absence of official recognition of the IEA further complicates international engagement and the delivery of aid. Aid organisations operate in a highly constrained environment, facing bureaucratic barriers and access restrictions. Current IEA policies systematically exclude women and girls—or allow only restricted access—to education, health care and humanitarian assistance. This results in a double layer of exclusion for displaced women and girls, who experience vulnerability both as women and displaced persons.

Afghanistan faces a critical juncture as mass deportation and refugee returns converge with the presence of 4.5 million IDPs.

This *bicc report* provides an overview of displacement in Afghanistan, with particular attention to the challenges posed by mass return amid an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

It assesses the country's capacities to absorb returnees and explores how development cooperation might support more sustainable reintegration. It also examines the policy dilemmas facing international agencies: On the one hand, they must engage with local government authorities they do not formally recognise; on the other, they are obliged to ensure that return movements are safe, dignified and durable in a context where livelihoods and basic services remain acutely strained.

The analysis is based primarily on a review of secondary literature and data sources, including published research and internal reports from major international organisations and think tanks working in and on Afghanistan. Given the fluidity of migration and return patterns, inconsistent documentation and shifting legal definitions—often influenced by policy considerations (Schmeidl, 2000, 2016, 2017)—all figures should be treated as approximate. Desk research was complemented by 35 semi-structured interviews and informal conversations held in

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May 2025 with representatives of humanitarian and development agencies (7), local authorities (14), community leaders (3) and returnees (11) (see Appendix 1). These were supplemented by participant observation by the lead authors and a local research partner.

The interviews and observations provide contextual grounding for the evidence review, offering insight into the lived realities of return, governance and aid delivery.

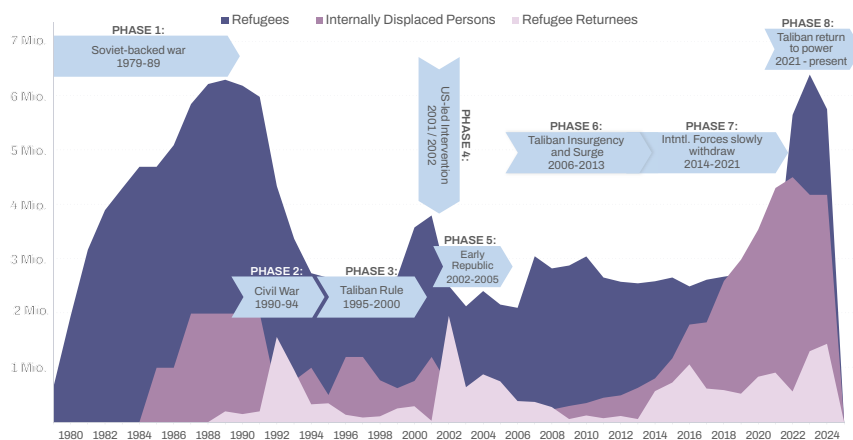
CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

Afghanistan represents one of the world's most protracted and complex displacement crises, shaped by more than five decades of conflict, political upheaval and economic fragility (Schmeidl, 2014, 2019). For many Afghans, mobility has long been both a coping mechanism and a means of survival—driven as much by the search for safety as by the pursuit of livelihoods and opportunity. Across successive waves of forced displacement and return, movement has rarely been linear or permanent: Many returnees have faced renewed insecurity, drought or loss of income, prompting repeated cycles of migration (Schmeidl, 2019, see Figure 1). These overlapping patterns of conflict-induced and economically motivated mobility have created a fluid landscape in which families often straddle borders and rely on migration networks for social and financial resilience. As a result, Afghanistan's displacement

dynamics are deeply regional, with neighbouring countries—particularly Pakistan and Iran—continuing to shoulder the primary responsibility for hosting Afghan populations, often with limited and inconsistent international support (Mielke & Schetter, 2022).

FIGURE 1: AFGHANISTAN DISPLACEMENT DYNAMICS INVOLVING IRAN AND PAKISTAN OVER TIME



Source: Authors based on long-term/ various data sources by UNHCR/ IOM/ IDMC; ©bicc/Julian Schindler

Since 2001, return movements have included voluntary and forced dimensions. In the years immediately following the fall of the first Taliban Emirate in late 2001, UNHCR oversaw one of its largest-ever repatriation efforts, with around 3.5 million Afghans returning home between 2002 and 2006 (UNHCR, 2014; Turton & Marsden, 2002; Kronenfeld, 2008). Although the pace of return slowed thereafter, more than 5.8 million had returned by March 2014 (UNHCR, 2014). After 2014, the trend in returns increasingly shifted from voluntary to coerced or forced, as security in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate and both Iran and Pakistan adopted more restrictive refugee and migration policies—suspending registration efforts and escalating deportations (Majidi, 2017). In 2017 alone, over 1.6 million Afghans returned from Pakistan—described by Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2017) as one of the largest unlawful forced returns in recent history. Between 2015 and 2018,

approximately four million Afghans were returned from both countries, underscoring the ongoing volatility of displacement and return in the region (Rahimi & Hussaini, 2018; Kamruzzaman et al., 2022).

These cycles of population movement over the past two decades set a clear precedent for the large-scale forced returns unfolding since 2023, underscoring both the entrenched fragility of Afghan displacement and the persistent absence of durable solutions—though current dynamics are likely to eclipse the numbers of the past very soon.

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1.1 (FORCED) MASS RETURNS FROM IRAN AND PAKISTAN SINCE 2021

The profile of Afghan citizens residing in Iran and Pakistan is highly diverse, reflecting overlapping histories of conflict, migration and shifting policy regimes. These populations include both Convention-based refugees—those who fled persecution and conflict in the 1980s and 1990s during the Soviet occupation and subsequent civil wars—and labour migrants who primarily moved in search of work or survival opportunities. In practice, however, these categories often blur, as most movements are driven by a complex mix of conflict, insecurity, economic

Iran and Pakistan remain among the world's largest hosts of Afghan nationals, with an estimated 6.76 million Afghans still residing across both.

hardship, drought and, more recently, the Taliban's 2021 takeover (Iqbal & McAuliffe, 2022). Many Afghans have moved back and forth between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan—engaging in circular mobility shaped by intertwined protection and livelihood needs. As such, their experiences only partially align with the 1951 Refugee Convention definition of who is a refugee, which is

why there are multiple categories and legal statuses for Afghans residing in neighbouring countries (Naseh, 2025). Iran also serves as a transit country, while Pakistan has hosted Afghans awaiting resettlement in the United States, Germany or other Western countries since 2021. For many, however, return remains unsafe or economically unviable, leading

to protracted exile—sometimes spanning generations—where Afghans are deeply embedded in host communities yet face mounting pressure from tightening host country policies, crackdowns and forced returns.

Afghan refugees and undocumented migrants in Iran and Pakistan have faced an intensified campaign of forced returns, particularly since Pakistan announced its “Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan” (IFRP) in September 2023. The crackdown—marked harassment, intimidation and the threat of arrest—has compelled many Afghans to leave under duress, allowing Pakistani authorities in particular to label these departures as ‘voluntary.’ While Pakistan’s measures have generated widespread fear and pressure, Iran has carried out a higher volume of official deportations, supplemented by workplace raids, detention and restrictions on essential services to further coerce Afghans into leaving.

Despite the scale of recent returns (3.9 million from both countries between 2023 and 3 September 2025), Iran and Pakistan remain among the world’s largest hosts of Afghan nationals, with an estimated 6.76 million Afghans still residing across both. Only about 2.2 million are formally registered as refugees (UNHCR, 2025i), underscoring the protracted, fluid and often undocumented nature of Afghan displacement in the region.

1.1.1 (FORCED) MASS RETURNS FROM PAKISTAN

In October 2023, when Pakistan announced the IFRP and began forcing Afghans to return, the country was hosting between 3.7 million (UNHCR estimate) and 4.4 million (Pakistani government estimate) Afghan nationals with varying legal statuses (see Appendix II):

- **Undocumented Afghans (approx. 2.2 million):** This group includes individuals in refugee-like situations without valid documents—such as those with expired visas, passports without

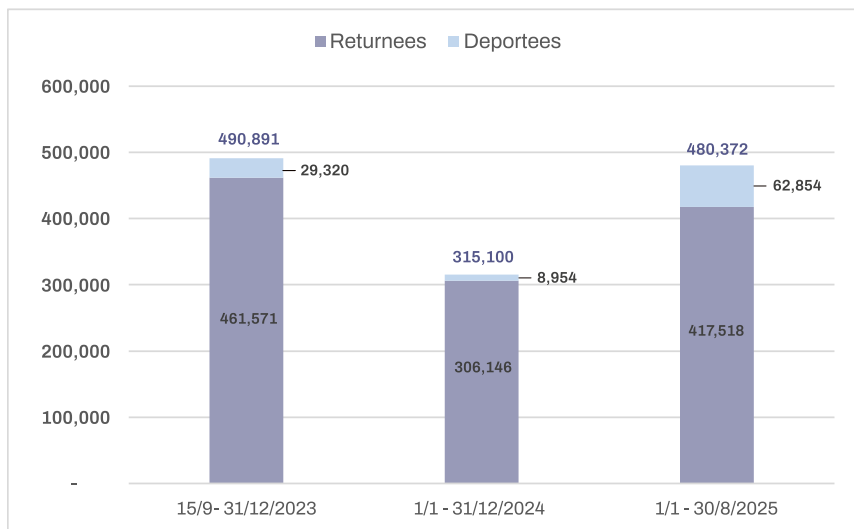
legal stay or only Afghan ID cards (*tazkiras*) . Many arrived after 2021 on short-term visas while seeking asylum or evacuation. They were the primary target of Phase 1 of the IFRP.

- **Proof of Registration (PoR) card holders (approx. 1.45 million):** Issued to Afghans in refugee-like situations who arrived before 2005, these cards provide temporary legal status and access to basic services. Although initially set to expire in June 2023, a one-year extension announced in July 2024 extended their validity to 30 June 2025.
- **Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders (approx. 800,700):** Issued between 2017 and 2018 by Pakistan’s National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) with IOM support, ACCs confirm Afghan citizenship and grant temporary residence—but not refugee status. They cannot be renewed or used to register children born after their issuance, providing only limited protection from deportation (Rahimi & Hussaini, 2018; IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix [DTM], 2024a, 2025b; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC] & Afghan Red Crescent Society [ARCS], 2025).

Pakistan’s phased implementation of the IFRP began with undocumented Afghans (Phase 1), followed by Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders (Phase 2), and PoR cardholders (Phase 3). Although government circulars stated that returns of ACC and PoR holders should be voluntary, both groups have faced increasing pressure to leave—through a combination of direct deportations and a coercive environment that undermines the protective intent of these documents. ACC holders were explicitly targeted in later phases, with authorities issuing deportation deadlines—such as 31 March 2025, later extended to 10 April—after which removals would begin (ACAPS 2023d; IFRC & ARCS, 2025; Afghanistan Border Consortium, 2025). These deadlines are frequently extended, and deportation notices are routinely delivered by police, contributing to widespread fear and uncertainty.

By 30 August 2025, 480,400 Afghans had already returned from Pakistan, bringing the total since 15 September 2023 to 1,286,363—an unprecedented scale of returns (UNHCR & IOM 2025). Afghans all over Pakistan—particularly in Islamabad, Punjab and Baluchistan—continue

FIGURE 2: RETURN OF AFGHAN NATIONALS FROM PAKISTAN AS OF 30 AUGUST 2025



Source: UNHCR-IOM, 2025 ©bicc/Julian Schindler

to face arrest, detention and deportation, often without access to legal safeguards while in custody (ACAPS 2023d; IOM DTM, 2024a, 2025b). Arrests and detentions surged dramatically in 2025, reaching 62,854 reported cases as of 30 August compared to just over 10,000 in 2024 and 30,000 in 2023, the majority involving undocumented migrants or ACC holders (UNHCR & IOM 2025, p. 2). Deportations have followed a similar trajectory, more than doubling as a share of returnees—from six per cent in 2023 to 13 per cent in 2025 (see Figure 2).

The pervasive climate of fear—including police raids, harassment, threats, arbitrary confiscation of belongings and worsening economic conditions—has prompted many Afghans to leave pre-emptively, resulting in forced returns being recorded as ‘self-organised’ or ‘voluntary’ (IOM DTM, 2024a–d, 2025a–d). Interviews with returnees confirm that escalating hostility—including harassment, extortion, economic

hardship and fear of police mistreatment—compelled their departure.³ Even those holding valid documents or asylum-seeker letters from UNHCR were not spared; some were told to ‘go back to your own country,’ and deportations frequently followed when bribes could not be paid.⁴

Many returnees described the harassment of women and girls as especially distressing⁵, with decisions to return often triggered by the inability to protect family members or cope with the psychological toll on children.⁶ Others reported abandoning homes, businesses and assets due to unaffordable living costs and lack of protection—challenges compounded by the breakdown of community support networks.⁷ For many, the cumulative pressure became ‘too much,’ leaving return as the only option.⁸ The emotional toll was profound: While return was primarily driven by fear and insecurity, it was also motivated by a desire to reclaim dignity and live in peace.⁹

The journey back to Afghanistan—partly self-organised, partly via buses and/or trucks arranged by Pakistan’s security agencies and almost always with an intermediate stop at camps before the border crossings—was not always safe. Many reported experiencing physical or emotional violence en route (Protection Monitoring Report, 2025). For some, crossing the border nonetheless brought relief—one returnee characterised the experience as “being released after spending 20 years in prison”.¹⁰

³ Returnee interviews 1-3-4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

⁴ Returnee interview 1, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

⁵ Returnee interview, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

⁶ Returnee interview 4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

⁷ Returnee interviews 1-3-4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025.

⁸ Returnee interview 3, Kabul, 7 May 2025.

⁹ Returnee interviews 1-3-4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

¹⁰ Returnee interview, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

1.1.2 (FORCED) MASS RETURNS FROM IRAN

The number of Afghans residing in Iran has been difficult to document consistently. In 2025, the Iranian government revised its estimate upward from approximately five million in mid-2024 (Naseh, 2025) to 6.1 million. The current figure includes (with only the first three categories considered as refugees or individuals in refugee-like situations):

- **Registered refugees (*amayesh* card holders; approx. 758,000):** The *amayesh* card is a temporary residence permit and refugee identification document, issued with the technical support of the IOM and in coordination with the Iranian government, to be renewed annually. It entitles the holder to remain in the country and access certain services and generally provides better access to education, healthcare, freedom of movement, labour rights and protection from arbitrary arrest, detention, as well as deportation than other statuses.
- **Afghan ID, passport and visa holders (approx. 1.27 million):** This category includes Afghans who hold valid Afghan passports and/or Iranian visas or residence permits. These are considered either as migrants or individuals in a refugee-like situation. While this status offers some protection from arrest and detention as well as limited freedom of movement, cardholders may struggle to access healthcare and education services despite governmental decrees. Visa holders are more likely to engage in short-term circular movements across the border. Many of these Afghans, including registered refugees, were offered electronic smart ID cards as part of Iran's effort to consolidate identification systems for foreign nationals (UNHCR, 2025d). However, some viewed the initiative as a means of exerting pressure on Afghans, particularly given the prohibitive cost—reportedly around US \$1,700 (Iran International, 2024).
- **Headcounted Afghans (approx. two million):** The headcount exercise led by Iran's Ministry of the Interior aimed to identify undocumented Afghan nationals (mostly labour migrants) and issue them temporary headcount slips. Although this document theoretically provides access to basic services such as

primary healthcare and education, in practice, such access is rarely guaranteed. The headcount slips have not been renewed beyond 20 March 2025, leaving many Afghans in legal limbo. Some observers suspect the exercise served less to protect Afghan nationals than to facilitate future deportations.¹¹

- **Undocumented Afghans (approx. two million):** This group comprises Afghans lacking official documentation to remain in Iran, including both labour migrants and individuals in refugee-like situations. They face severe vulnerabilities and protection risks, including the constant threat of detention and deportation, limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, housing and justice, and the risk of human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

Iran has long maintained restrictive policies toward Afghan migrants, but the scale of deportations has intensified sharply in recent years, driven by economic pressures, security concerns and shifting domestic

Afghan returnees from Iran cite a range of inter-related push factors, with deportation and fear of deportation emerging as primary drivers.

policies (Naseh, 2025). In 2024, Iranian authorities announced plans to deport almost two million undocumented Afghan migrants by March 2025 (Al Jazeera, 2025), a prospect that posed a worst-case scenario for most aid agencies. The situation escalated further in 2025, particularly after Iran's 12-day conflict with Israel, when average daily deportations of Afghans surged from

around 4,400 to over 34,000 individuals (UNHCR, 2025f). This marked a dramatic acceleration compared to previous practices, with nearly 138,000 recorded deportations in June 2025 alone (UNHCR, 2025a).

Between 1 January and 3 September 2025, almost two million Afghans (1,993,000) returned from Iran, 60 per cent of them through deportations (UNHCR, 2025a, Figure 3). This shows that Iran has acted on the threats it issued the previous year. It is important to note, however, that

¹¹ INGO interview, 15 May 2025, online.

FIGURE 3: RETURN OF AFGHAN NATIONALS FROM IRAN AS OF 3 SEPTEMBER 2025



Source: UNHCR (2025a, 2025e), ©bicc/JulianSchindler

UNHCR has only recently begun to track voluntary refugee returns from Iran systematically (UNHCR, 2025k). As a result, current return figures for Iran also capture regular cross-border movements, not solely refugee returns (UNHCR, 2025a), which may help explain the high (total) numbers.

Afghan returnees from Iran cite a range of interrelated push factors, with deportation and fear of deportation emerging as primary drivers—particularly for those lacking valid documentation, a vulnerability that has grown since late 2023 (IOM DTM, 2024a, 2025b; Protection Monitoring Report, 2025). Economic hardship, inflation, limited job opportunities and exploitative labour conditions have also led many to leave after exhausting their options. Returnees described feeling unsafe in Iran due to frequent police harassment, risk of arrest or deportation—even for those with valid documents—and exposure to threats such

as trafficking, robbery, withholding of wages and restricted access to services. New restrictions, including regional entry bans and the invalidation of temporary documents, further erode legal protection, leaving many unable to avoid detention without paying bribes.¹²

Although many returns are officially recorded as voluntary, most were induced by sustained pressure and worsening living conditions, due to the deterioration of Iran's economy—not least due to international sanctions. Returnees frequently described their decisions as made under duress rather than out of free choice.¹³ Widespread discrimination, deteriorating public attitudes and barriers to justice reinforced Afghans' sense of marginalisation and decreasing support structures. The coercion intensified through restrictive measures, such as the policy introduced on 21 March 2025 that bars undocumented Afghans from accessing essential services, including healthcare, education and housing (Tolow News, 2025). These pressures were particularly severe for families: young people unable to continue their education, elderly relatives facing detention¹⁴ and households losing homes, businesses or assets—including property that could not be reclaimed after deportation due to ownership registration barriers.¹⁵ Despite material losses, many returnees expressed relief upon return, describing the comfort of being in their own country, free from harassment and surrounded by shared language and culture—a return to dignity and belonging.¹⁶

¹² Returnee interviews 1-2, Herat, 13 May 2025; Returnee interview 2, Kabul, 7 May 2025.

¹³ Returnee interviews 2-4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview 2, Herat, 13 May 2025.

¹⁴ Returnee interview 2, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview 2, Herat, 13 May 2025.

¹⁵ DoRR interview, Herat, 13 May 2025.

¹⁶ Returnee interviews 2-4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview 2, Herat, 13 May 2025.

1.2 INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Internal displacement has long been a defining feature of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, driven not only by conflict—particularly during intense phases such as 1992–1994—but also by recurring natural hazards, including droughts, floods, earthquakes and famines. Many IDPs experience so-called protracted displacement, remaining displaced for five years or longer without achieving durable solutions—that is, without being able to return home, locally integrate or resettle elsewhere in safety and dignity. Repeated displacement is also common, especially among those affected by climate-related shocks (e.g., floods, droughts) or natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes), who are often forced to move multiple times in search of secure livelihoods and habitable conditions.

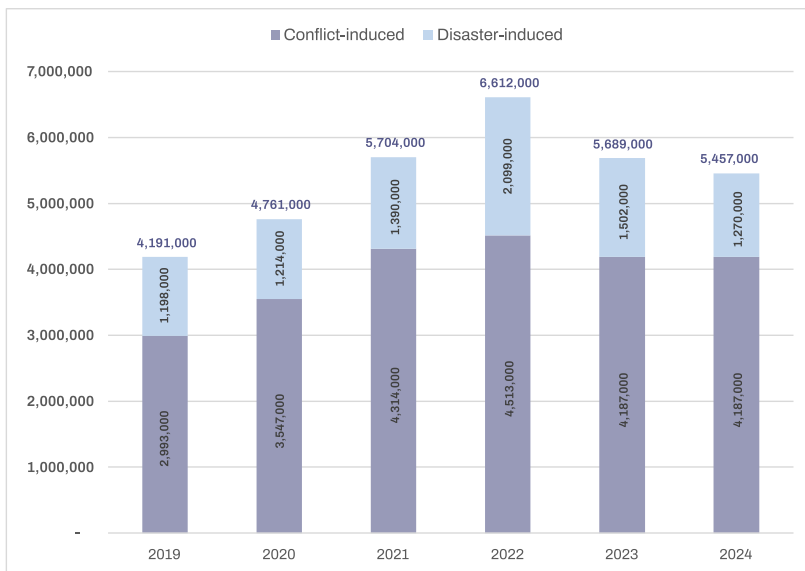
As of the end of 2024, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2025a, p. 65) estimated that 5.4 million people remained internally displaced in Afghanistan, including 4.2 million displaced by conflict prior to 2021 (Figure 4)—out of an estimated total population of 39.2 million.¹⁷ UNHCR (2025h, 2025i), by contrast, reported a lower figure of 3.22 million conflict-induced IDPs. This one-million discrepancy underscores the

¹⁷ The figure represents the average between the Afghan government's 2024 population figures (35.7 million) and 2024 World Bank estimates (42.6 million). For the population data, cf. <https://nsia.gov.af/library>, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan>. The discrepancy of seven million is significant and cannot be resolved. Only a partial census was conducted in the 1980s, and population figures have been extrapolated ever since. The current government has announced a census, but no details are known (as of September 2025).

methodological and structural difficulties in monitoring displacement in Afghanistan's complex and fluid context (Schmeidl & Hedditch, 2018; Schmeidl, 2017).

Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, UNHCR reported that approximately 1.2 million IDPs spontaneously returned to their places of origin (largely in previously inaccessible rural areas), with an additional 450,000 returning by the end of 2024.¹⁸ The IEA has actively encouraged such return movements, including through evictions from informal urban settlements (ACAPS, 2023a, 2024a). However, many displaced families lack viable places to return to due to insecurity, loss of land or destroyed homes, which raises the likelihood that returns will be temporary and lead to cycles of secondary displacement, making a significant reduction in IDP figures unlikely in the future (ACAPS, 2024c).

FIGURE 4: IDPS IN AFGHANISTAN (STOCK FIGURES)



Source: IDMC, 2025, ©bicc/JulianSchindler

¹⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/afghanistan>

Figure 4 illustrates that disaster-induced displacement in Afghanistan is no longer temporary, with more than one million IDPs remaining permanently displaced during 2024. Flow figures further indicate sharp spikes in displacement during emergencies such as the earthquakes in Paktika (2022) and Herat (2023), which displaced an estimated 418,000 and one million people respectively (IDMC, 2025), as well as the most recent ones on 31 August, 4 and 23 September 2025 in Kunar and Nangarhar—a region to which 370,000 Afghans from Pakistan and Iran had returned since January 2025 (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2025, p. 5).¹⁹ This emerging trend signals a gradual shift in the internal displacement landscape, underscoring the growing impact of climate-related and natural hazards—an issue likely to intensify in the coming years and requiring forward-looking, climate-sensitive responses.

With long-term IDPs and returnees unable to reintegrate into their areas of origin, Afghanistan's internal displacement crisis is set to remain widespread and protracted.

The dynamics are further compounded by mass returns from Iran and Pakistan, where many returnees—especially those forcibly returned—face immediate secondary displacement due to lack of shelter, livelihoods or land (UNHCR, 2025j). Combined with the pressures faced by long-term IDPs and returnees unable to reintegrate into their areas of origin, Afghanistan's internal displacement crisis is set to remain widespread and protracted. This convergence of climate-induced displacement and mass returns highlights the urgent need to address reintegration not only as a humanitarian challenge but as a structural issue central to Afghanistan's long-term stability.

¹⁹ As of the time of writing (September 2025), the number of IDPs related to this latest earthquake series was not clear. OCHA (2025, p. 7) estimated that 498,130 people were in need of emergency shelter and that 6,500 houses were damaged or destroyed, with many households “currently sheltering outdoors, some in makeshift shelters and informal settlements.”

CHAPTER 2

GOVERNANCE AND RESPONSE MECHANISMS FOR RETURNS

The main regional policy framework governing returns to Afghanistan is the Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR). Introduced in 2012, the SSAR built on and expanded the earlier Tripartite Agreements between Afghanistan, UNHCR and either Pakistan or Iran, establishing a broader cooperation framework that links humanitarian and development efforts. Its core objective has been to support the voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration of Afghan refugees as the preferred so-called durable solution (Ahmadi & Lakhani, 2016).

In December 2019, the SSAR was transformed into the SSAR Support Platform aligned with the Global Compact on Refugees (2018) and operationalised through an initial Portfolio of Projects in 2020 (UNHCR,

n.d.). Following Pakistan's IFRP in late 2023, both the IEA and international agencies began responding to large-scale refugee returns. Most recently, the SSAR Support Platform Local Core Group in Afghanistan was relaunched to revitalise coordination and mobilise resources for reintegration (Asia Displacement Solutions Platform [ADSP], 2025).

The Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees established a broader cooperation framework that links humanitarian and development efforts.

However, as these processes are still evolving—and implementation varies across regions—it remains too early to fully assess how these mechanisms are functioning in practice or the extent to which they are addressing the diverse realities of returnees.

2.1 INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

Over the past two decades, international actors have worked with successive Afghan governments through multilateral and bilateral channels to address large-scale displacement—internal and cross-border, voluntary and forced—through a range of strategies and policies (see Figure 5 for an overview of the most important ones). Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, however, these frameworks have become less effective, in part due to the lack of international recognition of the IEA.

International agencies, including UN agencies and (I)NGOs, have continued to provide humanitarian and protection assistance to IDPs and returnees within different SSAR-related frameworks and through various mechanisms post-2021. As outlined in Figure 5, these include emergency response mechanisms and plans, as well as needs assessments such as the Afghanistan Returnees Rapid Needs Assessment (ARRNA), completed under World Bank technical leadership in February 2024 through the Durable Solutions Working Group. In addition, the Afghanistan Border Consortium, formed in 2023 as an alliance of 12 humanitarian organisations²⁰ led by IOM, has since provided

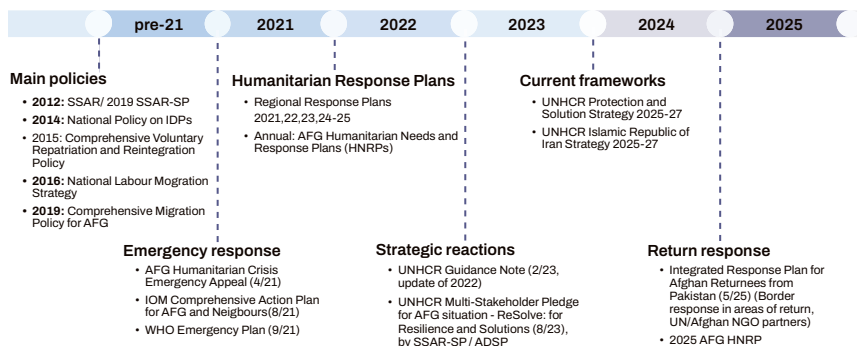
²⁰ These include Danish Refugee Council (DRC), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Medecins sans Frontiers (MSF), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Premiere Urgence International (PUI), Save the Children International (SCI), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO). All are present at the Zero Point, plus UNHCR partner, the NGO Welfare Association for the Development of Afghanistan (WADAN) and Save the Children in Torkham.

emergency assistance at major border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan, so-called Zero Points, IOM-run reception centres, transit centres and encashment centres for vulnerable returnees and households. UNHCR complements this by supporting PoR cardholders and deported asylum seekers.

The reception centres are strategically positioned near official border crossings with Iran in the west (Islam Qala, Herat) and south-west (Saranj, Nimroz), and with Pakistan in the south (Spin Boldak, Kandahar) and east (Torkham, Nangarhar). In coordination with the IEA, the Border Consortium, the UN system and INGOs (such as the French charity Agence d'aide à la coopération technique et au développement–ACTED, Norwegian Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee and Oxfam) have progressively scaled up and adjusted border operations since mid-September 2023, allowing assistance to be provided on the day of arrival. A coordination mechanism is also in place within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IFRC). These actors, working directly or through national partners, address needs such as shelter, water, sanitation, hygiene and access to education.

Humanitarian actors increasingly recognise that durable solutions for mass returns can only be achieved if emergency response at the border is systematically linked to mid- and long-term support in areas of return. This recognition is reflected in the Integrated Response Plan for Afghan Returnees from Pakistan (Border Response and Reintegration Response in Areas of Return), launched in May 2025 by the Afghanistan Border Consortium (2025) under IOM's lead in partnership with UN and NGO actors. This response plan highlights several key enabling conditions for the successful and durable reintegration of returnees, many of which have been identified in research for some time. Beyond improved security (Ahmadi & Lakhani, 2016; Rahimi et al., 2018; Samuel Hall et al., 2018; Majidi, 2017), these include broader human security and social justice—both of which remain elusive in today's Afghanistan, given the systemic discrimination against women (UN Women, 2025a, 2025b). Access to essential services such as health-care, education and social safety nets is equally vital (Samuel Hall et al., 2018). To secure such access, documentation and legal identity are

FIGURE 5: TIMELINE OF MIGRATION-RELATED POLICIES AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES IN AFGHANISTAN



Source: authors, @bicc/Katja Mielke & JulianSchindler

prerequisites (Majidi, 2013, Samuel Hall & ADSP, 2024b). Housing, land and property (HLP) rights are another critical factor, as unresolved land claims and the absence of property restitution continue to block durable solutions (Majidi, 2013).

Long-term reintegration therefore requires a combination of legal support for returnees and substantial investment in both urban and rural development (Mielke et al., 2018; Samuel Hall & ADSP, 2024a; Harild et al., 2015). This includes fostering integration with host communities, providing targeted assistance to vulnerable groups (such as the poorest and/or single female-headed households, the elderly and large families), and the creation of sustainable livelihoods, which is particularly essential for rural returnees who depend on land (Majidi, 2013; Harild et al., 2015). Development interventions must also focus on expanding housing, employment and income opportunities. The private sector, though often underutilised, could play a greater role in job creation and reintegration (Harild et al., 2015). Taken together, these factors underscore the need for reintegration strategies that go beyond short-term humanitarian relief, linking legal, social and economic interventions to broader structural transformation.

This is exactly the focus of UNHCR's Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARRs), which serves as the core geographic framework for reintegration programming. As of 2024, UNHCR had designated 80 PARRs across Afghanistan—five cities and 75 districts encompassing more than 12,000 villages—with around 17 million Afghans residing in these areas, including both returnees and host communities (UNHCR, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). Selection criteria included high return rates, the presence of displaced populations, accessibility and capacity to support reintegration. This reflects a 'whole-of-community' approach that aims to promote social cohesion and resilience, and PARRs remain integral to the broader SSAR.

Operationally, the PAARs are embedded in the UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan (UNSFA), and UNHCR's multi-year Protection and Solutions Strategy for Afghanistan (2025–2027), and coordinated through two complementary platforms: OCHA-led regional Inter-Cluster Coordination Groups (ICCGs) for emergency assistance; and the Durable Solutions Working Groups (DSWGs) at national and regional levels, led by the Durable Solutions Secretariat at the UN Resident Coordinator's Office (RCO) focusing on reintegration programming (UN & NGO Partners, 2025). The intention is to achieve cross-sectoral coherence between humanitarian and development actors, following an area-based approach that treats returnees and non-returnee population equally as beneficiaries (Afghanistan Border Consortium, 2025). While this is an ambitious framework, significant challenges remain—not least ensuring continuity of support once returnees move beyond border facilities such as Zero Point and the transit centres.

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2.2 IEA RESPONSE

The IEA has not formally renounced existing international policy frameworks and continues to coordinate with the United Nations and (I)NGOs across all administrative levels. At the same time, it is developing its own approach—most notably elevating reintegration to a national policy priority and integrating returnee assistance into national development plans (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2025). Yet the sheer scale and speed of returns, combined with Afghanistan’s underlying fragilities, have placed immense strain on the capacity of all actors involved, underscoring the need for enhanced, long-term and well-coordinated support.

In the absence of a comprehensive national policy, the IEA has introduced several institutional and operational measures to manage the mass returns.²¹ Its stated intention is to pursue an integrated approach that links emergency reception with (re)integration assistance. Emergency response is led by a newly established interministerial High Commission for Refugees and Returnees (*Komision-e a’li rasidagi ba mushkelati muhajeran wa a’datkunandagan*)—known in short as Returnees Affairs Commission—created by decree of the Amir in October 2023 and headed by the Second Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi (Ariana News, 2023). The Refugee Affairs Commission’s Secretariat oversees twelve committees responsible for resolving operational

²¹ According to Samuel Hall, the national authorities appear to have produced a semi-official document titled “Policy and Response of Afghan Returnees” in 2024. However, the authors have been unable to locate it, and interviewees from the IEA at Directorate levels could not confirm its existence or content either.

issues.²² Each committee is headed by a minister, with several relevant ministries represented.

The sheer scale and speed of returns have placed immense strain on the capacity of all actors involved.

The activities of the Returnees Affairs Commission Secretariat and the committees are financed through an extraordinary funding line within the Administrative Office of the Prime Minister (AOP) budget. All committees coordinate closely with the Provincial Directorates (DoRRs) of the IEA Ministry of

Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR). At the provincial level, the MoRR branches are tasked with overseeing mid- to long-term (re)integration measures. Provincial and district-level branches of the MoRR depend on the MoRR budget for reception support; however, the implementation of these measures largely awaits international humanitarian and development assistance.

2.2.1 EMERGENCY RESPONSE: RECEPTION OF RETURNEES

As emergency response, the IEA has set up registration points and temporary camps at the border—most notably Islam Qala and Saranj on the border with Iran (Milak), and Torkham and Spin Boldak on

²² The different committees cover the following areas 1) registration, verification and reception of returnees; 2) transport and transfer; 3) temporary settlement; 4) health affairs and services; 5) mobilisation and coordination of humanitarian assistance; 6) allocation of land for permanent resettlement; 7) information and public awareness; 8) facilitating services of traders and industrialists; 9) organising religious and educational affairs; 10) leasing land and transferring property to returnees; 11) creating employment opportunities; 12) financial affairs and resource management.

the border with Pakistan.²³ The current response architecture along Afghanistan's eastern border was first established in reaction to the first major expulsion drive following the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP)'s announcement in September 2023. At that time, the registration facilities at the border crossings (Zero Points) were expanded and reception camps such as Omari camp in Torkham and Anjargi camp in Takhta Pul district near Spin Boldak) were introduced.

After returnees have crossed the border, IEA security organs conduct an initial security check to detect potential fraudulent returnee claims.²⁴ At Torkham, the IEA conducts joint screenings with UNHCR and IOM, noting down the names and data of new arrivals in accordance with each agency's mandate. These screenings monitor population flows and determine eligibility for immediate humanitarian assistance. After the initial screening, arrivals undergo an extended registration procedure at the offices of various IEA-run committees for emergency relief. These committees operate partly at Zero Points, partly in IEA reception camps and include:

- Registration, confirmation and reception committee (biometric registration, joint screening/referral for IOM [in charge of undocumented returnees, incl. ACC holders] and UNHCR [in charge of PoR card holders, deported asylum seekers and deported resettlement cases]);
- Health affairs and services committee (provision of food and SIM cards free of charge, health screening and treatment where necessary, possible vaccination);
- Temporary settlement committee (tent allocation/monitoring for stay in the reception centre [as desired, usually up to 3–4 days], water tank oversight);

²³ Most other border crossings—particularly those along Afghanistan's north-eastern border north of Torkham, i.e. bordering Pakistan's north-western areas—are closed. The only ones operating with returnee reception are Angur Ada (Paktika), Dand Patan (Paktia), Zanjir/Shamalzo (Zabul) and the crossing in Nimroz (IEA, 2023). As of May 2025, Bahram Shah (Helmand), Ghulam Khan (Khost), Bermal (Paktika) and Kong (Nimruz) have also been receiving returnees, with basic reception infrastructure considered/ under way (IO representative interview, 25 May 2025, Jalalabad).

²⁴ Head of the DoRR Nangarhar interviews, Jalalabad, Torkham, 24 May 2025: Anecdotal insights shared by an INGO suggest that the IEA use WhatsApp-Groups to carry out security and background checks of returnees (INGO interview, Kabul, 20 May 2025).

- Transport and transfer committee (providing transport from Zero Points to reception camp and renting vehicles to transport returnees to their 'home' provinces);
- Labour committee (registration of returnees' qualifications for later referral to employers/hiring);
- Information and public awareness committee (process explanation and provision of immigration papers);
- Finance management committee (hand out of cash assistance, 5,000 to 10,000 AFN per family²⁵);
- Land allocation committee (registration for land/shelter allocation and verification that the returnee does not own land—the Cabinet tasked the Returnees Affairs Commission in a Cabinet meeting in April 2025 to provide returnees with land).

The committees report directly to the provincial branch of the Returnees Affairs Commission, which then forwards all information to the Commission's Secretariat in Kabul. This reporting line effectively excludes

the MoRR from the emergency response chain,²⁶ although MoRR remains involved operationally in some committees. While in May 2025, the mentioned committees provided services at Zero Points and IEA reception camps on the Pakistan border, IOM additionally ran its own reception camps near each location (Kandahar, Torkham). According to IEA officials, efforts were underway to consolidate all possible committee services in the IEA camps.²⁷

The response architecture along Afghanistan's border was established in reaction to the first major expulsion drive following the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan's announcement.

²⁵ Initially, varying amounts were handed out and later standardised to 10,000 AFN per family regardless of size by the IEA (DoRR interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025), or 2,000 AFN per person (Registration and Biometric Committee interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025). The figure of 5,000 AFN received for one family was reported by a returnee in Asadabad, Kunar (interview, 23 May 2025).

²⁶ IO Nangarhar field representative interview, Jalalabad, 24 May 2025.

²⁷ IO Nangarhar field representative interview, Jalalabad, 24 May 2025.

In addition to these IEA structures at national and subnational levels, provincial authorities (e.g., governors), NGOs, private and volunteer initiatives/welfare foundations contribute to emergency relief at various stages of arrival and reintegration, although their scope remains limited and largely short-term. Given the scale of returns, the IEA's limited absorption capacity and lacking infrastructure (e.g. shelters, housing, employment and training facilities), local support from community leaders (*arbabs*, *malks*, tribal elders), volunteer initiatives—including self-help groups by ordinary Afghans or businesspeople—personal networks and diaspora remittances remains crucial for addressing returnee needs.²⁸ For example, some volunteers in Kabul have set up self-help initiatives for relatively affluent Afghan returnees from Pakistan, providing (legal) awareness and guidance on accessing assistance and engaging with authorities.²⁹ These informal efforts demonstrate the crucial role of ordinary Afghans in filling immediate gaps, though they cannot replace long-term structural support.

2.2.2 IEA REINTEGRATION RESPONSE

The IEA presents the successful reintegration of returnees as both a test of their governing capacity and a means of gaining international recognition, declaring a strong commitment to meet immediate needs and pursue long-term strategies—described by officials as “very high in both word and action.”³⁰ Operationally, the MoRR is engaged at multiple administrative levels through specialised departments. At the provincial level, MoRR directorates (DoRR) include departments for return and reintegration, IDPs, finance, and protection, each handling different aspects of assistance and reintegration.³¹ In Nangarhar, for example, the DoRR reception department in Jalalabad confirms returnee status,

²⁸ Community leader interview, Herat, 13 May 2025, Community leader interview, Kabul, 10 May 2025.

²⁹ Interview with volunteers, Kabul, 22 May 2025.

³⁰ Spin Boldak Registration and Biometric Committee Member interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025.

³¹ DoRR interviews, Herat, 13 May 2025, Kabul, 13 May 2025 & Kandahar, 13 May 2025.

while the IDP department conducts vulnerability screenings, manages surveys and oversees distribution.³² Officials emphasised that the IDP department in Nangahar would continue to exist, but it assisted other departments with returnees since conflict-related internal displacement had stopped since the IEA came to power and there were no displacement cases due to natural disasters as of May 2025.³³

Protection oversight extends to schooling as well as measures linked to the interministerial emergency response at Zero Points. For example, returnees are granted customs exemptions that allow them to bring personal household items into the country without fees, subject to quantity limits.³⁴ The DoRR also assists returnees in obtaining legal documents such as *tazkiras* (national identification cards) and marriage certificates by referring them to relevant government authorities including the

The IEA's integrated approach to refugee return aims to link emergency response with medium-to long-term, reintegration strategies.

Afghan Statistics and Information Authority.³⁵

At the time of data collection in May 2025, this service was suspended in Herat³⁶ but remained operational in Nangarhar and Kunar.³⁷ Returnees who missed registration at the border can reportedly register and receive assistance at provincial directorates.³⁸ This uneven availability of documentation services highlights significant

barriers to assistance and rights, as legal identity remains a prerequisite for accessing education, healthcare and livelihoods support. However, evidence on how such measures are implemented at the local level remains cursory, limiting a clear understanding of their reach, consistency and impact across different regions.

³² Head of Nangarhar DoRR IDP Department interview, Jalalabad, 24 May 2025.

³³ Head of Nangarhar DoRR IDP Department interview, Jalalabad, 24 May 2025.

³⁴ Herat DoRR interview, Herat, 13 May 2025: However, according to the interviewee, the Herat DoRR does not support vehicle imports.

³⁵ DoRR interview, Kabul, 13 May 2025; Member of Registration & Biometric Committee interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025.

³⁶ Herat DoRR interview, Herat, 13 May 2025.

³⁷ Several interviewees confirmed this during interviews in Nangarhar and Kunar, 23–24 May 2025.

³⁸ Member of Registration & Biometric Committee interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025.

The IEA's integrated approach to refugee return aims to link emergency response with medium- to long-term reintegration strategies. According to different interviews with IEA representatives, the underlying assumption of the authorities seems to be that complementary activities in different dimensions—especially the provision of land, employment and services—will enable lasting reintegration. A central pillar for this comprehensive vision is the development of new settlement areas and townships (*shahraks*).

From shelter to land allocation and township development

Upon immediate arrival, returnees who do not own land or housing are sometimes provided with accommodation in designated temporary settlement areas in the district of return. The idea is that returnees who do not own land are, at least in principle, eligible for land allocation and will be referred to permanent land allocation schemes once these are ready, and depending on the urgency of the individual family's situation (as determined through the vulnerability screening).³⁹ In practice, however, once these designated spaces are filled, many returnees must rely on family or community members to share housing or resort to renting.⁴⁰

For land allocation, the IEA has revived the Land Allocation Scheme (LAS) introduced under the previous government, promoting new townships as a solution for returnee settlement. This imitates UNHCR's Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARR) approach, though both approaches are implemented under very different governance logics⁴¹. According to several IEA officials, the IEA plans to designate approximately 2,000 ha of land in each province for returnee settlement, with provincial leadership responsible for identifying available land. As of 1 May 2025, 58 townships had reportedly been established nationwide for land distribution to returnees, including in Damaan district (Kandahar)⁴², in Jawzjan and the Rabat area near Gardez (Paktiya). In

³⁹ Returnees are free to choose to settle elsewhere and forego land allocation. Interview, Kabul DoRR, Kabul, 13 May 2025.

⁴⁰ Returnee interviews 1-2, Herat, 13 May 2025; Returnee interviews 2-4, Kabul, 7 May 2025.

⁴¹ The main difference is that PARRs emphasise community-based, inclusive development, whereas *shahraks* seem to be envisioned more state-directed and top-down currently.

⁴² Member of Registration & Biometric Committee interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025.

Sites and infrastructure—such as markets, small industries development, health facilities and parks—are to be developed largely by non-state organisations.

Nangarhar, three distribution sites had been identified: Khanage (800 ha), already prepared for allocation; Sparala/Rohdat (3,600 ha), where eligible returnees were being contacted; and Bam/Ghagha in Khogiyani district (2,500 ha), which remained under planning.⁴³ It remains unclear to what extent these new townships, land plots and flats designated for returnees are obtained from state land reclaimed from illegal land grabs by members of the previous government and/or illegal townships established in all major cities of Afghanistan. As of May 2025, a newly appointed Commission to Prevent Land Grabbing and Identify Seized Land had identified 49.7 million acres of usurped land nationwide, of which 3.9 million acres were reportedly reclaimed.⁴⁴

Land allocation is intended to follow family size, although the IEA is still working on finalising uniform criteria.⁴⁵ For example, the Nangarhar DoRR representatives outlined clear rules: Families of up to five members are entitled to five *biswas* (about 500m²), up to ten members to ten *biswas*, and up to 15 members to 15 *biswas*.⁴⁶ Returnees in Kunar, however, reported lacking clear information on the progress of land allocation, pointing to either uneven application of existing rules or procedures still being defined. Experiences varied widely: Some had not heard of the scheme since their temporary settlement in their district of origin, others had been asked to submit their documents without receiving updates, while one reported having received notice of imminent allocation a few days before the interview⁴⁷—underscoring the uncertainty and inconsistency that characterise current land distribution efforts. While land in

⁴³ Nangarhar DoRR interview, Jalalabad, 24 May 2025.

⁴⁴ In mid-May 2025, the Amir issued a decree that reinforced these efforts by establishing a dedicated Ministry of Land and Recovery of Usurped Land Reclamation (*Ariana News*, 2025).

⁴⁵ Kabi DoRR interview, Kabul, 13 May 2025; Member of Registration & Biometric Committee interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025.

⁴⁶ Nangarhar DoRR interview, Jalalabad, 24 May 2025.

⁴⁷ Returnee interview, Kunar, 23 May 2025.

these sites is state-owned, sites and infrastructure—such as markets, small industries development, health facilities and parks—are to be developed largely by non-state organisations and with international investments. For example, the media reported that various charitable organisations, such as the Qatar Red Crescent and the Qatar's Women's Association, support the Gardez project (The Frontier Post 2025a, b). In Nangarhar, the Reintegration Department acts as referral body for (I)NGOs and IOs (IOM, UNHCR, Save the Children, WFP, among others.) through its updated lists of registered returnees, seeking to guide and influence an even and integrated assistance coverage across all 22 districts of Nangarhar province.⁴⁸

From livelihood support to services and job placement

Similarly, service delivery and livelihood support remain tentative and improvised in immediate reception/transit contexts, where initiatives range from supporting returnees in finding work, starting micro-businesses or offering tailoring workshops for women⁴⁹ to providing materials for businesses like chicken farms.⁵⁰ In Nangarhar and southern provinces, Afghan NGOs, for example, reportedly provide vocational training for women.⁵¹ In the longer term, returnees are supposed to be allocated jobs according to their skills, ideally in township-adjacent small industrial development zones. Therefore, the above-mentioned Labour Committee at returnee reception camps reportedly conducts skills screening with the state aim of linking returnees to job placements and vocational training in their final places of settlement. One returnee in Kunar shared his certificate from a six-month training course in electricity issued by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. However, he noted, that since graduation, no job placement had come forward.⁵² These initiatives, however, remain limited in scope and impact, often raising expectations without delivering sustainable opportunities, thereby highlighting the gap between short-term skills training and the

⁴⁸ Nangarhar DoRR Head of Reintegration Department interview, Jalalabad, 24 May 2025.

⁴⁹ Community leader interview, Herat, 13 May 2025.

⁵⁰ Registration and Biometric Committee member interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025.

⁵¹ Phone conversation with Director of a national NGO, 26 May 2025.

⁵² Interview with male returnee, Kunar, 23 May 2025.

creation of viable livelihoods for returnees. Part of the long-term reintegration strategy is also access to education and health care inside the

While the short-term provision of aid and material assistance is operational and partly effective, these measures fall short of creating a systematic approach to support reintegration.

new townships.⁵³ Enrolling returnee children in school is a particular focus, as access to education remains both a central concern and key aspiration for returnee families.⁵⁴ Given the IEA's restrictions on girls' education, however, such opportunities are likely to disproportionately favour boys. Experiences of returnees with service delivery varied: Some reported successfully enrolling their children (sometimes for the first time) while others were unable to do so. One head of

household explained that he could not afford the costs of the school uniforms and school materials for his two children.⁵⁵

While the short-term provision of aid and material assistance is operational and partly effective, these measures fall short of creating a systematic approach to support reintegration, particularly where a township approach is envisaged to serve all needs for shelter, service delivery and employment.

⁵³ Conversation with three Senior IEA Officials, Kabul 6-8 May 2025, Kabul DoRR interview, Kabul, 13 May 2025. Community leader interviews, Herat, 13 May 2025 and Kabul 10 May 2025; Returnee interview 1, Herat, 13 May 2025; Returnee interviews 1-2-4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Kabul DoRR Head interview, Kabul, 13 May 2025; Registration and Biometric Committee member interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025; Returnee interview, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

⁵⁴ Community Leader interviews, Herat, 13 May 2025 and Kabul 10 May 2025; Returnee interview 1, Herat, 13 May 2025; Returnee interviews 1-2-4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Kabul DoRR Head interview, Kabul, 13 May 2025; Registration and Biometric Committee member interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025; Returnee interview, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

⁵⁵ Among surveyed returnees residing in single rooms or hosted by family and community members in Kunar (23 May 2025), Returnee group interviews, Kunar, 23 May 2025.

2.3 IEA COORDINATION WITH INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Throughout the interviews, IEA representatives emphasised their openness to collaborate with any actor—whether (I)NGOs, UN agencies or others—so long as the engagement delivers tangible benefits for returnees. Similarly, international and national actors assisting returnees must coordinate—at least at some basic level—with the IEA if they wish to remain operational in Afghanistan.

At present, coordination between the IEA and international partners remains primarily focused on reception (Zero Point) and transit centres,⁵⁶ with the integrated response approach of the Border Consortium just beginning to take shape. While there are some positive examples of cooperation, such as the ‘joint screening’ and the provision of basic needs and services at arrival points, gaps in coordination are evident. For example, no common database exists, which leads to duplicated or overlapping services, in part due to trust issues. A representative from an international organisation explained that vulnerability data—which is collected by IOM and UNHCR and serves as a referral to the 12 different Border Consortium partners—is withheld from the IEA to protect returnees.⁵⁷ In turn, the committees of the IEA Returnee Affairs Commission

⁵⁶ Interview with IO field representative, Torkham, 24 May 2025.

⁵⁷ Interview with IO Nangarhar field office representative, Jalalabad, 25 May 2025.

conduct their own screening of returnees and establish their own database for long-term reintegration assistance (covering SIM card provision⁵⁸, *tazkira* registration, skills mapping and land allocation registration, among others). As one INGO interviewee remarked: “There is not much coordination with the local authorities. The authorities trace the settlement trajectory of returnees, but this information is not shared.”⁵⁹

Another possible coordination gap exists around transport allowances.

The IEA, for example, provides free transport services from the border to provincial destinations, which are complemented by IOM’s long-standing system of cash grants scaled to distance travelled. When asked whether this constituted a duplication of resources, the answer was that the IOM had always provided the transport allowance and that the IOM cash transfers function as flexible assistance, which returnees may use for other needs. Furthermore, a local administrator at an arrival camp complained that many organisations and foundations offer assistance, but only a few return and implement them.

arrival camp complained that many organisations and foundations offer assistance, but only a few return and implement them.⁶⁰

The IEA’s response has also drawn on bilateral donations. For example, tents provided by China were used at Torkham Zero Point and Omari camp, while Indonesia furnished another large section of Omari camp with orange tents. However, the camp manager voiced concerns about the temporary nature of these camp sites, explaining that they do not provide sufficient protection and that more permanent buildings would be needed as refugee returns are expected to continue for the next 10 to 15 years.⁶¹ Last but not least, according to some interviews, the Returnee Affairs Commission and DoRR protection departments have

⁵⁸ A SIM card is initially valid for three months, which gives an indication of the time frame within which the IEA authorities may have intended to re-establish contact with the returnees at their destination. However, anecdotal evidence on whether this actually occurs is mixed.

⁵⁹ INGO interview, Kabul, 20 May 2025.

⁶⁰ Interview with camp manager, Omari camp, Nangarhar, 24 May 2025.

⁶¹ Interview with camp manager, Omari camp, Nangarhar, 24 May 2025.

expressed an interest in property claims of Afghans dispossessed in Iran and Pakistan, which could be pursued by potential bilateral commissions in the future.⁶²

Overall, coordination remains shaped by the interests of different actors as well as the tension between humanitarian pragmatism and the politics of engagement with the IEA, raising questions about how far international actors can balance immediate needs with longer-term concerns of accountability and legitimacy.

Overall, coordination remains shaped by the interests of different actors as well as the tension between humanitarian pragmatism and the politics of engagement with the IEA.

⁶² Interviews 20 May 2025 with INGO representative in Kabul and 23 May 2025 with former government official, Kunar.

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CHAPTER 3

LONG-TERM DISPLACEMENT IMPACTS ON AFGHAN SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

The long-term impacts of displacement and return in Afghanistan are shaped by the compounded effects of a weak economy, recurrent climate-related disasters, a repressive state that lacks international recognition and shifting regional policies. These dynamics intersect to deepen structural vulnerabilities and intensify pressures on Afghan communities and institutions. Large-scale returns have further strained rural and urban areas already struggling with weak infrastructure, inadequate services and fragile economies. Returnees often encounter serious obstacles to reintegration, including limited livelihoods, insufficient housing and unresolved land or property disputes, while overstretched

The long-term impacts of displacement and return are shaped by the effects of a weak economy, climate-related disasters, a repressive state the lacks recognition and shifting regional policies.

host communities lack the resources to absorb them. The challenges are especially acute in provinces with a high proportion of returnees, for example, in Kunduz, where returnees make up 20 per cent of the province's estimated one million inhabitants (Afghanistan Border Consortium, 2025, p. 50).

Importantly, the strain does not stem from returnees themselves, but from the scale and timing of returns into fragile socio-political environments. The inability of local institutions to mount an adequate response carries wider implications for social cohesion, economic stability and the legitimacy of the IEA. For many—especially those returning after years or decades abroad—the gap between expectations of 'home' and the stark realities they encounter fuels disillusionment and complicates the path to self-reliance.

3.1 ECONOMIC ABSORPTION CAPACITY AND LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

One of the most urgent challenges facing returnees is securing income-generating opportunities in an economy already under immense strain. Afghanistan's formal sector accounts for just nine per cent of total employment, with the vast majority dependent on informal and often precarious work. Unemployment remains high—estimated at around 30 per cent as of mid-2023—and is exacerbated by a saturated labour market, rapid urbanisation and the growing influx of returnees (UNDP, 2025; ACAPS, 2024a, 2024b, 2024d). The World Bank (2025) most recently observed a concerning trend of rising unemployment among the educated and youth, particularly young women, who make up 55 per cent of youth unemployment. The post-2021 economic collapse has drastically reduced household incomes and state capacity. Despite a modest GDP growth of 2.5 per cent in 2024 (World Bank, 2025), Afghanistan's economy remains deeply fragile, with household consumption still sustained largely by shrinking humanitarian assistance.

For many returnees, reintegrating into rural economies is especially challenging (UNHCR, 2025j). Lacking agricultural skills, social networks or start-up capital, they are often excluded from traditional livelihoods. Urban areas, though perceived as offering opportunity, present their own obstacles: fierce job competition, rising housing costs and weak social support (Samuel Hall & International Institute for Environment and Development [Iied], 2024, Sydney, 2020, Mixed Migration Centre,

2019). This mismatch between returnees' skills and market demand—exacerbated by climate-driven disruptions to agriculture—frequently leaves returnees unable to secure even a basic income. Access to work consistently emerges as their top priority.⁶³ Falling wages and irregular work force many into precarious, informal daily-wage labour or street vending to try and cover basic needs. One returnee described being

Failure to generate sustainable livelihoods risks not only fuelling renewed displacement but also undermining the IEA's credibility as an effective governing authority.

forced into street vending after earning a university degree as crossing a personal 'red line.'⁶⁴ Others characterised the lack of employment as 'exhausting,' fuelling deep anxiety about the future.⁶⁵

Long-term unemployment has pushed many to adopt negative coping strategies, such as reducing food intake, pulling children out of school or taking on debt (ACAPS 2023b)

These pressures fall most heavily on young people, women and ethnic minorities, who face additional barriers to employment and economic inclusion (Mirzada & Shapour, 2025). While the IEA is acutely aware of the need to provide returnees with jobs, many call on authorities to create more opportunities—especially for skilled youth—while broader economic revitalisation and labour market integration remain stalled.

Addressing the livelihoods crisis requires more than job creation. It calls for targeted support in vocational training, access to credit and tools and investment in climate-resilient livelihoods. Without such measures, inadequate livelihoods will remain a barrier to sustainable reintegration—and a persistent driver of secondary displacement (Sydney, 2020). Failure to generate sustainable livelihoods risks not only fuelling renewed displacement but also undermining the IEA's credibility as an effective governing authority.

⁶³ Returnee interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025; Returnee interviews 1-3, Kabul, 7 May 2025.

⁶⁴ Returnee interview 1, Herat, 13 May 2025.

⁶⁵ Returnee interview 3, Kabul, 7 May 2025.

3.2 COMPETITION OVER SCARCE RESOURCES: LAND, HOUSING AND PROPERTY

Access to adequate shelter is one of the most significant challenges for returnees. Many do not own land, housing or a secure place to stay upon arrival.⁶⁶ Some were previously displaced by conflict or forced to vacate their homes, only to find their land occupied upon return. Climate change and rapid urbanisation have further reduced available land, especially in cities where housing capacity is already overwhelmed. As a result, returnees are frequently pushed into costly rentals or forced to live temporarily with relatives in overcrowded conditions. They describe shelter as one of their most urgent needs.⁶⁷ Rising demand for shelter has placed added stress on urban informal settlements at the fringes of Kabul, Jalalabad and Herat, many of which expanded under the former (Republican) government (Samuel Hall & iied 2024). Home to an estimated nine million people, these overcrowded areas often lack basic infrastructure (water, sanitation) and services (health care, education), as well as tenure security, leaving returnees in direct competition with host communities (UN Habitat, 2025; ACAPS, 2024a).

As discussed under 3.2.2 (a), the IEA is acutely aware of the need to address this situation and has revived the Land Allocation Scheme

⁶⁶ Returnee interview 1, Herat, 13 May 2025; Returnee interview 3, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interviews, Kandahar, 13 and 14 May 2025.

⁶⁷ Returnee interview 4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview 2, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

(LAS) introduced under the previous government and promotes new townships (*shahraks*) as a flagship component of its reintegration policy.⁶⁸ Yet, past experiences—such as the failed Alicegha project, funded by the Australian government—demonstrate the limitations of such approaches, which have consistently suffered from weak infrastructure, poor access to services and the geographic isolation of sites with limited livelihood opportunities (Majidi, 2013; Samuel Hall & Asia Displacement Solutions Platform [ADSP], 2024a). Furthermore, corruption and weak accountability in past land allocation processes have eroded trust in such schemes, while inadequate resource and water management frameworks fuel tensions with neighbouring communities (Samuel Hall & ADSP, 2024a).

LAS are often based on the flawed assumption that planned settlements can foster viable communities in the absence of meaningful consultation, local acceptance and adequate services and infrastructure. Unsur-

Climate change and rapid urbanisation have further reduced available land.

prisingly, land distribution alone has repeatedly failed to deliver sustainable return or reintegration (Majidi, 2013), with the current process often perceived as opaque, subject to long delays or inconsistently implement-

ed.⁶⁹ Even when land is allocated, returnees often lack access to water, electricity, healthcare, education, employment and transport—making secure shelter only one part of a much larger reintegration puzzle.

Underlying these failures is a broader, systemic issue: Land ownership in Afghanistan is deeply contested and politically charged (Pain, 2013). Decades of conflict and displacement, compounded by climate pressures and population growth, have intensified competition over land (Wily, 2003, 2004; ACAPS, 2023c). Landlessness is not unique to returnees; it is a widespread challenge across the country, driven by weak land registration systems, destroyed cadastral records, unresolved disputes and increasingly scarce inhabitable land (Majidi, 2013).

⁶⁸ INGO interview, online 15 May 2025.

⁶⁹ Returnee interview 1, Herat, 13 May 2025; Returnee interviews 2-4, Kabul, 7 May 2025.

3.3 PRESSURE POINT

CLIMATE CHANGE

Afghanistan is among the world's most climate-vulnerable countries—ranking 35th on the INFORM Risk Index and 6th on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index—yet is one of the least equipped to respond effectively (ACAPS, 2024b). The country faces a widening range of climate-related hazards, including rising temperatures, recurrent droughts, floods, landslides, and sandstorms. These risks are amplified by Afghanistan's semi-arid environment, underdeveloped water infrastructure and decades of institutional fragility. Water scarcity, once seen as a rural issue, now threatens urban areas as well—most acutely Kabul, where an intensifying water crisis puts at risk the lives and livelihoods of its six million residents (Mercy Corps, 2025).

Climate stress has become a significant and intersecting driver of displacement, compounded by rapid population growth, chronic poverty and weak governance. These pressures heighten vulnerability and fuel competition over scarce resources—particularly land and water—often sparking tensions in densely populated or agriculture-dependent areas and between settled populations and pastoral nomads (UNHCR et al., 2025; ACAPS, 2024b; see also Section 4.2). Displacement itself increases exposure to climate risks, as many IDPs and returnees settle in ecologically fragile informal settlements or on the urban periphery, typically without access to basic infrastructure. The collapse of rural water systems—once maintained through international development programmes—has further discouraged return to rural areas, thereby fuelling unplanned urban expansion.

Displacement itself increases exposure to climate risks, as many IDPs and returnees settle in ecologically fragile informal settlements or on the urban periphery.

As noted earlier (see 2.2), climate-induced displacement is steadily rising, with international actors and IEA authorities acutely aware of the need to address climate stress. This shared concern may provide a rare entry point for constructive engagement between the Taliban authorities and international stakeholders. Ultimately, integrating climate resilience into displacement and reintegration efforts will be critical to achieving durable solutions for IDPs and refugee returnees alike.

3.4 NO FUTURE FOR YOUNG AFGHANS, WOMEN AND GIRLS

Women, children and youth make up a substantial share of Afghan refugee returnees: On average, women and girls account for about half of all returnees, while children represent more than 50 per cent (UNHCR, 2025a, c, e, g, k). Anecdotal evidence suggests a rise in female- and even child-headed households among more recent returnees from Iran.⁷⁰

Women and girls face overlapping vulnerabilities linked to gender and displacement status, further compounded by disability, household composition, ethnicity and poverty (Naomi Higham Consultancy LTD/ NHC, 2025). Social exclusion restricts their access to information, decision-making and social networks, limiting autonomy and access to services (NHC, 2025). Upon return, many women lack documentation, restricting their access to aid, healthcare and land or housing rights. This heightens exposure to gender-based violence and psychosocial distress (UN Women, 2025b). Earlier research already documented elevated risks of domestic violence among displaced young women in urban areas, linked to the breakdown of community protection mechanisms and worsening mental health (Schmeidl & Tyler, 2015). These vulnerabilities have since deepened amid poverty and the collapse of support systems, pushing many women toward negative coping strategies (ACAPS, 2023b).

⁷⁰ Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group Meeting, 30 June 2025.

The Taliban's restrictions on women's mobility, work and education further compound these risks (UN Women, 2024a). Female-headed households—especially those without a male guardian (*mahram*)—are often unable to access aid or secure livelihoods, leaving them dependent on others and vulnerable to exploitation, harassment and gender-based violence (Mirzada & Shapour2025). The Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (GiHA WG) recently reported that the IEA is in the process of establishing Women's Centres, where unaccompanied female returnees—those travelling without a *mahram*—are detained alongside other women in similar circumstances, raising significant protection concerns.⁷¹ One recent study concluded starkly that in today's Afghanistan, achieving durable solutions for women and girls is virtually impossible (NHC, 2025).

Female-headed households are often unable to access aid or secure livelihoods, leaving them dependent on others and vulnerable to exploitation, harassment and gender-based violence.

Child returnees also face heightened risks, particularly girls and those returning unaccompanied. Economic hardship and the erosion of safety nets increase the likelihood of child labour, early marriage and other forms of exploitation (ACAPS, 2023b; UN Women, 2025b). As displacement becomes more protracted, barriers to essential services such as health-care, education and livelihoods are not only compounded but increasingly entrenched (NHC, 2025). For educated youth and families with school-aged children, access to education remains a central concern—especially for girls, given the ongoing ban on female education beyond primary school (UN Women, 2025a).⁷² Many parents hope their children can resume their studies and see education as key to rebuilding their lives and securing their children's (economic) future,⁷³ linking hopes for reintegration to access to learning

⁷¹ Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group Meeting, 30 June 2025.

⁷² Returnee interview 2, Herat, 13 May 2025; Returnee interview 4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

⁷³ Returnee interview4, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview, Kandahar, 14 May 2025.

opportunities.⁷⁴ At the same time, many young Afghans—both male and female—experience prolonged states of *waitthood*, a suspended transition into adulthood in which aspirations for education, employment and independence are indefinitely deferred (Schmeidl & Bose, 2016). This chronic lack of opportunity and the inability to meet daily needs through current earnings⁷⁵ fuels frustration and marginalisation and, in some cases, can lead to renewed displacement or recourse to high-risk survival strategies. For young men, this includes vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups such as Islamic State - Khorasan Province or involvement in criminal networks.

The chronic lack of opportunity and the inability to meet daily needs fuels frustration and marginalisation and can lead to renewed displacement or recourse to high-risk survival strategies.

Without targeted and sustained support, the return process risks reinforcing a cycle of disempowerment for Afghanistan's next generation. Yet even within this bleak context, entry points exist. Humanitarian actors highlight the value of programmes that strengthen community resilience, preserve social networks and engage local authorities in pragmatic dialogue on the needs of women, girls and youth (NHC, 2025).

⁷⁴ Returnee interview 4, Kabul, 7 May 2025.

⁷⁵ Returnee interviews 1-3, Kabul, 7 May 2025; Returnee interview, Kandahar, 13 May 2025.

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CHAPTER 4

DILEMMAS AND TRADE-OFFS

Based on primary and secondary evidence and analysed through a conflict-sensitive lens, this assessment finds that international actors responding to Afghanistan's highly complex displacement landscape face profound constraints that require balancing competing priorities. Unmet needs translate directly into heightened risks, while donor governments must navigate difficult trade-offs between humanitarian principles, political realities and operational limitations. If these challenges are inadequately addressed, several destabilising dynamics could unfold:

First, mass returns could lead to widespread frustration, protests or unrest. The inability of the authorities to meet even basic needs could fuel repression and violence, thereby deepening fragility. Second, while many returnees bring diverse skills and experience acquired abroad, the mismatch between their qualifications and Afghanistan's constrained labour market poses a high risk of underemployment. Without targeted vocational training, access to credit or employment networks, these

Tying aid to political agendas undermines trust and blurs humanitarian principles.

assets risk going unused, driving marginalisation—particularly among youth—and increasing susceptibility to recruitment by armed groups. Third, longstanding policies such as land allocation and township schemes, intended to provide plots to land-

less returnees, are prone to failure if poorly designed. Past schemes often placed families in remote, underserved areas without viable livelihood opportunities, leaving them further marginalised. Without integrated planning, such interventions may perpetuate displacement rather than resolve it.

Beyond these risks, donor governments must grapple with a set of dilemmas that underscore the difficulty of sustaining humanitarian engagement in an environment of protracted crisis, political non-recognition and constrained resources. We identified the following dilemmas:

- **Balancing emergency response with durable solutions:** Humanitarian assistance remains essential for survival, but Afghanistan's chronic displacement crisis requires long-term investments in livelihoods, housing and basic services. An exclusive focus on emergencies risks entrenching vulnerability, while development-oriented approaches are politically sensitive and slow to deliver. Bridging this divide requires flexible, multi-year funding that meets urgent needs while supporting gradual reintegration.
- **Tension between voluntary return and coerced repatriation:** While host governments often frame returns as voluntary, Afghans face growing harassment, restrictive policies and intimidation that undermine free choice. This blurring of lines between voluntary and coerced return threatens international protection standards and risks fuelling repeated displacement. Donors face a stark dilemma: Explicitly labelling such movement as forced may strain relations with host governments and jeopardise operational access, yet tacitly accepting the narrative of voluntariness risks masking coercion and eroding asylum norms. The result is a difficult trade-off between preserving influence with host states and upholding core protection principles.

- **Balancing humanitarian independence with politicised return agendas:** Under domestic pressure to manage migration, donors may be tempted to align aid with political objectives, such as incentivising returns or leveraging cooperation from host states and Taliban authorities. While this may deliver short-term results, it risks eroding humanitarian neutrality, compromising the voluntariness of return and weakening protection standards. Tying aid to political agendas also undermines trust and blurs humanitarian principles. The challenge is to sustain principled engagement anchored in the rights of displaced people while resisting pressures to instrumentalise assistance as a tool of migration management or political bargaining.
- **Designing returnee support without alienating host communities:** Returnees often arrive in communities already struggling with poverty and overstretched services. Exclusive targeting of returnees risks fuelling resentment, while overly broad programming can dilute resources and overlook specific vulnerabilities. Donors must therefore calibrate support at the community level, ensuring that both returnees and host populations benefit from assistance. Area-based approaches—defined as interventions focused on a clearly delineated geographic zone, using multi-sector analysis, inclusive of all populations (hosts, returnees, displaced) and engaging local actors in participatory planning—are most likely to foster social cohesion and avoid aid-related tensions (Schell et al., 2020).
- **Support to livelihoods vs. the risk of market saturation:** Sustainable reintegration depends on viable livelihoods, yet Afghanistan's fragile economy has limited absorption capacity. Poorly designed support can saturate local labour markets, drive down wages and heighten competition with host populations. Neglecting livelihoods, however, fuels aid dependency and erodes dignity. Interventions must therefore be tailored to market demand, climate realities and local contexts. Investing in climate-resilient

Poorly designed support can saturate local labour markets, drive down wages and fuel competition with host populations.

agriculture, small enterprises and inclusive economic initiatives that benefit both returnees and hosts can mitigate saturation risks and foster stability.

- **Afghanistan engagement vs. political non-recognition:** A core dilemma stems from the IEA's lack of international recognition (with the exception of Russia) and its policies that contradict donor values, particularly on women and minorities. Avoiding engagement constrains the reach and the effectiveness of assistance, while cooperation risks conferring legitimacy and enabling repression. In practice, engagement often takes pragmatic and technical forms, such as dialogue around service delivery, training or urban planning, without implying recognition. At the same time, sustaining support to civil society is essential to preserve accountability, foster inclusive dialogue and counterbalance authoritarian governance over the longer term.
- **Support to host countries vs. aid focused on Afghanistan:** Donors face the challenge of balancing assistance between Afghanistan itself and neighbouring host countries. Pakistan and Iran still host millions of Afghan refugees, yet declining international support leaves them struggling to cope. Over-prioritising assistance inside Afghanistan risks accelerating forced returns if host states feel abandoned, while focusing too heavily on host countries undermines reintegration prospects in Afghanistan. Effective responses require a comprehensive, cross-border approach that supports Afghans in exile, during return and in reintegration, consistent with regional frameworks such as the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees. Evidence shows that investments across all phases of displacement yield more sustainable outcomes than narrow, return-focused strategies.
- **Data and coordination gaps:** Long-term ('durable') solutions depend on reliable data and effective coordination, yet both continue to be insufficient. Current systems are fragmented, duplicative and poorly harmonised, leaving major gaps in tracking returnees and assessing reintegration outcomes. Donors often deprioritise investment in data and coordination as secondary to service delivery, but without accurate, disaggregated information, programming is poorly targeted, and accountability

suffers. Strengthening interoperability between humanitarian and development actors, harmonising definitions and streamlining data-sharing mechanisms are essential to enable evidence-based planning and long-term reintegration.

Taken together, these risks and dilemmas illustrate the immense difficulty of mounting an integrated response to Afghanistan's displacement crisis under current political and financial constraints. The central challenge is to sustain life-saving humanitarian assistance while simultaneously laying the groundwork for long-term support and solutions that can reduce vulnerability and foster stability. Meeting these challenges requires principled engagement that resists politicisation, programming that balances the needs of returnees and host communities, livelihood interventions grounded in economic realities, pragmatic coordination with IEA authorities and comprehensive regional approaches. Without such measures, Afghanistan risks entering yet another cycle of displacement and fragility, with serious implications not only for its own population but for the wider region.

Evidence shows that investments across all phases of displacement yield more sustainable outcomes than narrow, return-focused strategies.

THE CENTRAL CHALLENGE IS TO SUSTAIN LIFE-SAVING HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR LONG-TERM SUPPORT AND SOLUTIONS THAT CAN REDUCE VULNERABILITY AND FOSTER STABILITY

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Afghanistan's displacement and return crisis remains one of the most complex and protracted in the world. Decades of conflict, political instability, economic collapse and climate shocks have created overlapping vulnerabilities that no single intervention can resolve. The mass returns since 2023, and especially during 2025, have further compounded these pressures, overwhelming institutions, straining host communities and leaving millions of Afghans without durable solutions.

The dilemmas and trade-offs outlined highlight that supporting Afghan returnees is a multifaceted challenge that demands comprehensive, long-term and people-centred strategies. Acknowledging the need for an integrated approach that links emergency relief with reintegration support represents a critical step forward over previous fragmented responses. In Afghanistan, this integrated approach also represents a rare overlap of interest between the IEA and international actors.

The challenge lies in translating principle into practice. Linking emergency assistance to long-term, so-called durable solutions means ensuring that returnees can safely return, reintegrate into their/local communities and rebuild sustainable livelihoods—without being forced to move again. Achieving this requires clearer positioning of international organisations and donors, to a) enable coordination and pragmatic cooperation with the IEA, and b) prioritise development-oriented measures that can make returns sustainable. Reintegration offers one of the few entry points where development engagement can cautiously

'test the ground' for coordination with Taliban subnational authorities and negotiate localised, needs-driven solutions, even amid reduced funding. If designed carefully, such cooperation could help address structural impediments faced by international and Taliban actors, including financial constraints, service gaps and reduced effectiveness. Against this background, we propose the following recommendations to donors and international organisations:

A broader shift towards development-led approaches is essential if returns are to be sustainable.

- **Shift to 'development,' prioritising area-based, needs-driven engagement that centres on people:** A broader shift towards development-led approaches is essential if returns are to be sustainable. This requires addressing challenges at the macro and micro levels—including reconstruction, service delivery and governance (Harild et al., 2015) through area-based, needs-driven strategies that start from the priorities of affected communities rather than the institutional logic of the aid system. In the current context, where traditional peacebuilding and statebuilding are not feasible, donors can still integrate conflict sensitivity and peace-promoting elements with development and humanitarian programming. Applying an Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus-lens can help align immediate relief with long-term recovery and local stability, supporting inclusive livelihoods, community cohesion and participatory decision-making. Programming must respond to the needs of returnees and host communities to mitigate tensions and prevent new sources of conflict. By adopting a principled, locally led and area-based approach—working through Afghan NGOs, community structures and, where essential, technical coordination with IEA actors—donors can strengthen resilience and lay the groundwork for social stability without conferring political recognition.
- **Invest in local coordination and coherence across humanitarian and development responses:** Weak coherence between humanitarian, reintegration and development programming undermines sustainability. Donors should incentivise

collaboration across the actor spectrum (the United Nations, NGOs, Afghan Civil Society Organisations and the private sector) and support integrated approaches that link short-term emergency assistance with long-term recovery. Strengthening coordination platforms such as the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), the Strategic Framework for Displacement Solutions (2025–2027) and regional initiatives that connect host countries with Afghanistan will be essential to finding durable solutions.

- **Expand flexible, multi-year and risk-tolerant funding:** Return and reintegration efforts require predictable, multi-year funding that bridges humanitarian and development responses. The current absence of sustained donor engagement in the context of ever-reduced funding has left (I)NGOs unable to meet community needs or address authority expectations to fill critical service gaps. Limiting support to short-term relief risks perpetuating cycles of vulnerability. Donors should therefore prioritise cross-sectoral investments in housing, livelihoods, basic services and resilience-building, backed by funding modalities that are flexible enough to adapt to political and operational constraints while remaining accountable to affected populations. Importantly, donors should also reconsider restrictions that prevent principled engagement with IEA. Enabling technical cooperation in areas such as training, capacity building and urban planning could significantly strengthen reintegration efforts without implying political recognition.
- **Reassess aid approaches through a localisation lens:** Donors should avoid reverting to pre-2021 aid models and instead design context-sensitive strategies that prioritise local leadership and ownership. Building on the localisation agenda, support should strengthen Afghan institutions and community networks, promote equity and resilience and reduce dependency by shifting decision-making and resources closer to those affected. Long-term viable ‘solutions’ must emerge from Afghan-led processes rather than externally imposed frameworks.
- **Enable strategic, risk-informed engagement with subnational IEA actors:** While many donors, including Germany,

Support should strengthen Afghan institutions and community networks, promote equity and resilience and reduce dependency by shifting decision-making and resources closer to the affected.

maintain policies of non-engagement with the IEA, limited and risk-informed interaction at the subnational level may be necessary to reach returnees and host communities. Structured engagement—carefully negotiated and coordinated with the United Nations—can help secure practical outcomes, such as continuity of female staffing or access to education for girls. Such engagement should remain condi-

tional, time-bound and closely monitored, with clear red lines to safeguard humanitarian principles.

- **Maintain humanitarian principles and avoid instrumentalisation of aid:** Humanitarian and development aid must not be used as bargaining chips to incentivise returns, secure migration deals or achieve political leverage. Donors should reinforce international protection standards and uphold voluntariness of return—including in their national return policies’ treatment of Afghan migrants. Sustaining the independence of aid from politicised agendas—whether in host countries or in Afghanistan—is essential to preserve trust, safeguard humanitarian space and protect the rights of displaced people.

**STRUCTURED ENGAGEMENT—CAREFULLY
NEGOTIATED AND
COORDINATED WITH
THE UNITED NATIONS—
CAN HELP SECURE
PRACTICAL OUTCOMES.**

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ACRONYMS

ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
ACC	Afghanistan citizen cards
ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development
ADSP	Asia Displacement Solution Platform
AFN	Afghani
ARCS	Afghan Red Crescent Society
CSO	Civil society organisation
DoRR	Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation (Provincial line ministry)
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix (managed by IOM)
GoP	Government of Pakistan
HLP	Housing, land and property
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally displaced person
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IFRP	Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LAS	Land allocation scheme
MoRR	De Facto Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NHC	Naomi Higham Consultancy LTD
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PARRs	Priority areas of return and reintegration
PoR	Proof of registration

REACH	Joint data/analysis initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT)
SSAR	Strategy for Afghan Refugees
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors sincerely thank all interview respondents and facilitators in Afghanistan who made this research possible. We would like to acknowledge the use of interview records provided by Hidayet Siddikoglu (consultant, indicated as 'local partner', cf. Appendix 1). This *bicc report* has benefited from constructive comments by colleagues in the GIZ unit Analytical Support for Development Engagement in Afghanistan, including Benjamin Etzold (bicc) and all other bicc colleagues who joined the colloquium discussion of an earlier draft. Last but not least, we are indebted to Gesa Himmelstoß for research assistance and Heike Webb for her meticulous editing of the paper. bicc discloses support for the research of this *report* from Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.

APPENDIX 1

OVERVIEW OF INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

Code	Date	Location/ Province	Who	Category
Authors	13-May-25	Online	INGO	INGO
Authors	20-May-25	Kabul	INGO	INGO
Authors	22-May-25	Kabul	Volunteers (Afghan) working with elite returnees	Volunteer
Authors	23-May-25	Kunar	Returnee and wife	Returnee family (male and female)
Authors	23-May-25	Kunar	Former district government official	Government official (Republic)
Authors	23-May-25	Kunar	Returnee (male)	Returnee (male)
Authors	23-May-25	Kunar	Returnee (father and son)	Returnees (male)
Authors	23-May-25	Kunar	Martyr family	Returnees
Authors	23-May-25	Kunar	Village affairs officer in district administration	Government official
Authors	24-May-25	Nangarhar	Head of the DoRR Nangarhar/Jalalabad at Torkham	Government official
Authors	24-May-25	Nangarhar	Head of DoRR Nangarhar/Jalalabad at Jalalabad	Government official
Authors	24-May-25	Nangarhar	DoRR department heads (IDPs, reintegration)	Government official
Authors	24-May-25	Nangarhar	Camp manager, Omari camp, near Torkham	Government official
Authors	25-May-25	Nangarhar	IO representative, IO field sub-office Jalalabad	International Organisation
Authors	24-May-25	Nangarhar	Two IO representatives at Zero Point reception	International Organisations
Authors	26-May-25	Kabul	Head of local NGO working in Nangarhar	NGO representative
Authors	28-May-25	Kandahar	Head of MoRR Directorate at Anjargi camp (Takhta Pul district)	Government official

Code	Date	Location/ Province	Who	Category
Authors	29-May-25	Kandahar	MoRR in charge at Zero Point Spin Boldak	Government official
Authors	29-May-25	Kandahar	Committee workers and IO-representatives at Zero Point Spin Boldak	Government employees and IO/ INGO representatives
local Partner	7-May-25	Kabul-1	Returnee (male), from Pakistan	Returnee (male)
local Partner	7-May-25	Kabul-2	Returnee (male), from Iran	Returnee (male)
local Partner	7-May-25	Kabul-3	Returnee (male), from Pakistan	Returnee (male)
local Partner	7-May-25	Kabul-4	Returnee (male), from Pakistan	Returnee (male)
local Partner	6-8 May 2025	Kabul	Three senior government officials	Government official
local Partner	10-May-25	Kabul	Local community leader (Malik)	Community leader
local Partner	13-May-25	Herat	DoRR Head of the Legal Affairs/ Protection of Rights Department	Government official
local Partner	13-May-25	Herat	Local community leader (Arbab)	Community leader
local Partner	13-May-25	Herat-1	Returnee (male), from Iran	Returnee (male)
local Partner	13-May-25	Herat-2	Returnee (male), from Iran	Returnee (male)
local Partner	13-May-25	Kabul	Kabul DoRR, Head of Department	Government official
local Partner	13-May-25	Kandahar	Member of the Registration and Biometric Committee	Government official
local Partner	13-May-25	Kandahar	Returnee (male); from Pakistan	Returnee (male)
local Partner	13-May-25	Kandahar	Kandahar DoRR, Department of Return and Reintegration	Government official
local Partner	14-May-25	Kandahar	Returnee (male), from Pakistan	Returnee (male)

APPENDIX 2: OVERVIEW OF KEY IDENTITY DOCUMENTS BY AFGHANS IN PAKISTAN

Proof of Registration (PoR) cards are issued by the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) in Pakistan, with technical support from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). PoR cards were issued to Afghans who arrived in Pakistan before 2005. The Pakistani government only recognises Afghans holding these cards as refugees. A PoR card provides the cardholder with temporary legal status in Pakistan, proof of identity and entitlement to a temporary stay. It also facilitates access to certain essential services, such as education, healthcare, banking and property rental, and allows the cardholder to enjoy freedom of movement. Although PoR cardholders can return to Afghanistan, they require a valid Pakistani visa to re-enter Pakistan. PoR cards allow children born after the initial registration to be registered. Pakistan has not issued any new PoR cards since 2007. Current PoR cards expired in June 2023, but a one-year extension to 30 June 2025 was announced in July 2024. Despite their status, PoR cardholders are reportedly among the categories potentially targeted in Phase 3 of Pakistan's Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan (IFRP). Fear of the cards expiring has been cited as a reason for returning to Afghanistan.

Afghan Citizen Card (ACC): From 2017 to 2018, NADRA issued these cards to undocumented Afghan nationals residing in Pakistan with technical support from IOM. This card confirms Afghan citizenship and grants temporary residence in Pakistan. While it reportedly protects cardholders from deportation to Afghanistan, it falls short of granting „refugee“ status. ACCs cannot be renewed, and children born after initial registration cannot be added to their parents' card. Similar to PoR

holders, ACC holders require a valid Pakistani visa to re-enter Pakistan after returning to Afghanistan. ACC holders are explicitly targeted by Pakistan's IFRP, potentially in Phases 2 or 3.

Valid Pakistan visas and passports: Afghan nationals holding valid Pakistani visas, often alongside an Afghan passport, are legally permitted to remain in the country. However, many newly arrived Afghans entered Pakistan after 2021 on various short-term visas (tourist, student or medical) which have since expired, placing them at risk of deportation.

Tazkira (Afghan national identity card): This is the primary national identification document in Afghanistan. While many Afghans in Pakistan may possess a Tazkira, having only this document is not considered valid proof of identity for staying in Pakistan, and they are considered undocumented.

UNHCR slips/asylum-seeker certificates: The UNHCR previously issued these certificates in Pakistan, but the government instructed them to stop meeting new arrivals to provide any form of documentation. Afghan nationals who were pre-registered with the UNHCR or who hold these slips are usually categorised as having invalid or undocumented documentation for the purposes of a legal stay in Pakistan. However, the UNHCR may be able to assist them upon their return to Afghanistan.

Undocumented and invalid documentation: This broad category includes Afghans who do not possess any documents allowing them to stay in Pakistan; those with only a *tazkira*; those with expired Proof of Registration (PoR) cards; and those with expired Afghan passports and/or visas. Afghan nationals in this category have no legal status and are subject to arrest, detention and deportation under Pakistani law. It is estimated that 2.2 million Afghans in Pakistan are currently unrecognised and without legal status or protection, including those who have arrived since 2021. This group was explicitly targeted in Phase 1 of the IFRP.

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This *bicc* report was compiled in the framework of the project
"Afghanistan and Development. Advice on Humanitarian, Security
and Social Challenges"



PUBLISHER

BICC – Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies gGmbH
Pfarrer-Byns-Straße 1, 53121 Bonn, Germany
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EDITOR: Elvan Isikozlu
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LAYOUT: Heike Webb
EDITORIAL DESIGN: Verena Krautter
PHOTO CREDITS: @bicc/Katja Mielke
MAP: @bicc/Noah Schauen (p. 8)
PRINT: Köllen Druck + Verlag GmbH, Bonn-Buschdorf

DATED: December 2025

<https://doi.org/10.60638/r95w-j876>



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The JRF institutes are institutionally
supported by the German state of
North Rhine-Westphalia



This *bicc report* provides an overview of displacement in Afghanistan, with particular attention to the challenges posed by mass return amid an ongoing humanitarian crisis. It assesses the country's capacities to absorb returnees and explores how development cooperation might support more sustainable reintegration. It also examines the policy dilemmas facing international agencies: On the one hand, they must engage with local government authorities they do not formally recognise; on the other, they are obliged to ensure that return movements are safe, dignified and durable in a context where livelihoods and basic services remain acutely strained.