



Afghanistan: Departures and returns after Taliban's takeover of power

Departures after the takeover of power

- Signals from the Taliban

Returns after the takeover of power

- Voluntary returns and vacation travels
- Operation of the airports
- Persons perceived as “westernised”

Background

Migration is part of the social and cultural landscape in Afghanistan. This, combined with the difficult security situation in recent decades, has resulted in many millions of Afghans leaving their home country and staying outside of Afghanistan's borders.

A major wave of migration was expected after the Taliban's takeover of power, but any significant wave has failed to materialise. According to an international organisation (conversation in Islamabad, March 2022), one of several reasons may be that a large part of the Afghan population is familiar with the Taliban and has a “wait-and-see” attitude towards the new rulers.

However, nothing indicates that the desire to migrate is decreasing among Afghans. Directly after the takeover of power, in August and September 2021, more than half the population stated that they wanted to leave the country. The percentage is particularly high among those with education beyond primary school. The desire to leave Afghanistan is higher among men than women, and among young people under 30 (Ray 2022).

Departures from Afghanistan after the takeover of power

In the first days after the takeover of power in August 2021, at least 120,000 Afghans were evacuated with Western assistance, many to the United States.

Conditions at the airport in Kabul were chaotic, and the end date for the evacuation was 31 August 2021. Many who wanted to leave were not evacuated (Dawi 2022a). During the autumn of 2021, several thousand Afghans applied for evacuation and protection through Western embassies (diplomat source, email, 2022).

There are no reliable estimates of the number of Afghans who have left their home country after the takeover of power. The estimates differ because a large number of border crossings are irregular. It has been reported that human traffickers are thriving and that prices have increased. The smuggling occurs relatively openly, and bribes make the border guards look the other way (France 24, 2022). According to the Mixed Migration Center (as quoted in Batha & Joya 2022), in February 2022 it cost about USD 400 to be smuggled into Iran. The price increased from USD 250 before the takeover of power. The smugglers have doubled the price for being smuggled into Pakistan, now costing just under USD 200.

According to figures from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), from August 2021 to July 2022, more than four million Afghans crossed the borders to neighbouring countries Iran and Pakistan. The greatest traffic was on the border from Afghanistan to Pakistan – around 2,850,000 people crossed during the mentioned period. The corresponding figure for Iran was just under 1.4 million (IOM & UN Migration 2022). There are no estimates of how many people intend to travel onwards to Turkey and Europe. There is reason to believe that a majority of the border crossings involve circular migration and circular economy, especially between Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹ Often, individuals will cross and return on the same day (IOM 2022).

Iranian authorities estimate that around 800,000 Afghans entered Iran during the period from August 2021 to January 2022. As a result of the high number, the Iranian authorities have allowed Afghans with valid passports to apply for tourist visas and cross the border legally. In this way, the Iranian authorities wanted to discourage irregular migration and get a better overview of who is entering the country. In April 2022, about 5,000 Afghans with passports and visas crossed the border into Iran daily (international NGO 2022).

Like Iran and Pakistan, Turkey has a large Afghan population residing illegally in the country (Foschini 2022). At the end of August 2022, 82,550 Afghans residing irregularly in Turkey had been apprehended by the Turkish authorities during the year (Turkish Ministry of the Interior 2022).

In the period after the takeover of power, Afghans have been one of the largest groups of asylum seekers in Europe (Eurostat 2022). In the months after the

¹ While 1,378,000 have moved from Afghanistan to Iran, 1,044,457 crossings from Iran to Afghanistan have been recorded. The corresponding figures for Pakistan are 2,853,000 crossings into Pakistan and 2,529,000 back to Afghanistan (IOM & UN Migration 2022).

Taliban's takeover of power, the number of Afghan asylum seekers increased significantly. In September 2021, 14,400 Afghans applied for protection in Europe, which was more than double compared to the months before the takeover of power (Askew 2022).

Afghans who remain in the country

Although the number of people leaving the country is relatively high, most Afghans remain in their home country. Many do not have the personal or financial resources to migrate, while others are actively choose to remain in Afghanistan.

After the republic collapsed on 15 August 2021, some people who had worked for the government left the country. However, several high-profile individuals chose to remain, even though they presumably had the opportunity to be evacuated. Among them, for example, are former President Hamid Karzai, chief of staff Abdullah Abdullah, several members of parliament and other politicians. Some high-profile politicians from the republic also stayed, such as Abdul Salam Raheem, chief of staff for Ashraf Ghani (Afghan analyst, email 2022).

According to a Pakistani analyst (conversation in Islamabad, March 2022), the reason for this may be that these people have been outside the country in the past and have experienced that life as a refugee is demanding. Others have chosen to remain in the country because they have a large family there. It is difficult to move them all, and they do not want to split up the family. Some now work for the de facto authorities but not in the highest positions reserved for the Taliban. Some of those who were evacuated quickly returned to Afghanistan (email, Afghan analyst 2022).

Signals from the Taliban

From the takeover of power until today, the signals from the Taliban have been that Afghans are encouraged not to leave Afghanistan. Directly after the takeover of power, during the evacuation, the Taliban requested that Western countries stop evacuating skilled Afghans. "We need their talent", said spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid (Matre & Lode 2021).

The Taliban recognises that they are dependent on the part of the population that has education and experience in administration in order to rule the country. Civilian and military leaders are therefore encouraged to return home. The message is that all Afghans are welcome back to Afghanistan to contribute to the country's development. According to a Taliban commander, being a beggar in one's own country is better than being a king in a foreign country (TOLO News 2022). Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada has acknowledged in a statement that it is necessary for the de facto authorities to solve the problems of Afghans who want to leave the country for political and economic reasons. Instead of them using their resources to develop their own country, they have to settle for low-

status jobs in the country they go to, says the Supreme Leader. He also points out that Afghan asylum seekers must denounce Islam or even submit false documentation to obtain asylum in another country (Rahimi 2021).

Returns to Afghanistan after the takeover of power

According to figures from the de facto authorities' Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (as reproduced in Xinhua 2022), 653,000 people have either been deported or returned voluntarily after the takeover of power during the period from August 2021 to May 2022, the vast majority from the neighbouring areas. As far as Landinfo is aware, there have been no forced returns to Afghanistan after the Taliban's takeover – neither from Norway nor other European countries.

On the other hand, neighbouring countries, particularly Iran, have deported a large number of Afghans. From January to the end of July 2022, more than 300,000 Afghans were deported from neighbouring countries, the vast majority from Iran. In 2021, the total number of people deported was around 770,000. The returnees are a complex group, and the de facto authorities allow IOM and UNHCR to provide assistance to the most vulnerable people (international organisation, email 2022).

There are several hundred thousand Afghans in Turkey, the vast majority of whom stay in the country illegally (Latifi 2022). Returning people without legal residence is a priority task for the Turkish authorities. According to figures from the Turkish authorities (as reproduced in Asian News International 2022), more than 28,000 Afghans were deported by air from Turkey from January to July 2022. Another 20,000 were deported in August and September. The total figure for the first nine months of the year is thus just under 50,000 people deported (diplomat source, email 2022).

Voluntary returns and Afghans travelling to their home country on holiday

There is no complete overview of Afghans who voluntarily return to their home country – either to move home or to stay for a shorter or longer period.

The Taliban has established the commission *Return of and Communications with Former Afghan Officials and Political Figures* (Daryosh 2022). According to a statement from the de facto Minister of the Interior Anas Haqqani, more than 50 former officials have agreed to return. Voice of America confirms that several prominent members of the previous regime have returned to Afghanistan, including former Minister of Education Farooq Wardak. Dawlat Waziri, who was the spokesman for the republic's Minister of Defence and an outspoken critic and opponent of the Taliban, has also returned to Afghanistan. The Taliban welcome the returnees, but nothing indicates that they are granted power or authority in the Taliban's de facto government apparatus (Dawi 2022b; Khaama Press 2022; Pakistan Observer 2022).

As mentioned, many Afghans stay outside Afghanistan's borders. At the same time, family ties are strong. Contact with extended family, relatives and networks is important for all Afghans, including those who live abroad. An Afghan source living in Kabul (conversation in Islamabad, March 2022) claimed it is impossible to prevent Afghans from travelling, and he referenced the strong family ties within Afghan families.

The source said that he occasionally flies into Afghanistan from the Emirates, and there are always Afghan families going home on holiday amongst the passengers. According to the source, this has not changed since the Taliban's takeover. The source explained that it is easy to tell the difference between Afghans who have lived abroad and Afghan families who have not lived outside Afghanistan. The Afghan journalist Ali Latifi (2022) describes the passengers on flights from Istanbul to Kabul as a mixture of Afghans visiting family, aid workers and deportees.

Operation of the airports

In the new year of 2022, the airports were operational again after having been closed down after the Taliban took power. Turkey and Qatar assumed responsibility for operating the airports, including responsibility for security (Hakimi 2022). There are weekly flights to/from Kabul to Islamabad, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Tehran. An Afghan source living in Kabul (conversation in Islamabad, March 2022) confirms that a private security company and security personnel from Qatar are responsible for the security at the airport in Kabul. Female employees serve female passengers. According to the source, the Taliban is completely invisible at the airport, both to those leaving and those entering the country. This is also confirmed by an international journalist (conversation in Islamabad, March 2022). The journalist described the system at the airport as very effective, and there is no one from the Taliban in sight. However, they are everywhere outside the airport and in the street.

After negotiations in the spring of 2022, Turkey was excluded as a partner, and the de facto authorities contracted with the Abu Dhabi-based firm GAAC Solutions to operate the three largest airports in the country: Kabul, Herat and Kandahar (Abdulrazaq & Kakar 2022; Faiez 2022).

Landinfo does not have concrete information about the possible presence of the Taliban at the airports after the agreement with GAAC Solutions come into force. One reason why Turkey lost the contract was that they did not want to train Afghan employees, nor did they want Afghan security personnel inside the airport. Because of the Taliban's opposition to foreign forces in Afghanistan, this condition was impossible to accept (Abdulrazaq & Kakar 2022).

The situation for persons perceived as “westernised”

The situation for some returned Afghans who have stayed in the West – so-called westernised persons – was also a topic before the Taliban took power. UNHCR

wrote in its Guidelines of 2018 that they were aware that returnees from Western countries had been subjected to severe reactions and that some were viewed with suspicion by families, local communities and local authorities (UNHCR 2018, p. 46, 47). Landinfo notes that UNHCR primarily relied on self-reporting. The year before the takeover, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO 2020) published a response about the situation for individuals perceived as “westernised”.

There is no precise definition or unified understanding of “westernised” as a concept. Rather, there is a loose, vague conception of what the concept entails. It often refers to people who have lived in Europe or other parts of the Western world and have been influenced by Western culture and lifestyle. The influence may involve physical characteristics such as clothing, hairstyle, beard length and coverings. It could also be attitudes and views on, for example, women’s participation in the workforce and freedom of movement, as well as attitudes towards the consumption of alcohol and pork.

In the years following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, the Western presence and influence in Afghanistan was strong – until the Taliban retook power 20 years later. Many people wore western clothes. The picture on the streets in the major cities was complex: there were women who covered themselves completely, women in burqas, men in the traditional shalwar kameez and men in western clothing.

In February 2022, Landinfo met with a representative of an international organisation (digital meeting, February 2022) who claimed that at that time, things had not changed significantly on the streets of Kabul. In the cities, there were still Afghans who wore western clothes, and there were women both with and without burqas. Another one of Landinfo’s sources has lived in Kabul since the takeover and continues to do so. He has a very western appearance – he has short hair, is clean-shaven and wears western clothing. When asked directly (conversation in Islamabad, March 2022) he stated that he did not have problems with the Taliban for that reason.

There is little relevant knowledge of what the situation is today. There have been no forced returns from Western countries after the takeover, and it is presumed that relatively few people have returned voluntarily. Landinfo is unaware of reports that Afghans have been subjected to reactions because they appear “westernised” or have stayed in a Western country.

At the same time, a number of regulations have been introduced that restrict women’s rights and freedom of movement, as well as a decree that women must be fully covered in public spaces. There is no doubt that women who defy the directive to cover up, or people who challenge the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam, may face reactions from the de facto authorities. Furthermore, the Taliban has instructed all those who work for the authorities to have beards, not to wear

western clothing and to pray at the correct times – those who do not respect this risk losing their jobs (Greenfield 2022). Landinfo has no concrete knowledge of how this directive is put into practice.

Afghanistan is a diverse and complex country, and this is reflected in the Taliban's rule. There is a considerable range in attitudes and local variations. There is reason to believe that this also applies to the view of people influenced by the West. Any reactions will there depend on the profile, network and where in the country the person resides. There is also reason to believe that Afghans who come from abroad have to deal with the Taliban's various decrees and regulations the same way as Afghans in Afghanistan do.

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Country of origin information presented in Landinfo's Query responses does not contain policy recommendations nor does it reflect official Norwegian views.

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