

A stylized map of Afghanistan composed of a grid of dots. Most dots are light gray, but several are colored red, highlighting specific regions or points of interest on the map.

## »We Knew That They Had No Future in Kabul«

Why and How Afghan Families Decide to Leave

AFGHANISTAN ANALYSTS NETWORK

April 2016

- In Afghanistan, people decide to flee their home every day. Many stay within the borders of their country, others take refuge in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran. Yet, a growing number of Afghans also decide to embark on a journey towards Europe. The European Commission estimates that in 2015 213,000 persons of Afghan origin arrived in Europe, making Afghans the second largest group of migrants and asylum-seekers to the EU, after the Syrians.
- For many Afghan families, taking refuge in Europe is not an unparalleled decision, it is merely a new chapter in a history of migration that has lasted for decades. For more than 30 years, regime changes, wars, fragile statehood, and economic despair in Afghanistan have caused waves of mass migration.
- The study in hand explores the motivations for Afghan migration from the perspective of families whose members have left or have been sent to Europe. The research is of an illustrative character and aims at contextualizing the respective decision-making process. In summary, the series of semi-structured interviews documents why Europe was chosen as a main destination, how the travel was prepared and financed and what were personal and social triggers behind the decision to leave.

## Introduction

The increasing number of refugees and migrants arriving across Europe has led to heated debates and an increased political polarisation between pro and anti-refugee movements and parties. Afghans are now the second largest group entering the European Union. 178,230 Afghans sought asylum in the 28 states of the EU in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Many, it seems, did not seek asylum; one leaked draft EU report said 223,000 Afghan »illegal migrants« had entered the EU in 2015.<sup>2</sup> According to the German migration authorities, 154,064 Afghans entered Germany in 2015. However, only 31,902 Afghans requested asylum. (The others may be staying on illegally or have travelled elsewhere).

Several countries have tightened their laws and tried to close their borders, while others are considering doing so. Germany, while initially generally welcoming refugees, has begun to take a much tougher line, for example, declaring it will deport Afghan asylum seekers whose applications are rejected.

There are clear information and knowledge gaps on the reasons behind the current, increased levels of Afghan migration. For this reason, this brief study aimed to explore the decision-making processes at the family level of a small number of migrants. The study consisted of 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with selected Afghan households one or more members of which had left for Europe in 2015 (Two brothers went from one household and two adults and two under-five children from another). This is a summary of the main findings.

## Methodology

The interviews took place in selected provinces, distributed across Afghanistan's regions as follows: central region (four interviews in Kabul and Wardak province), northern region (four interviews, in Takhar, Sar-e Pul, Kunduz and Baghlan), eastern region (one interview in Nangarhar), southern region (two interviews in Helmand

and Kandahar) and western region (one interview in Herat). The ethnic composition and urban/rural population ratio in provinces was taken into account in the interviewees' selection. The respondents were selected and located through a referral system where AAN researchers reached out to their networks looking for families where at least one member had left for Europe in 2015. At least 30 families were located and screened based on geographic locations and the timing of the migrants' departure. AAN contacted suitable families and interviewed those who agreed to participate. (A significant number of originally identified families did not want to be interviewed, even when their anonymity was assured, as they feared exposing private information about their family; in some cases security concerns were cited.)

The final set of respondents were interviewed using a questionnaire with nine questions concerning the departure of family member(s), how decisions were made before the departure, details of the trip to Europe that the family members were aware of, and thoughts on the future of the migrant in Europe. In addition, basic household information was collected for each of the families to get an idea of the overall context.

## Respondent Information

With the exception of one respondent who had himself tried to reach Europe and been forcibly returned, all respondents were relatives of migrants who had arrived in Europe. All the migrants the families reported on were male (brothers or sons), with the exception of one case where a husband, wife and two young children travelled together. Two other migrants left behind their wives and young children. The ages of the migrants were between 15 and 30 years old; most were in their early to mid-twenties. The youngest (apart from the two children who travelled with their parents) was 15 and he went with his older brother.

The heads of all the migrants' households were male and between 40 to 70 years old. The only exceptions were two men who were themselves the migrants and were also the heads of their own households. Both were in their late 20s. One, who had lived in a nuclear family, took his wife and small children with him. The other was the head of an extended family and left mother, wife

1. Eurostat: Statistics Explained; [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:First\\_time\\_asylum\\_applicants\\_in\\_the\\_EU-28\\_by\\_citizenship,\\_Q4\\_2014\\_-\\_Q4\\_2015.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:First_time_asylum_applicants_in_the_EU-28_by_citizenship,_Q4_2014_-_Q4_2015.png).

2. <http://statewatch.org/news/2016/mar/eu-council-afghanistan-6738-16.pdf>.

and children behind, along with other brothers and sisters; he travelled with a brother, cousin and two friends. The family size of the households whose members we spoke to varied from 10 and 19 members (although this might not always include all female household members, as their information was not always disclosed in full by the interviewees). Some households included in-laws and other relatives residing with the core family. The majority of the interviewed families still had younger children at home; the family member who had left for Europe was often the oldest, or second oldest, unmarried son.

In terms of household wealth, the respondents generally placed themselves in the lower and middle-income brackets. The majority of the respondent households had to take out large loans in order to finance the trip to Europe. Most said they were in rented accommodation and had only one or two breadwinners in the family. In several cases, children had had to abandon their education to take up work and support the household. The main breadwinners generally reported low to medium level income. Most of the migrants were reported to have some education, usually up to class 10, although some also had university degrees. Several families had

## Afghan Refugees in Germany

(all figures for full year 2015, unless otherwise indicated)

### Total arrivals in all 28 EU countries: 213,000 (14 %)

- 2<sup>nd</sup> largest group
- Number of asylum applications: 176,900 (EU/European External Action Service (EEAS)) or 178,200 (Eurostat)

### Germany

Arrivals (registration in EASY system): 154,064 (14.1 %)

- 4<sup>th</sup> largest group
- 2<sup>nd</sup> largest group in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter 2015 only

Number of first-time asylum applications: 31,382 (7.1 %)

- In 2014: 9,115

Breakdown of decisions on asylum applications:

- **Total figure: 5,966**
  - Refugee status: 1,708 (28.6 %)
  - Political asylum: 48 (0.8 %)
  - Subsidiary protection: 325 (5.4 %)
  - Protection from deportation: 809 (13.6 %)
- **Protection quota (official): 47.6 %**
  - Rejections: 819 (13.7 %)
  - Other »closed cases«: 2,305 (38.6 %)
- **Adjusted protection quota (without »others«): 76.4 %**
- Open cases: 38,014 (includes pre-2015 applications)

### Afghan Citizens in Germany: 131,454 (2014: 75,385)

Including (status):

- Political asylum: 2,292
- Refugee status: 10,005
- Subsidiary protection: 17,023
- Rejected asylum application: 28,154
- Protection from deportation: 13,304
- The Federal Statistics Office gives 31,607 without any protection or other title.
- Afghan citizens in Germany (for more than 6 years): 29,532
- Born in Germany: 6,908
- Unlimited settlement right: 13,763

There were less than 1,300 Afghans that had been rejected as asylum applicants and received no protection from deportation (no concrete figure available as not among countries with 10 highest figures in this category).

Beyond the Afghanistan's sub-region (Pakistan and Iran), Germany hosts the largest number of Afghan refugees.

Sources used:

- [https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Downloads/Infothek/Statistik/Asyl/201512-statistik-anlage-asyl-geschaeftsbericht.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile](https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Downloads/Infothek/Statistik/Asyl/201512-statistik-anlage-asyl-geschaeftsbericht.pdf?__blob=publicationFile)
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- <http://statewatch.org/news/2016/mar/eu-council-afghanistan-6738-16.pdf>
- <http://www.unhcr.org/562a22979.html>

main breadwinners who worked in some sort of government employment, or had done so in the past (as teachers, policemen, or working for the ministry of education); others reported that they worked as shopkeepers, for small private companies and factories, or for an NGO. In one case, the family had lost their house and land due to a conflict with the local nomad population and had been forced to relocate from Wardak province to Kabul.

## Previous Refugee Experience

Five of the twelve families interviewed stated they had had no previous experience of being refugees, although some of these had been internally displaced within Afghanistan during the civil war or the Taleban regime. The remaining seven families had been refugees in Pakistan and Iran; most had left Afghanistan in the early to mid 1990s when the civil war broke out. One family that had left earlier, returned after the mujahedin victory in 1992, but left again in 1996 when the Taleban seized power. Another family, on the other hand, returned when the Taleban came to power. The remaining families returned during the first years of the Karzai government, most of them between 2003 and 2004 (the head of one family had initially returned alone in 2002).

## Intended Destinations

All migrants in the sample were currently in a European country, with the exception of the person who was forcibly returned (and who plans to leave to Europe again, as soon as resources are available). Seven of the migrants were in Germany, two in Belgium, and one each in Austria, Finland, and Italy.

In terms of their destinations, some migrants had had a very concrete idea of a specific destination, such as Sweden, Germany, Norway or Belgium, while others had just been generally heading to Europe. Some of them made a final decision about where to go while en route (sometimes based on the recommendation of smugglers or based on information from other migrants they met on the way); others just happened to »end up somewhere.« In some cases, migrants decided to stay in a certain country, even though they had initially planned to go to a different one. »Germany was a random choice because my

brother didn't have more money to go onward to Sweden or Australia [sic],« a respondent from Kunduz explained.

Motivations to head to a specific country were usually based on media information, information from friends or family already on the way to Europe (via Facebook, for example) or who have been living in Europe for a while or advice from the smugglers engaged by the family. One migrant's family explained that, »Belgium was his first choice because we believed that people were accepted as migrants easily there.« A respondent from Nangarhar said: »We had decided he would leave Afghanistan for Norway or Belgium. These were chosen because we believed the policies there were easy for asylum seekers. Also, we had a relative already in each country and they said more work was available there.«

For most of the migrants in the sample, their trip ended in Germany (8, plus two children) or Belgium (2). Many ended up in camps in Germany, stayed there and have now started their asylum petition process. A few still harbour ambitions to continue on to Scandinavia, in particular Sweden. One migrant reportedly had wanted to reach Belgium, but after the Paris attacks in November 2015, had decided to turn south and is now in Italy.

## The Route to Europe

Most of the migrants in the study travelled to Europe via Iran and Turkey, often entering Iran via the western Afghan provinces of Nimroz and Herat. Some had an Afghan passport and a valid Iranian visa; others made a detour via Pakistan because of the tougher security along the border between Afghanistan and Iran. None of the migrants in the sample had been issued with a Turkish visa. In some cases, the smugglers who organised their travel advised them and their families not to bother getting a passport, while in other instances, families said they did not have enough money to apply for visas and therefore had to rely on the (illegal) overland route.

All migrants initially intended to travel to Greece from Turkey by boat. The one migrant who returned to Afghanistan and who was interviewed directly stated he did not feel the smugglers had made sufficient arrangements for a safe boat trip and therefore decided to try the land route instead. He was arrested on the Turkish-Bulgarian border. In terms of the routes onwards after

Greece, few families had precise information about how their relatives had travelled and only a vague knowledge of European geography. One father explained that his son had travelled through »Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Romania, and Germany and finally made it to Italy.«

Based on the information of their families, all the migrants had set out between the (early) summer and late autumn of 2015. The families often had only sketchy details of how long the trip had taken, but it was clear that many of them had been forced to interrupt their journey on the way. In Iran and again in Turkey, several had to wait for smugglers to arrange for their onward passage. In one case, a migrant worked in Turkey (for seven months) to earn money for the onward journey. Even for those just passing through, the stay in Turkey was also often long because the majority initially entered the country by foot through the mountains. Many of the migrants also spent a long time (anywhere from several days to weeks) on the Mediterranean Sea coast, as it often took several attempts to cross the sea to Greece. After each failed attempt (for instance because the engine broke down or the boat took on water), the migrants would return to Turkey and wait for a new opportunity to sail.

## Making the Decision to Go

How decisions were reached varied between families. In the majority of cases, it was the migrants themselves who initiated the conversation about going. The majority of interviewees described how the younger migrants, in particular, justified their wish to go to Europe by pointing to the lack of economic and educational opportunities in Afghanistan and what they felt were their generally bleak prospects for the future. Several families also said that their brothers and sons had friends or relatives already in Europe who were urging them to come. A few families said they had heard Germany was taking in refugees and this had contributed to them agreeing to the migrant's request to go. A respondent from northern Afghanistan, whose brother was being threatened by the Taliban said:

*In fact, neither had we ever thought about such words as »going to Europe« nor did my brother evoke them. In the end though, we said, »Where should he go?« We thought, »Should he go Pakistan or Iran?« Then,*

*we assumed there are lots of problems in Afghanistan. Temporarily, the media were broadcasting reports of people leaving for Europe. We said, »Let's trust in God. You will reach somewhere.«*

Brother of migrant  
from Sar-e Pul

In about half the cases, the migrants' families said they had initially opposed the idea of their sons or brothers going to Europe. Respondents described the family discussions as follows:

*Well, we all opposed him leaving because we told him he would become an illiterate person by going abroad, because there he should either go to college or be considered uneducated.*

Brother of migrant  
from Nangarhar

*We told him he should not go to Europe and that he should stay in Afghanistan, but he argued against this. Later, he told us his reasons for wanting to leave and urged us to support him. He said he had studied for almost 18 years, but he could not find a job and nobody would hire him.*

Brother of migrant from  
Maydan Wardak

*So, finally their father agreed to send them, because many times the boys had planned to leave without letting us know. Their father was compelled to send them with his blessings, rather than they should go and deal with unreliable people.*

Mother of two migrants  
from Kabul

Initial disagreement often led to a protracted decision making process where the migrants tried to persuade their families, over weeks, to give them their blessing and, in many cases, help them secure the necessary funds. While most of the migrants' families reported having been initially unified in their refusal, often over time, a mother or father was eventually convinced and started to advocate on behalf of the person who wanted to go. Usually, if a migrant had a family (wife and children) or fiancée, they opposed the departure throughout the whole process. The brother of the man from Herat who went with his family to Europe said his wife had not wanted to go.



In about half of the cases, the migrants had initially been either reluctant to leave, or undecided or indifferent, but their family members said they were persuaded by circumstances that leaving was the right thing or the only thing to do. In these cases, it was either the parents or older siblings who urged or advised the migrants to consider leaving, justifying this request by pointing to increasing insecurity and/or economic pressures on the family.

*As you might know, security has been deteriorating in the country. The war has taken so many young people's lives. Like I said, we lived in Dand-e Ghor, but when the Taliban took control of the area, we realized that the security in the country was not getting better, but getting worse. My brother had just finished high school. He was unemployed. The Taliban were recruiting young men in the area to fight the Afghan government forces. We were afraid they might hire my brother. My brother was young and unemployed, so we feared he might make wrong decisions. It was a family decision to send my brother abroad. We all agreed because we wanted him to live longer and not die in the war.*

Brother of migrant  
from Baghlan

*After the insurgents killed our brother, and set our house on fire, the decision was made to send our brother away. I do not know why they shot and killed my brother. I do not even know who they were. All the family decided together that we would send our brother to Europe so that he can help out the whole family financially once he makes it to Europe.*

Brother of migrant  
from Takhar

The time between the decision that the migrant would indeed go and the actual departure varied and depended on the amount of preparation needed. Especially in cases where migrants applied for passports or still needed to secure funds, weeks or even months passed.

## Factors Contributing to a Person Leaving

For the younger migrants, the lack of economic and education opportunities were mentioned as the main drivers for them leaving. The families interviewed related how their sons and brothers had complained about not being able to find suitable employment or had been unable to

enter university. One of the migrants surveyed did have a good job, however. He was in his late twenties and was a senior, highly-respected journalist. He had the perfect life of an Afghan man, his brother said: a wife, children, a home, a car, a good job, but felt compelled to leave because of threats related to his reporting.

Not being able to find a job had led some of the young migrants to consider joining the Afghan army, which is seen as one of the sure sources of employment. This worried several families, who did not want their sons to risk their lives in the war and preferred them to go to Europe, as one Nangarhari man explained:

*My brother was not happy here, since he failed the entry test to the university. He wanted to join the Afghan National Army [ANA]. We did not want him to join the ANA, because he would be killed if he joined.*

Others mentioned the worsening security situation and the relative's own fears for their personal safety as having influenced the decision to leave. The brother of a 30-year old migrant from Helmand said:

*He used to say that if we are rich in Afghanistan, we will be threatened and if we are poor, we will be in a bad condition anyway. He was also threatened by insurgents because he used to work with international organisations. And his wife is a teacher and a social activist.*

The sister of a man from Kunduz province said:

*It was decided [that he would leave] after my brother was threatened. My father and other family members decided he should leave the country; Germany was not specifically chosen. It was just that he could reach there with the money he had.*

Another migrant, this time from Wardak province, had already earlier fled to Kabul, said his brother:

*He was not feeling safe even in Kabul, because once when my father went to the mosque in Kabul, someone had thrown a hand grenade at him. It only injured him and did not kill him, but this had a bad effect on my brother. He had had no intention of leaving for Europe in the past, but the situation got very bad during [President] Karzai's final years and it has gotten even worse under the new government. These developments definitely motivated him to leave.*



## Practicalities of the Journey

Often it was difficult for family members who were interviewed to provide a detailed account of the journey. In many cases, the migrants did not tell their families the entire extent of difficulties they faced along the way, in order not to worry them. Other family members said they had asked not to be told the details because they were too upsetting.

Some migrants did tell their families about the difficulties of their journey, however, mentioning instances of arrest, mistreatment and perilous journeys by boat. They also told of the hardships of being at somebody else's mercy when it came to getting food, water and shelter. Some migrants told their families that the trek over the mountains around the Iranian-Turkish border had been horrible; others said they had been mistreated by either the smugglers or the local authorities:

*He said he was arrested with two smugglers along the Turkish border with Iran and mistreated. We didn't have any news from him for almost two weeks. He then had to spend almost one month in a migrant camp in Turkey where the conditions were very bad.*

Brother of migrant  
from Helmand

*My brother said a local smuggler in Iran beat him, along with a group of 50 Afghans, gave them electric shocks and took their money and luggage.*

Brother of migrant  
from Nangarhar

Most families were able to speak about the preparations ahead of the journey, as they had usually been involved. Preparations in most cases involved the family contacting a smuggler to discuss the options and agree on a price. With a few exceptions, most families discussed at length the difficulties they faced in getting the funds together. For many, it required borrowing money from relatives and friends and/or mortgaging their homes. The payment arrangements, as well as the prices for the journey to Europe, seemed to vary widely: from 5,000 US dollars to more than 8,000 US dollars per person. Some migrants' families were able to negotiate payment only being made after their family member had reached Europe, while others paid after each leg of the journey was completed (generally Iran, Turkey and Europe).

The migrant from Kandahar, who was repatriated and then forced by continuing threats to relocate to Kabul (and who was able to give the most detailed account of his journey), said he paid increments of 2,000 to 3,000 US dollars for each leg of the trip. Other families reported that their brothers or sons would contact them when they needed money while en route and would provide them with instructions on how to pay.

Most of the information about the journey that the family members of the migrants were able to recall was focused on Iran and Turkey, with few having any information about the journey within Europe, in terms of conditions along the way, or the time that was taken by the family member to reach the country where they are now.

## What of the Future?

The majority of the respondents expressed a mixture of relief that their sons and brothers had reached Europe, and hope for their future. About half of the families reported that their relatives were now settled in one place and had started the process of applying for permanent status in the country.

*The government asked him to come for one interview, and after the interview, he was told they would need to see him again in six months' time. My brother is not planning to go anywhere else; he wants to stay there.*

Brother of migrant from Wardak/Kabul  
who is now in Austria

Relief that their family members were now safe was expressed by several respondents. Others expressed the hope that they would eventually be able to join the migrant or that he would send money home after finding a good job there or establishing a business or would be able to study:

*The main motive for him going to Europe was economic — to earn more money and hopefully set up a good business there.*

Brother of migrant from Helmand

*If he has a good salary, he can maybe help us too.*

Father of migrant from Kabul

*I hope that, after enduring the risks and hardships of this journey, the boys study there and have a better future — because we knew that they had no future in Kabul. We are happy that they safely made this journey. Only God knows about their future. I would like to go and join them in Germany. Younger siblings too would like to join them in Germany. Afghanistan is not a safe anymore and everyone wants to live in a safer place. We are happy with this decision now. If, God forbid, something happen to us in Kabul, then two of our family are safe and alive in Germany.*

Mother of two migrants  
from Kabul

A couple of interviewees reported a particular concern:

*My parents are also worried about his religious practices. Even if he continues his religious practices, they are concerned about the next generation who they think might not stick to our religious beliefs.*

Brother of a man  
from Helmand

*We all disagreed with him going, all the brothers. We believe more in our own tradition, rather than going to another place. We are a traditional family with our own character. I've been (...) overseas and I know about the difficulties of being a foreigner, especially those with Asian traditions and culture and languages and even religion and even the skin is different. Even if you're skin isn't different, there is racism there sometimes. There are many advantages in Europe, but people can't count on them.*

Brother of a man  
from Herat

This man added: *»His children will be German.«*

Only a few families reported that their family member was not happy where he was: some are not happy in Europe at all; others are still planning to proceed to another country. A respondent from Nangarhar, for instance, said his brother was: *»very, very unhappy there with no legal status. He intends to leave for a city in France where they say he will be accepted as an asylum seeker more quickly.«*

He had been against him going and said his brother had *»ruined his life.«* He was now trying to persuade him to come home: *»I am still encouraging him to return because, even after spending around 8,000 US dollars, he now also regrets his decision to go.«*

Another man, however, warned of the consequences if his brother was refused asylum in Finland and sent home:

*He will suffer psychologically as well (...) maybe my father and all of us will tell him that we spent all our money on you and you returned home with nothing and no future. So there will be a lot of pressure on him. My father will probably tell him that we don't have any more money to invest in you and nobody will risk giving him any money either.*

Brother of migrant from Baghlan

Despite having agreed, sometimes unwillingly, to their family members leaving, some respondents in their final comments could not help but share their personal view on the current »exodus«:

*I am actually a person who is against people leaving Afghanistan, because leaving Afghanistan is not a solution. We should find ways to stop the outflow of Afghans and use our human resources within the country to improve our current situation.*

Brother of migrant from Helmand

Another respondent, from Nangarhar, echoed a similar stance: *»My personal comment is that people shouldn't leave the country. They should study here, help build the country, because even if a person leaves, at the end of the day, he will return to the country.«*

A respondent from the northern province of Sar-e Pul who sent his brother away for security reasons, explained that:

*I'm really sad about him going to Europe because he will complete his education there and will not come back. He is wealth for Afghanistan. I wish such treasures as my brother could stay to build Afghanistan.*

Brother of migrant from Sar-e Pul





### About the authors

**The Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN)** is an independent non-profit policy research organisation. It aims to bring together the knowledge, experience and drive of a large number of experts to better inform policy and to increase the understanding of Afghan realities. It is driven by engagement and curiosity and is committed to producing analysis on Afghanistan and its region, which is independent, of high quality and research-based.

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