UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

UNHCR AFGHANISTAN

BORDER MONITORING REPORT

JANUARY-DECEMBER 2023

Returnee/Deportee Reception Center in Spin Boldak Crossing Point, Kandahar, Afghanistan. © UNHCR/Afghanistan

165,376
Inflow & Outflow Monitoring Interviews

147,970
89%

17,406
11%

BACKGROUND

- UNHCR's border monitoring seeks to assess people's access to "the right to return" and map potential protection risks and human rights violations faced across official crossing points. UNHCR conducts inflow and outflow monitoring interviews at both individual and household levels across all eight official crossing points Afghanistan shares with neighboring countries; Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, in response to the situation in Afghanistan. It is worth noting that UNHCR's inflow and outflow monitoring interviews respondents are selected using a systemic sampling approach which can generate representative samples with a fixed skipping interval. The interval was determined by the average arrivals the previous week. In addition, UNHCR conducts border monitoring Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) at unofficial crossing points.
- This report presents the findings of outflow and inflow border monitoring interviews conducted with Afghans by UNHCR's partners i.e., Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (CHA), The Welfare Associate for the Development of Afghanistan (WADAN), Watan Social and Technical Services Association (WSTA), and Women for Afghan Women (WAW) at eight official crossing points, along with discussions with KIIs near 41 unofficial crossing points in 2023.
- UNHCR's border monitoring is protection centric, and seeks to understand the triggers, intentions and motives behind Afghan cross-border movements. It assesses access to territory and "the right to seek asylum", while also identifying barriers impeding the movement of individuals who may be in need of international protection. During 2023, **165,376** outflow and inflow monitoring interviews were conducted, involving **147,970** male and **17,406** female respondents. Given that a significant portion of those crossing the border were men, the majority of interviews were conducted with male respondents. At unofficial crossing points, interviews were primarily conducted with male key informants due to the remote locations and challenges in identifying female key informants.
- Despite UNHCR's ongoing commitment to gender-balanced border monitoring, the ban on female aid workers which was in place until late 2023 hindered UNHCR border monitoring partner's ability to deploy female staff across all official crossing points, thereby impacting UNHCR's efforts to conduct a higher number of interviews with female travelers. Despite limitations, UNHCR/UNHCR partner female staff conducted interviews with female respondents in separate interview areas which allows to capture protection concerns reported by female respondents (11%).

UNHCR AFGHANISTAN

2023 CROSS BORDER MONITORING

Outflow Monitoring

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

79,429 AFGHANS

29,586 families

70,835 89%

8,594 11%

SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **79,429** Afghans (**70,835** males and **8,594** females) were interviewed prior to their departure to Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. This includes **49,843 interviews** with single individuals and **29,586 interviews** with the families. **58 per cent** of the respondents were 18-34 years old, **39 per cent** were 35-59 years old, **one percent** 12-17 years old, and **two percent** were 60 and above.

- UNHCR border monitoring partners conducted **676 KIIs**. A large majority (81%) of Afghans are fleeing Afghanistan to Iran via unofficial crossing points. Those interviewed mentioning having entered irregularly into Pakistan have historically been very low (below 1%), however this number has risen to 18% in 2023. Furthermore, according to accounts by witnesses the majority of unofficial crossings are by minority groups. Respondents shared many challenges encountered during their movement, ranging from a scarcity of portable water, food, healthcare, privacy, accommodation, to transportation hurdles. Additionally, some reported that they sustained severe injuries during flight including burns, broken body parts, wounds. They also faced risks such as trafficking and ill-treatment from smugglers. Of particular concern were the vulnerabilities faced by children, pregnant and lactating women, medical patients, and elderly individuals, who were especially at risk.

- Capturing reasons for movement presented during border monitoring interviews is complex for both official and unofficial crossings points. For interviews at official crossing points Afghans are presented with a list of reasons they can select from. Respondents provide a mix of reasons for moving, some related to persecution, violation of rights, and some in search of improved quality of life or family unification. However, these interviews are conducted in Afghanistan making it difficult for responses, particularly those in need of international protection, to express their concerns. For unofficial crossings, the data is collected through key informants who may be less at risk, expressing second hand, people's reasons for leaving Afghanistan. It is essential not to overlook the ongoing human rights violations in the country. While Afghans may initially prioritize immediate needs for survival, a comprehensive assessment of their international protection needs remains imperative for Afghan asylum seekers. UNHCR also considers Afghan women and girls to be likely in need of international refugee protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention, given the stringent measures imposed by the DfA. See Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan. In the firster quarter of 2024, the percentages of women and girls crossing to Iran increased to 57% compared to 8% during the same time last year. For Pakistan the proportion remained similar.

- In 2023, there were pendular movements between Afghanistan and Iran, as well as Pakistan reported by passport holders. Most respondents reported staying in both countries for approximately a month, usually in accommodations provided by relatives. Within this group, **41 percent** reported it was their second time visiting the country, while **32 percent** mentioned it was their third time. A small percentage (**1 percent**) mentioned regularly moving back and forth, while the remaining **26 percent** stated it was their first time traveling to Iran. Conversely, **88 percent** of respondents who travelled to Pakistan reported multiple visits. Among them, **35 percent** mentioned it was their second visit, and **52 percent** stated it was their third visit. **1 percent** mentioned moving back and forth between both countries, while the remaining **12 percent** mentioned it was their first time traveling to Pakistan. This trend differs slightly from the 2022 findings. In that year, **51 percent** of respondents traveling to Iran reported multiple visits, while **49 percent** stated it was their first time. For those traveling to Pakistan, **84 percent** reported multiple visits, with **16 percent** stating it was their first time visiting. However, this represent a subset of movers traveling to Iran and Pakistan as more than half of those fleeing to Iran are undocumented, based on information collected at unofficial crossing points. In the first quarter of 2024, the average length of stay increased. The majority (79%) stayed between 6 months and 5 years.

- The outflow movement from Afghanistan to Pakistan via official crossing points declined notably following the announcement made by the Pakistani Government on 3 October 2023, regarding the "Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan" (IFRP) to repatriate over a million foreigners without valid documents, primarily consisting of Afghans. Following the announcement, the government of Pakistan only allowed Afghans in possession of valid passport and visa to travel to Pakistan via Torkham and Spin Boldak.

Barriers to leaving Afghanistan:

- The Afghan National Passport Office is responsible for distributing national passports. However, due to a substantial backlog and persistent demand for passports, the waiting time is considerable.

- Reportedly the DfA increased patrols near unofficial points during the last quarter of 2023 which is aimed to prevent the movement of people to Iran particularly minority groups.

- The "mahram" (the male chaperone) requirement that prevents women/girls from travelling abroad unless accompanied by a male chaperone (husband, father, brother, son) continues to be in place in Afghanistan.

- Challenges have been reported by the interviewed individuals in obtaining a visa for the neighboring countries such as lengthy waiting time for a Pakistani visa and suspension of visa processing by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, Turkey and the Russian Federation.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. The dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not been yet agreed upon the parties.

UNHCR AFGHANISTAN

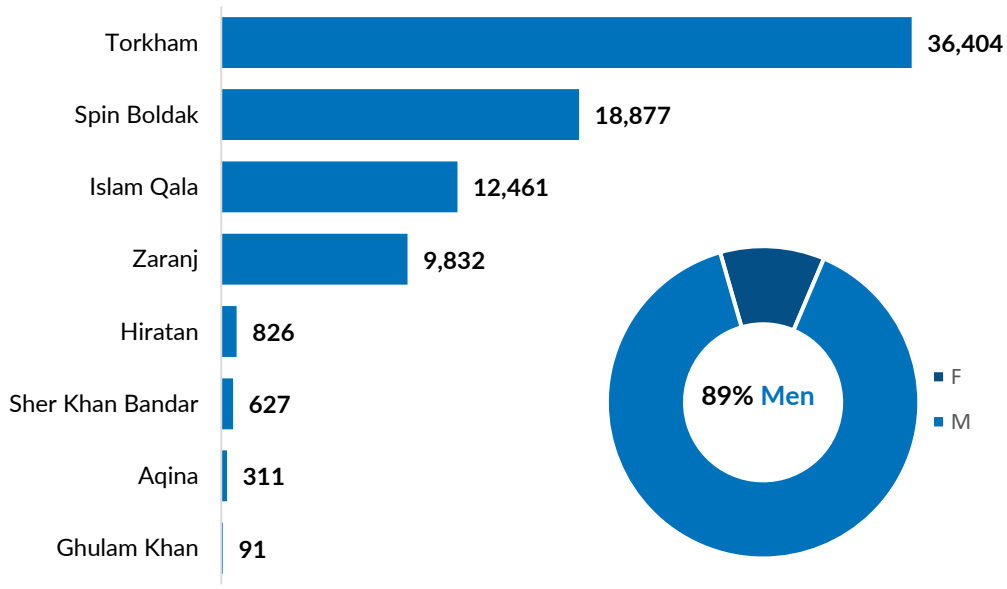
2023 CROSS BORDER MONITORING

Outflow Monitoring

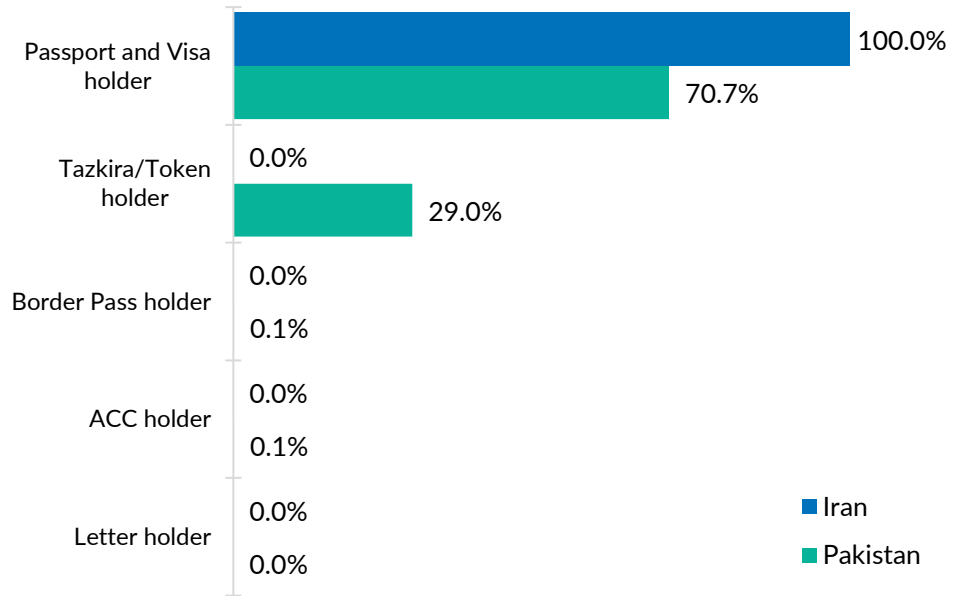
UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency

Summary Findings: Official Crossing Points

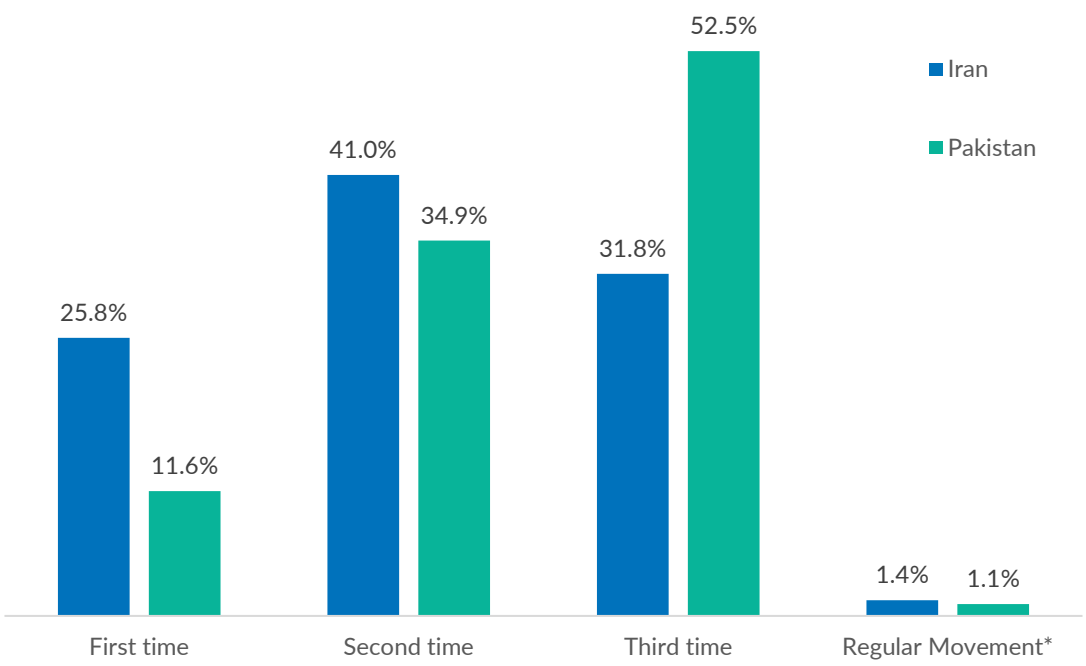
Interviews by Official Entry Point



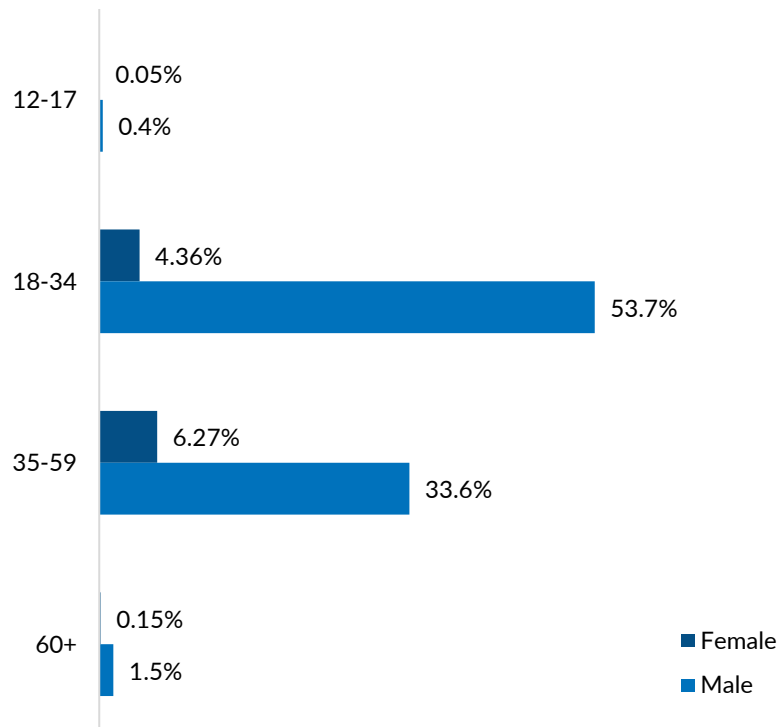
Documentation status of respondents



**Movement Frequency of passport holding respondents via official crossing points (% of interviews per Country)



Respondents Age and Gender



*Regular movement refers to individuals living in Afghanistan with businesses in Iran or Pakistan, or individuals living in Iran/Pakistan with businesses in Afghanistan.

** Movement frequency only refers to movers who were traveling to Iran and Pakistan via official crossing points and hold passports. Based on information collected at unofficial crossing points, more than half of Afghans fleeing to Iran are undocumented and flee Afghanistan through unofficial crossing points.

Islam Qala crossing point, Herat, Afghanistan. © UNHCR/Afghanistan

UNHCR AFGHANISTAN

2023 CROSS BORDER MONITORING

Inflow Monitoring

85,271 AFGHANS

25,096 families

76,459 89.7%

8,812 11.3%

SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **85,271 Afghans** – **76,459** male (89.7 per cent) and **8,812** female (11.3 per cent) – were interviewed upon arrival in Afghanistan. This includes **60,175** single individuals and **25,096** families. **69,670** interviews were conducted with spontaneous returnees and **15,601** with deportees. However, Afghans who were forcibly returned from Pakistan at the end of 2023 were mainly families with women, children making up **75 per cent** of the returns (**46 per cent** women and girls). UNHCR continues to receive inquiries from women, seeking support for education and expressing concerns about women protection. These cases involve allegation about forced marriages, denial of job opportunities, and other forms of gender discrimination. Women have also reported that their livelihoods have been detrimentally impacted by DFA policies.

- **61 per cent** of the respondents were 18-34 years old, **36 per cent** were 35-59 years old, only **two percent** minors (12-17 years old), and **one percent** were 60 and above.

- A majority of respondents from Iran were undocumented while most respondents from Pakistan were passport holders. However, since September 2023, over **half a million Afghans** including refugees and those in refugee-like situations, have had to return from Pakistan.

- **81 percent** of the respondents including children traveled to Iran via unofficial crossing points, whereas **92 per cent** of Afghan respondents who went to Pakistan departed via official crossing points. Of respondents moving to Iran via official border crossings, **41 per cent** crossed for the first time. This was the case for **23 per cent** to Pakistan. As only passport holders move via official border crossings this is in accordance with findings on documentation types.

- Movers were asked their reasons for leaving Afghanistan. While most respondents departed to Iran in search of better living conditions or employment opportunities, capturing reasons for movement is complex as interviews are conducted in Afghanistan making it difficult for respondents, particularly those in need of international protection, to express concerns. Most respondents who traveled to Pakistan cited reasons such as medical treatment, improved living conditions, or employment opportunities. The list of reasons provided is not exhaustive and may not capture all motivations as Afghans may initially prioritize immediate needs for survival. UNHCR also considers Afghan women and girls to be likely in need of international refugee protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention, given the stringent measures imposed by the DfA.

- Respondents who returned spontaneously from Iran and Pakistan highlighted the high cost of living, limited employment opportunities, and family reunification as the primary reasons for return. Conversely, irregular entry and lack of documentation were cited as the main reasons for deportation among deportees from both countries. However, since September/October 2023, respondents have increasingly reported that they decided to return due to fear of arrest, deportation, ongoing harassment, arbitrary arrests, extortion and night raids by police. Those who were deported stated that they were arrested during night raids or at police checkpoints and were transferred to temporary detentions centers before being deported to Afghanistan.

- **20 per cent** of respondents returning from Iran and **90 per cent** of those returning from Pakistan stated that they had no information about the risks of irregular migration.

- Lack of food, water, instances of robbery, physical violence perpetrated by smugglers, and the risk of trafficking were reported as the primary challenges encountered by travelers.

- The cost of movement facilitated by smugglers ranges between AFN 3,000 to 10,000 ($40 – $130) per person. The reported amount in 2022 was: AFN 1,000 – 10,000 ($15 – $130) per person.

Interview with a deported family at Zaranj/Milak crossing point, Nimroz, Afghanistan © UNHCR/Afghanistan

Spin Boldak crossing point, Kandahar, Afghanistan © UNHCR/Afghanistan

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Deportation Trends

FROM IRAN

- Based on estimations provided by UNHCR's border monitoring partners, in 2023, an estimated **690,400 undocumented Afghans** were deported from Iran through Islam Qala and Zaranj crossing points. This represents a daily average of **1,891 individuals**. The deportation figures for undocumented Afghans in 2023 are approximately **42% higher** compared to an estimated **485,000** deportees during 2022.

- Among those deported, UNHCR border monitoring identified **29 refoulment** cases among Amayesh card holders (**17 single males, and 6 families/40 individuals**). Additionally, a group comprising **34 families/174 individuals**, all relatives, was deported from Mashad, Iran, on 31 December 2023. In 2022, UNHCR's border monitoring team recorded the **refoulment of 12 refugees** (Amayesh card holders) from Iran via Islam Qala and Zaranj.

- Furthermore, border monitoring teams at Islam Qala and Zaranj crossing points identified an estimated **73,900** Afghans who declared themselves as headcount slip holders, indicating a refugee-like situation. This group consisted of approximately **41,800** regular returnees and **32,000** deportees. These cases were identified starting from February 8, 2023, when UNHCR began screening the deportation of headcount slip holders from Iran. Therefore, a comparison against 2022 figures is not feasible. The deported individuals were reportedly arrested at various locations, including their workplaces. Some were apprehended because they did not possess the headcount slip at the time of arrest, while others were detained for moving to different areas without a movement permit. Some alleged that the police disregarded the importance of the headcount slip.

- UNHCR conducted protection monitoring interviews and delivered support to refoulment cases while IOM provided assistance to vulnerable undocumented deportees and returnees from Iran.

- The vast majority of deportees are undocumented Afghans. Among them, deportation without a court order or/and not having access to formal complain mechanism is reported. As a result, these deportees had no opportunity to raise concerns about potential protection risks in Afghanistan before being deported.

- Deportees consistently report numerous human rights violations, including physical violence, lack of access to adequate food, water, and sanitation, insufficient healthcare, verbal abuse and insults, overcrowded conditions, family separation, and loss of assets and money, among other issues.

FROM PAKISTAN

- The announcement and implementation of the "Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan" by the Government of Pakistan led to an increase in the number of undocumented Afghans returning or being deported. Prior to the announcement, the average daily number of undocumented Afghans returning from Pakistan through Spin Boldak (Kandahar) and Torkham (Nangarhar) was approximately **260 individuals**. However, the figures saw a significant rise since September 15, with the peak occurring in early November 2023. Since then, the number of individuals crossing these official border points has steadily decreased, although it remains significantly higher than the numbers observed before September 15.

- From September 15 – December 31, 2023, nearly **500,000 Afghans**, have returned to Afghanistan. Among them, **29,548 were deported** predominantly through Torkham and Spin Boldak. Among the returned or deported Afghans, UNHCR identified and provided assistance to a total of **39,158 individuals**, including Afghan refugees holding PoR (Proof of Registration) cards, as well as individuals in refugee-like situations, such as holders of UNHCR's Slip/Asylum Certificate and Protection Cases.

- To compare the above figures to the previous year, **2,372 undocumented Afghans were arrested** and deported on charges of infringing the 1946 Foreigners Act. No deportations of PoR (Proof of Registration) cardholders were recorded in 2022 according to UNHCR partners.

FROM TAJIKISTAN

- Around **12 Afghan refugees were deported** from Tajikistan and were assisted by UNHCR in 2023. In 2022, an estimated **100** Afghans were deported from Tajikistan.

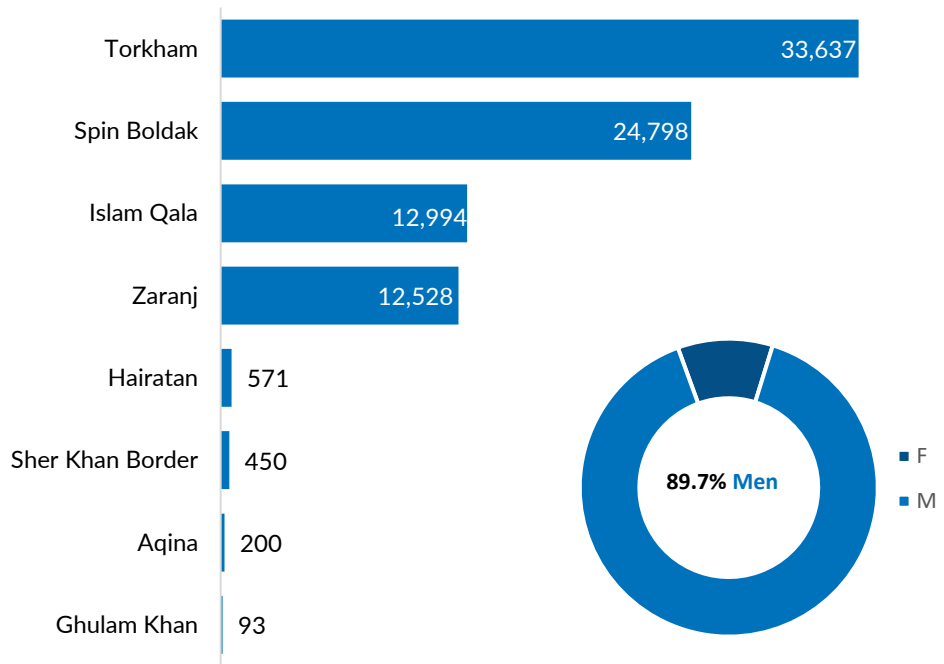
UNHCR AFGHANISTAN

2023 CROSS BORDER MONITORING

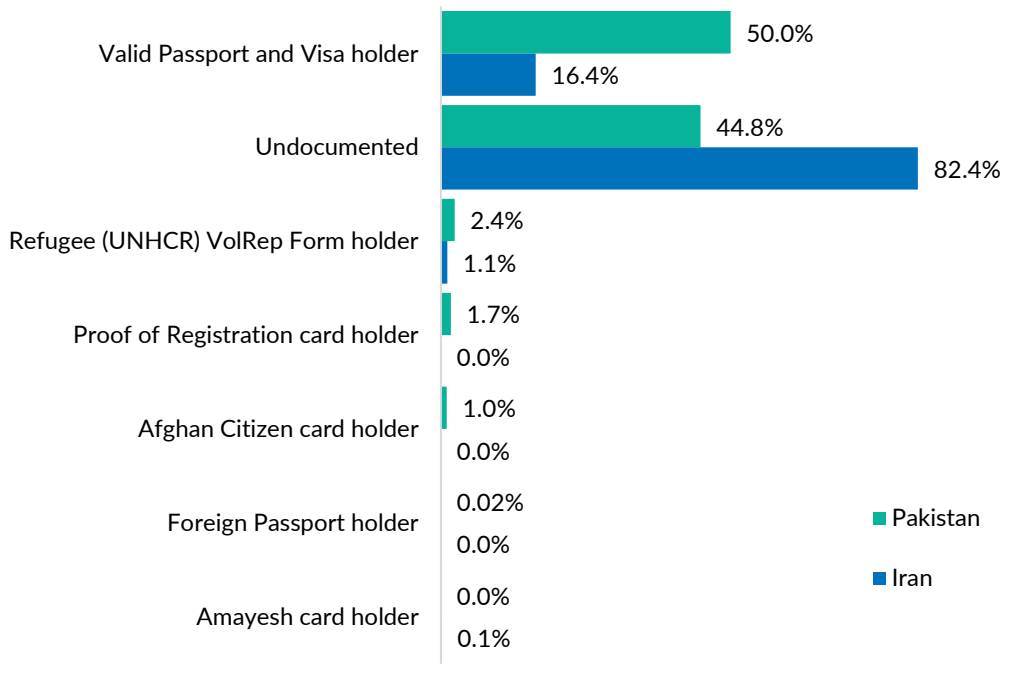
Inflow Monitoring

UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency

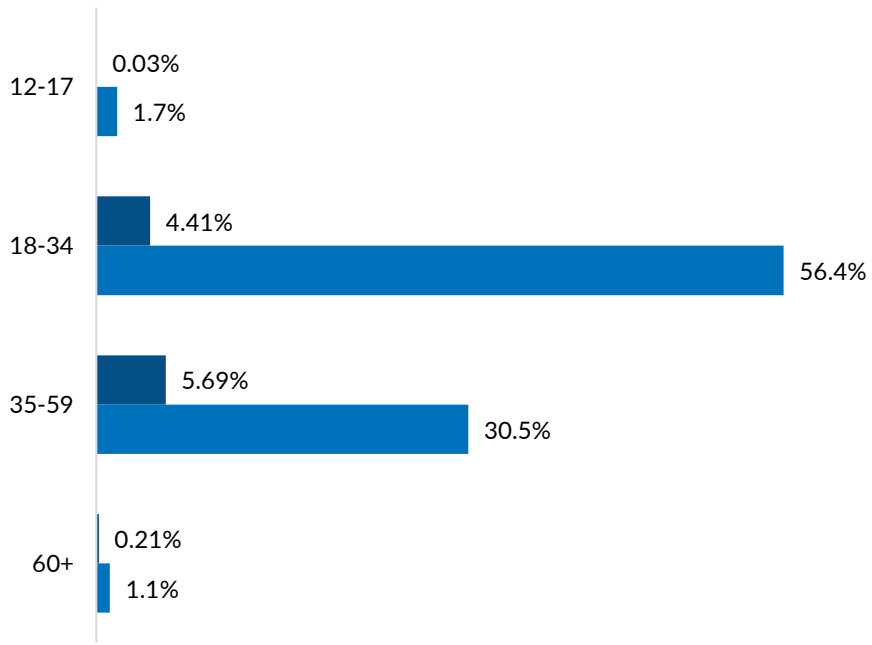
Number of Interviews by Official Entry Point



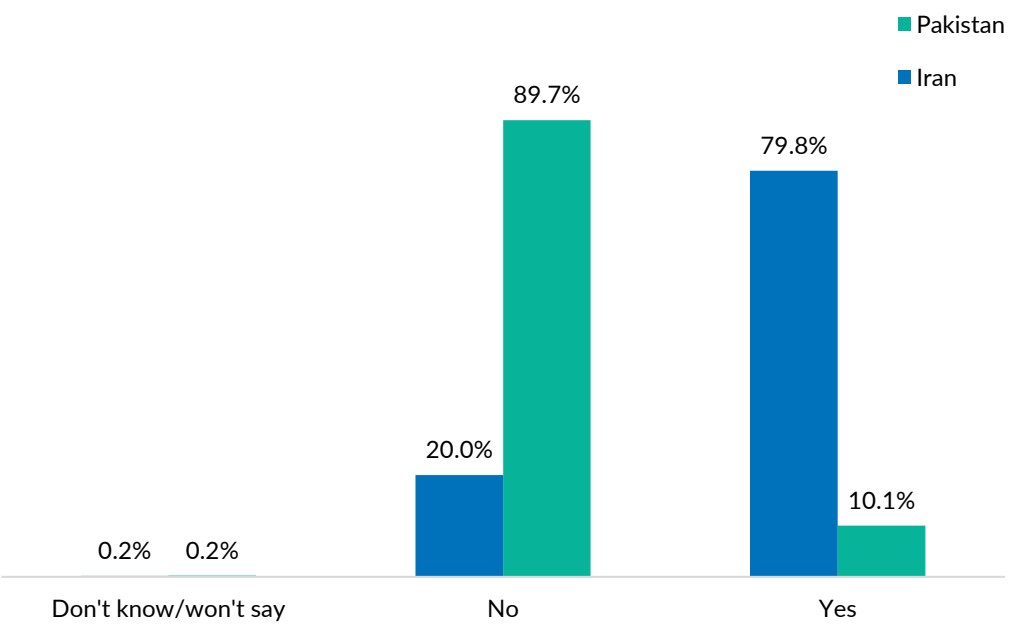
Documentation Status of Respondents



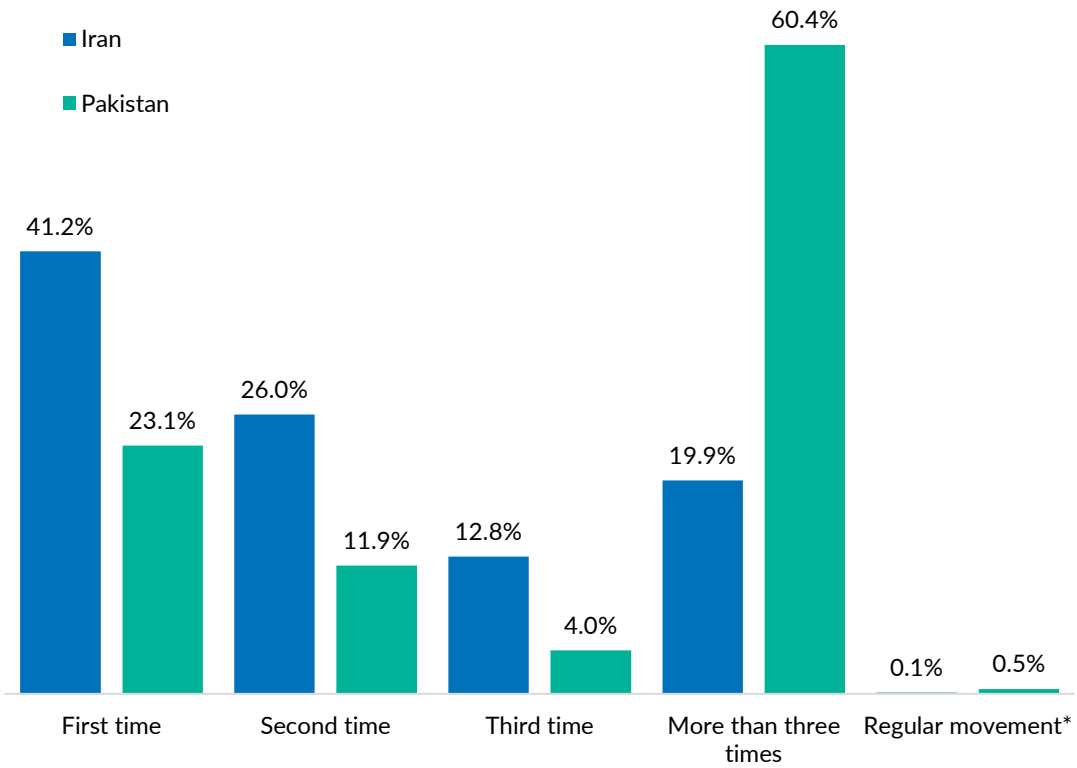
Respondents Age and Gender



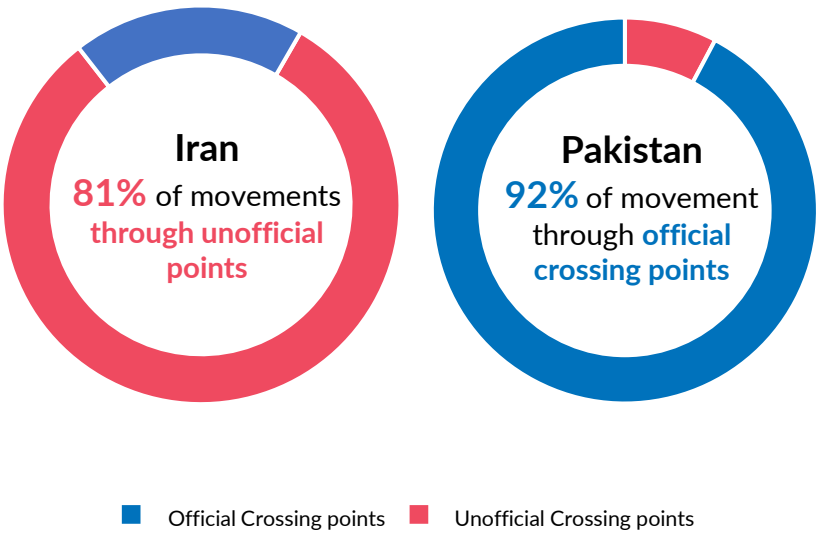
Awareness of Interviewed Returnees/Deportees about the Potential Protection Risks



Movement Frequency of passport holding respondents via official crossing points (% of interviews per Country)



Type of Movement



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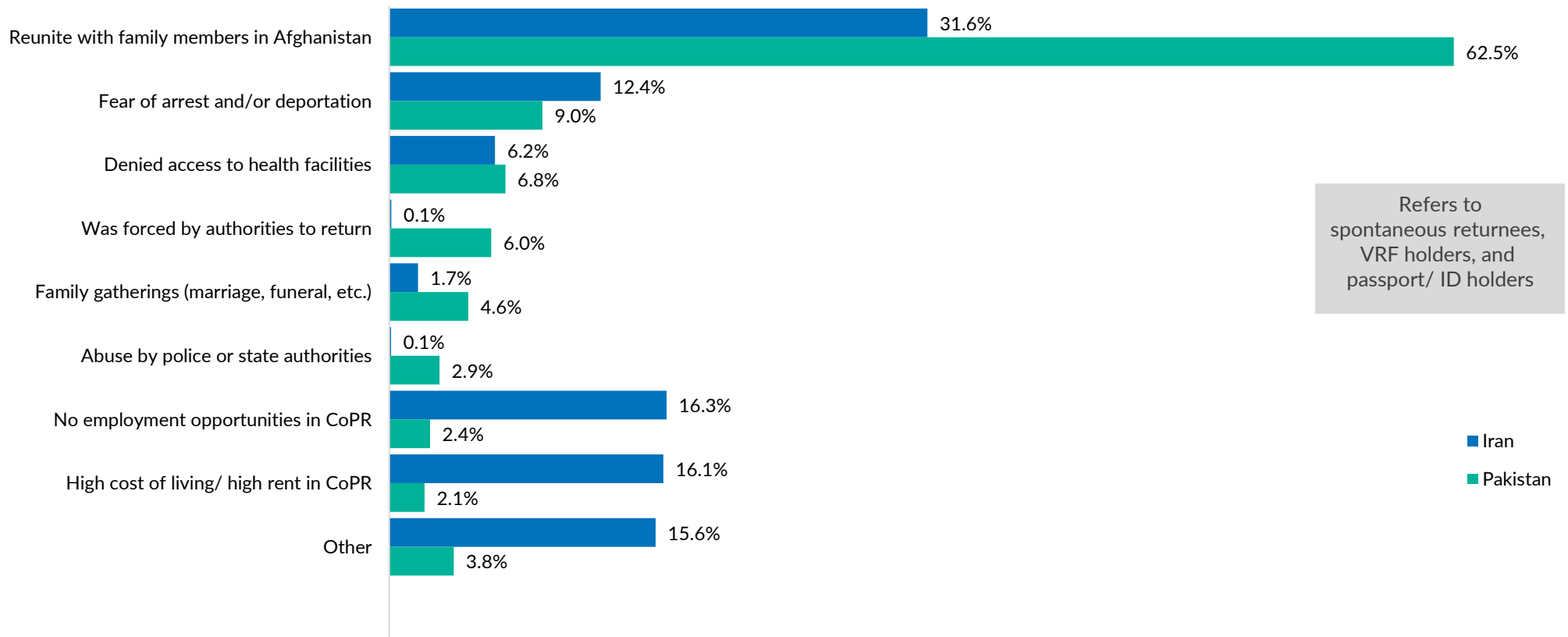
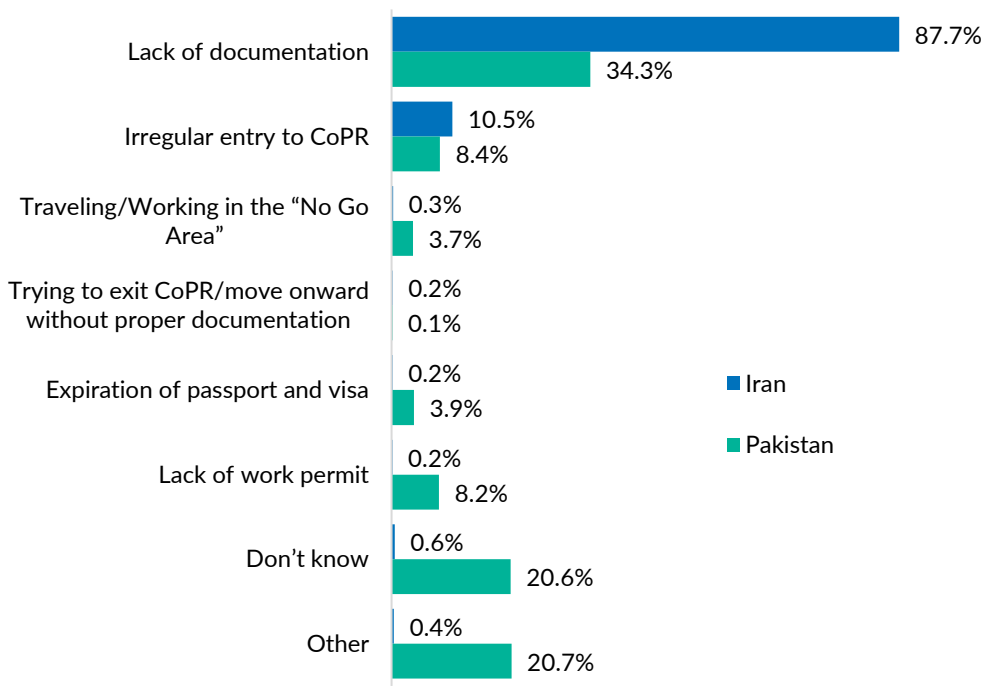
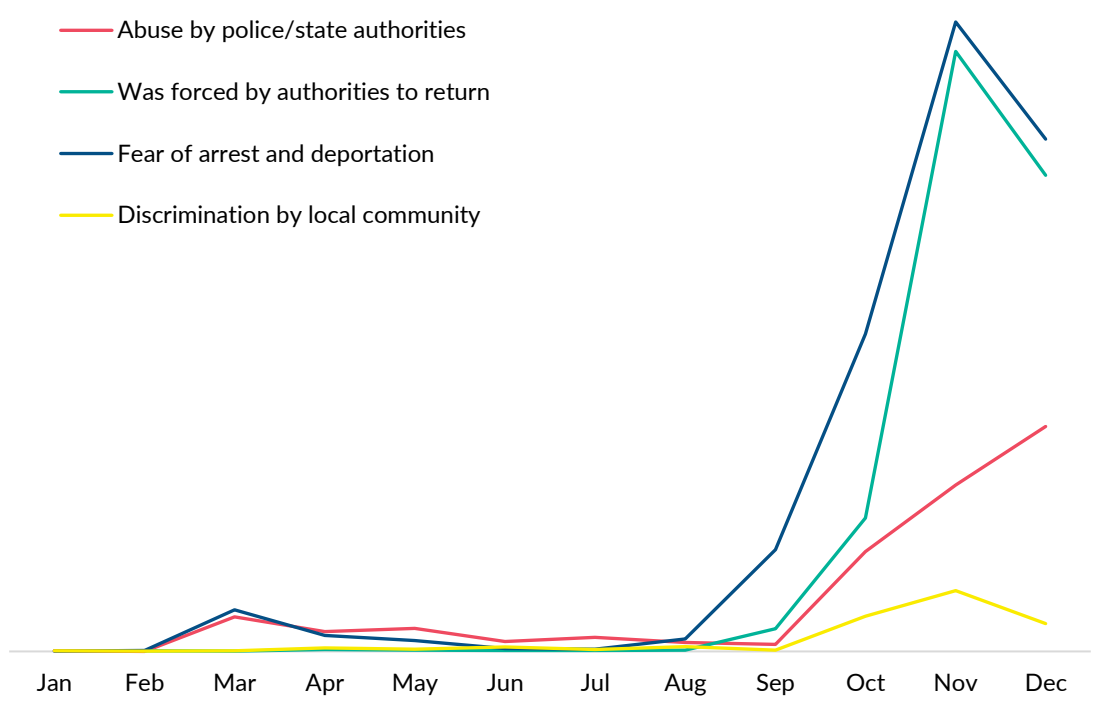
Reasons for Return to Afghanistan (Spontaneous Returnees, VRF holders, and Passport/ID Holders)



Reasons of Deportation

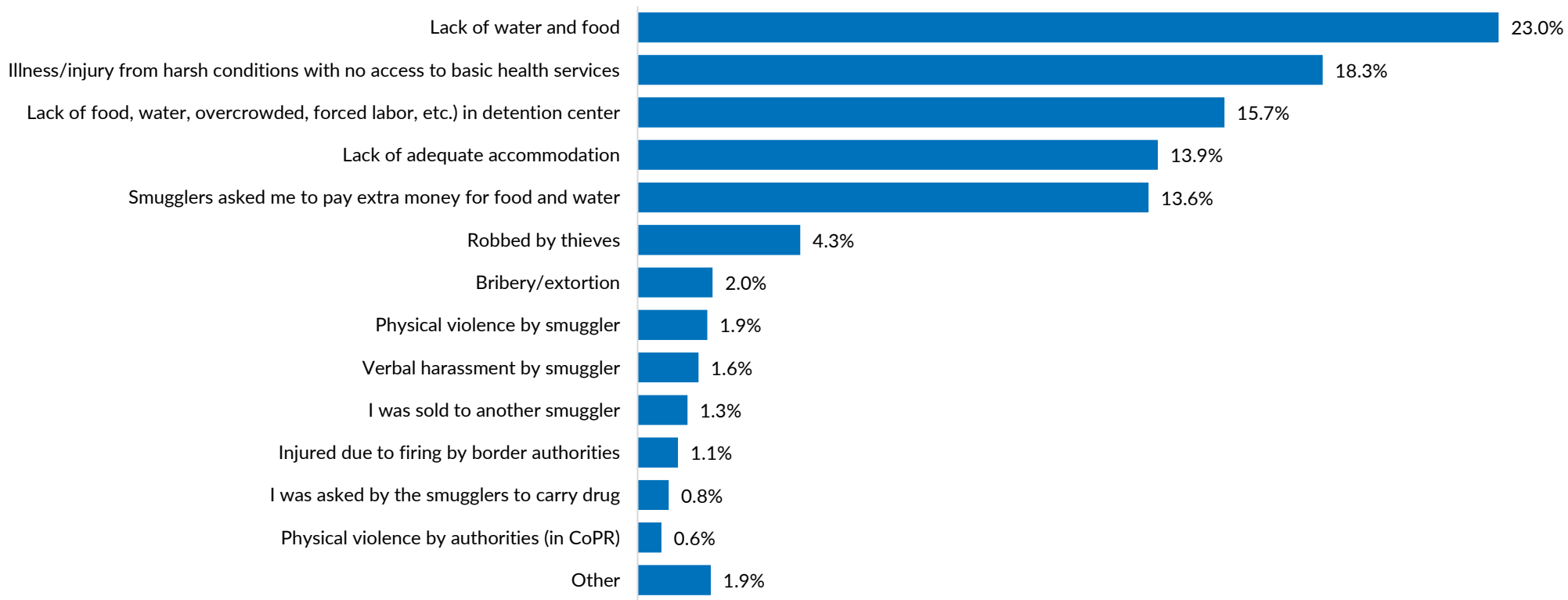


Reasons for Return from Pakistan (due to Protection Concerns)



The vast majority of deportation are crossing through unofficial points are to/from Iran.

Problems Faced during the Journey through Unofficial Crossing Points: Iran



UNHCR partners collected estimated inflow and outflow figures at official crossing points. In 2023, an estimated **15 million individuals**, predominantly Afghans, moved to or from Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The majority of these movements occurred via Spin Boldak in Afghanistan (to Pakistan), followed by Torkham (to Pakistan), Islam Qala and Zaranj (to Iran), Hiratan (to Uzbekistan), Aqina (to Turkmenistan), and Sher Khan Bander (to Tajikistan).

PAKISTAN – OUTFLOW MOVEMENTS

- In 2023, there were an estimated **6.7 million** outflow movements. The majority, around **5.8 million**, occurred via Spin Boldak, followed by approximately **0.8 million** via Torkham. Approximately **70 – 80 percent** of outflow movements via Spin Boldak were Afghans, primarily holders of Tazkira, border pass tokens and passports, mainly from Kandahar province. Around **20 – 30 percent** were Pakistani National ID Card holders, mainly from the Chaman area. Many of those travelling via Spin Boldak are small business owners who reside on one side of the border and conduct business on the other side, thus moving regularly between the two. The majority of outflow movements via Torkham were Afghans with valid passports and visas, although Pakistani authorities sometimes allowed individuals without travel documents to cross for critical medical purposes.
- In addition, an estimated **5,000 – 6,000** Afghans went to Pakistan via unofficial crossing points located in several provinces on a weekly basis. This group primarily consisted of local individuals who traveled back and forth for business, medical treatment, and family visit purposes.
- The outflow movements through official border crossings experienced a **significant decline since October 2023** due to the government of Pakistan's decision to only permit individuals holding passports and visas to cross into Pakistan.

IRAN - OUTFLOW MOVEMENTS

- An estimated **620,000 Afghans** travelled to Iran with valid travel documents during the first half of 2023. This represented an average of **1,697** individuals per day.
- In addition, approximately **1,200 to 1,500 undocumented Afghans** travelled to Iran through unofficial crossing points on a weekly basis.
- All movements through unofficial crossing points were reportedly facilitated by smugglers.
- Challenges in obtaining passports and visas due to the overcrowded situation at national passport offices and at respective embassies or consulates and the deterioration of the financial situation, continues to limit individuals' ability to obtain documents, and may motivate more people to rely on irregular movement channels.

PAKISTAN – INFLOW MOVEMENTS

- In 2023, there were an estimated **6.8 million** inflow movements, mainly via Spin Boldak. Prior to the announcement by the government of Pakistan, inflow movements from Pakistan to Afghanistan via official crossing points were minimal, averaging only **260 individuals** daily. The inflow movements significantly increased after the implementation of Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan by the government of Pakistan. From September to December 2023, nearly **half a million** Afghans, including refugees and those in refugee-like situations, returned from Pakistan. The main driver for this increase during the last quarter of the year was the implementation of the plan by the government of Pakistan. Afghans who returned or were deported from Pakistan carried various documents, including passports, Proof of Registration (PoR) for refugees, Afghan Citizen Card (ACC), voluntary repatriation forms (VRF) for refugees returning under the facilitated voluntary repatriation program, and undocumented Afghans.

IRAN - INFLOW MOVEMENTS

- In 2023, an estimated **1.5 million** Afghans either returned to Afghanistan or were deported from Iran. This marks a notable increase from the overall returnee figure for 2022, which was just over **1.1 million** Afghans. Among the returns recorded, approximately **862,000** were regular cross-border movers, while **690,000** were deportation movements, averaging around **1,697 daily**. The deportation figures represent a significant increase of 42% from the estimated **485,000** recorded during the same period in 2022.

POPULATION MOVEMENTS BY CROSSING POINT

Movement type	Spin Boldak	Torkham	Islam Qala	Zaranj	Sher Khan Bandar	Hiratan	Aqina	Total
Outflow total (A)	5,860,576	817,787	451,356	168,154	1,906	16,443	6,388	7,322,610
Outflow Monthly Average	488,381	68,149	37,613	14,013	159	1,370	532	610,218
Inflow total (B)	5,776,600	1,008,013	817,915	734,486	1,515	16,834	5,999	8,361,362
Inflow Monthly Average	481,383	84,001	68,160	61,207	126	1,403	500	696,780
Total (A+B)	**11,637,176**	**1,825,800**	**1,269,271**	**902,640**	**3,421**	**33,277**	**12,387**	**15,683,972**

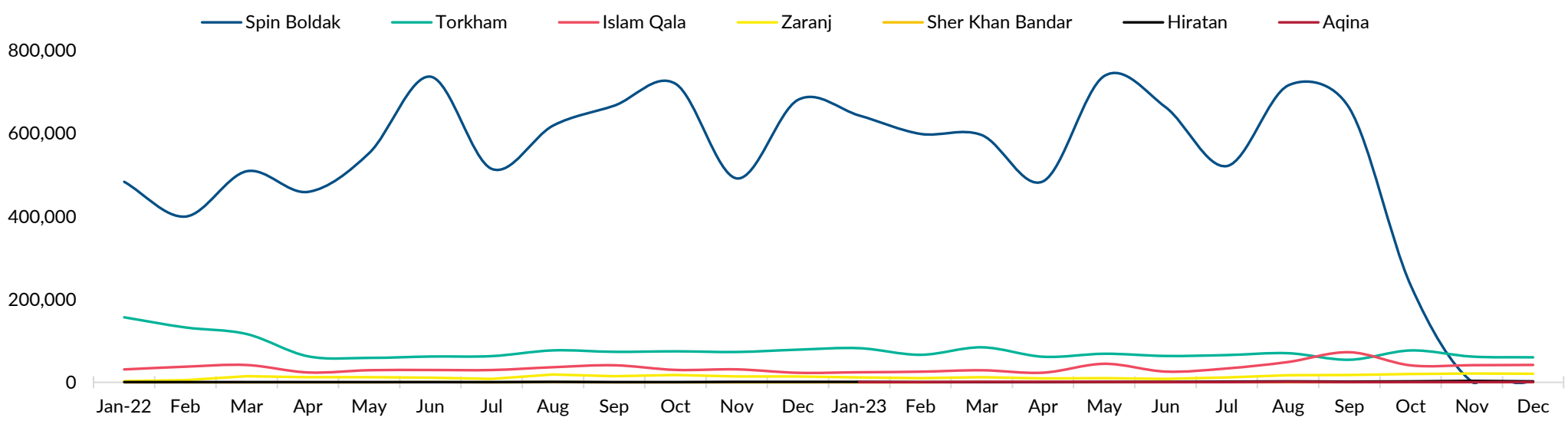
Population Movements - Central Asia

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan – 2023

- Population movements to Central Asia remained low.
- **TURKMENISTAN:** In 2023, the Aqina border was exclusively open for commercial movements and visa holders. An estimated **6,400** individuals, primarily railway staff and drivers from Turkmenistan, along with a small number of Afghan visa holders, traveled to Turkmenistan. Similarly, approximately **6,000** individuals with a similar profile returned to Afghanistan through the same border.
- **UZBEKISTAN:** The border in Hiratan was restricted in 2023 to commercial movements and visa holders only. An estimated **16,400** individuals, mainly railway staff, drivers from Uzbekistan, and diplomats, as well as Afghan visa holders travelled to Uzbekistan while an estimated **16,800** individuals with a similar profile returned to Afghanistan. To be able to cross the border, Afghans were required to present resident permits, business/education documents or an official letter from the Government of Uzbekistan.
- **TAJIKISTAN:** The border in Sherkhan-Bandar remains open. An estimated **1,900** Afghans and foreigners with valid visas, gate passes, or permission documents travelled to Tajikistan while an estimated **1,500** individuals returned to Afghanistan.

Note: the figures of in/outflow movements, in the below charts, are estimates and do not represent actual figures of Afghans moving either way to Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan weekly.

Estimated Monthly Outflow Movement – Individuals - (1 January 2022 - 31 December 2023)



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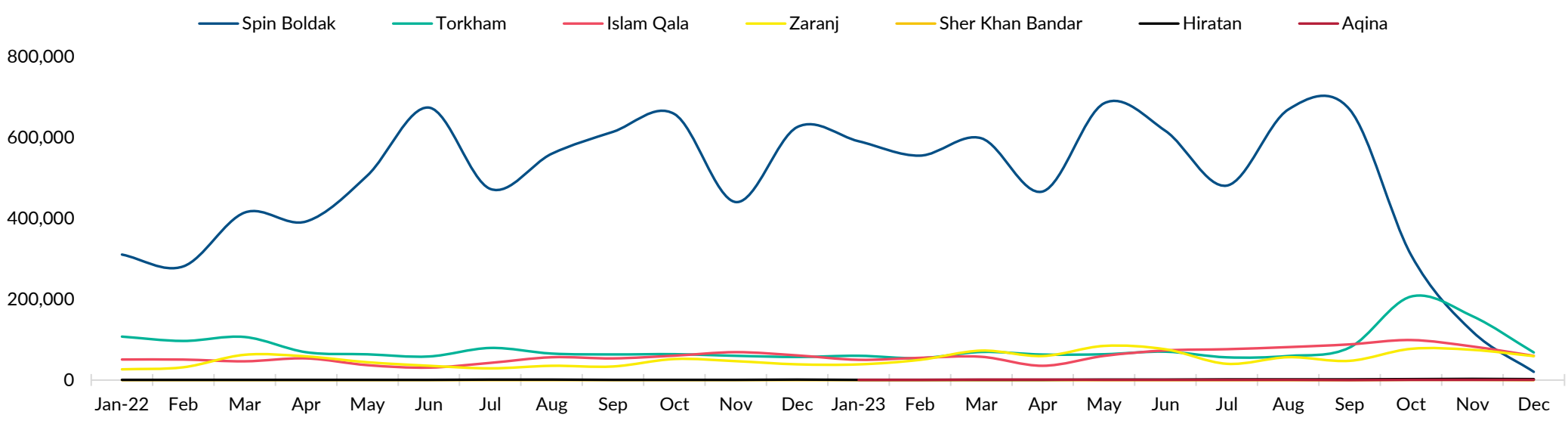
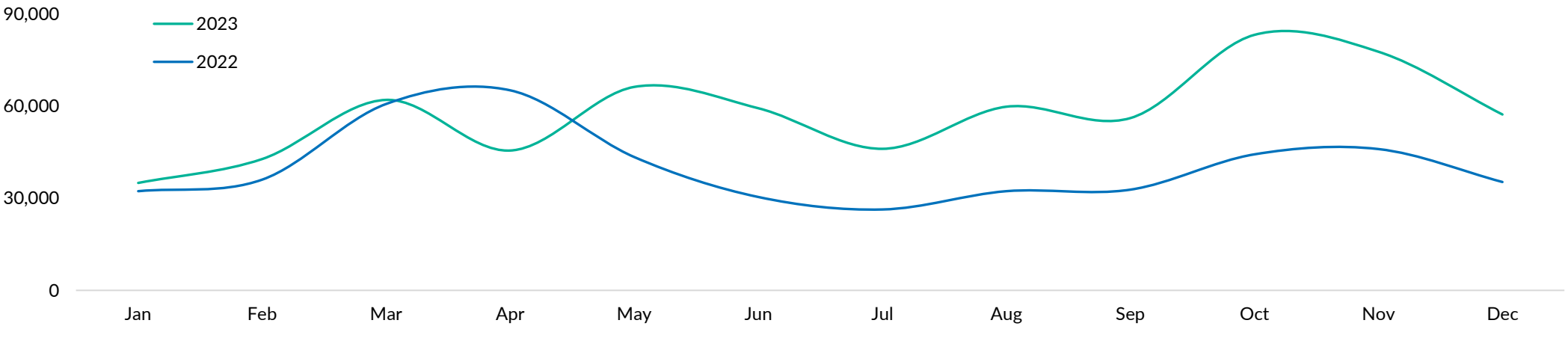


Deportation of Undocumented Afghans from Iran (1 January to 31 December 2022)



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