UNHCR
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SSAR Support Platform
GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES

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Route-Based Approach

SOUTH-WEST ASIA ROUTE TO EUROPE

August 2026

SITUATION OVERVIEW

The South-West Asia (SWA) Route has become an increasingly significant corridor for irregular arrivals to Europe. In 2021, nationals from South Asia and South-West Asia countries constituted 15 per cent of total irregular arrivals to Mediterranean Europe,[1] doubling to 30 per cent in 2025. This flow is concentrated among a small number of nationalities, with Afghans, Iranians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis accounting for nearly all arrivals from the Asia-Pacific region.

Movements along the SWA Route take place within a context in which mobility depends not only on conditions in countries of origin, but also on the quality of protection and prospects for self-reliance in first countries of stay, asylum or destination. Recent developments affecting Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, including large-scale deportations, illustrate how deteriorating conditions in first countries of stay or asylum can prompt onward movement. The context has also been marked by growing regional instability, from the short but acute "12-day war" in 2025 to the 2026 Middle East crisis affecting Iran and the broader region, which further deepened protection risks and socio-economic insecurity for refugees and others on the move. Movement toward Europe is therefore not always direct or pre-planned. It often unfolds in stages, as people reassess their options in response to legal insecurity, barriers to accessing rights and services, and limited livelihood opportunities. Even then, only a small proportion decide to move onwards and make their journey to Europe, with many remaining in their first country of stay, asylum, or destination. For example, by the end of 2025, Iran alone hosted over 1.6 million Afghans, including refugees and others in need of international protection. This was more than twice the number recorded across the whole of Europe, which reported 800,000 Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers.

Against this backdrop, this report analyses the mixed movements of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants from South-West Asia to Europe.[2] The report is based on UNHCR's Afghanistan Border Monitoring Data, Afghan Post-Return Monitoring Survey, interviews conducted with people moving along the SWA Route in South-West Asia and Türkiye, 657 protection monitoring interviews conducted in South-Eastern Europe between January 2025 and July 2026,[3] and focus group discussions conducted in Greece and Italy. It covers, among others, the profiles of people on the move, the factors triggering departure from countries of origin and onward movement, and the protection challenges individuals experience along the route and upon arrival.

1 *Mediterranean Europe refers to the five European countries included in this analysis: Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain, hereinafter referred to as "Mediterranean Europe." These countries serve as the primary entry points for irregular arrivals to Europe.*

2 *Mixed movements from the region involve several migration corridors. For instance, while not the focus of this report, movements of Bangladeshi nationals towards Europe predominantly involve air travel from Bangladesh to Libya, often via the United Arab Emirates and Egypt and, in some cases, Türkiye and other transit countries. They typically involve overland movement through Libya before undertaking onward sea journeys across the Central Mediterranean towards Europe.*

3 *Interviews were conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Kosovo (references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244/1999).*

MACROECONOMIC SPILLOVER RISKS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROTECTION SPACE

Recent analysis by UNDP[4] indicates that the military escalation in the Middle East is generating significant macroeconomic spillovers across Asia and the Pacific, with Iran and Pakistan among the most exposed countries due to energy dependence, food import reliance, large informal labour markets, and constrained fiscal space.

In Iran, UNDP simulations project human development losses equivalent to 1–1.5 years of Human Development Index (HDI) progress, alongside a potential increase of over 5 million people falling into poverty, driven by rising food prices, income losses and supplychain disruption. Pakistan faces more moderate but still material impacts, including rising poverty risk, food inflation pressures and fiscal strain under prolonged disruption scenarios.

The findings point to indirect but relevant risks for protection space for refugees, stateless persons and migrants along the route. Rising living costs, weaker employment prospects, and shrinking fiscal buffers disproportionately affect low income households, informal workers, refugees and migrants - groups in which Afghans are overrepresented in both Iran and Pakistan.

These spillover effects are likely to compound existing vulnerabilities and pressures already facing Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, such as legal uncertainty, informality, and limited access to protection mechanisms. Under such conditions, the capacity of host States to sustain inclusive policies such as access to livelihoods, services and social protection may be further constrained. The evidence underscores the importance of monitoring how economic shocks interact with protection environments, particularly for populations already at heightened risk of onward movement and returns under adverse circumstances.

4 *Military Escalation in the Middle East: Human Development Impacts Across Asia and the Pacific https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/publications/military-escalation-middle-east-human-development-impacts-across-asia-and-pacific*

POPULATION FLOW

2.1 How have movements along this route evolved over time?

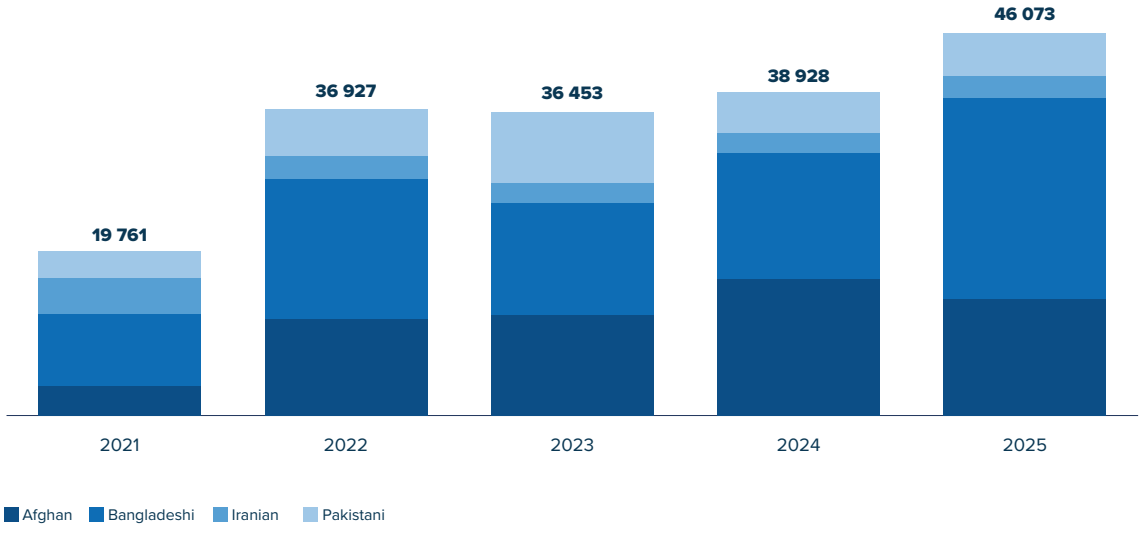
Between 2021 and 2025, irregular arrivals from South-West Asia and South Asia represented a substantial and increasing share of total arrivals to Mediterranean Europe, doubling from 15 per cent (19,903) to 30 per cent (46,141).

The composition of arrivals remained stable, with nationals of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Iran consistently comprising 99 per cent of arrivals from South-West Asia and South Asia. Bangladeshi nationals represented the largest share, accounting for 37–53 per cent of arrivals annually, followed by Afghan nationals at 18–41 per cent. Collectively, nationals of Bangladesh and Afghanistan made up 62–83 per cent of arrivals from Asia-Pacific region.

Across the reporting period (2021–2025), Italy remained the main point of entry for arrivals from South-West Asia and South Asia, although the share has declined in the last two years. Between 2021 and 2023, the proportion of arrivals entering Italy remained at approximately 70–80 per cent, before dropping to 50 per cent in 2024. In 2025, the share slightly increased to 58 per cent but remained below earlier levels, indicating a shift towards diversified entry points. The overall concentration of arrivals to Italy is linked to Italy serving as the primary entry point for Bangladeshi nationals, who represented the largest share of arrivals from Asia-Pacific region.

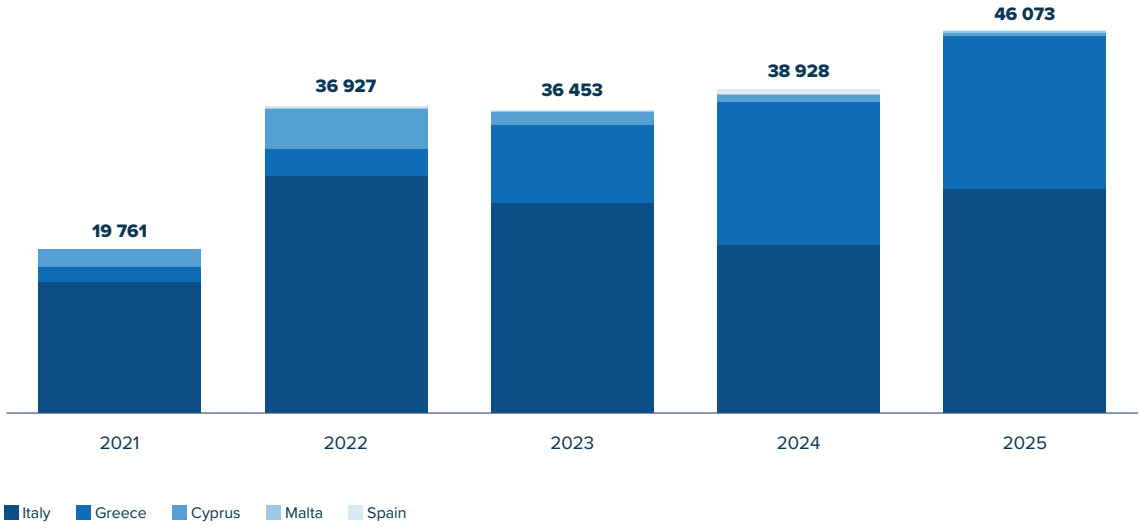
Relatedly, Greece has witnessed a marked increase in arrivals from the Asia-Pacific region. In 2021 and 2022, Greece accounted for 9 per cent of arrivals from the region, which rose to 26 per cent in 2023 and further to around 40 per cent in 2024–2025. The increase in 2023 and 2024 was largely driven by a rise in arrivals from Afghanistan. In 2025, while Afghan arrivals remained among the highest, Greece also recorded a fivefold increase in arrivals of Bangladeshi nationals, from 695 in 2024 to 3,793 in 2025.

ARRIVALS TO MEDITERRANEAN EUROPE OF THE NATIONALITIES IN FOCUS IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS



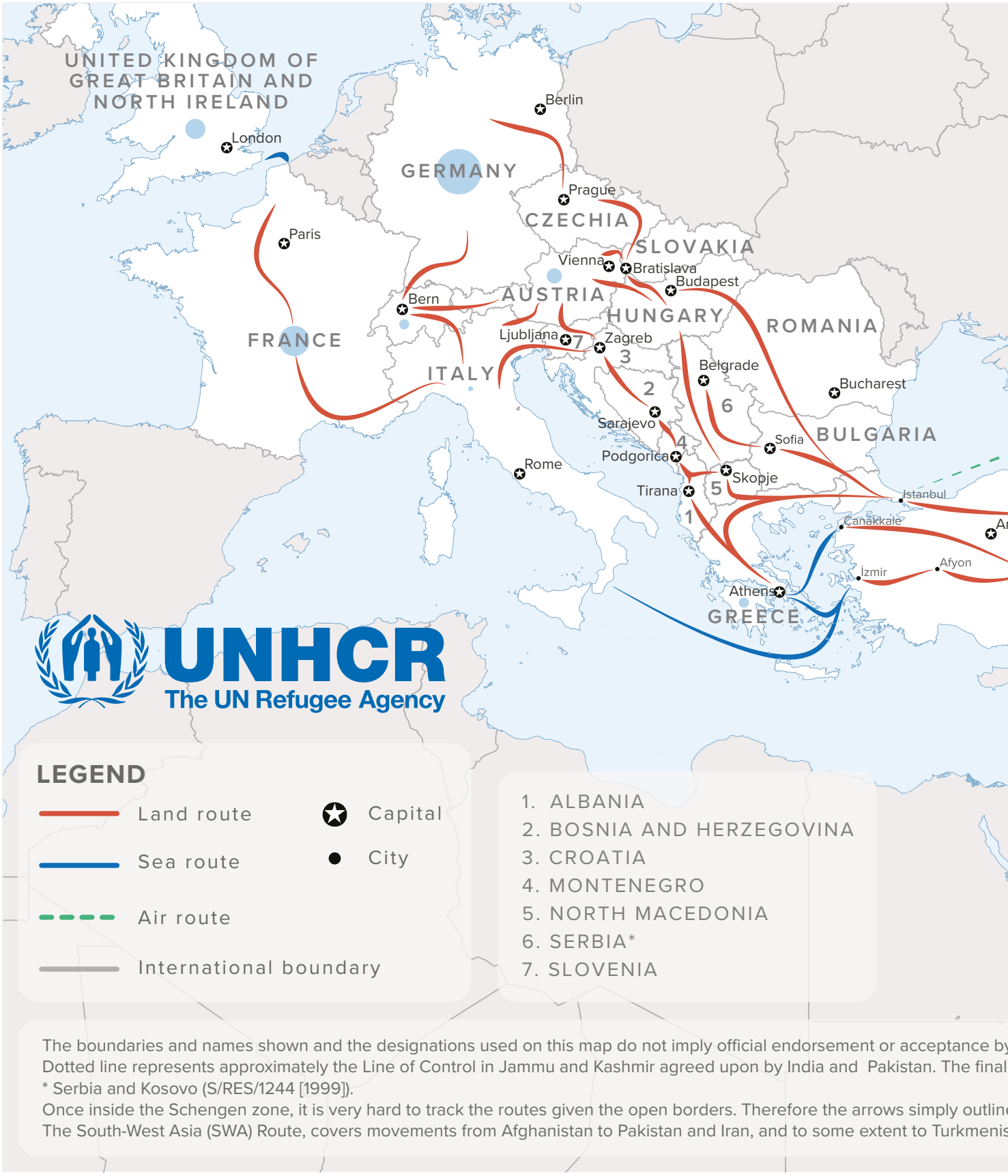
Source: Governments, UNHCR

AFGHANS, BANGLADESHI, IRANIANS AND PAKISTANIS TOTAL ARRIVALS BY COUNTRY OF ARRIVAL



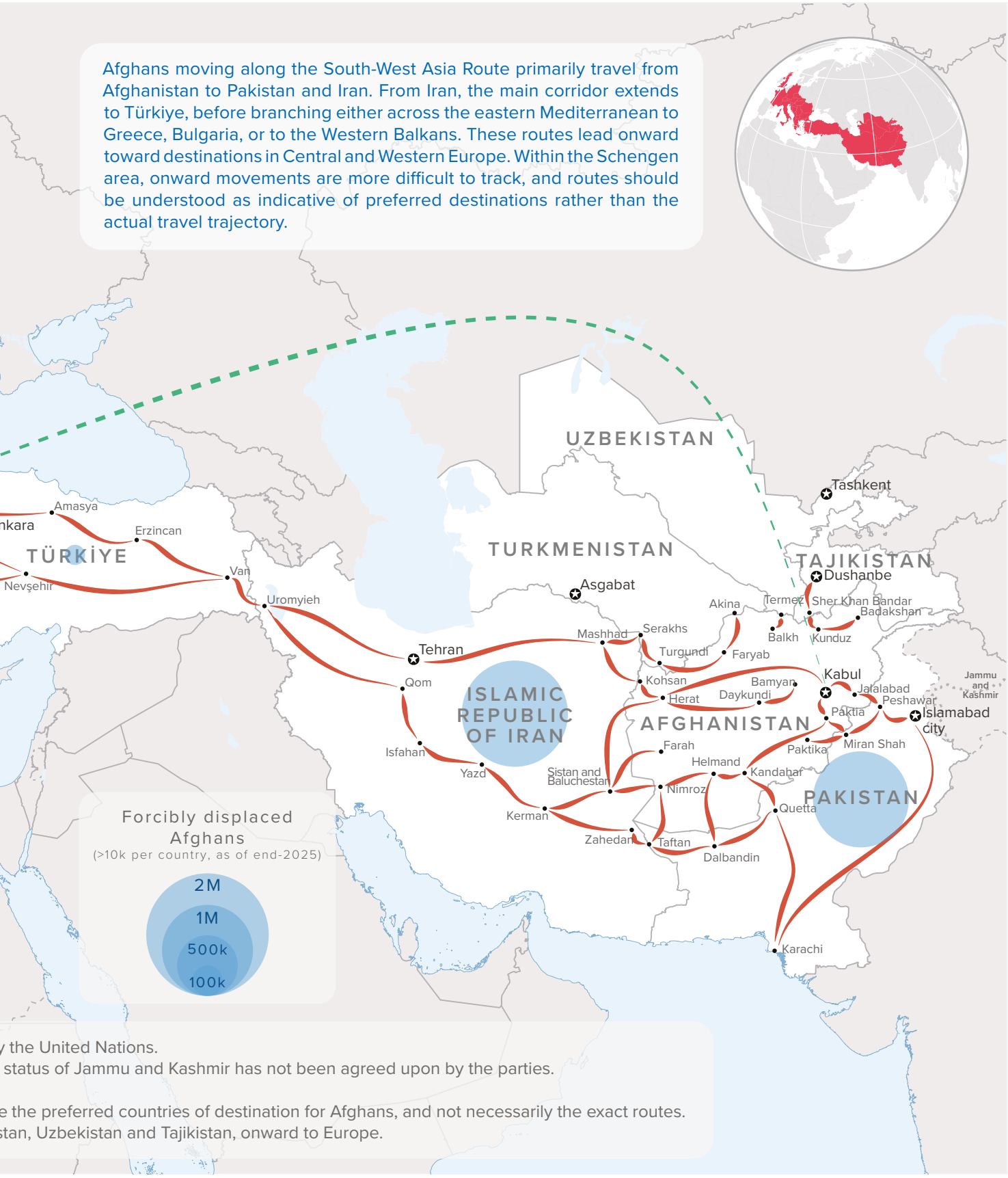
Source: Governments, UNHCR

2.2 Which routes are people taking?



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by
Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final
* Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244 [1999]).
Once inside the Schengen zone, it is very hard to track the routes given the open borders. Therefore the arrows simply outline
The South-West Asia (SWA) Route, covers movements from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran, and to some extent to Turkmenis

Afghans moving along the South-West Asia Route primarily travel from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran. From Iran, the main corridor extends to Türkiye, before branching either across the eastern Mediterranean to Greece, Bulgaria, or to the Western Balkans. These routes lead onward toward destinations in Central and Western Europe. Within the Schengen area, onward movements are more difficult to track, and routes should be understood as indicative of preferred destinations rather than the actual travel trajectory.



y the United Nations.
status of Jammu and Kashmir has not been agreed upon by the parties.

e the preferred countries of destination for Afghans, and not necessarily the exact routes.
stan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, onward to Europe.

OPERATIONALIZING THE ROUTE–BASED APPROACH

The Route-Based Approach (RteBA) for mixed and onward movements along the South-West Asia Route, operationalized by UNHCR and partners, moves beyond fragmented, reactive country-specific interventions to deliver a coordinated operational response across points of origin, asylum, transit, and destination.

Rather than a static chain of geographic steps, the RteBA adopts six mutually reinforcing pillars designed to save lives and provide protection and solutions as early as possible, to create alternatives to dangerous journeys, and support States in strengthening asylum capacity together with rights-based migration governance to effectively manage mixed and onward movements.

Early protection-sensitive border screening and immediate humanitarian stabilization (Pillars 1 & 3) establish an entry point that may be further strengthened through fair asylum procedures, effective migration responses, prevention of trafficking, and expanding the inclusion of refugees into national legal, educational, and economic systems (Pillars 2 & 4).

Lastly, the RteBA enables UNHCR, States, and development partners to mitigate protection risks, build community resilience, and unlock safe, regular mobility pathways (Pillar 5) alongside dignified solutions including return (Pillar 6), supporting in providing sustainable alternatives to dangerous, irregular onward journeys.

POPULATION PROFILE

3.1 Who are the refugees and migrants moving along South-West Asia Route to Europe?

Between 2021 and 2025, arrivals from South-West Asia and South Asia to Europe remained predominantly male. However, overall figures obscure important differences, with country-level data showing distinct gender, age, and nationality patterns.

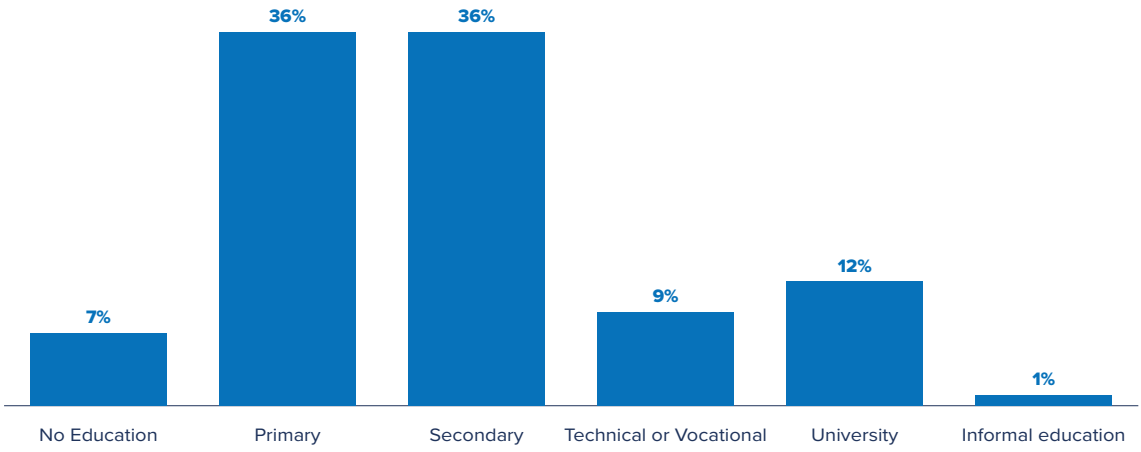
Women constituted a prominent share of arrivals in Cyprus and Greece, with the vast majority originating from Afghanistan and a notable proportion from Iran. In Cyprus, the share of women arrivals increased from 3 per cent in 2021 to 32 per cent in 2025, and in Greece from 9 per cent in 2021 to around 20 per cent in 2023–2024, before declining to 14 per cent in 2025. Both countries also recorded high proportions of accompanied children. The parallel higher shares of women and accompanied children indicate that women are more likely to travel with their children. This is supported by qualitative evidence from focus group discussions conducted with women, many of whom reported travelling with their children.[5] Information available at country level, for example in Cyprus, also show that many women arrivals are single heads of household with specific needs.

In contrast, arrivals to Italy, the majority of whom are from Bangladesh and Pakistan, remained largely composed of men (79–92 per cent) and unaccompanied children (3–14 per cent). Similarly, men make up the majority of arrivals in Malta, with a non-negligible share of unaccompanied children.

Protection monitoring interviews conducted in South-Eastern European countries with nationals of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran and Pakistan provide further insight into the profile of arrivals. The majority of those surveyed have some level of education, mostly at primary or secondary level (72 per cent), while only 7 per cent reported having no formal education. In terms of employment, nearly 80 per cent of working-age individuals surveyed reported being employed or having recently been employed in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and hospitality.

5 *Mixed Movements in South-East Europe: Women on the Move available at https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/118309.*

EDUCATION LEVEL



Source: UNHCR Regional Protection Monitoring Survey (RPMS)

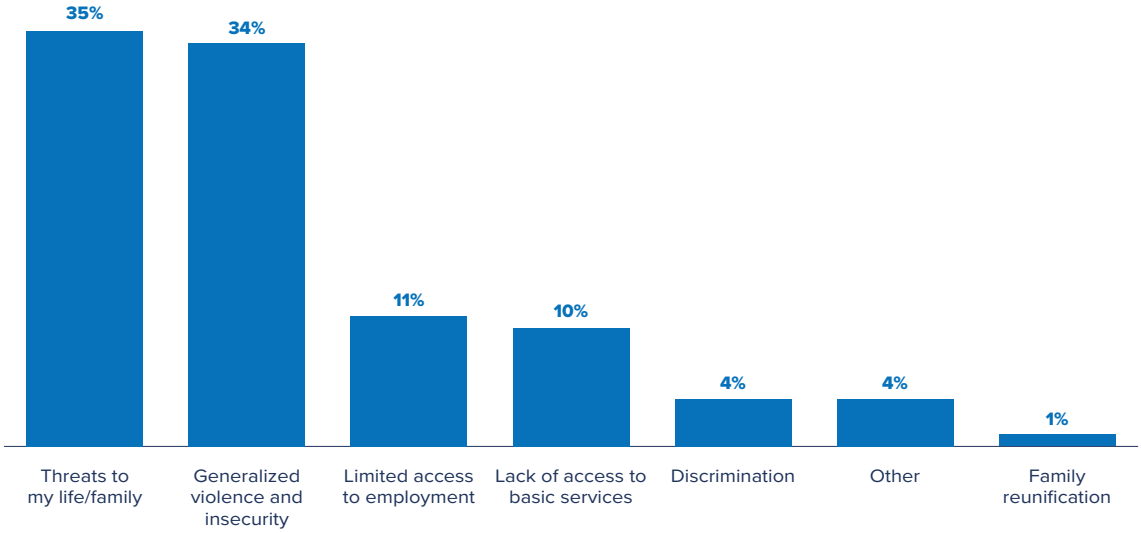
3.2 Why are refugees and migrants leaving their Country of Origin?

Protection monitoring data reveals a mix of motivating factors behind people's decisions to leave their countries of origin, ranging from threats to their lives to limited employment opportunities. The relative weight of these factors, however, varies significantly across nationalities.

For Afghan nationals, departures were overwhelmingly linked to protection concerns. Nearly 90 per cent reported leaving because of insecurity, threats to themselves or their families, or discrimination. This finding is reflected in focus group discussions conducted in Greece, where participants described leaving Afghanistan due to insecurity and risks of persecution, particularly following the Taliban takeover in 2021. Some respondents linked these risks to previous affiliations with the former government or NGOs, while others highlighted the increasingly restrictive conditions faced by women and girls, including barriers to secondary education and restrictions on mobility.

While protection concerns predominated, a smaller share of Afghan respondents cited limited employment opportunities and lack of access to services as their primary reasons for

REASON FOR LEAVING COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



Source: UNHCR Regional Protection Monitoring Survey (RPMS)

leaving. In Afghanistan, the economic situation is dire, with 62 per cent of surveyed households unable to meet their basic daily expenses.[6]

Among Iranian nationals, protection-related concerns were also the main reason for departure, with 82 per cent of those surveyed reporting threats to their lives or those of their families, insecurity or discrimination. Only a small minority identified a lack of basic services or limited employment opportunities as their main reason for leaving.

In contrast, economic factors featured more prominently among Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationals. Limited employment opportunities and lack of access to basic services were cited as the main reasons for leaving by 64 per cent of Bangladeshi and 80 per cent of Pakistani respondents. Protection concerns were cited by both groups as reasons for leaving their countries of origin, though they represented a relatively small share of responses. These findings are consistent with evidence from a separate survey of people moving along the South-West Asia Route, which found that Pakistani respondents were likely to describe mobility as driven by economic hardship and labour-market constraints.

6 *UNHCR Afghanistan Protection Monitoring Summary 2025.*

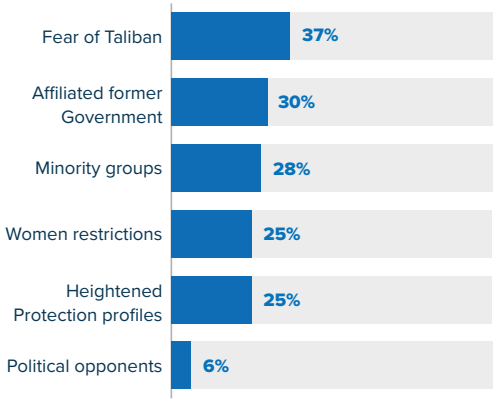
PROFILE OF NEWLY ARRIVED AFGHANS WHO APPROACHED UNHCR PAKISTAN

REASONS FOR FLIGHT

- **70%** **At least one at-risk profile**
- **22%** Economic reasons
- **4%** General insecurity
- **4%** Other reasons

At-risk profile reasons breakdown

multiple choice may add up to over 100%

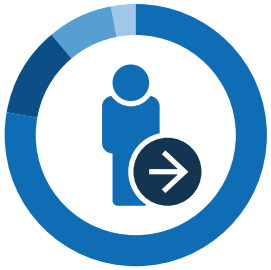


ETHNICITY

- **50%** Pashtoon
- **31%** Hazara
- **13%** Tajik
- **2%** Pashai
- **4%** Others

PROFILE OF NEWLY ARRIVED AFGHANS WHO APPROACHED UNHCR IRAN

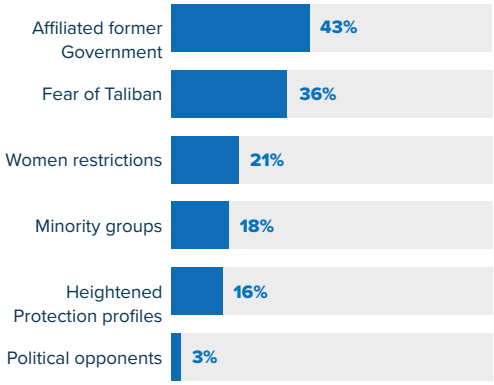
REASONS FOR FLIGHT



- **78%** **At least one at-risk profile**
- **11%** Economic reasons
- **8%** General insecurity
- **3%** Other reasons

At-risk profile reasons breakdown

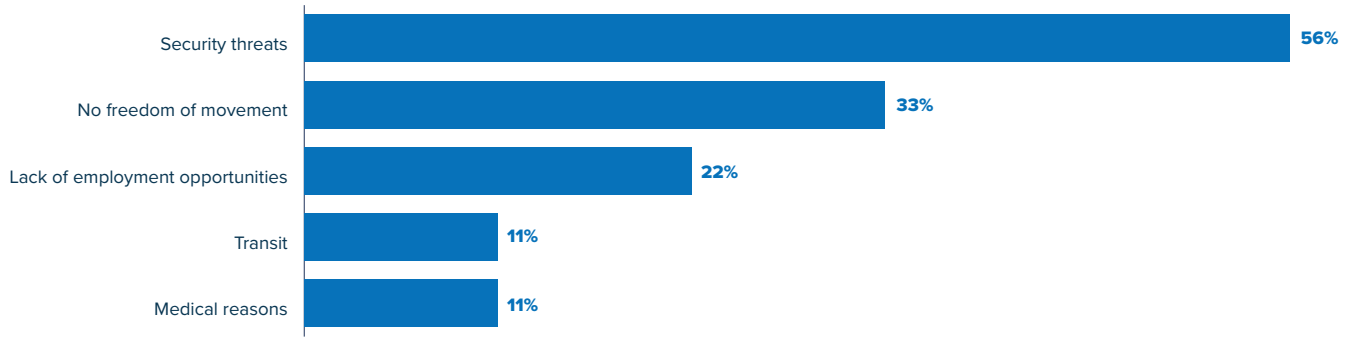
multiple choice may add up to over 100%



ETHNICITY

- **45%** Tajik
- **34%** Hazara
- **10%** Pashtoon
- **5%** Sayyid
- **6%** Others

AFGHAN ONWARD MOVEMENT DRIVERS FROM PAKISTAN TO IRAN



Source: UNHCR, Asia Pacific – RteBA New Arrivals Interview questionnaire, proGres PRIMES Forms

AFGHAN PROTECTION RISKS AND RIGHTS-RELATED CONSTRAINTS ARE MORE VISIBLE ALONG UNOFFICIAL BORDER CROSSINGS

UNHCR border monitoring in 2026 highlights a marked contrast between official and unofficial movement pathways. Outflows through official crossings primarily reflect documented, individual movement driven by economic pressure: among respondents leaving Afghanistan for Iran, 81 per cent cited escape from poverty and/or search for livelihood, while 65 per cent travelled alone.

By contrast, Afghans leaving through unofficial crossings display a stronger protection and human rights profile alongside economic stress. Following increased tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan since late February 2026, most unofficial crossings were closed, resulting in limited outflows. Among those moving irregularly to Iran, lack of livelihoods and basic services remained prominent drivers, but protection concerns were more explicit: discrimination was cited by 25 per cent of respondents and bans on female employment by 16 per cent. Smugglers facilitated movement in 90 per cent of key informant interviews, often charging high fees (AFN 10,000+ or USD 150 in 78 per cent of cases) and exposing people to significant risks, including unsafe shelter, shortages of food and water, looting, arrest and abuse. These findings suggest that unofficial routes, particularly towards Iran, more clearly reflect displacement driven by intersecting protection risks, economic pressures and rights-based constraints, including those affecting women and girls.

Sources: UNHCR Afghanistan HMNA 2025; UNHCR Afghanistan Protection Monitoring 2025; MMC/UNHCR Life in the Shadows (2025); UNHCR Afghanistan Post-Return Monitoring Survey Report, December 2025

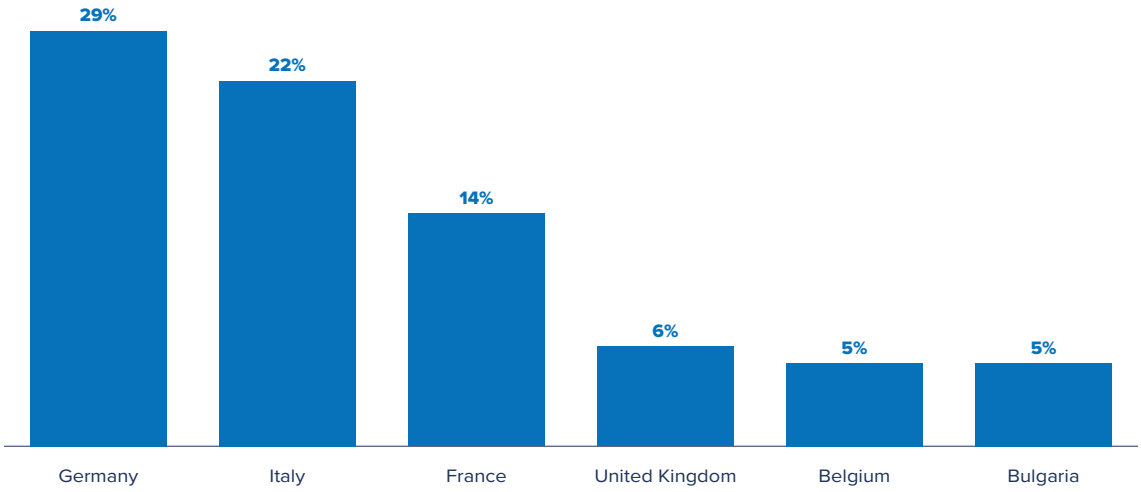
3.3 Where are people trying to go and why?

According to protection monitoring interviews conducted in South-Eastern Europe, almost 97 per cent of respondents reported having a destination in mind. Destination preferences and the reasons behind them varied by nationality.

Germany is the primary intended destination among Afghan nationals (29 per cent), closely followed by Italy (21 per cent) and France (20 per cent). This choice is primarily influenced by the presence of social networks and perceptions of more efficient asylum procedures. A similar pattern is observed among Iranian nationals, for whom Germany (38 per cent) and the United Kingdom (18 per cent) are the most commonly reported intended destinations, also largely due to existing social networks. Among most Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationals, however, Italy is the preferred destination (46 and 59 per cent respectively), a choice driven mainly by better labour market expectations.

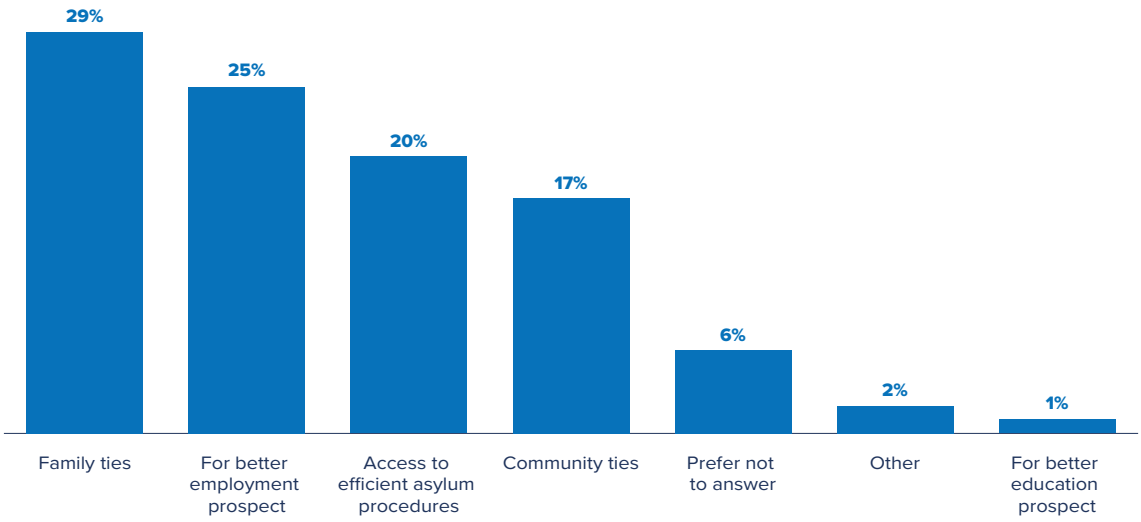
Notwithstanding, 23 per cent of respondents, including some with specific destinations in mind, indicated a desire to remain in their current host countries if conditions improved, particularly through access to legal status, the right to work and job opportunities. This highlights that, for many, access to rights and self-reliance outweigh the importance of reaching a particular destination. Even the reasons behind choosing a specific destination, such as efficient access to asylum procedures and better employment prospects, illustrate this point. For many, these conditions matter more than the destination.

CURRENT INTENDED DESTINATION



Source: UNHCR Regional Protection Monitoring Survey (RPMS)

REASON FOR TRAVEL TO CURRENTLY INTENDED DESTINATION



Source: UNHCR Regional Protection Monitoring Survey (RPMS)

Consistent with this, route-based interviews conducted in Türkiye with Afghans arriving from Iran found that 70 per cent had initially intended to remain in Iran. However, conditions in Iran contributed to onward movement: among those who had initially intended to stay, 95 per cent cited legal uncertainty, discrimination, protection risks, poor living conditions and economic hardship as the main reasons for leaving.[7]

CHALLENGES ALONG THE ROUTE

Individuals from South-West Asia and South Asia arriving in Europe often undertake long and arduous land and sea journeys.

According to protection monitoring interviews conducted in South-Eastern Europe with Afghan, Bangladeshi, Iranian and Pakistani nationals, 35 per cent reported leaving their country of origin between one and five years ago, while 7 per cent had left more than five years ago. However, 81 per cent of these respondents arrived in their current host country within three months from the date of the survey. This gap highlights lengthy journeys, during which individuals typically face a range of protection risks, including pushbacks, detention, and exposure to life-threatening situations.

This extended travel time is also evident in the number of countries respondents passed through before reaching their country of interview; specifically, respondents from these four nationalities reported crossing an average of five countries during their journey. Barriers to accessing rights and economic hardship along the route often drive these onward, multi-country journeys. For example, during focus group

7 *An Analysis of Afghan Onward Movements from Iran to Türkiye*.

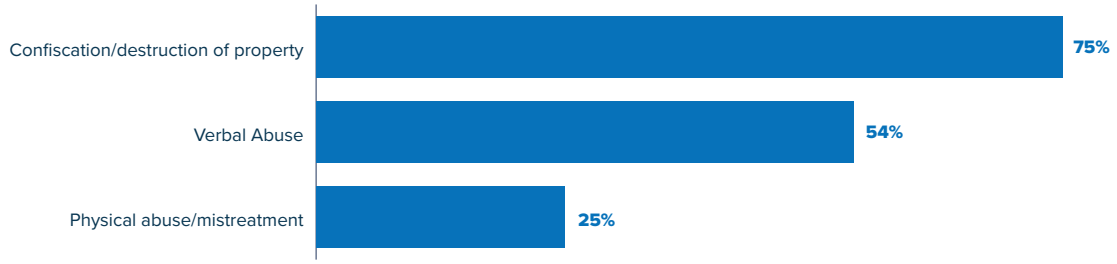
discussions in Italy, several Bangladeshi nationals reported leaving Serbia after arriving on work visas, citing low wages that did not allow them to cover living costs or repay debts incurred to finance their Serbian work visas.

Similarly, focus group discussions with Afghan nationals in Greece highlighted related drivers. Many described being unable to obtain or renew legal status in Iran and Türkiye, with one respondent reporting having remained undocumented in Iran for 26 years. As a result, many said they were unable to access basic rights and services, including health care, housing, and employment, while also living in constant fear of arrest and deportation. For those who left Iran or Pakistan, this fear was likely fuelled by ongoing large-scale deportations of Afghan nationals. In 2025 alone, an estimated 1.26 million Afghans were deported from Iran, while 154,600 were deported from Pakistan. Economic hardship further compounded these pressures, with unemployment and the high cost of living cited as factors that made continued stay unsustainable.

UNHCR Post-Return Monitoring findings further indicate that return does not necessarily mark the end of displacement.[8] As of August 2025, onward mobility intentions remained higher among returnees from Iran: 6 per cent of returnees from Iran reported intending to leave Afghanistan again. In addition, 11 per cent of returnees from Pakistan reported that relatives or community members had already left and moved back into Pakistan after returning to Afghanistan. These findings suggest that returns, particularly those occurring under adverse conditions, contribute to cyclical and secondary movements when post-return conditions fail to meet basic protection and survival needs.

Another challenge reported along the route is the denial of entry at borders. Protection monitoring interviews conducted in South-Eastern Europe found that 10 per cent of respondents had previously been denied entry at borders in the region. Among them, 38 per cent reported experiencing violence during the process, including the confiscation or destruction of personal belongings, verbal abuse, and/or physical assault. Focus group discussions highlighted similar concerns, with participants reporting repeated interceptions, family separation, and transfers to facilities with poor conditions.

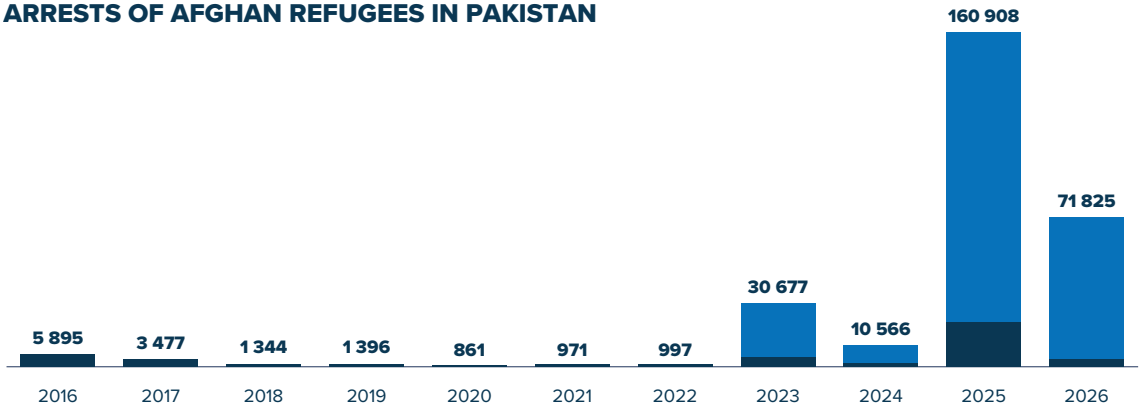
TYPE OF VIOLENCE



Source: UNHCR Regional Protection Monitoring Survey (RPMS)

8 Over 8,000 assessments covering almost 58,000 individuals.

ARRESTS OF AFGHAN REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN

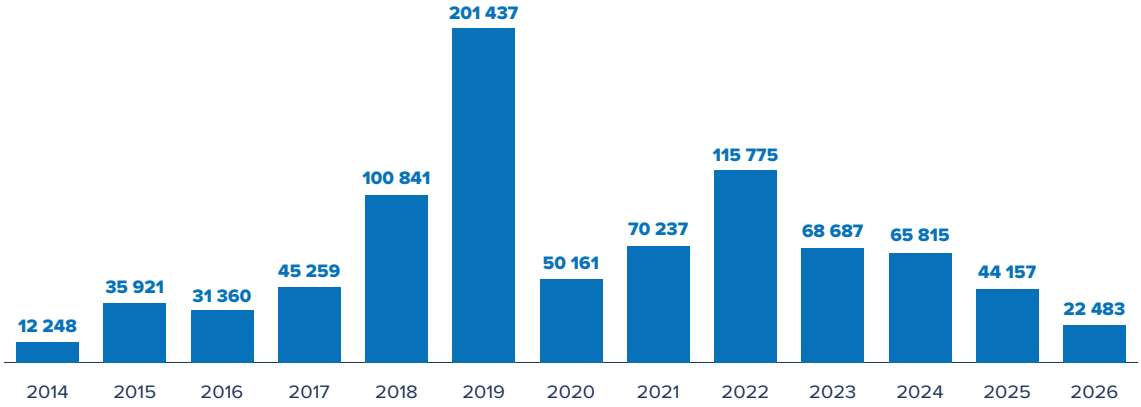


Asylum seekers and holders of Proof of Registration (PoR) Undocumented or holder of Afghan Citizen Card (ACC)*

* Prior to 2023, there was no data collected on the arrest and detention of ACC holders or undocumented Afghan nationals.

Source: UNHCR-IOM Pakistan Flash update #104 on Arrest and Detention/Flow Monitoring, as of 25 July 2026

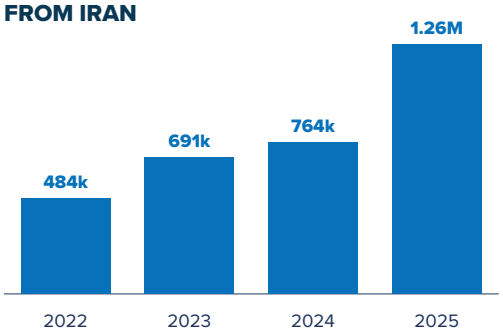
APPREHENSION OF AFGHAN NATIONALS IN TÜRKIYE



Source: Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior Presidency of Migration Management, as of 30 July 2026

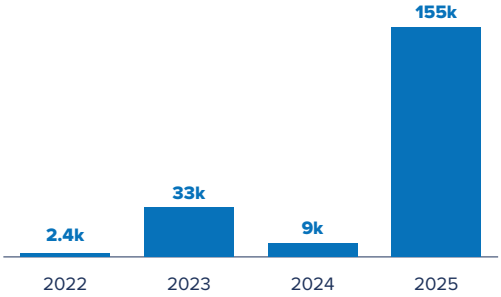
AFGHAN DEPORTEES

FROM IRAN



Source: UNHCR returns data

FROM PAKISTAN



Source: UNHCR returns data

AFGHANS

Afghan mobility along the South-West Asia Route to Europe is shaped by interconnected movements between countries of origin, asylum, transit, destination and return. While Afghan arrivals to Europe remain significant, they represent only one component of a much larger regional human mobility system involving millions of Afghans across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia and Türkiye.

Returns to Afghanistan continue to play a central role in these dynamics. As of 18 July 2026, UNHCR recorded over 1 million returns to Afghanistan in 2026, including over 386,000 deportations. This follows trends observed in 2025, when returns from Pakistan and Iran exceeded departures from Afghanistan to those countries. Population movements affecting Afghans are therefore increasingly characterized by circular and repeated mobility, in which return does not necessarily represent the end of displacement or movement.

Pakistan and Iran remain at the centre of this regional human mobility system. Both continue to be countries of asylum hosting large Afghan populations while simultaneously serving as countries of return, transit and onward movement. In Pakistan, the Afghan population declined by approximately 11 per cent between October 2025 and January 2026 amid continued returns and deportations, reflecting the combined impact of return policies, border management measures and broader protection pressures. In Iran, an estimated 4.4 million Afghans remained in the country as of August 2025, making it one of the largest refugee-hosting countries globally, with 1.6 million Afghan refugees, while returns to Afghanistan continued to be heavily influenced by deportations.

Türkiye remains a key transit and destination context for Afghans moving westward. Irregular migration detections involving Afghan nationals remained significant during early 2026, while detections by the Turkish Coast Guard were concentrated along western coastal provinces, including İzmir, Aydın, Muğla, Antalya, Çanakkale and Balıkesir. These locations are closely associated with onward movement across the Aegean Sea towards Greece and with movements through Bulgaria and the Western Balkans.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight that Afghan movements towards Europe cannot be understood in isolation from broader regional population movements. Decisions to move onward are often shaped by changing circumstances across multiple countries, including return processes, legal status, access to livelihoods and protection conditions. As a result, Afghan mobility increasingly reflects a continuum of movement across South-West Asia rather than a single linear journey from Afghanistan to Europe.

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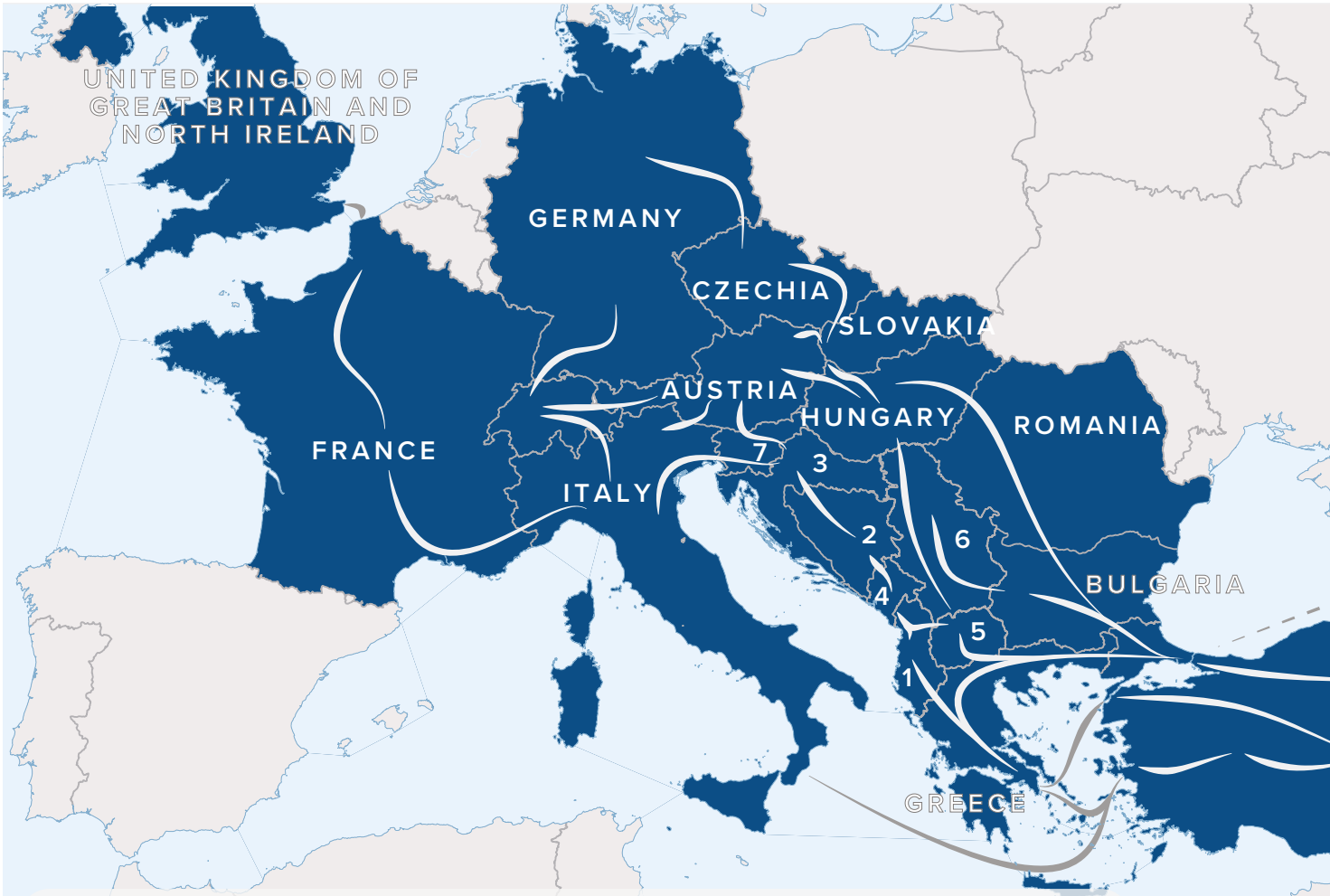
PROTECTION ENVIRONMENT



How to read the map:

1951 Convention

- 1951 Convention signatory
- Not party to the 1951 Convention

National asylum systems

- Operational first instance and appeal
- National legal framework but not operational
- No national legal framework

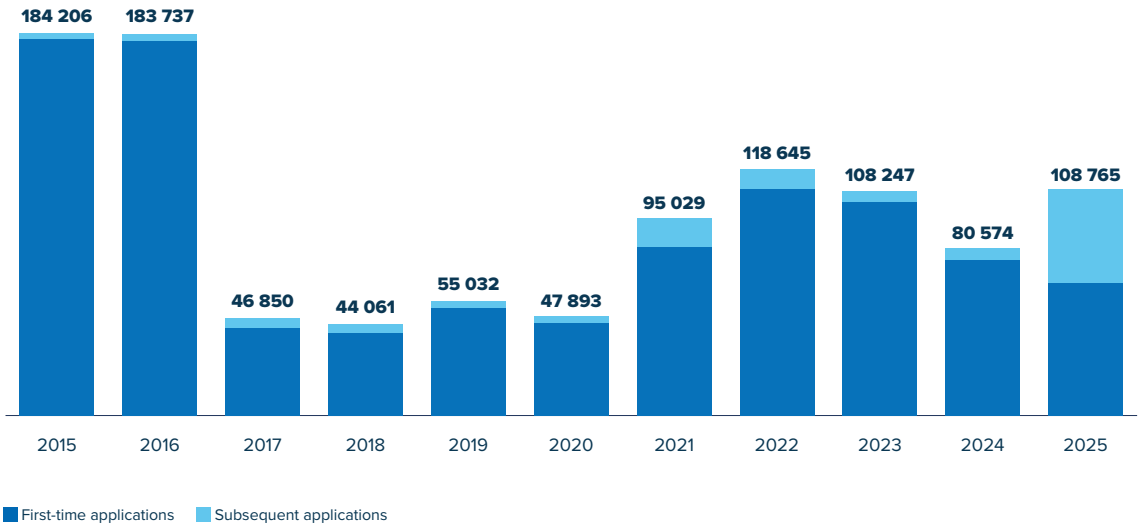
1. ALBANI
2. BOSNIA
3. CROATI
4. MONTEN
5. NORTH
6. SERBIA*
7. SLOVEN

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance b
Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final
* Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244 [1999]).

4.1 Legal Framework

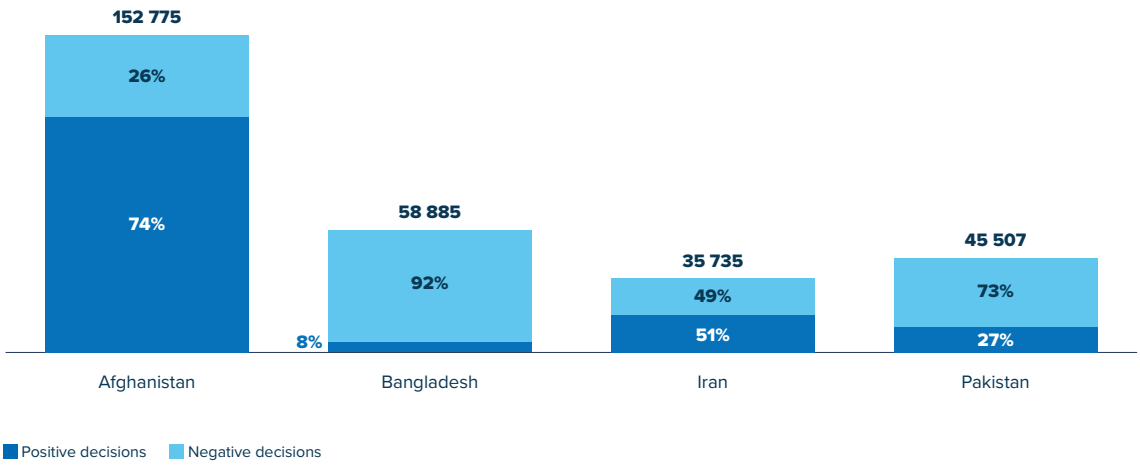
The legal protection framework varies considerably across countries in South-West Asia. Although 23 countries along the South-West Asia route to Europe are parties to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and/or its 1967 Protocol, 77 per cent of forcibly displaced Afghans are hosted in Iran and Pakistan, where national asylum systems are absent or not fully operational.w

AFGHAN ASYLUM APPLICATIONS IN THE EU+ BY APPLICATION TYPE



Source: UNHCR 2025 Annual Statistical Report

RECOGNITION RATES FOR THE NATIONALITIES IN FOCUS



Source: Global Data, UNHCR 2025 Annual Statistical Report

4.2 Protection response and gaps

Iran remains one of the world's largest refugee-hosting countries and has, over many years, facilitated access to education, health care and other public services for recognized refugees. With support from UNHCR and partners, the Government has maintained documentation arrangements, refugee settlements and programmes supporting education, health, livelihoods, legal assistance and community-based protection. However, growing economic pressures, inflation and the wider humanitarian consequences of the 2026 Middle East regional conflict have further strained national systems and reduced the overall protection space.

While documented refugees may access public education, health care and subsidized health insurance, Afghans without valid documentation face significant barriers to legal stay, formal employment, housing, education, health care, financial services and freedom of movement. Humanitarian actors provide legal counselling, cash assistance, psychosocial support, vocational training and targeted assistance for vulnerable groups, but their capacity to address documentation-related challenges remains limited.

These constraints are compounded by widespread fear of arrest, detention and deportation. Large-scale deportations and pressured returns have continued, often with limited opportunities for individual assessment or the identification of international protection needs. Returnees and deportees have reported family separation, loss of property and livelihoods, and difficult conditions during arrest, detention and return/deportation.

In Pakistan, the protection environment has progressively deteriorated, with invalidation of all forms of refugee documentation and the denotification of the refugee villages rendering the entire Afghan population vulnerable to arrest and detention, with many hiding in their homes for fear of arrest and forced deportation.

In the absence of a national refugee law or State asylum system, legal stay previously depended on temporary documentation or ad hoc arrangements, leaving refugees vulnerable to changes in government policy and enforcement practices. However, as a result of the phased implementation of the 2023 Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP), by mid-2025 all forms of protection documentation have been invalidated and (with the exception of those holding valid Pakistani visas) all Afghans in Pakistan have been rendered 'illegal foreigners' subject to arrest and deportation.

In this context, considerations of irregular onward movements are repeatedly made during community consultations, particularly by those at risk of harm upon return to Afghanistan, for whom dangerous journeys in search of safety are becoming unavoidable due to the scant regular pathways. UNHCR has been engaging in interagency collaborations to operationalize the Route-Based Approach with emphasis on data-sharing, interagency referral SOPs, referral pathways, mobile and hybrid implementation modalities and enhancing protection and assistance provision at strategic locations along mixed and onward movement routes including through the establishment of multipurpose hubs. Continued capacity building of front line border and other officials is required to sensitize them on 'do no harm' and the importance of protection-sensitive identification and referrals to address the lack of asylum procedures.

In Pakistan, UNHCR and partners provide legal assistance, cash assistance, MHPSS and community-based protection, while also supporting schools, health facilities and other services that benefit both refugees and host communities.

Despite these efforts, access to employment, housing, education, health care and financial services remains limited, including due to rising living costs, discrimination and a lack of documentation. Moreover, livelihood opportunities remain largely confined to the informal sector, while health and education services in refugee-hosting areas are often overstretched.

These challenges have been exacerbated by the intensified implementation of the IFRP, with arrests, detention, deportations and movement restrictions often taking place without adequate opportunities for individual protection assessment or legal recourse. Fear of enforcement increasingly discourages Afghans from accessing public services and humanitarian assistance, while the absence of secure legal status limits the effectiveness of existing protection programmes. Restrictive border practices and the limited availability of safe and regular pathways leave many Afghans with few alternatives but to return to Afghanistan or undertake irregular onward movements towards Türkiye and Europe.

In Europe, government responses to mixed and onward movements have focused on strengthening border management, reforming asylum systems and – in countries seeking accession to the EU - aligning national frameworks with EU-level requirements. Several countries have introduced or expanded screening mechanisms, border procedures and reception capacities, while the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum has recently introduced significant changes in these areas in EU Member States. A gradual shift toward inclusion in national systems is also observed, including access to public services in countries such as Türkiye and Romania, and efforts to expand labour market participation and complementary

pathways in Spain and Greece. In some contexts, governments support localized responses through municipalities and community-based structures, which facilitate access to protection and services at the local level.

Despite these measures, gaps remain. A key challenge is ensuring that migration control objectives are pursued alongside robust protection safeguards. As States increasingly rely on detention and other deterrence measures, it remains important to preserve effective access to fair asylum processes.

UNHCR continues to emphasise the need for safeguards that mitigate risks of refoulement, including in the context of border management processes and accelerated procedures. At the same time, further efforts are needed to strengthen systems for identifying and referring persons with specific needs, including unaccompanied and separated children and victims of human trafficking, to ensure they receive appropriate protection and assistance.

Additional challenges relate to ensuring adequate reception conditions and timely access to essential services. In some contexts, gaps in legal assistance, interpretation, and mental health support continue to affect newly arrived populations, including in frontline contexts such as Greece, Italy, and Türkiye. Access to housing, social protection and livelihood opportunities also remain uneven in parts of the region, which can contribute to onward and secondary movements as people move along routes in search of basic protection conditions and opportunities for self-reliance. These gaps highlight the need for stronger investment in protection-sensitive approaches and inclusion along routes.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve the aims of the Route-Based Approach for mixed and onward movements, UNHCR proposes concrete measures and recommendations, for all the six pillars, that can be jointly implemented together with States and other international, regional and national stakeholders.

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UNHCR calls for sustained international engagement to address the underlying drivers and root causes of Afghan forced displacement, including restrictive decrees, human rights concerns, exclusion of women and girls from education and public life, and the lack of prospects for a safe and dignified future. Without progress on these root causes, efforts focused solely on return and migration management are unlikely to result in sustainable solutions and may contribute to renewed displacement and onward movements.

UNHCR emphasizes the need for protection-sensitive entry and admissions - Swift screening to identify persons with international protection needs within mixed movements, facilitate their admission into the country, registration and documentation to ensure protection against refoulement and referral to appropriate procedures, is necessary to ensure effective access to asylum. Early screening can also serve to identify refugees[9] and migrants with specific needs and facilitate their referral to services in a timely way.

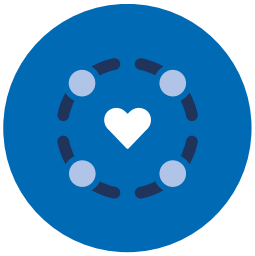
UNHCR calls for the strengthening of asylum systems for refugees and rights-based migration governance - Establishing or strengthening asylum systems and addressing the structural gaps in migration governance in a coordinated fashion in countries along the route is vital to provide refugees with rights and protection as soon as possible after displacement and to ensure that asylum systems can function effectively, even under the pressure of high numbers of applications. Asylum and migration management function hand-in-hand, because when lawful avenues are available to migrants, and effective returns processes exist for persons found not to be in need of international protection or to qualify for migration pathways, asylum procedures are not overburdened or misused, which helps to safeguard the integrity of, and public trust in, national asylum systems. Effective and accessible asylum and migration systems should be considered mutually reinforcing to manage complex refugee and migrant dynamics.

UNHCR calls for addressing immediate protection and assistance needs and comprehensively addressing trafficking and smuggling - Refugees in mixed and onward movements find themselves in precarious and dangerous situations. Addressing their immediate protection and humanitarian assistance needs along the route, including for unaccompanied and separated children, survivors of gender-based violence, victims of trafficking, or for other vulnerable persons, is an imperative.

9 *UNHCR Guidance Note on Afghanistan.*

UNHCR calls for more support and responsibility sharing to host countries who have generously hosted Afghan refugees for decades. UNHCR urges donor countries, development and international financial institutions to provide meaningful and multi-year financial support to countries of asylum. Support is required in devising and coordinating programmes which enhance national administrative capacities, effective registration of refugees, access to asylum procedures or effective protection and inclusion measures, grounded in clear legislation, political commitment and cooperation with NGOs and other actors which are essential to ensure outreach out to refugees and proper referral to services. Ensuring inclusion, protection and solutions earlier on the route provides a meaningful alternative to dangerous journeys.

UNHCR calls on countries to expand the number of resettlement places and to establish safe, regular and complementary pathways. Efforts should be made to ensure the viability and accessibility of regular pathways, such as family reunification, education pathways, and labour mobility opportunities. Efforts should also promote genuine responsibility sharing by expanding both the number of resettlement places and the scope of resettlement admissibility criteria. This would provide a protection tool for highly vulnerable refugees who continue to face serious harm in the country of asylum, as well as imminent harm if they were returned to their country of origin.



UNHCR calls for more support inside Afghanistan to support the reintegration of Afghan refugees returning home. Investments in national and local systems and services are required to make voluntary returns sustainable. Without humanitarian and development assistance, including legislative reforms, reintegration efforts may be unsuccessful, with negative consequences for regional peace, economic development, and long-term stability.

UNHCR emphasizes the need for safe and dignified return, readmission and reintegration. Strengthening safe, dignified and rights-based return, readmission as well as sustainable reintegration of those not in need of international protection are vital. This preserves the integrity of asylum systems and the protection space for those in need of international protection, while ensuring that the rights of returning migrants are protected. This is therefore a key element for the successful roll-out of a comprehensive route-based approach.

Supported by UNHCR,
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Route-Based Approach

SOUTH-WEST ASIA ROUTE TO EUROPE

August 2026

Analysis prepared by:
UNHCR REGIONAL BUREAU FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC & REGIONAL BUREAU FOR EUROPE