

AFGHANISTAN

VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION UPDATE

8,079 AFGHAN REFUGEES RETURNED IN 2019

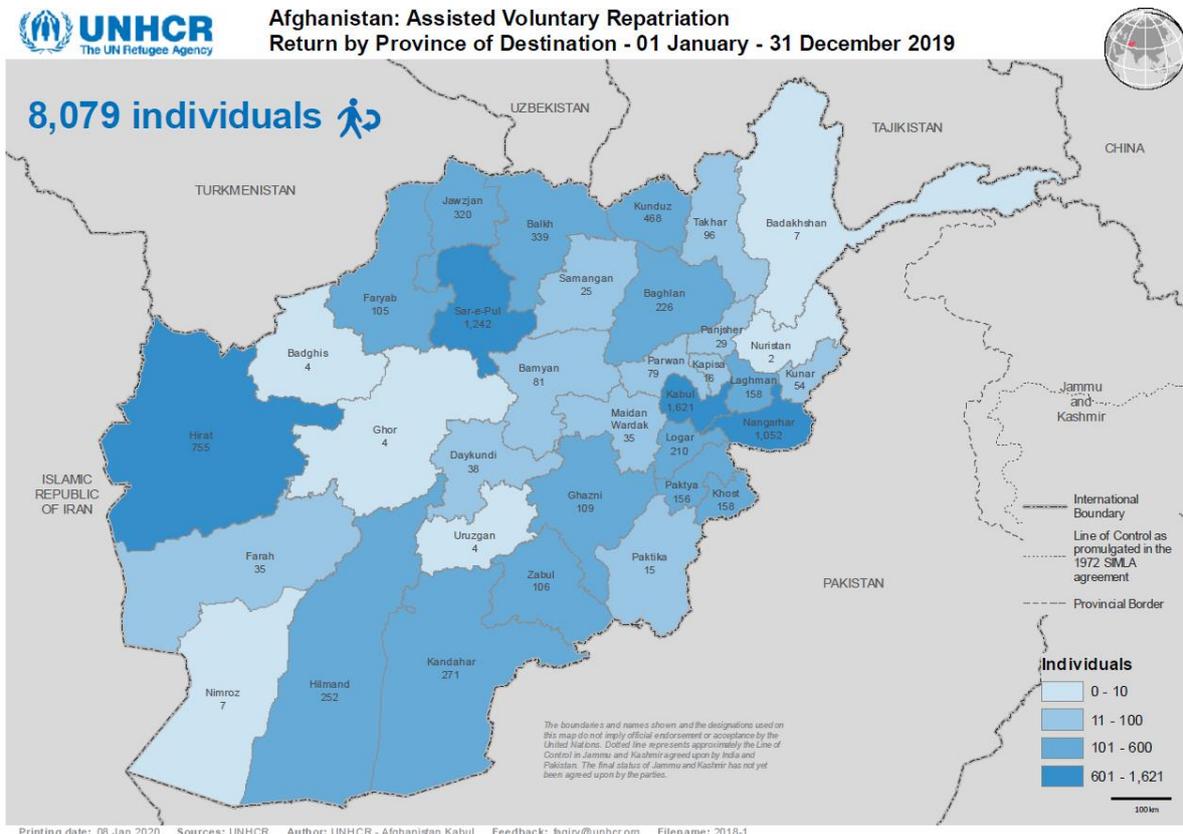
During 2019, some 8,079 Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan (6,062), Iran (1,939), and other countries (78) including Tajikistan, India, Azerbaijan, Kenya and the Russian Federation. This figure represents a decrease of 49% compared to the 15,699 refugees who returned during the same period in 2018. The lower rate of return in 2019 reflects ongoing security concerns, as well as a worsening economic situation across Afghanistan.

UNHCR's facilitated return from Pakistan is paused from 1 December 2019 until 29 February 2020 for winter, while return from Iran and other countries will continue throughout the year.

On the margins of the Global Refugee Forum held between 16 and 18 December 2019 in Geneva, Switzerland, the governments of the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, together with

UNHCR launched a new Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR). This initiative will enhance on-going efforts to mobilize additional resources and support for Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, including facilitation of voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan.

During the event, the three countries reiterated their commitment to work together to protect and find lasting solutions for refugees, including by allowing refugees to work, study and contribute to the countries hosting them. Enhancing the capacity of Afghan refugees for voluntary return to Afghanistan in safety and dignity is one of the three key objectives of the SSAR. UNHCR continues to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees who wish to return home.



Process of return

UNHCR's Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) in Iran and Pakistan process refugees wanting to return to Afghanistan and issue a voluntary Repatriation Form (VRF) for each family. Two VRCs are located in Pakistan: one in Azakhel in Peshawar (KPK) and one in Baleli in Quetta (Baluchistan). Repatriation from Iran is facilitated through all UNHCR Offices, including the VRC in Soleimankhani.

Upon return to Afghanistan, returnees are assisted at four Encashment Centers (ECs) located in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Kandahar for returnees from Pakistan and other countries, and in Herat for those returning from Iran.

At the ECs, all returnees with a valid VRF receive a grant averaging USD 200 per person (based on their area of origin) to support their immediate humanitarian needs and transportation costs.

In addition to cash grants, a range of inter-agency services are provided for returning refugees, including basic health and malnutrition screening and vaccination (by the Ministry of Public Health supported by WHO and UNICEF), mine risk awareness (by the Danish Demining Group supported by UNMAS), information on school enrolment (by the Ministry of Education supported by UNICEF), and overnight accommodation, if needed.

UNHCR and the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation also conduct returnee monitoring and identify persons with specific needs to refer to specialized service providers for assessment and assistance.

Mine risk education is important as a protection intervention for awareness of the threats associated with landmines, improvised explosive devices and unexploded ordnance, to prevent injury and loss of life particularly for children and those returning to rural areas.

IN BRIEF

All returnees are provided with a multi-purpose cash grant (an average of USD 200 per person) at 4 Encashment centres. UNHCR's cash grants to refugee returnees are intended to prevent, reduce, and respond to immediate protection risks and vulnerabilities upon return to Afghanistan. Cash grants are an important protection tool that provide returnees with the means to meet their immediate humanitarian needs and their transportation costs.



Returnees waiting to receive cash grants at Kabul Encashment Centre. UNHCR/M. Haroon

IN BRIEF

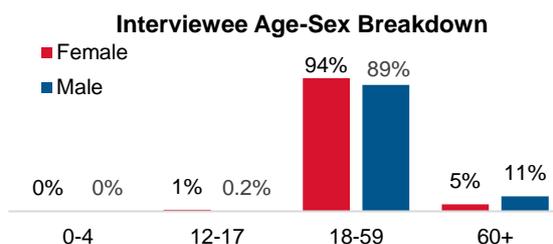
Between January and December 2019, a total of 8,079 Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan under UNHCR's facilitated voluntary repatriation program, with the majority returning from Pakistan (6,062) and smaller numbers returning from Iran (1,939), Tajikistan (58), India (9), the Russian Federation (5), Kenya (3) and Azerbaijan (3).

These returns were 49% lower than the 15,699 Afghans who returned during the same period in 2018. This is largely due to the worsening security and economic situation across Afghanistan.

Returnee Monitoring

Returnee monitoring is an important part of the **protection monitoring** carried out by UNHCR in Afghanistan. UNHCR monitors refugee returnees through the entire process of voluntary repatriation: beginning with an interview at the Voluntary Repatriation Centre in the country of

asylum, continuing with monitoring at the Encashment Centres in Afghanistan upon arrival, and followed up between one and six months later through phone surveys. UNHCR also includes refugee returnees as a population group in its protection monitoring at the community level.



ENCASHMENT CENTRE (EC) MONITORING

Encashment Centre monitoring is conducted with refugee returnees upon their arrival in Afghanistan. It aims to identify return trends through an assessment of the voluntariness of return, reasons for return, the level of information that returnees received in countries of asylum to allow them to make a well-informed decision to return, the conditions and respect for basic rights in the country of asylum, and returnees' plans for the future. Monitoring identifies persons with specific needs and also helps detect harassment and violations that should be brought to the attention of responsible authorities.

Between 1 January and 31 December 2019, a total of 1,028 households were interviewed, including 539 male and 489 female respondents. Interviewees are selected randomly from among returning families at the ECs, the first point of contact between returnees and UNHCR in Afghanistan.

Post-Return Monitoring

To supplement ongoing protection monitoring in Afghanistan and to ensure representative sampling, UNHCR uses mobile phone surveys to collect real-time data from returnee populations one to six months after the returnees have settled in their communities. This is complemented by interviews with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and members of host communities for comparison purposes. This provides UNHCR with a comprehensive perspective on current population mobility trends and actionable data regarding assistance needs, protection risks, vulnerability, and comparative information from a broad cross-section of the population. This also enables the design of evidence-based programming and advocacy to systematically address protection risks and immediate to short-

and medium-term needs of populations of concern.

In November 2018, UNHCR contracted Orange Door Research and VOTO Afghanistan to conduct socioeconomic household phone surveys with returnees (2,738), IDPs (4,350) and members of host communities (3,351), as well as post distribution monitoring with returnees (2,738) and persons with specific needs (1,300) who were provided with cash grants over the course of 2018. The findings are presented in a final report available in UNHCR's data portal: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/70157>

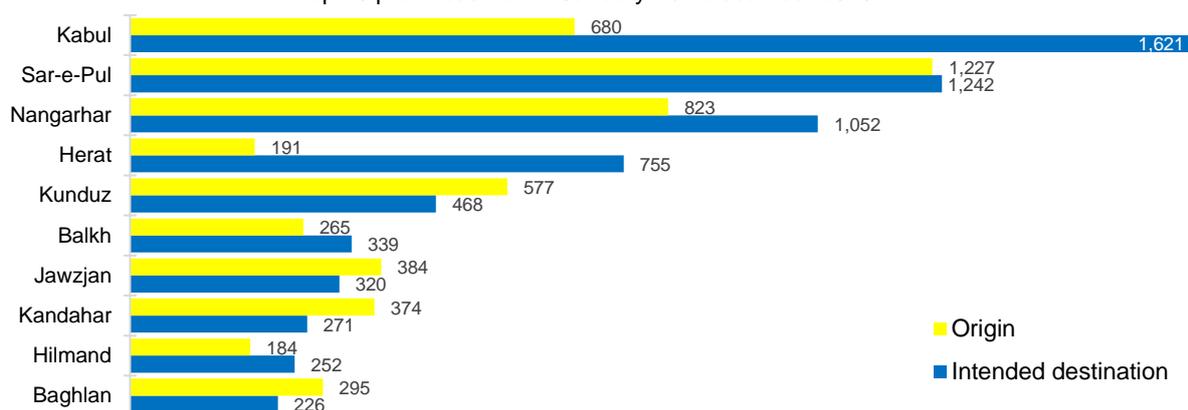
This exercise was not repeated in 2019 due to the low level of return.

Return Trends

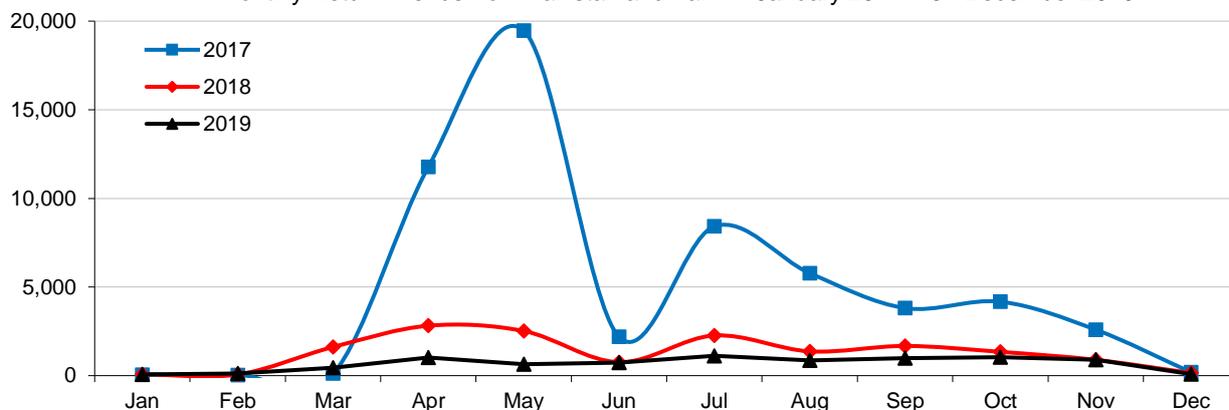
Since large-scale repatriation began in 2002, UNHCR has facilitated the return of over **5.26 million** Afghan refugees, mainly from neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

Some **64% (5,138)** of refugee returnees in 2019 have returned to Kabul, Sar-e-Pul, Nangarhar, Herat and Kunduz. Kabul and Nangarhar have remained among the top five provinces of return since 2002.

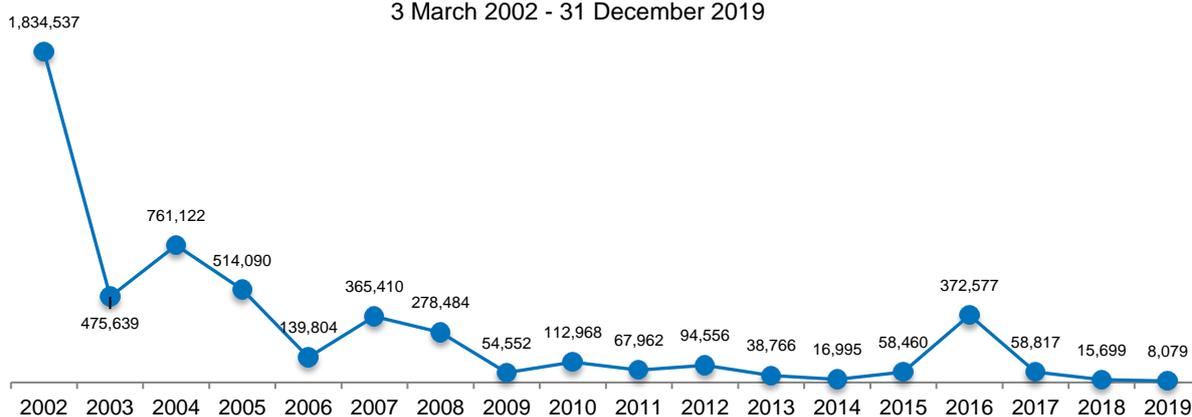
Comparison of Recorded Province of Destination with Province of Origin
 Top 10 provinces from 1 January - 31 December 2019



Monthly Return Trends from Pakistan and Iran - 1 January 2017 - 31 December 2019



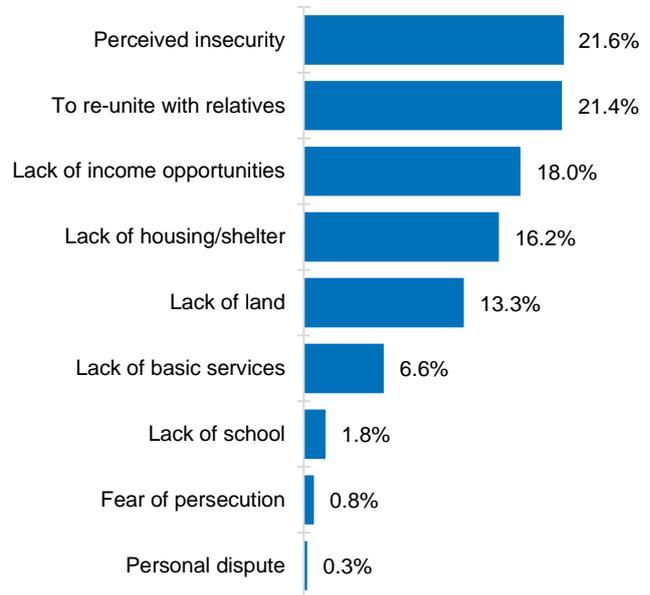
Annual VolRep Trends from Pakistan, Iran and Other Countries to Afghanistan
 3 March 2002 - 31 December 2019



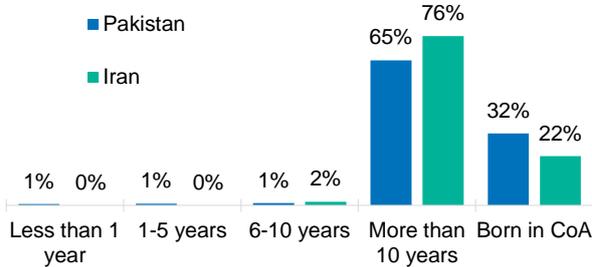
IN BRIEF

- 53% of interviewed Afghan refugee returnees returned to their province of origin, while 47% returned to other locations.
- 65% of returnees from Pakistan and 76% from Iran returned after spending more than 10 years as refugees.
- 32% of returnees from Pakistan and 22% from Iran were born in the country of asylum.
- 88% of returnees stated they had information about the overall situation in Afghanistan, including security in their place of origin, before leaving the country of asylum.

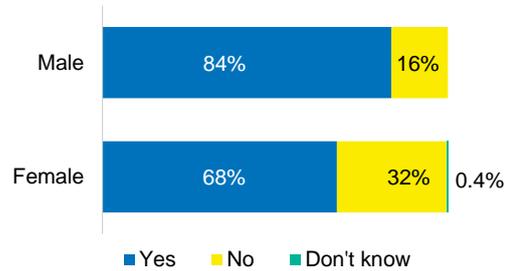
Reasons for Not Returning to the Province of Origin



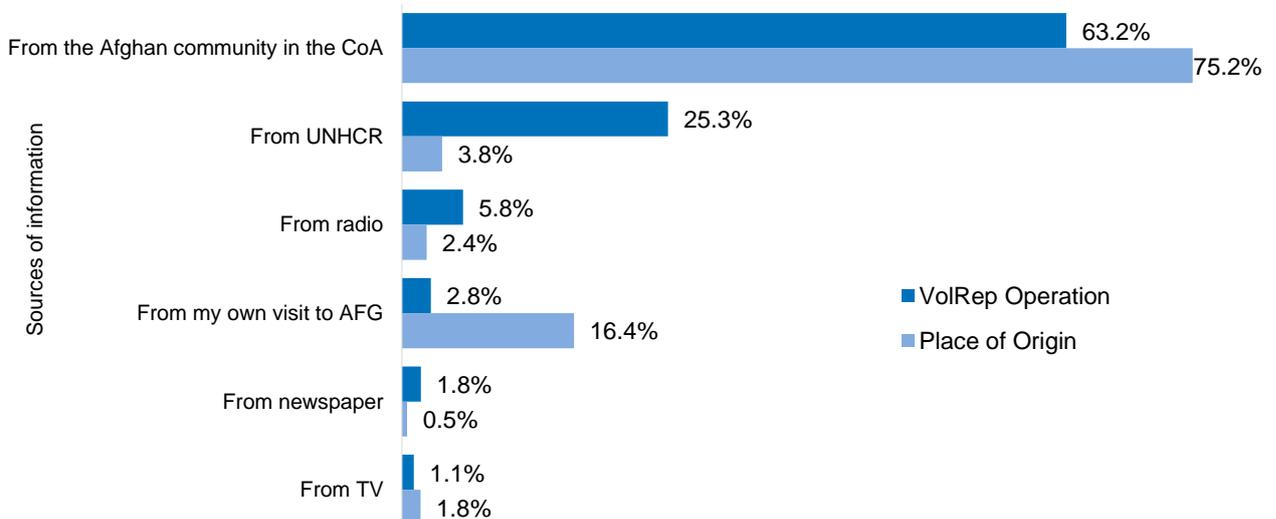
Displacement period



Awareness About Cash Grant



Sources of Information about Place of Origin and UNHCR's VolRep Program

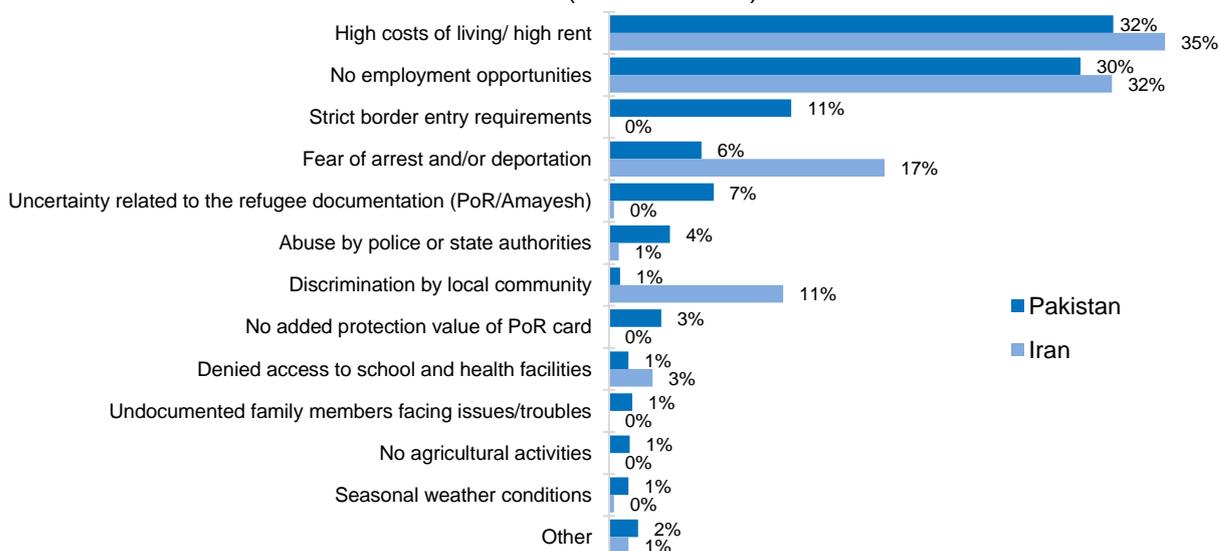


Reasons for Return

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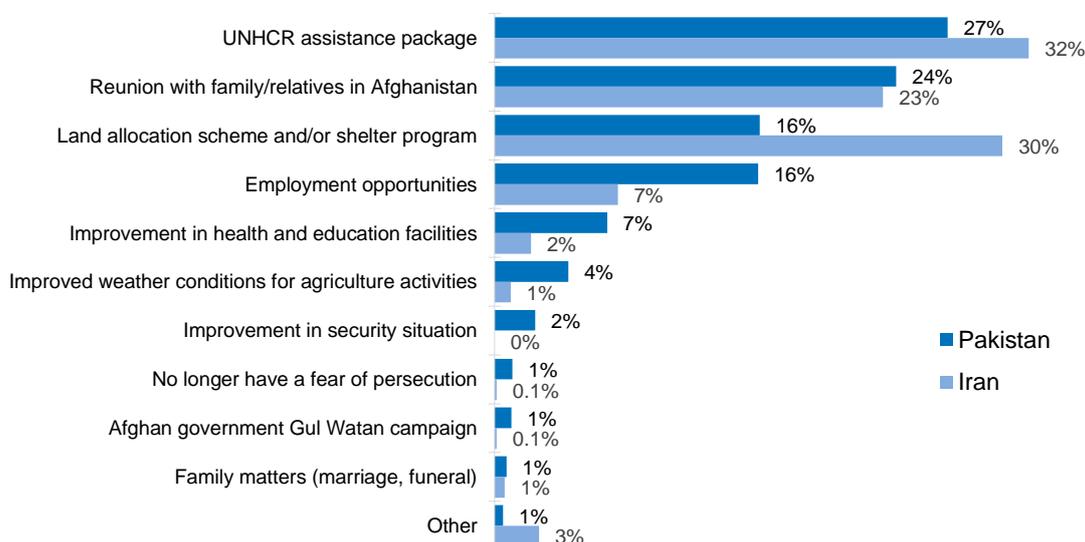
Some 712 newly arrived refugee returnees from Pakistan, 312 from Iran and 4 from other countries were interviewed as part of UNHCR's returnee monitoring in 2019. The main reasons for leaving Pakistan and Iran include: high cost of living; lack of employment opportunities; stricter border controls resulting in separation of families; fear of arrest and/or deportation; and uncertainty related to the extension of government-issued refugee documentation. 30 interviewed returnees from Iran (20) and Pakistan (10) reported they or their relatives were arrested (in Pakistan and Iran) within the last year.

Reasons for Leaving Pakistan and Iran - 2019 (Push Factors)



The main reasons for return to Afghanistan in both 2019 and 2018 are almost the same for returnees from Pakistan and Iran. The lack of employment opportunities, the high cost of living, and strict border controls resulting in separation of families were mentioned as the main reasons influencing refugees' decision to return.

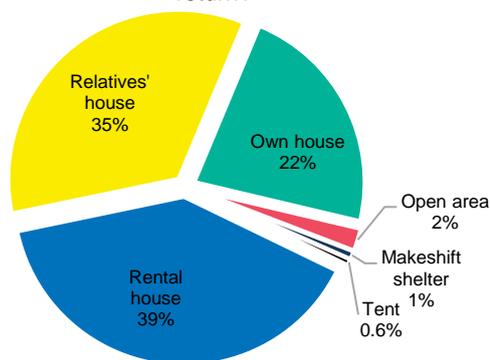
Reasons for return (from Pakistan and Iran) to Afghanistan - 2019 (Pull Factors)



Intentions after leaving the Encashment Centre

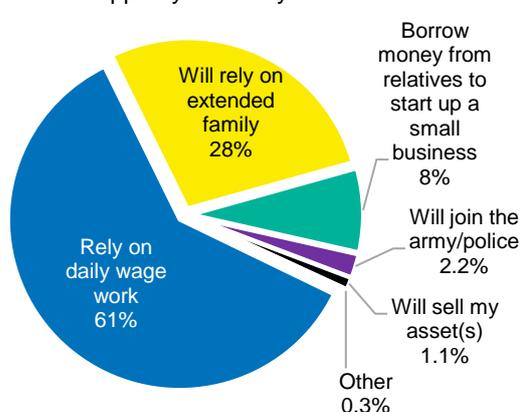
The below findings are based on interviews carried out at the four Encashment Centers. These findings give an indication of returnees' intentions upon return (while noting that these could change after returnees settle in their communities). These findings also help compare dynamics among returnees during the return and reintegration phases.

What will be your living arrangements after return?

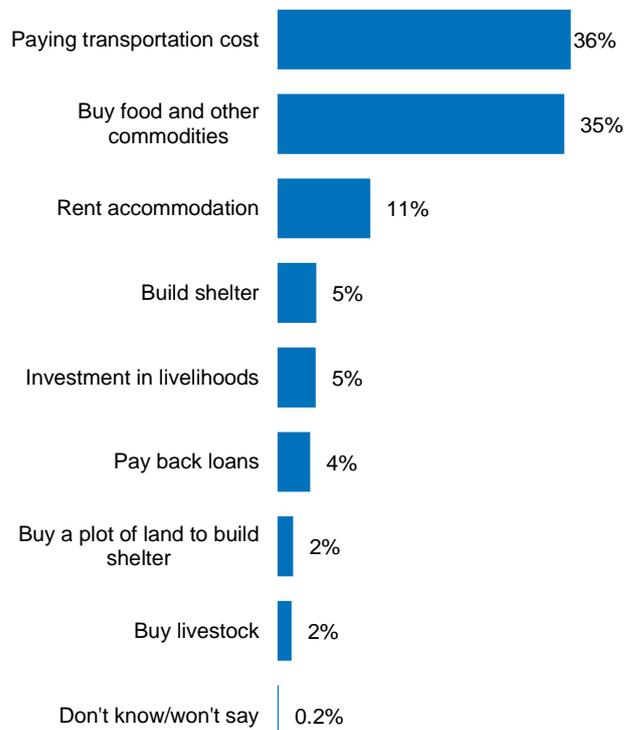


A returnee women head of household receiving her family's cash grant at Kabul Encashment Center. UNHCR/M. Haroon

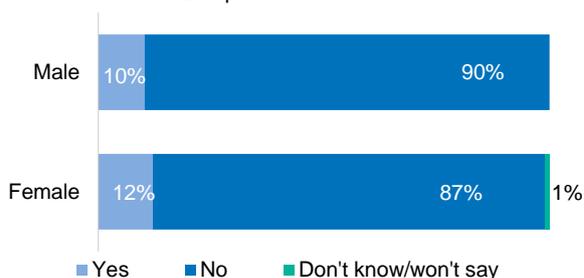
After you spend your cash grant, how will you support your family?



Upon return, how do you plan to spend the cash grant?



Did you or your family members consider moving to Europe or other countries?



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