

A Panoramic/Route-Based Approach

**REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS FROM
SOUTH-WEST ASIA TO EUROPE**

July 2025

Onward and mixed movements of refugees and migrants¹ along the South-West (SW) Asia Route, from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran onwards to Europe, entail complex challenges for governments, the people themselves and the communities in countries of origin, asylum, transit and destination.

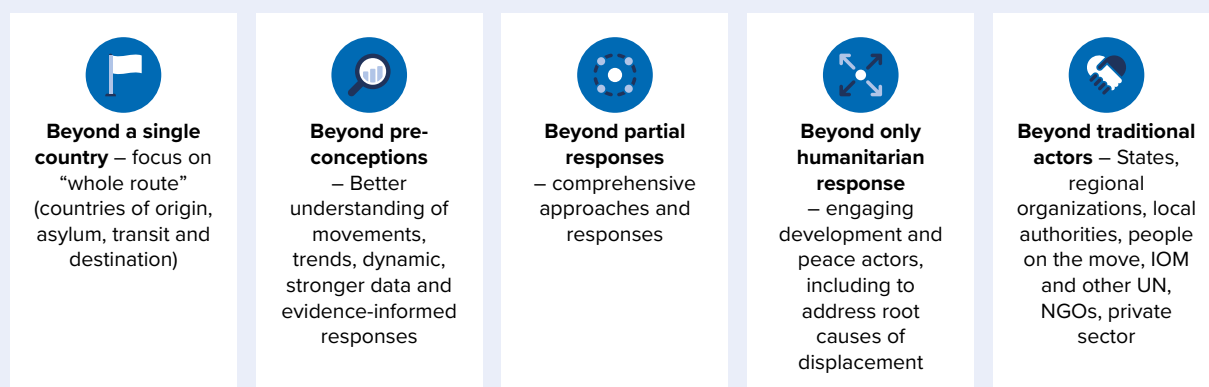
While some movements along the SW Asia Route are predominantly composed of refugees, such as the initial movements of Afghans outside their country of origin,² further along the route in Türkiye and the Balkans the movements become mixed when merged with migrant flows (e.g. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis³) or when intersecting with the broader mixed movements from the Middle East and Africa.

Intended to support the analysis of movement trends and inform the operationalization of UNHCR's Panoramic/Route-Based Approach⁴ to onward and mixed movements along the SW Asia Route, this paper presents key datasets organized around 10 thematic areas relevant to the pillars of the Panoramic Approach.

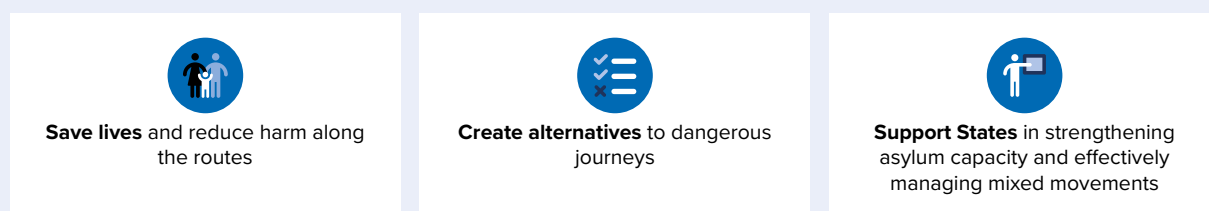
The paper is based on both primary data – mainly quantitative and qualitative information collected through UNHCR protection monitoring and focus group discussions in relevant countries – and secondary sources, including official data from national authorities and existing studies and research.

Why a Panoramic/Route-Based Approach?

Recognizing that the current responses to manage onward and mixed movement often fall short, UNHCR's Panoramic/Route-Based Approach (PA/RBA) calls for a shift to more humane and effective responses through a comprehensive and revitalized strategy that adopts a 'panoramic view' to the movements:



To conceptually frame and support the operationalization of the PA/RBA, [six pillars and enablers for strategic engagement](#) have been developed with the overarching aim to:



1 [Refugees](#) are people who cannot return to their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and who, as a result, require international protection. The tendency to conflate refugees and migrants, or to refer to refugees as a subcategory of migrants, can have serious consequences for the lives and safety of people fleeing persecution or conflict. See, e.g., UNHCR [Asylum and Migration](#); and UNHCR Explainer, “[Refugees or “Migrants”?](#) How word choices affect rights and lives.

2 [UNHCR, Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan \(Update I\), February 2023](#) (UNHCR's Guidance Note on Afghanistan).

3 The majority of migrants from Bangladesh arriving to Europe via the Central Mediterranean Route are transiting through Libya. Prior to arriving in Libya most (56 per cent or 12,125 Bangladeshi migrants) had reportedly used Türkiye as a transit country. [IOM \(March 2023\)](#)

4 UNHCR is globally implementing the Route-Based Approach along prioritized routes. In some regions the terms 'whole-of-route approach' or the 'hemispheric approach' has been used to capture the essence of the route-based approach. For the Asia-Pacific region and for the South-West Asia Route, the term 'Panoramic Approach' is deemed to be the most appropriate.

POPULATION FLOW



1. How many refugees and migrants have taken the South-West Asia Route towards Europe?

In the past five years from 2020 to 2024, some 145,600 people from Asia were reported to have arrived irregularly by land and sea in Europe,⁵ corresponding to 17 per cent of total estimated irregular arrivals in Europe through the Mediterranean and Atlantic Routes. Arrivals have been rising steadily, with a nearly three-fold increase from 13,000 in 2020 to 39,000 in 2024. From 2020 to 2023, Afghans were the second-largest group of persons irregularly arriving in Europe from the Asia-Pacific region (33 per cent of arrivals), after Bangladeshis (41 per cent). However, in 2024, Afghans became the largest group, accounting for 42 per cent of arrivals, confirming an increasing trend in arrivals that started after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021.

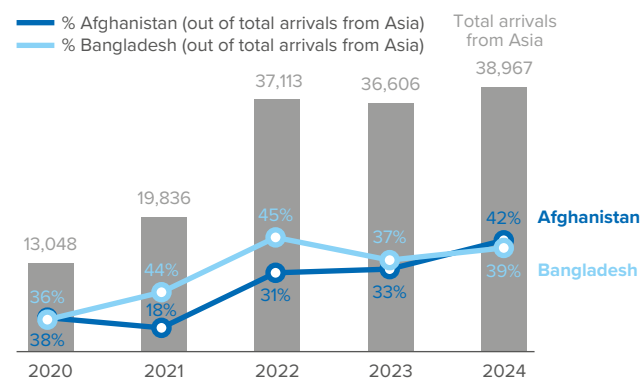
Over the past five years, Greece and Italy have recorded the highest number of arrivals to the European Union (EU) from Asia through the South-West Asia Route. Among the top nationalities of arrivals, Bangladeshi, Iranian and Pakistani nationals primarily reached Italy, crossing either from Türkiye or North African countries. Of those arriving in the EU, 94 per cent of Bangladeshis, 70 per cent of Pakistanis, and 53 per cent of Iranians are estimated to have entered the EU through Italy.

In 2024, 1.28 million Afghans crossed into Iran⁶ and 1.08 million entered Pakistan,⁷ with around 162,000 moving onward from Pakistan to Iran.⁸ From there, some Afghans have continued their journey through Türkiye toward Europe.⁹ In 2024, 90 per cent of Afghans arriving in the EU reached Greece via the Eastern

Mediterranean Route,¹⁰ before continuing through the Western Balkans, northern Italy and France. From France, many Afghans – along with other nationalities – attempt to cross the English Channel to the UK. Others travel overland through Bulgaria and onward through the Western Balkans. Separately, 1,156 Afghan arrivals were reported in Italy by sea, with 97 per cent travelling via Türkiye. Despite these movements toward Europe, Iran and Pakistan remain the largest host countries for Afghan refugees, with over 87 per cent of those fleeing Afghanistan still residing in the two neighbouring countries.

OF PEOPLE WHO ARRIVED IRREGULARLY BY LAND AND SEA IN EUROPE FROM ASIA (2020-2024)

145,600



5 Based on data on irregular arrivals in Europe provided by national authorities of Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Malta.

6 Includes movement through official crossing points from the Afghanistan de facto Directorate of Refugee and Repatriation and unofficial crossing points from UNHCR border monitoring.

7 Includes movement through official crossing points.

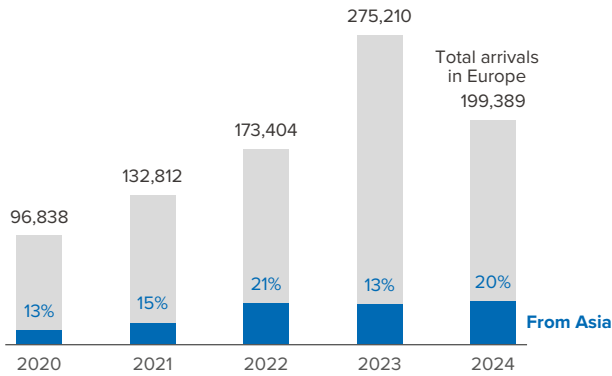
8 Movements recorded through border monitoring ([UNHCR Afghanistan 2024 Border Monitoring Report](#)).

9 UNHCR Regional Protection Monitoring System (RPMS) dashboard indicates Türkiye as previous country of asylum for 27 per cent of Afghan nationals. Furthermore, RPMS indicates that 50 per cent of the Afghan nationals in Türkiye fled Afghanistan between one and five years ago, and 9 per cent fled Afghanistan more than five years ago, before undertaking onward movements from Türkiye to the EU. Many Afghan nationals interviewed have lived for a long time in Türkiye and often in Iran before their onward movements due to, for example, administrative measures that force people to move from one province to another, losing jobs and housing, and the earthquakes.

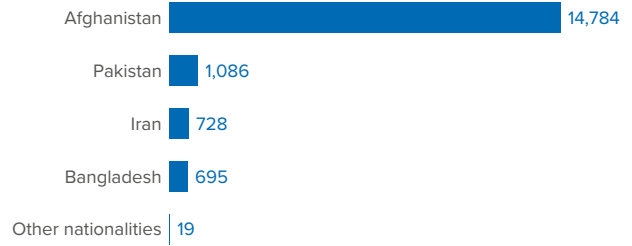
10 A significant pathway for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants en route to Europe from the Middle East, Asia and Africa with Türkiye as the main transit country to reach Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria.

AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ESTIMATED IRREGULAR ARRIVALS IN EUROPE FROM ASIA (2020-2024)

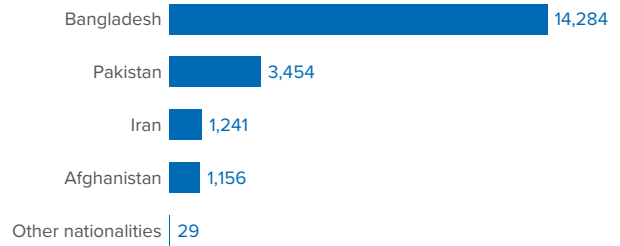
17%



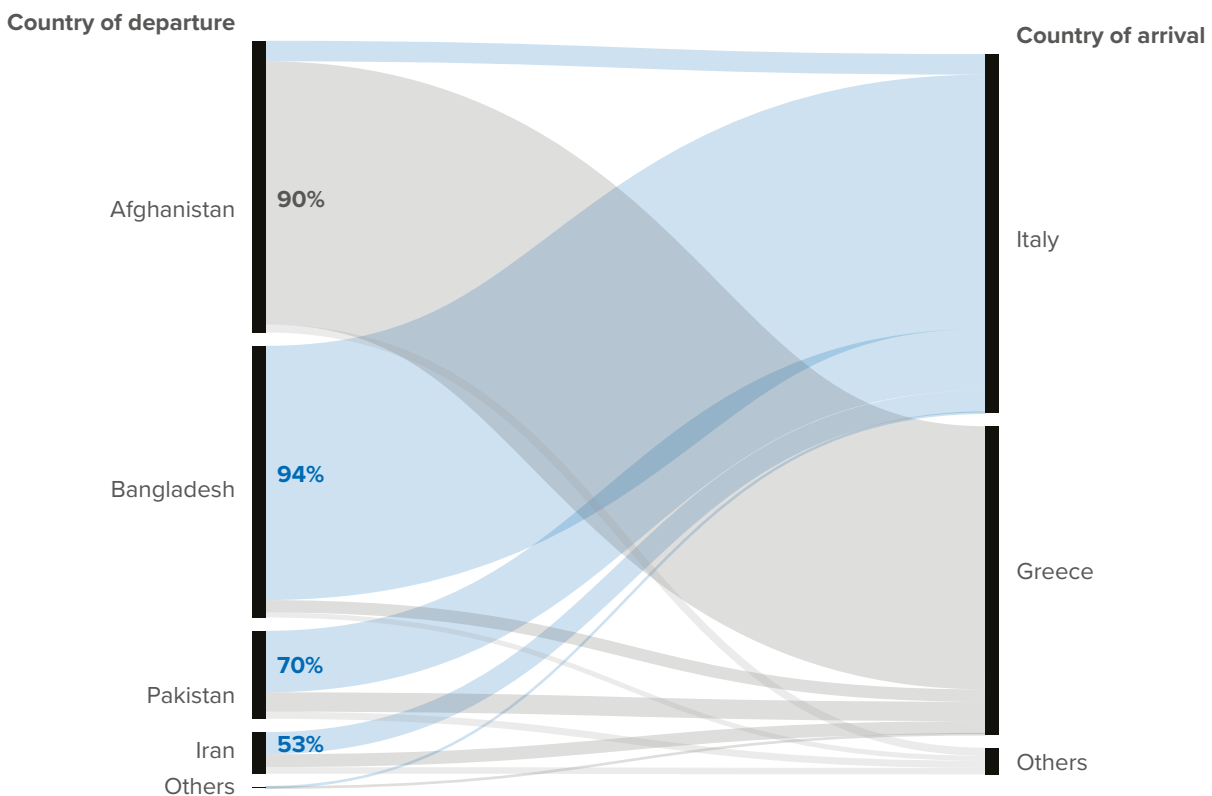
TOP NATIONALITIES OF ARRIVALS FROM ASIA AND THE PACIFIC TO GREECE (2024)



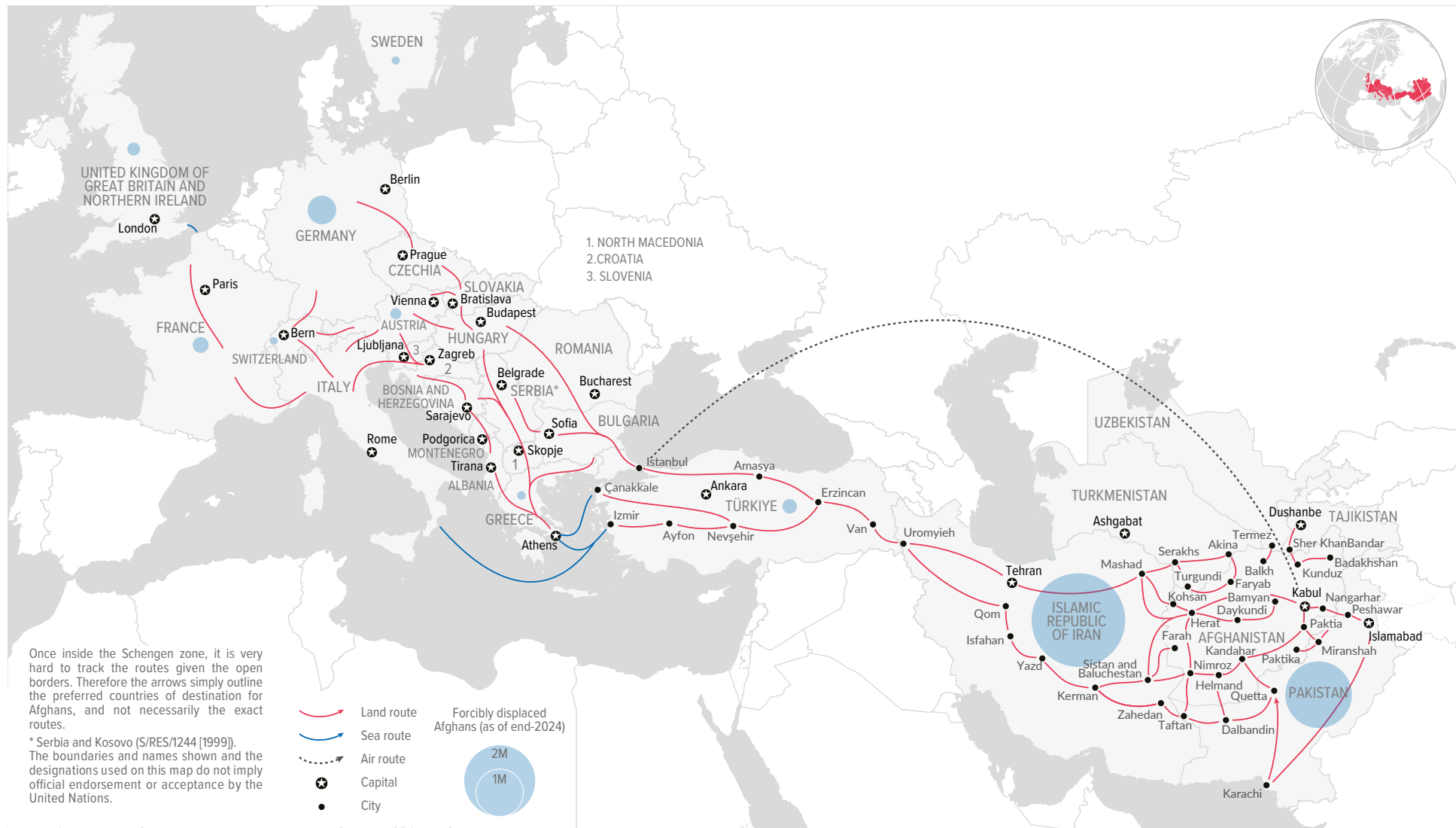
TOP NATIONALITIES OF ARRIVALS TO ITALY FROM ASIA AND PACIFIC (2024)



COUNTRY OF DEPARTURE AND ARRIVAL



WHICH ROUTES ARE REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS TAKING?



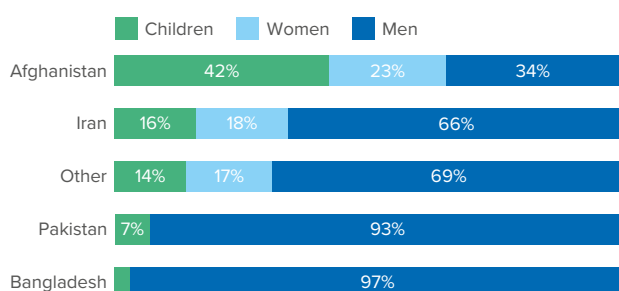
POPULATION PROFILE



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

Based on data on arrivals provided by European country national authorities in 2024, Afghan and Iranian nationals show a distinct demographic profile, with women making up 28 per cent of Afghan arrivals and 27 per cent of Iranian arrivals, compared to 6 per cent of Bangladeshis and 5 per cent of Pakistanis.¹¹ Children account for 41 per cent of Afghan arrivals and 21 per cent of Iranians, while the proportions are notably lower among Bangladeshis (4 per cent) and Pakistanis (5 per cent), potentially highlighting greater protection and family-related needs among Afghans and Iranians.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE



Protection monitoring interviews conducted between January and December 2024 across South-East European countries¹² reveal significant gender-based disparities in socio-economic profiles among Afghans and Iranians on the move. Within the younger cohort (18-24 years), all Afghan women interviewed reported having no formal education, compared to only 10 per cent of men in the same age group. Conversely, among those aged 25–59 years, 25 per cent of women had attained a university degree, compared to just 7 per cent of men. Despite these higher education levels, 75 per cent of Afghan women reported never having held an occupation in their country of origin, compared to 29 per cent of men.

Similar trends are observed among Iranians. While 26 per cent of Iranian women interviewed held university degrees – double the rate among men (13 per cent) – 39 per cent of women reported no previous employment, compared to 21 per cent of men.

The socio-demographic profile of Afghan and Iranian women interviewed seems to point to the de facto authorities' in Afghanistan systematic exclusion of women from education and employment in Afghanistan, coupled with restrictive social norms and legal constraints in Iran, as significant push factors driving Afghan and Iranian women to leave their country of origin.

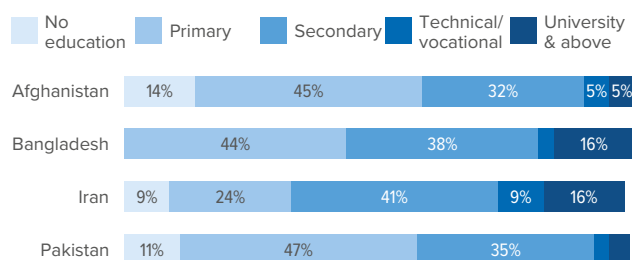
According to protection monitoring interviews conducted between January and December 2024 across South-East European countries under the framework of UNHCR Regional Protection Monitoring System, varying education and occupation levels are also observed across nationalities. Afghan and Pakistani women and men on the move tend to have on average lower levels of formal education, with 14 per cent and 11 per cent respectively reporting no education, and the majority completing only primary education (45 per cent of Afghans, 47 per cent of Pakistanis). In contrast, Bangladeshi and Iranian women and men report on average higher levels of secondary and tertiary education. Notably, 16 per cent of both Bangladeshis and Iranians have attained university-level education or above, compared to just 5 per cent of Afghans and 4 per cent of Pakistanis. Technical or vocational training remains limited across all groups, ranging from 3 per cent to 9 per cent.

11. Based on data on irregular arrivals in Europe provided by national authorities of Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Malta.

12. UNHCR Regional Protection Monitoring System, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo (UNSCR 1244/1999), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia.

These figures illustrate diverse education profiles, which can influence integration and support needs in host countries. Despite this, among refugees and migrants interviewed across South-East European countries in 2024, 32 per cent of Afghans reported not having worked in Afghanistan or in their previous country of asylum, compared to 26 per cent of Pakistanis, 25 per cent of Iranians, and 17 per cent of Bangladeshis.

EDUCATION LEVELS



3. Why are refugees and migrants leaving their country of origin to travel along the South-West Asia Route to Europe?

The reasons for leaving the country of origin vary significantly by nationality, highlighting differing needs. Among Afghans, 88 per cent cited conflict or violence as the primary reasons for their movement, comprising generalized insecurity (48 per cent) and threats to their life and family (40 per cent) as their main reasons for leaving, while 66 per cent of Iranians reported the same (36 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively). In contrast,

most Pakistanis (68 per cent) and Bangladeshis (75 per cent) left due to limited access to employment and basic services as the primary reasons, with only 19 per cent of Pakistanis and 8 per cent of Bangladeshis citing violence or threats. These figures point to a stronger protection dimension in the journeys of Afghans and Iranians, compared to the more economically driven movements of Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals.

REASONS FOR LEAVING THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

	Protection			Socio-Economic			Other
	Generalized violence and insecurity	Threats to my life/family	Discrimination	Limited access to employment	Lack of access to basic services	Family reunification	
Iran	36%	30%	16%	8%	3%	1%	6%
Afghanistan	48%	40%	3%	3%	4%		2%
Bangladesh	8%		13%	75%			4%
Pakistan	12%	7%	7%	43%	25%	1%	4%

According to the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA),¹³ common profiles among Iranian asylum-seekers include political opponents, protesters, human

rights defenders, journalists, and individuals perceived to have violated Islamic norms or laws. Indeed, the recognition rate for Iranian applicants across EU+

13 [European Union Agency for Asylum, Country Guidance: Iran.](#)

countries reached 40 per cent in 2024,¹⁴ substantiating the international protection needs associated with these profiles.

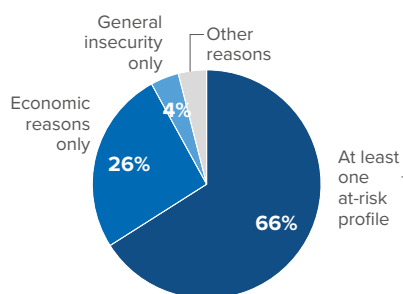
Moreover, most Afghans who approached UNHCR in Iran and Pakistan and arrived after the Taliban’s takeover in August 2021 have profiles which place them at risk of serious harm and likely to be in need of international protection, as defined in the UNHCR Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan (Update I).¹⁵ In Iran, 80 per cent of Afghans reported protection-related reasons for flight – including affiliation with the former government (34 per cent), fear of the Taliban (29 per cent), restrictions on women (16 per cent), and minority status (13 per cent) – compared to 35 per cent before August

2021. Minority Afghan groups such as Tajiks, Hazaras and Sayyeds make up 81 per cent of arrivals, while only 12 per cent cited solely economic reasons. In Pakistan, 66 per cent of post-2021 arrivals from Afghanistan also reported protection concerns, with similar risk factors.

While the unprecedented humanitarian crisis affecting Afghanistan is of deep concern, it must not obscure the widespread human rights violations taking place in the country and the protection risks that Afghans might be facing. Although many Afghans may initially cite urgent survival needs as the first or primary reason for their flight, this does not negate their concurrent international protection needs, which calls for a comprehensive assessment.

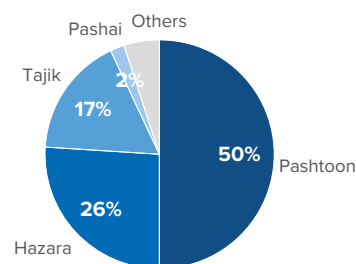
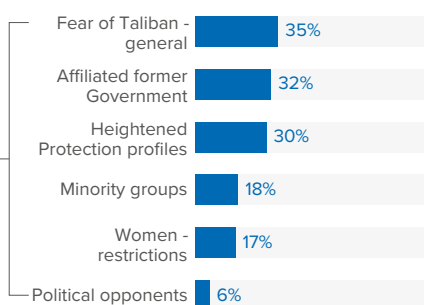
PROFILE OF NEWLY ARRIVED AFGHANS WHO APPROACHED UNHCR PAKISTAN

Reasons for flight



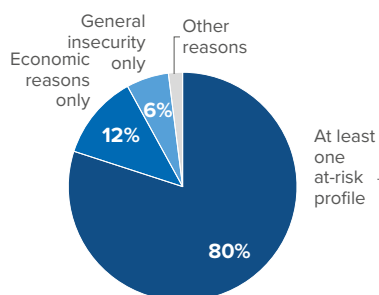
Ethnicity

At-risk profile reasons breakdown



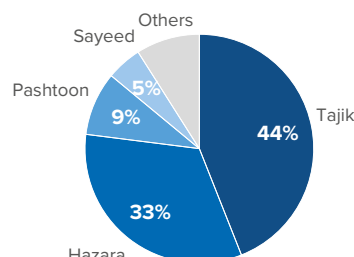
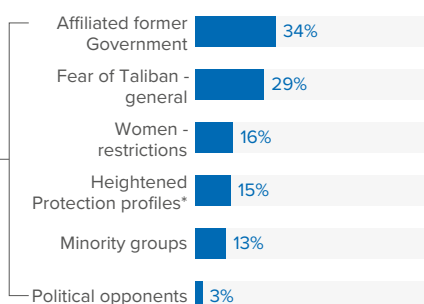
PROFILE OF NEWLY ARRIVED AFGHANS WHO APPROACHED UNHCR IRAN

Reasons for flight



Ethnicity

At-risk profile reasons breakdown



¹⁴ The total protection rate was calculated excluding decisions granting stay permits on humanitarian grounds.

¹⁵ [UNHCR, Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan \(Update I\), February 2023.](#)

UNHCR's Guidance Note on Afghanistan highlights that many Afghans will have international protection needs, and emphasizes the following profiles as they present increased refugee protection needs:



Afghan women and girls



Afghans associated with the former government or with the international community in Afghanistan, including former embassy staff and employees of international organizations



Journalists and other media professionals; human rights defenders and activists, as well as defence lawyers supporting them



Members of minority religious groups and members of minority ethnic groups, including the Hazaras



Afghans of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and-or gender expression



Former members of the Afghan national security forces and Afghans associated with the former international military forces in Afghanistan



4. Why are Afghans continuing to move on from countries of asylum in South-West Asia?

Iran and Pakistan have for decades generously hosted the vast majority of the global number of Afghan refugees and remain to date the largest hosting countries for Afghan refugees worldwide. Many Afghan refugees have spent years in Iran or Pakistan, only deciding to move onwards towards Europe when deportations, economic hardship or insecurity made staying impossible, given the protection standards for voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan are not met. However, in the absence of a comprehensive refugee protection framework in these countries of first asylum, Afghans in both countries have remained in legal, economic and protection uncertainty for years.

The level of protection in each country differs based on the documentation type, and Afghan refugees in both countries have generally been living in an unpredictable and dynamic protection situation. In September 2023, the introduction of the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) by the Government of Pakistan led to the return under adverse circumstances of 806,000

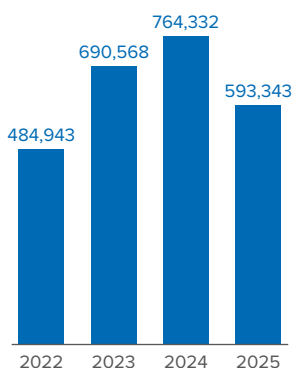
Afghans to Afghanistan by the end of 2023, of which 39,000 were deportations. In 2024, 764,000 Afghans were deported from Iran to Afghanistan and 9,000 from Pakistan.

From 1 January to 30 June 2025, there have been over 1.3 million returns to Afghanistan, which have comprised Afghans who have returned or are forced to return - including individual deportations, as well as Afghans who feel compelled to return in the context of an overall environment of discrimination, harassment and intimidation, as well as risks of arrest, detention and removal. This has arisen from the implementation of broad return policies and plans of the Governments of Iran and Pakistan implemented solely on the basis of their legal status and/or documentation. The Government of Pakistan publicly announced on 7 March 2025 the resumption of the IFRP to include all Afghan Citizenship Card (ACC) holders, in addition to the remaining undocumented Afghans, who should voluntarily return to Afghanistan by 31 March 2025 or

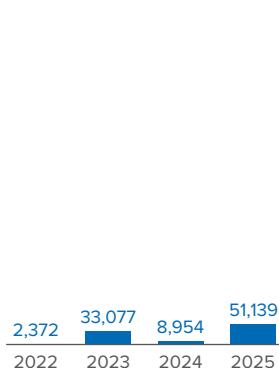
face deportation as of 1 April 2025. In parallel, as a consequence of the Government of Iran’s announcement on 23 February 2025 that the validity of headcount slips (a type of document issued for Afghans in Iran whom UNHCR considers to be in refugee-like situations) will not be extended beyond 20 March 2025, a 20 per cent increase of returns from Iran has been observed.¹⁶

AFGHANS DEPORTATION (AS OF 30 JUNE 2025)

From Iran

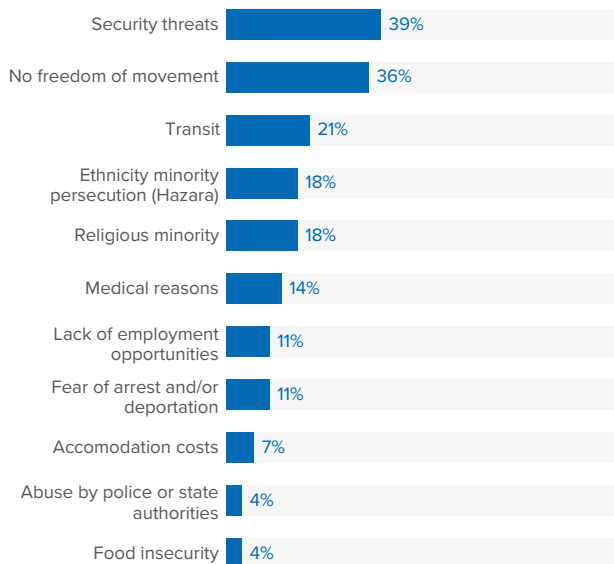


From Pakistan



According to information collected by UNHCR from Afghan refugees who moved from Pakistan to Iran, the main drivers to leave the first country of asylum are the following:

AFGHAN ONWARD MOVEMENT DRIVERS FROM PAKISTAN TO IRAN



¹⁶ Based on recent IMF studies, when one country tightens its migration and/or refugee policies, flows are often deflected to others. A 20 per cent reduction in inflows in one group of countries can increase inflows elsewhere by 10 per cent over five years and these redirected flows can raise economic output by about 0.2 per cent in the receiving countries if integration is effective. See, e.g., [World Economic Outlook, April 2025: A Critical Juncture amid Policy Shifts](#) (Chapter 3).



Afghan refugee family finds hope in Slovenia after losing everything in Türkiye earthquakes.
© UNHCR/Zsolt Balla

PROTECTION ENVIRONMENT



5. What are the drivers for onward movements along the South-West Asia Route to Europe?

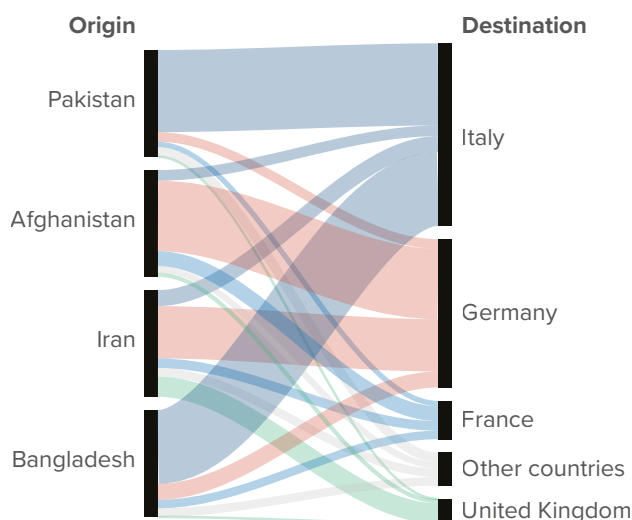
Intended destination countries of people on the move vary notably by their nationality. Italy is the top choice for 77 per cent of Pakistanis and 69 per cent of Bangladeshis, while only 13 per cent of Iranians and 10 per cent of Afghans report it as their intended destination. In contrast, 67 per cent of Afghans and 49 per cent of Iranians intend to reach Germany. France attracts smaller proportions overall, with 15 per cent of Afghans, 9 per cent of Iranians, and just 8 per cent or less among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. The United Kingdom is an intended destination for 19 per cent of Iranians, compared to only 4 per cent of Afghans, and of minimal interest to Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. These patterns highlight differing objectives and needs, with Afghans and Iranians more often aiming for northern and western Europe.¹⁷

Reasons for identifying a destination country differ markedly by nationality, reflecting varying motivations and needs. Among Afghans and Iranians, protection-related factors are prominent: 28 per cent of Afghans and 27 per cent of Iranians cited safety as their primary reason for the intended destination, while 17 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively, pointed to the existence of asylum procedures. Family and community ties also play a role, accounting for the intended destination of a combined 39 per cent for Afghans and 37 per cent for Iranians. In contrast, economic factors are the main driver for Bangladeshis and Pakistanis. Employment opportunities were the top reason for 56 per cent of Bangladeshis and 45 per cent of Pakistanis, while community ties were also important for 23 per cent of Pakistanis and 21 per cent of Bangladeshis. These

patterns underscore the protection-driven nature of Afghan and Iranian movements, compared to the economically-motivated migration of Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals.

It is worth noting that around one-third of interviewed Afghans, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, and one-quarter of Iranians, indicated they might have considered settling in a country of transit if certain conditions had been met. For Afghans and Iranians, the most important factor is being granted asylum – followed by family reunification for Afghans, and access to employment for Iranians. In contrast, for Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, the main condition for considering settlement in a country of transit is access to work.

TOP 4 INTENDED DESTINATION COUNTRIES



¹⁷ To be noted, according to UNHCR Regional Protection Monitoring System interviews collected in 2024, for one per cent of Afghans and Pakistani, and four per cent of Iranians, the intended destination country is unknown.

REASONS FOR CHOOSING THE DESTINATION COUNTRY

	Safety	Asylum procedures	Family ties	Community ties	Employment
Afghanistan	23%	15%	19%	14%	22%
Bangladesh	0%	8%	12%	12%	69%
Iran	14%	11%	16%	18%	30%
Pakistan	3%	7%	10%	34%	42%



6. What protection issues do refugees and migrants face along the journey from South-West Asia to Europe?

Refugees and migrants undertaking the journey to Europe face significant protection risks associated with smuggling and trafficking networks. The SW Asia Route from Pakistan through Iran, Türkiye, Greece, Bulgaria, and onward to other EU countries is fraught with dangers. Restrictive border controls, insufficient protection-sensitive border controls and limited legal pathways, including barriers to family reunification, force many refugees and migrants to rely on smugglers or to fall victim to trafficking, exposing them to various forms of exploitation, abuse and human rights violations. Moreover, current reception conditions and lack of integration opportunities, particularly in countries like Bulgaria, are significant factors driving forcibly displaced persons to seek protection elsewhere in the EU. Refugees and migrants moving through the Western Balkans countries have reported physical assault and confiscation or destruction of personal property and identity documents, arrests and verbal abuse at the hands of smugglers/traffickers, police, border guards and other authorities.

Children, women and persons with disabilities are among the most vulnerable profiles enduring the journey. Child protection risks include violence, abuse and exploitation, with the worst forms of child labour featuring prominently. Family separation before, during and after the journey is a key risk to be mitigated to ensure a first line of protection for children, and unaccompanied children constitute one of the most vulnerable categories among children on the move.

Access to Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services, generally, however also along the journey, is critical for the children to maintain resilience.

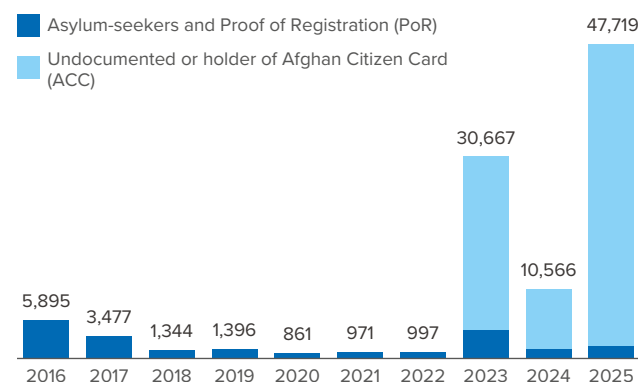
Women and girls face significant risks including gender-based violence and are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly those travelling by themselves, women heads of household, women and girls with disabilities, and persons with diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC).

From Türkiye to Greece, refugees alongside migrants continue to embark in dangerous and perilous journeys to reach safety in Europe. These movements through the land border and by sea in Greece often occur in overcrowded or unseaworthy vessels, which in some cases may result in the loss of lives, persons going missing or injured, or being subjected to pushbacks at sea or land borders. Living conditions in reception and accommodation facilities for asylum-seekers and refugees arriving to Greece remain challenging, particularly at periods of increased arrivals. Although significant progress has been observed toward the integration and self-reliance of refugees in Greece, those who wish to stay in Greece continue to face a number of administrative and legal obstacles, including access to documentation, employment, education, healthcare, renting a house, applying for social benefits or reuniting with their families in Greece, increasing their risk of exploitation, abuse, destitution and discrimination.

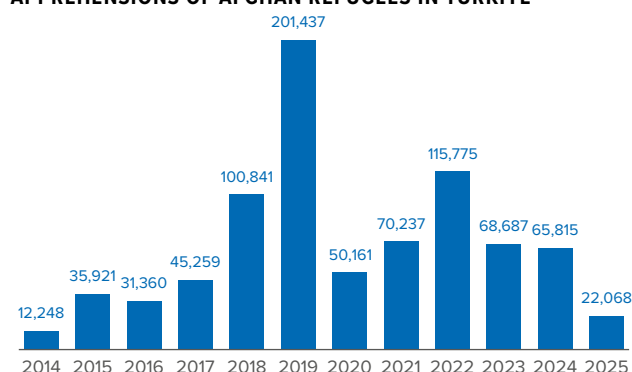
From 2020–2023, the number of Afghan refugees and migrants losing their lives during transit in South-West Asia increased by 250 per cent from 308 to 1,078 persons.¹⁸ The vast majority of recorded deaths and disappearances involved Afghan refugees fleeing along the SW Asia Route from Afghanistan to Iran while attempting to move onwards towards Türkiye and into the EU.

In Iran, Pakistan and Türkiye, arrests and detention reportedly under poor conditions, often leading to deportations, have been widely reported. While 21,000 Afghans were arrested in Pakistan in 2024, Türkiye reported close to 66,000 Afghans being apprehended in the territory during the year. Afghans report a lack of basic services like food, water and accommodation, illnesses from harsh conditions, and monetary exploitation by smugglers in exchange of basic services.

ARRESTS OF AFGHAN REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN



APPREHENSIONS OF AFGHAN REFUGEES IN TÜRKIYE¹⁹



7. How many refugees and migrants have returned to their countries of origin in South-West Asia?

Since the announcement of the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) in September 2023, 1.1 million Afghans have returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan as of 30 June 2025. This includes 89,400 individuals deported by Pakistan – 51 per cent of the total returns were women and girls. Available information indicates that at least 17 per cent of the returnees have crossed back into Pakistan, based on UNHCR’s protection return monitoring. The same survey reveals that while male returnees see gradual economic improvement, women face worsening barriers, deeper vulnerabilities, and growing food insecurity. This contrast underscores the fragile reintegration progress and the urgent need for targeted support to the return areas.

Men’s wages and employment improve over time, likely because humanitarian assistance transitions to labor-based income. Employment rises by 14 per cent within six months of return. These gains are linked to better local integration and improved access to labor market information. Men, in particular, experience these gains, with wages in male-headed households increasing by 14 per cent on average.

Women, however, are excluded from these benefits with their wages declining and employment rates dropping, reinforcing gender inequalities. Female-headed households face a 22 per cent drop in wages and employment falls below 40 per cent, widening gender gaps. Women earn 17 per cent less than men and face

18. [Annual Regional Overview 2023 – Missing Migrants Project](#)

19. Source: Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior Presidency of Migration Management.

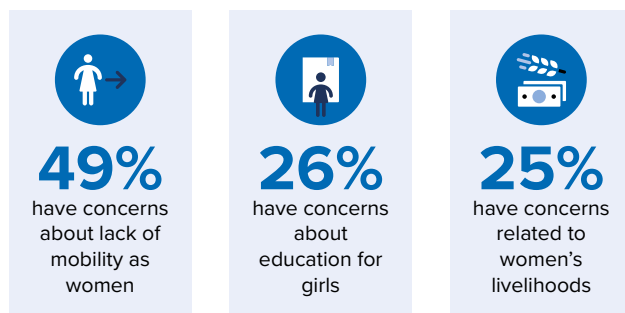
restricted access to essential services. Only 25 per cent have mobile phones (vs. 95 per cent of men), and 20 per cent lack national IDs (vs. 5 per cent of men).

At the household level, debt and food insecurity rise despite men’s improved employment. 89 per cent of returnee families are in debt—a 13 per cent increase in six months. Over half face food insecurity, worsening by 8 per cent overall and nearly 10 per cent for female-headed homes. These issues show that economic gains are not meeting rising basic needs.

Despite challenges, over 94 per cent of returnees intend to stay in their current communities, signaling that these returns are not temporary. But without gender-responsive support and inclusive economic opportunities, rising debt and exclusion will continue to undermine resilience—especially for vulnerable groups.

According to UNHCR protection interviews conducted with returnees from Pakistan between May and October 2024,²⁰ over 60 per cent of the issues identified in all interviews are related to restrictions for women and girls. From Iran, almost a quarter of a million Afghan refugees and people in a refugee-like situation were estimated to have returned to their country in 2024.

Two-thirds of women and girls interviewed reported that they have concerns upon return to Afghanistan due to restrictions placed upon females. The main concern is restrictions on unaccompanied movements by women and girls; especially highlighted by single women/women-headed households. These concerns are less common among men (expressed by 16 per cent of respondents), but when expressed they tend to stress the limitations on their daughter’s access to education. A significant number of Afghan returnees in the first half of 2025 are persons who are at heightened risk who are likely to be in need of international protection, in accordance with the risk profiles presented in UNHCR’s Guidance Note on Afghanistan.



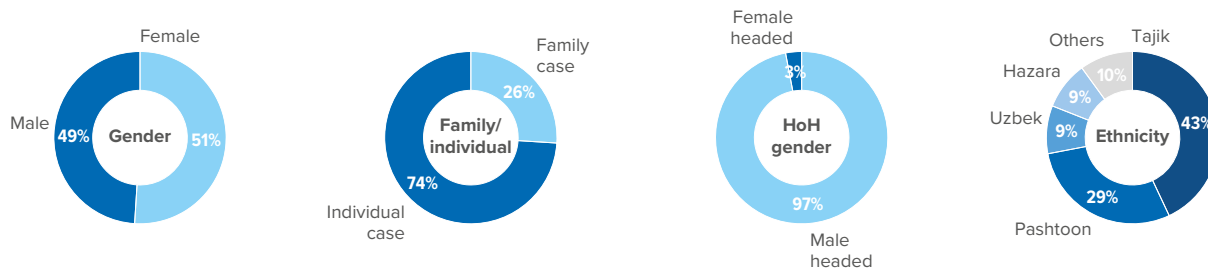
From Iran, between January 2023 and 30 June 2025, there have been a total of 4 million returns, out of which 2.4 million were deportations. In 2023 and 2024 the significant majority of the total returns – 74 per cent - were individuals while 26 per cent were family cases. Since the beginning of 2025, there have been significant shifts in the proportion of returnees traveling as families (54 per cent in quarter 2) rather than individuals (46 per cent in quarter 2). Afghans of Tajik ethnicity constituted 43 per cent of those returning from Iran.

Afghans and other nationalities from Asia also face risk of deportations from Türkiye, following interception and identification of being in the country irregularly. 66,000 Afghans were thus apprehended in 2024.²¹

According to the Presidency of Migration Management’s (PMM), Türkiye, a total of 66,534²² Afghans were deported from Türkiye to Afghanistan in 2022. In addition, in the first ten months of 2023, 28,734²³ Afghans were deported.

According to PMM, in 2024, 9,000 applicants were registered for international protection. Among those, 5,550 applicants (61 per cent) were of Afghan origin.

PROFILE OF AFGHAN RETURNEES



20 Based on systematic sampling. UNHCR Afghanistan: Post return monitoring report. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/112147>
 21 Government of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, Irregular migration statistics. <https://www.goc.gov.tr/sinir-disi-119817>
 22 <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Haber/Detay?Id=63482949-af94-4a00-bcc9-018bb2856e7f>



8. How many refugees have sought asylum in the European Union after having travelled along the South-West Asia Route?

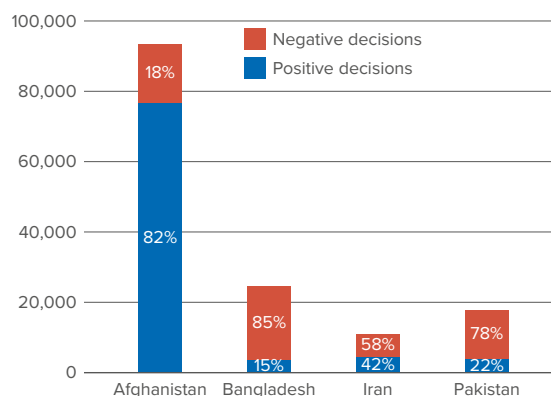
It is not always possible to determine the exact route taken by refugees applying for asylum in Europe. Data offers valuable insights into overall flow, and their linkages with conditions in countries of origin, including conflict, economic crises, natural disasters, and other drivers of forced displacement or migration.

According to Eurostat, in 2024, Afghan nationals submitted the second highest number of first-time asylum applications in the EU+²⁴ after Syrians, with a total of approximately 77,200. Strikingly, around 40 per cent of these applicants were children under 18 years of age (including more than 6,250 unaccompanied children), and roughly one in three was female. In contrast, first time applications from Bangladeshi (41,235) and Pakistani (20,225) nationals were overwhelmingly male and adult-dominated, with men aged 18-34 years of age accounting for most claims. Iranian applicants (9,385) presented a more balanced age and gender distribution, with significant representation across adult age brackets and a higher proportion of female applicants compared to other nationalities.

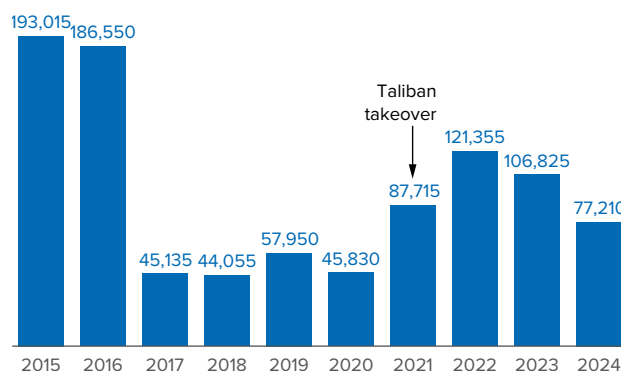
In 2024, Afghan nationals accounted for the second highest number of first-instance asylum decisions in the EU+ after Syrians, with nearly 94,000 decisions and a recognition rate of 60 per cent,²⁵ reflecting the continued international protection needs of this population. Iranian applicants also recorded a comparatively high recognition rate of 40 per cent out of almost 11,000 decisions, consistent with ongoing reports of political and human rights-related persecution. In contrast, Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationals faced significantly lower recognition rates – 4 per cent and 12 per cent respectively – despite

substantial decision volumes (over 24,600 and 17,800), underscoring the expected disparities in protection needs based on country of origin.

RECOGNITION RATES



ASYLUM APPLICATIONS OF AFGHANS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION*



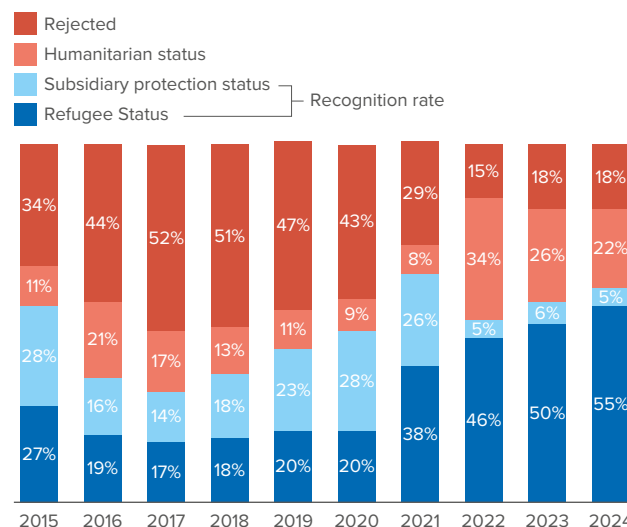
*Source: Eurostat data providing applications and decisions trends. Asylum applications are likely much higher than arrivals, due to multiple applications and new applications of people already present on the territory irregularly. Data extracted on 26 March 2025.

²⁴ European Union 27 Member States, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

²⁵ The recognition rate is calculated excluding stay permits granted on humanitarian ground from positive decisions.

Following the Taliban takeover, the recognition rate of Afghan asylum applications in 2021 rose to 64 per cent (38 per cent refugee status and 26 per cent subsidiary protection), a substantial increase from 48 per cent (20 per cent refugee status and 28 per cent subsidiary protection) in 2020. Despite fluctuations in subsequent years, the recognition rate in 2024 **remains relatively high at 60 per cent**, with 55 per cent granted refugee status and five per cent subsidiary protection. The data also shows a noticeable shift in the form of protection granted by the receiving EU+ countries following the takeover in 2021, with a stronger emphasis on granting refugee status for Afghan applicants.

FIRST-INSTANCE ASYLUM DECISIONS IN EU+ (2024)



9. How many Afghan refugees have fled again from Afghanistan after being compelled to return?

In 2024, there were 315,000 returnees from Pakistan to Afghanistan, of which 17 per cent are reported to have re-entered Pakistan, potentially indicating new or continuing protection concerns in Afghanistan that prompted re-entry.²⁶ A significant proportion (49 per cent) of those deported from Iran and Pakistan, have fled from Afghanistan more than once, with at least 11

per cent fleeing over three times.²⁷ Afghans fleeing persecution in Afghanistan may not have been able to register their asylum claims upon arrival in the country of asylum in the absence of national asylum systems and/or due to constraints existing with regards to access to registration.

²⁶ UNHCR Post returns monitoring survey.

²⁷ UNHCR border monitoring.



10. What are the options/third-country solutions available for refugees who travel along the South-West Asia Route?

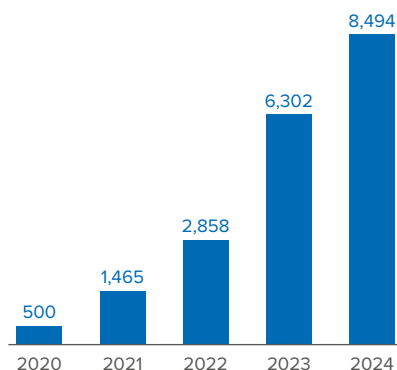
The number of Afghans departing for resettlement has increased progressively over the past five years; however, this trend is unlikely to continue given the reduction in resettlement quotas, which in 2025 have fallen to their lowest level in two decades.

The United States of America, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom are the top resettlement countries for Afghans, accounting for 85 per cent out of the 19,000 Afghans resettled globally from 2020 to 2024. The remaining 15 per cent have been resettled in the European Union+ and New Zealand. In 2024 alone, 8,494 Afghans were resettled.

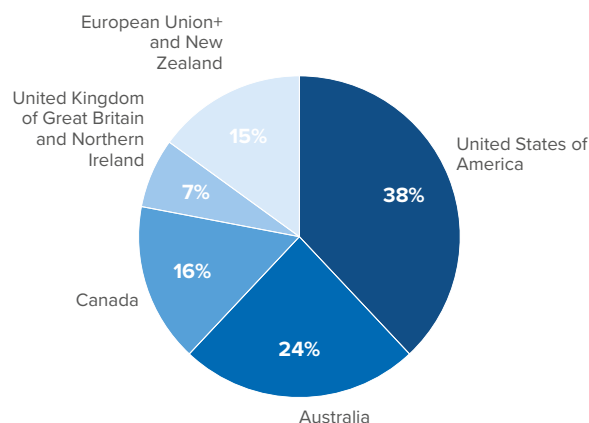
Owing to the recent changes in US foreign policy, resettlement programmes have been severely affected. 38 per cent of the Afghans resettled in the past five years were to the US. This trend is not expected to continue.

From 2020 to 2024, UNHCR recorded departures of some 11,400 Afghan refugees on complementary pathways, including community and private sponsorship, humanitarian visas, family reunification, labour mobility and education pathways, most notably to Canada (more than 7,600), Australia (more than 2,000) and the US (more than 900), with just 3 per cent departing to European countries.

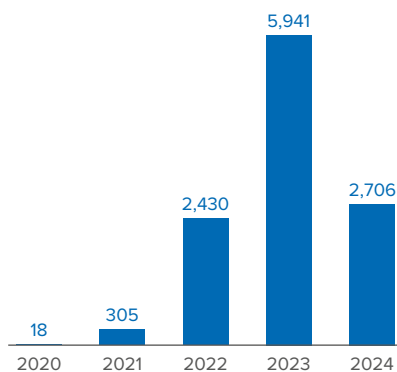
AFGHANS RESETTLED GLOBALLY BY YEAR



AFGHANS TRAVELLING GLOBALLY BY COUNTRY



AFGHANS TRAVELLING THROUGH COMPLEMENTARY PATHWAYS



RECOMMENDATIONS

The 10 datasets and thematic areas presented in this paper inform evidence-based decision-making and the design and delivery of flexible and adaptable programming to meet the critical needs along the SW Asia Route. To achieve the aims of the Panoramic/Route-Based Approach, 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.



UNHCR emphasizes the need for protection sensitive entry and admissions - Swift screening and admission of persons wishing to claim international protection is necessary to ensure effective access to asylum procedures. Early screening can also serve to identify refugees 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 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.



UNHCR calls for addressing immediate protection and assistance needs and comprehensively addressing trafficking and smuggling - Refugees in mixed movements can 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 imperative.



UNHCR calls for more support and responsibility sharing to host countries who have generously hosted Afghans for decades. UNHCR urges donor countries, development and international financial institutions to provide meaningful and multi-year financial support to reception countries. 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 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, as well as genuine responsibility sharing both through expanding the number of resettlement places and expanding the scope of resettlement admissibility criteria, to provide a protection tool applicable to highly vulnerable refugees who continue to face imminent harm upon return to the country of origin.



UNHCR calls for more support inside Afghanistan to support the reintegration of Afghans 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, while ensuring that returnees' rights are protected. This is therefore a key element for the successful roll-out of a comprehensive panoramic/route-based approach.



Manija, a refugee from Afghanistan, with her 5-month-old son at the terrace of Irida Women's Centre NGO in Thessaloniki, northern Greece.
© UNHCR/ Socrates Baltagiannis

A Panoramic/Route-Based Approach

REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS FROM SOUTH-WEST ASIA TO EUROPE

July 2025

Cover photo: Khadija Amin is an Afghan journalist and refugee living in Spain. On 15 August 2021, she was a news presenter on national television in Kabul. When the Taliban regained control, Khadija's life was in immediate danger. With the assistance of a Spanish journalist, she fled to Spain, leaving behind her family and everything she knew. © UNHCR/Ébano Stories



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