



# Afghanistan Returnees Rapid Needs Assessment

May 2024

## I. Executive Summary

Decades of conflict have led to Afghanistan being one of the countries with a significant population of refugees in protracted displacement globally. Despite some Afghans returning over the years, ongoing security and political challenges have driven more recent waves of refugees. As of mid-2023, Afghans represented the second largest refugee population, with a substantial number residing in neighbouring countries like Iran and Pakistan.

The October 2023 announcement by the Government of Pakistan to repatriate all undocumented foreigners from its territory, notably impacting some 1.3 million undocumented Afghans in Pakistan, coupled with an unfavourable political and socio-economic environment led to the large-scale return of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan, notably from September to December 2023. Coupled with the urgent humanitarian need, this sudden influx of returnees to Afghanistan has raised concerns across humanitarian, basic human needs and the wider international community about how medium to longer-term support will be provided to assist in the reintegration of this population, notably in light of the conditions in Afghanistan where abject poverty, soaring unemployment, and limited public services prevail.

The Afghan Returnees Rapid Needs Assessment (ARRNA) conducted by the UN Country Team in Afghanistan and the World Bank aimed to identify the needs and backgrounds of current and potential Afghan returnees. The assessment, completed in January 2024, focused on data analysis from various sources, including administrative records and household surveys.

Key findings from the report indicate that the profiles of recent returnees from Pakistan were mainly of undocumented Afghans, with a significant number being children below 15 years old. This is significant in a context where girls are banned from continuing their education beyond Year Six. Factors to consider in returnee vulnerability assessments include age, specific needs (such as disability, female-headed household) and lack of formal education. Some 77 per cent of returnees were primarily involved in low-skill manual labour in urban settings, posing challenges for their reintegration into predominantly rural areas in Afghanistan. The report also highlights the potential future return of documented Afghan refugees from Pakistan, which could further strain local capacities and resources.

Return flows were highly localized geographically, with some districts and provinces being particularly affected, with implications on the local absorption capacity of host communities. Notably, Nurgal district, Kunar province, could experience a population increase of more than 50 percent.

The analysis emphasizes the importance of tailored support for returnees and host communities, especially considering the concentrated nature of return inflows in specific districts. Addressing the needs of returnees, particularly in terms of education, employment, and basic services, is

crucial to ensuring successful reintegration and preventing secondary displacement movements. Efforts to support local integration and enhance the welfare of both returnees and host populations are recommended to address the complex challenges associated with the large-scale returns observed in recent times.

In light of a potential steep uptick in returns from mid-April 2024 onwards, return estimates currently stand at some 1.17m undocumented and Afghan Citizenship Card holders and a further 280,000 Proof of Registration (PoR) and Slip Holders (Asylum seekers) between 15 September 2023 and 31 December 2024. Therefore, the urgent upscaling of presence and assistance at borders and in areas of origin will fundamentally shape the outcomes for these returnees in the medium to long term as Afghanistan continues to grapple with multiple political, socio-economic and environmental challenges.

## II. Context

Starting with the 1979 Soviet invasion, decades of conflict positioned Afghanistan as one of the countries with the largest population of refugees in protracted displacement, worldwide. Despite the return of many Afghan refugees over the decades, the persistent security and political challenges have led many more to flee in recent years. As of end of year 2023, Afghans represented the second largest refugee population (6.1 million), after Syrians (6.5 million) and before Ukrainians (5.9 million)<sup>1</sup>. The majority of Afghan refugees live in neighbouring countries in the region. Together, Iran and Pakistan host 5.5 million Afghan refugees in addition to an estimated 1.5 million undocumented Afghans.



On 3 October 2023, Pakistan's national Apex Committee endorsed a plan to repatriate over one million foreigners without valid documents, largely impacting Afghans, and requiring them to leave the country by 1 November. Following the announcement of the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) by the Government of Pakistan, large-scale returns to Afghanistan were observed, with most of the cross-border movements occurring through the Torkham and Spin Boldak-Chaman border points. In the period from 15 September to 31 December 2023, at the height of the

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

displacement, a total of 490,200 returns to Afghanistan were recorded,<sup>2</sup> While 89 percent of returns are comprised of undocumented Afghans directly affected by the IFRP, the hostile conditions in Pakistan including intimidation and fear of deportation, also spurred the return of Afghanistan Citizen Card (ACC) holders and Proof of Registration (PoR) card holders (refugees), Voluntary Return Form (VRF) holders and UNHCR slip holders (asylum seekers). The scale and compressed timeframe of these returns have elicited the concerns of humanitarian and basic human needs' actors as well as the wider international community in terms of managing the needs of returnees within a context whereby one in two Afghans live in poverty<sup>3</sup>, unemployment is soaring, and public services are insufficient to absorb new arrivals.

### III. Afghan Returnees Rapid Needs Assessment (ARRNA)

The Afghan Returnees Rapid Needs Assessment (ARRNA) is an initiative by the UN Country Team in Afghanistan and the World Bank to identify the needs and profiles of current and potential Afghan returnees. This desk review was led by the World Bank and in collaboration with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency and the IOM, the UN Migration Agency, within the framework of the Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG) for Afghanistan. The ARRNA desk review was completed in January 2024, and the results were consulted within the DSWG to support planning, coordination and resource mobilization. The information presented in this report is correct as of this date.

#### Methodology

The findings presented in this report build on the systematic analysis of secondary sources. In particular these include: (i) administrative records on returns collected at the border by IOM and UNHCR over the period 1 July - 30 December 2023; (ii) administrative records on PoR and ACC cardholders residing in Pakistan; and (iii) household survey data on the socio-economic profile of Afghans collected by the National Statistical and Information Authority (NSIA) in 2019-20.

Building on the assessment conducted during previous large-scale Afghan returns and by integrating quantitative evidence from different data sources, this study provides an overview of the demographic profile of returnees, as well as the geographic distribution of returns within Afghanistan. The analysis is done both for the returns that were observed in the second half of 2023 as well as potential future returns from Pakistan which could affect ACC and PoR cardholders. To better understand potential re-integration challenges, the sociodemographic

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<sup>2</sup> Border Consortium update 30Dec. 2023

[https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11071/files/documents/2024-01/en-30dec-border-consortium-pakistani-border-operations\\_m.pdf](https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11071/files/documents/2024-01/en-30dec-border-consortium-pakistani-border-operations_m.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/975d25c52634db31c504a2c6bee44d22-0310012023/original/Afghanistan-Welfare-Monitoring-Survey-3.pdf>

profile of returnees, both current and potential, is contrasted with that of the population residing in Afghanistan as of 2019-20.

### What can we learn from previous large-scale Afghan returns?

The current scale of Afghan returns is not unprecedented. In 2016, close to 400,000 Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan due to heightened uncertainty over the renewal of PoR cards. At the same time, close to 600,000 undocumented Afghans either returned voluntarily or were deported from Iran and Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> Between 2001 and 2015, approximately 4.8 million refugees were assisted by UNHCR to return to Afghanistan, with 80 percent of flows concentrated in just 4 years during the initial years of the Republic. While no information is available on the return of undocumented Afghans, estimates indicate that, in 2014, close to one in five Afghans who resided in the country at the time had returned from abroad.

Previous large-scale returns can provide important insights into the challenges posed by the current returns.<sup>5</sup>

1. Return flows were highly localized geographically, with some districts and provinces being particularly affected, with implications on the local absorption capacity of host communities.
2. While returns in the early 2000s, due to sustained economic growth, had been more successful in their socioeconomic re-integration, over time, a sluggish economy, the rising level of poverty and conflict, as well as limited access to services contributed to a progressive increase in internal displacement and secondary displacement among returnees.<sup>6</sup>
3. Internal displacement and mobility flows have been mostly directed towards urban centres, with Afghans seeking better employment opportunities in addition to security and access to services.
4. With widespread poverty in the country, historical evidence indicates that being a returnee does not necessarily determine a higher risk of poverty compared to other population groups within Afghanistan. Rather, it is the socio-economic profile of returnees that matters in determining their welfare outcomes. As for other Afghan households, the risk of poverty for both IDPs and returnees critically depends on their human capital profile. Interestingly, with most of the Afghan returnees having spent decades in Iran and Pakistan and most of the youngest generations of refugees having been born and having received education while residing in host countries, the literacy rate of refugees who returned to Afghanistan in the first decade of the century, was higher than that of the general population.

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<sup>4</sup> UNAMA, Population Movement Bulletin, [issue 7 November 2016](#), [issue 8 January 2017](#)

<sup>5</sup> [World Bank, UNHCR \(2017\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> The incidence of internal displacement among the returnees who came back in 2013 is twice as high compared to those who returned in 2002, despite the fact that returnees in 2002 were almost 50 times more than in 2013 (ibid).

## Profile of current return inflows

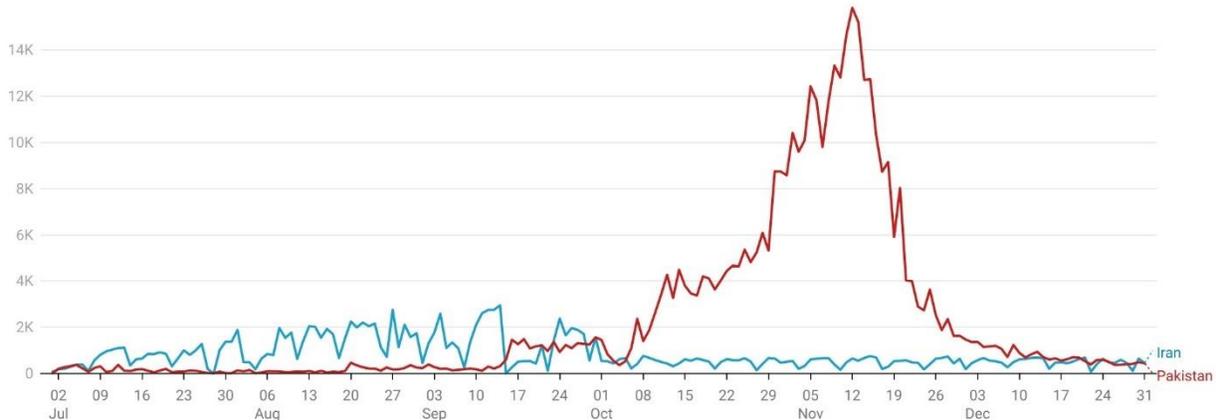
According to IOM and UNHCR records, between 1 July and 31 December 2023, 645,239 Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan. Nine in ten Afghans who returned in the second half of 2023 were undocumented – i.e. not in possession of legal documentation for their stay abroad.

The spike in returns corresponds to Pakistan’s announcement and subsequent implementation of the IFRP. Since its announcement on 3 October 2023, the daily inflows of Afghans from Pakistan have increased significantly, reaching their peak in November (Figure 1). Overall, 489,706 Afghans returned from Pakistan in the second half of 2023, out of which 419,892 were undocumented and 320,200 returned from 1 November to 31 December 2023.

Returns also continued from Iran, of which the overwhelming majority comprised of undocumented Afghans. Returns from Iran were mostly represented by working-age males returning alone and can potentially be attributed to regular cross-border circular migration. On the other hand, Afghans who returned from Pakistan were largely accompanied by their families.

Given the distinctive profiles and associated challenges, the following analysis focuses solely on returns from Pakistan observed through the Torkham and Spin Boldak border crossings.

**Figure 1 - Returns to Afghanistan from 1 July to 30 December 2023**



Source: IOM, UNHCR • Created with Datawrapper

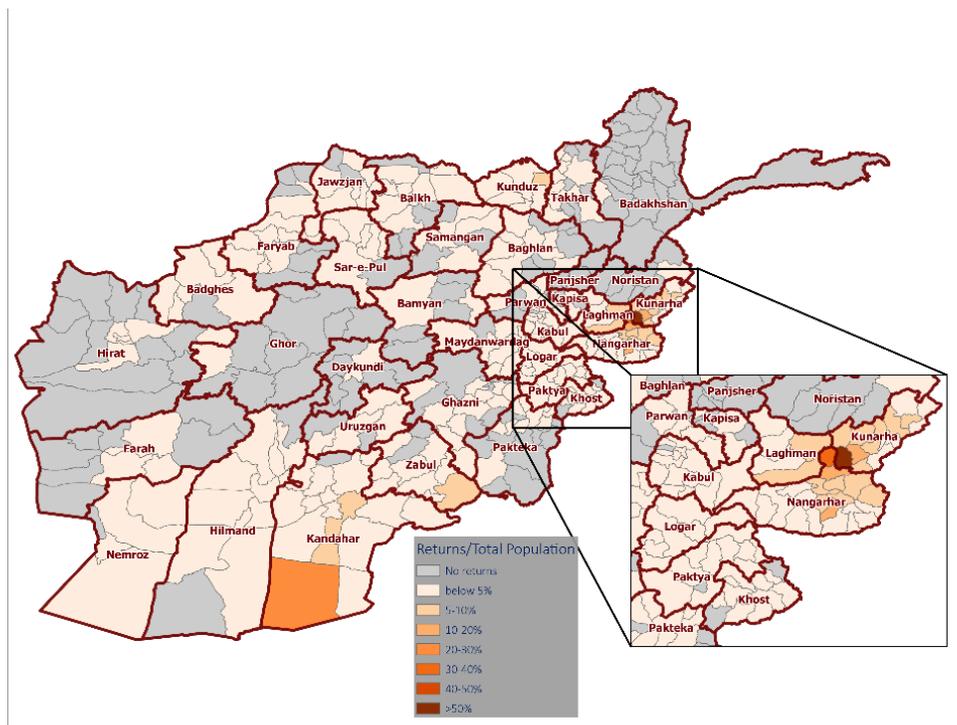
Similar to previous large-scale returns, the current wave of returns from Pakistan is highly localized geographically. The analysis of areas of origin and self-reported areas of return indicates that specific districts will face the highest burden of returnee inflows (Figure 2). Nurgal district, Kunar province, is estimated to have experienced a population increase of more than 50 percent, hile Dara-e-Nur district, in Nangarhar province is expected to observe a population increase of about 30 - 40 percent and Reg district, in Kandahar province, will observe a population increase of 20-30 percent. The districts of Kuz Kunar and Kot in Nangarhar province, and the district of Chawkay in Kunar province are expected to face a population increase of 10 to 20 percent. The high

prevalence of returnees in these districts will likely stretch the local absorption capacity, even more so considering their predominantly rural profile.

Compared to the population of Afghanistan, the current wave of returns has a significantly younger demographic profile. Among current returns, children below age 15 represent 56 percent of the total, while the corresponding share in the Afghan population in 2019-20 was 49 percent. The higher incidence of children amongst the returnees population is reflected in its higher dependency ratio (1.31 v. 1.05 among hosts), meaning that, on average, every returnee of working age provides for 1.3 dependents. The high share of the population below age 15 among the current returns will likely increase the demand for access to education in most affected districts.

The current wave of returns is predominantly represented by Afghans who have moved to Pakistan (without documentation) in the past decade. On average, current returnees have lived in Pakistan for eight years. Compared to the historical profile of Afghan refugees who had stayed in Pakistan for decades, current returnees are more likely to have maintained contact with their homeland and, in general, to be more familiar with the livelihood challenges in their areas of origin.

**Figure 2- Incidence of current returns (from 1 July to 30 December 2023) on the district of origin's population**



Source: IOM and UNHCR

**The educational profile of current returns is very poor compared to that of the host population.** The overwhelming majority (94 percent) of heads of households who have recently returned from

Pakistan reported lacking any formal education, whereas the corresponding figure among hosts is 65 percent. ***The poor education profile of current returns indicates a high level of potential vulnerability to poverty and may exacerbate constraints on livelihood opportunities already faced by the poorest segments of Afghan society.***

The population of current returns was primarily engaged in low-skill manual labour (outside the agriculture sector) in Pakistan. Given the educational profile of current returnees and the primarily urban nature of the settlement of Afghans in Pakistan, this finding is unsurprising, however, given the rural profile of reported areas of return, it is likely that returnees will not have the skills to integrate into the agriculture sector, where 40 percent of the “host” Afghans are currently employed.

### Profile of potential future returns

The probability and timing of potential future returns from Pakistan will likely depend on the degree of protection granted by their documentation status. In Pakistan, where intense pressure to repatriate Afghans continues, undocumented Afghans will remain the most vulnerable group to deportation. As of March 2024, recent media reports indicate that the Government of Pakistan’s efforts to map the presence of undocumented Afghans in Pakistan have been extended to include Afghan Citizen Cardholders (ACC), possibly indicating an intention to proceed to their repatriation next. According to the records of Pakistan’s National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), at the time of registration in 2017, the number of ACC holders in Pakistan stood at approximately 803,200, a lower-bound estimate that does not account for the demographic growth to date.<sup>7</sup> In addition to ACC holders, Pakistan hosts Afghan refugees possessing a Proof of Residence (PoR) card. According to the latest Document Renewal and Information Verification Exercise (DRIVE) conducted by UNHCR between March 2021 and February 2022, the number of PoR cardholders is estimated at 1.3 million. Since 2016, the extension of PoR card validity has been time-bound and subject to uncertainty and political considerations.

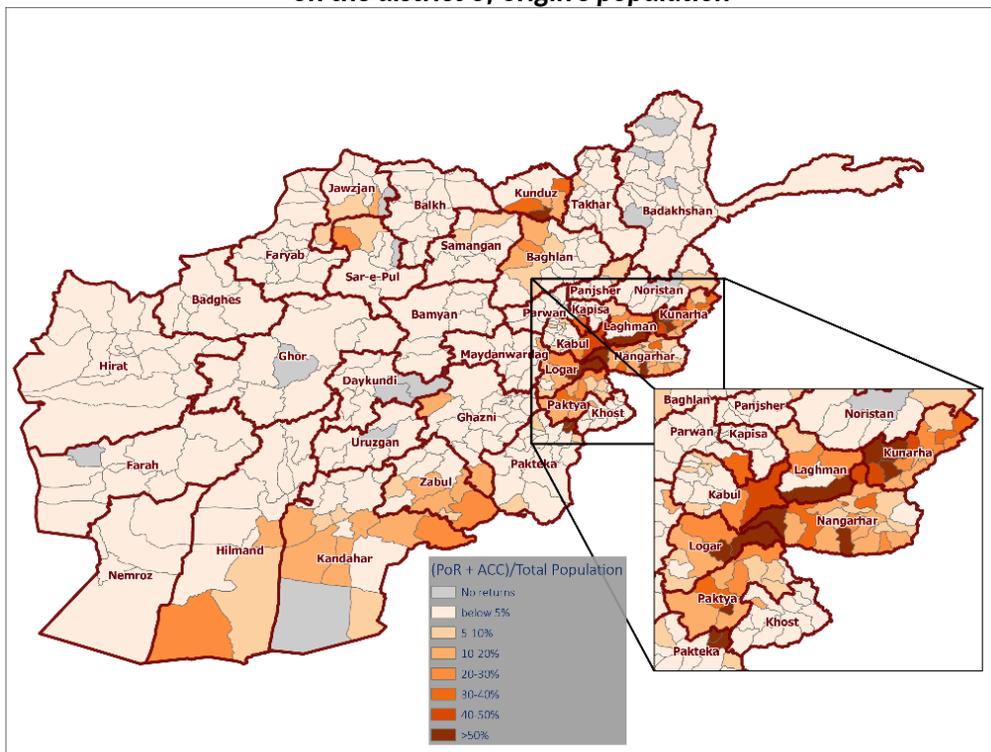
The following section provides an analysis of the profile of potential future inflows of Afghans from Pakistan. The analysis of areas of return is based on information for both ACC holders and PoR cardholders, whereas – due to data limitations – the socioeconomic profile only focuses on PoR cardholders.

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<sup>7</sup> In February 2017, Pakistan adopted the Comprehensive Policy on the Repatriation and Management of Afghans, which: (i) extended the validity of PoR cards until the end of 2017; (ii) includes a commitment to adopt a national refugee law and a visa regime for different categories of Afghan refugees who have PoR cards; and (iii) mandated for the first time the registration of undocumented Afghans. Afghans registered under this scheme receive Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC), providing them legal protection from arbitrary arrest, detention or deportation under Pakistan’s Foreigner’s Act, and allowing them to stay in Pakistan until they can be issued documents, such as passports, by the Government of Afghanistan.

The inflow of potential future returns will be spatially concentrated in some of the provinces already facing the highest demographic impact of current returns. Kunar and Nangarhar provinces are estimated to receive the greatest number of arrivals of potential future inflows, with Nurgal and Dara-e-Nur districts potentially increasing their populations by 40-50 percent should ACC holders and PoR cardholders return to their areas of origin. A total of twelve districts could face return inflows of ACC and PoR holders larger than half of their current population (incidence levels higher than 50 percent), out of which three would also be located in Kunar province and two within Nangarhar.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 3- Incidence of potential returns from Pakistan of ACC and PoR cardholders on the district of origin's population**



Source: NADRA, UNHCR

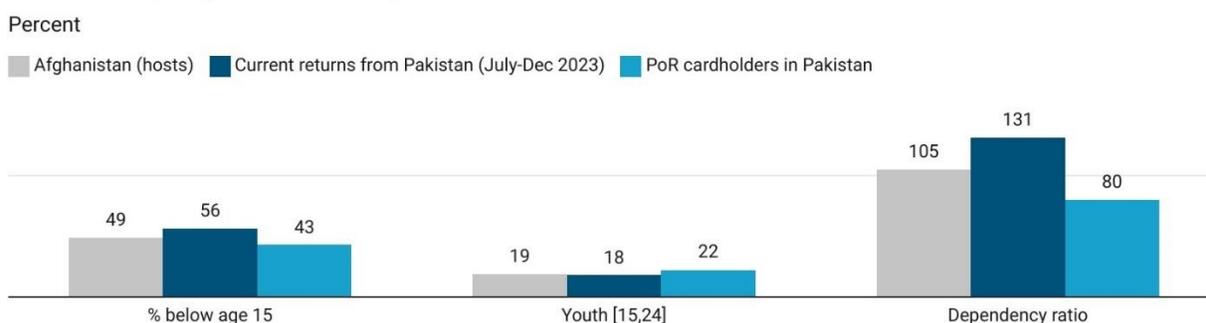
Compared to current returns which are primarily undocumented, the demographic profile of PoR cardholders shows a higher prevalence of working-age individuals, most of whom were born in Pakistan. Compared to returns of undocumented Afghans that were observed in the second half of 2023, the population of PoR cardholders will have a lower dependency rate (Figure 4). While demand for services will further increase should returns continue, the demographic -notably age profile - of potential future returns will imply a disproportionate impact on the labour market. Moreover, as 84 percent of the population of PoR cardholders was born in Pakistan, the likely lack

<sup>8</sup> These districts are Chapa Dara, Chawkay, Dara-e-Pech (Kunar); Ali Abad (Kunduz); Shawak (Paktya); Ziruk, Naka (Paktika); Deh Bala, Hesarak (Nangarhar); Khoshi, Azra (Logar); Qarghayi (Laghman)

of familiarity with the Afghanistan context might pose additional reintegration challenges upon arrival (Figure 5). On the other hand, compared to current returns, the education profile of PoR cardholders is more aligned with that of the host population. As such, provided the immediate humanitarian needs upon return will be met, the vulnerability profile of future return will not pose any specific challenge, but it will rather be aligned with that of the population of Afghanistan as a whole.

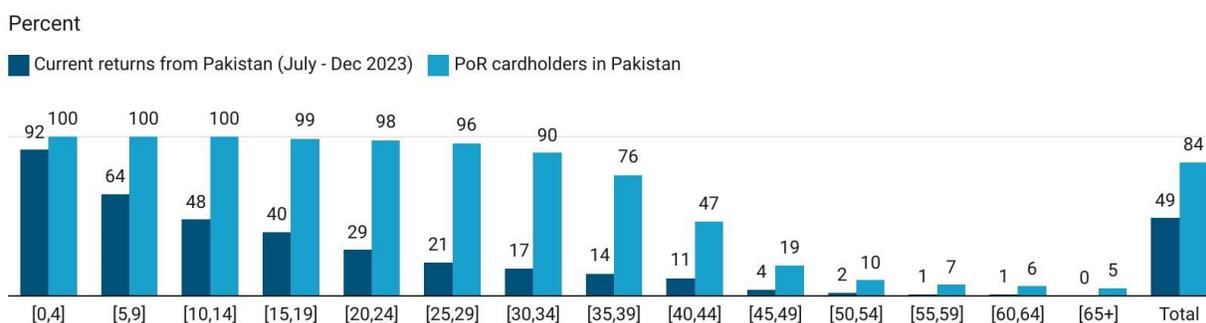
While PoR cardholders in Pakistan are not explicitly restricted from engaging in any lawful occupation in Pakistan, in practice, they cannot access formal employment, own property or businesses in the absence of joint ventures with a Pakistani national. Until early 2019, refugees were not allowed to open bank accounts. The occupation profile of PoR cardholders in Pakistan is similar to that of the broader Afghan population at home, with one notable exception that PoR holders in Pakistan are not engaged in the agriculture sector. This is akin to the current wave of returnees (Figure 6).

**Figure 4 - Demographic profiles - Population in Afghanistan, Returnees from Pakistan (July - Dec 2023) and PoR cardholders in Pakistan.**



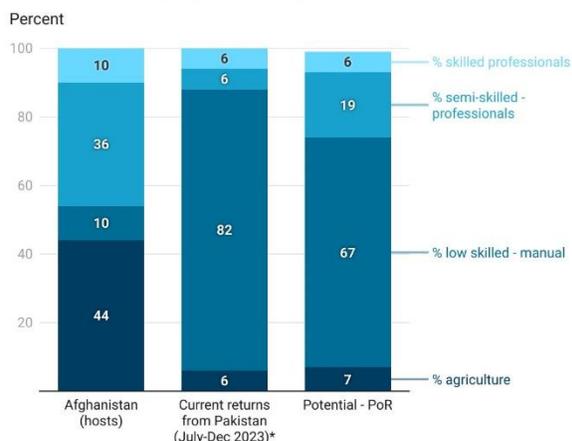
Source: NSIA, IOM, UNHCR • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 5 - Proportion of Returnees from Pakistan (July - Dec 2023) and PoR cardholders who were born in Pakistan, by age group.**



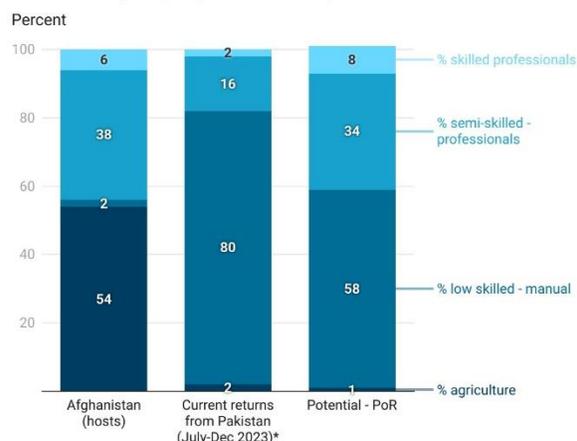
Source: IOM, UNHCR • Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 6a - Labor market profile of Afghans (host) and of current and potential returns (PoR) in Pakistan (Employed Male)**



Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 6b - Labor market profile of Afghans (host) and of current and potential returns (PoR) in Pakistan (Employed Female)**



Created with Datawrapper

#### IV. Final considerations and look ahead

The large surge in the number of returns from Pakistan since mid-2023 and the prospect of additional inflows from April 2024 present a serious challenge from both humanitarian and basic human needs perspectives. In addition to the resources necessary to support returnee households with the most pressing needs upon return, the challenges that will be further placed on service provision and labour market integration will be severe, not only because of the structural constraints affecting Afghanistan’s economy, but also in light of the spatially concentrated profile of returns and the magnitude of population increases in some areas. As evidenced in periods of previous large-scale returns, the possibility of observing secondary displacement movements cannot be ruled out. In this context, interventions aimed at supporting local integration and welfare outcomes of both returnees and host communities should be complemented by efforts to strengthen the monitoring of internal population movements.

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*Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.*