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Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019

Situation of Returnees in Kabul

15.10.2019 - Country Information Service



Introduction

This report has been prepared as part of the FAKTA project¹, which is funded by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Researchers from the Finnish Immigration Service's Country Information Service visited Kabul on a fact-finding mission from April 7 to 12, 2019. The aim of the mission was to collect information on the living conditions of returnees in Kabul City and issuance of identification documents for Afghan citizens. This report focuses on the living conditions and another report will look at the identification documents.

An overview of the situation in Afghanistan and Kabul is provided in the first chapter. The second chapter looks at the returnees' living conditions, access to livelihoods, and their societal treatment in Kabul. The main focus is on those returnees who have come from Europe. The final chapter of the report describes the situation of people belonging to the Hazara ethnic group.

Security was mentioned as the biggest concern for civilians in Afghanistan and Kabul. Despite the ongoing peace negotiations and a decrease in the civilian casualties caused by the conflict in the first half of 2019, the complex political situation will continue to affect Afghanistan's security in the future. More detailed information about security incidents in different regions of Afghanistan is available in the situational reviews published by the Country Information Service².

The conflict inside Afghanistan as well as the situation in the neighbouring countries has caused massive migration to the cities, making the capital Kabul one of the fastest growing cities in the world. The mass urbanisation has created environmental and social problems affecting all residents of the city. There are also limitations in access to housing, basic necessities, sustainable income sources, and services, such as health care, in Kabul. Those who return, like other residents of Kabul, mostly have to rely on their family and other networks, which can be difficult especially for those who have not lived in Kabul before. Returnees from Europe may not be welcomed by their families due to their loss of assets and the stigma that follows failure in supporting the family by migration.

The Hazara community in Kabul is cohesive, and Hazaras returning to the city often end up in the Hazara-majority areas. These neighbourhoods function on their own without much support from the government, but they have been subject to increased attacks, mostly claimed by ISIS.

A number of international and local organisations and experts based in Afghanistan as well as Afghan officials were interviewed during the mission. Some of the respondents wished to remain anonymous in the mission reports. In addition, a contact network of international and national experts was created during the mission in order to obtain information on the situation in Afghanistan from the experts to support decision-making in the Finnish Immigration Service in the future.

¹ Development Project for fact-finding mission practices on country of origin information 2017-2020.

² Available at <https://migri.fi/raportit>.

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Information on the report

The report by the Finnish Immigration Service's Country Information Service is based on the European Union's quality guidelines for analysing country information as well as guidelines for fact-finding missions. The report is based on carefully selected sources. The report makes use of the interviews conducted during the fact-finding mission and, where necessary, it has been supplemented with written source material. The amount of the source material use is limited, and the report is not exhaustive. To obtain an exhaustive picture about the matter at hand, the report should not be used in decision-making alone but supplemented with other sources. The absence of an event, person or organisation from the report does not imply that it never occurred or that the person or organisation did not exist. The report is based on independent research and analysis by the Country Information Service. The Country Information Service is responsible for the contents of the report. The perspectives and statements presented in the report do not necessarily represent the opinion of the Finnish Immigration Service, nor should the report be regarded as a legal or political statement.

1. Situation in Kabul and Afghanistan

1.1. Brief introduction to Kabul

During the last decades, Kabul has gone through various changes impacted by continued instability in the country. The city has been Afghanistan's political, cultural, and economic centre since its designation as the capital in 1775–1776. The masterplan of the city was created in 1978 before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the city – currently home to around five million people – was designed to host only 800 000 residents. After the Soviet invasion, Kabul was a major battlefield of the civil war in the early 1990s and fell under the Taliban rule in 1996, which caused a significant number of its residents to flee from the capital. After the 2001 military intervention that caused the collapse of the Taliban rule, a new growth boom was introduced, as the international community presence encouraged many returnees and newcomers to migrate to the city. Nowadays, Kabul is among the fastest growing cities in the world.³

Kabul is a densely populated city that is divided into sections that are inhabited by different ethnicities. Estimates on Kabul's population vary from 3.5 to over 5 million.⁴ Historically, Kabul is a Dari-speaking city, inhabited by populations from many ethnicities, including Tajik, Pashtun, and Hazara, many identifying themselves simply as 'Kabulis', residents of Kabul. Now the original Kabulis form only a fraction of the current population, which is characterized by newcomers from other provinces and abroad; almost one third of the residents have lived parts of their lives somewhere else.⁵ Today Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Baluchis, Sikhs, and Hindus live in the city.⁶

The city is divided in 22 municipal districts, which are more often called police districts (PDs) or *nahia* (in Dari and Pashto).⁷

³ Foschini 03/2019, p. 1–4.

⁴ Foschini 04/2017, p. 9–10.

⁵ Foschini 04/2017, p. 13.

⁶ PAN Elections 2019.

⁷ Foschini 03/2019, p. 4.

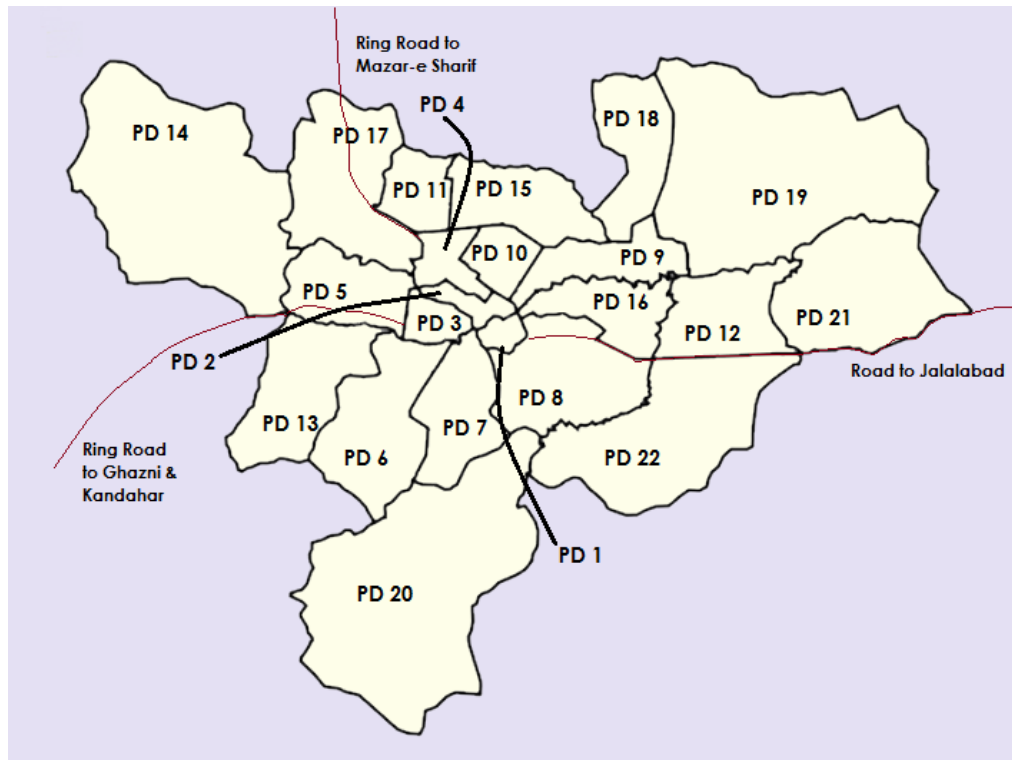


Figure 1. Police Districts (PDs) in Kabul. Image: Country Information Service, base map Wikimedia Commons ([CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)).

1.2. Security situation

A representative of an international organisation described Kabul as “a mixture of hope and fear, where the main challenge is insecurity and a second challenge is poverty and the lack of sustainable income sources.” The representative explained further: “People live their lives and if something happens, for a couple of days, people remember it, and then they move on. People do not care about small explosions anymore because there has been too many of them.” The representative concluded: “At the early mornings in Kabul it is possible to feel hope, but the hopelessness arises during the day and comes from the increasing insecurity. However, Afghans are resilient with good coping mechanisms.”⁸

According to several sources, security is indeed the biggest concern in Afghanistan for returnees and civilians in general.⁹ Some even claim that Kabul is one of the least secure provinces in the country.¹⁰ The random nature of violence means that everyone is at risk.¹¹ The overall security situation has been deteriorating since 2013-2014. People have grown tired of the

⁸ IPSO 11.4.2019.

⁹ AMASO 9.4.2019; UNHCR 9.4.2019; IPSO 11.4.2019.

¹⁰ IOM 8.4.2019.

¹¹ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

deteriorating security, and in the last years large numbers of Afghans have left the country for Iran, Turkey, and Europe.¹²

There is ongoing conflict and fighting in various parts of the country. It is important to note that the conflict is not just between the government and the anti-government elements (AGEs), but also between the AGEs themselves. Besides the Taliban there are about 50 other anti-government groups. The Taliban, Daesh (ISIS), and ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province) are the groups which are having the biggest impact, but there are other smaller groups active in certain parts of the country.¹³

According to an expert on Afghanistan, ISIS remains a serious threat in Kabul. Especially Hazaras living in the Dashti Barchi neighbourhood have suffered from indiscriminate killings claimed by the organisation. The Taliban, however, had reduced the number of civilian casualties during the first half of 2019.¹⁴ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded 3812 civilian casualties (1366 deaths and 2446 injured) during the first six months of 2019, which was 27 per cent less than in the same period in 2018. UNAMA attributed 38 per cent of the casualties to the Taliban, and 14 per cent to other AGEs, which amounted to a 43 per cent decrease in casualties caused by AGEs in this period.¹⁵

According to the expert this shows that the Taliban understands that they are losing support, and that they want to be in power again.¹⁶ Others, however, interpret this as only a political statement since in reality the number of attacks on civilians by the Taliban remained high even during this period.¹⁷ Moreover, the situation has changed since the first half of 2019, as there has been a significant increase in attacks again.¹⁸

The conflict and fighting have an impact on the people of Afghanistan. Local people tend to support Taliban in the Taliban-controlled areas and the government in the government-controlled areas. The people do not have any other choice, other than to cope with the existing situation. In general, people want to get on with their lives and they accept whatever force that brings peace into their community. There are exceptions to this, however.¹⁹

According to an expert on Afghanistan, after high-profile attacks, such as the bombing near the German Embassy in May 2017 and the so-called 'ambulance attack' in January 2018, "there were no people on the streets and Kabul was a ghost city. But now in the middle of 2019 it seems that it is possible to feel life on the streets of Kabul again and people are going out." The expert, however, added that there is no guarantee that the situation will remain like this.²⁰

¹² AMASO 9.4.2019.

¹³ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁴ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

¹⁵ UNAMA 30.7.2019, p. 1, 5–6.

¹⁶ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

¹⁷ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

¹⁸ An Expert on Afghanistan 22.8.2019. The expert added this comment during the review of the meeting notes.

¹⁹ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

²⁰ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

The attacks that happen in Kabul tend to be resolved soon. An explosion is quickly cleaned up and traffic is immediately opened. In most cases people can go about their businesses in two or three hours after the incident.²¹

Besides violence caused by AGEs, Kabul is also affected by criminal gangs. Kidnapping is a major concern for many citizens of Kabul.²² According to Dr Sima Samar, former chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), there is a lot of criminality in Kabul. This is mostly small crime, such as theft, but also killings occur.²³ Criminality, including street crime, is a challenge even in the more well-off areas of Kabul, such as Shahr-e Naw.²⁴

An expert on Afghanistan mentioned that it seems that there are a lot of young people with spare time on the streets without jobs, and therefore criminality is increasing. There have been more muggings than before. The economic situation is not good, hence the increase in criminality and pickpocketing of money.²⁵

According to a January 2019 article by the New York Times, Kabul is indeed under the influence of crime syndicates which are referred to as "the pyramid of crime" by the authorities. There are around 1500 people who are suspected of criminal activities and many of these criminals are armed. The power of these criminal gangs is based on the protection that they receive from the country's elite. According to the authorities, the security forces have started a campaign fighting criminality in the city and some influential criminal leaders were arrested during the winter 2019. ²⁶ Many of these criminal were, however, released due to weak judicial system.²⁷

1.3. Political situation

An expert on Afghanistan stated that there is a lot of hope with the peace talks, and the breaking point was the June 2018 ceasefire which was the first ceasefire in 18 years. Before that there was no trust in achieving a ceasefire. According to the expert people are feeling more confident about security in Kabul.²⁸

However, there is also a lot of anxiety regarding the peace talks especially among women. Women have not been included in the negotiations so far, and people are anxious that the rights that women have achieved may be lost. ²⁹ If the Taliban is not the enemy anymore and there is a political settlement, there will be questions like can girls go to school and will there be a women quota in the parliament. ³⁰

So far the negotiations have been conducted between the United States and the Taliban, and there have been no real intra-Afghan peace talks at this point. According to an expert on Afghanistan, once the peace process starts

²¹ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

²² UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

²³ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019.

²⁴ Al-Jazeera/Latifi 11.7.2019.

²⁵ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

²⁶ NYT/Mashal 16.1.2019.

²⁷ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

²⁸ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

²⁹ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

³⁰ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

it is going to be a complicated and tense process, and until the people really sit at the table it does not look very promising.³¹ The peace talks between the Taliban and the United States were called off in the beginning of September 2019 by the US President Donald Trump. This has been interpreted as a failure to reach a political solution between the two parties, and a negotiated end to the war will be less likely, at least for now.³²

One of the main concerns is the role of the Taliban after the possible peace deal. The expert clarified that the Taliban is both an Islamic Emirate, a force running the state, as well as a movement. It is authoritarian and not democratic at all. The Taliban does not believe in elections.³³

Many questions remain about the peace process. There has been a scenario about transitional government, which is seen as more likely because the Taliban will not go to an election and it will not register as a political party either. There are hundreds of questions open in the air. Having the elections before or after the peace deal is certainly going to be a very challenging task.³⁴

The political situation, including the presidential elections of September 2019, affects the general situation in Afghanistan. The presidential elections were regarded as much more contested and complicated than the parliamentary elections held in late 2018. There was concern that the elections would turn violent, although the Afghan people and the government were more aware of the positive implications of having a peaceful election.³⁵ The presidential elections also raise bigger expectations among Afghans about the next president.³⁶ The first round of the election was held in September 28, 2019, and it was characterized by very low voter turnout.³⁷ The results were yet to be released at the time of the publication of this report, and a second round of voting was considered possible.

The result of the election will affect the security situation for the next couple of years. It is unclear how the new government will improve the security, livelihoods, and peace in Afghanistan.³⁸ Some negative scenarios have been proposed, the most serious of which the peace process going the wrong way. It can go wrong in many ways, for example the United States may leave Afghanistan, or even a civil war is possible.³⁹

1.4. Humanitarian situation

The massive population growth in Kabul has caused several problems during the 2000s. There have been high levels of urbanisation and peri-urbanisation (where urban and rural areas mix) in the bigger cities of Afghanistan, such as Kabul.⁴⁰ There has been no masterplan for urban development in Kabul since 1978, when the designed population was only 800 000, and the growth of the

³¹ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

³² AAN/Clark 8.9.2019.

³³ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

³⁴ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

³⁵ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

³⁶ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

³⁷ AAN/Ruttig & Bjelica 28.9.2019.

³⁸ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

³⁹ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

⁴⁰ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

city is not under anyone's control.⁴¹ More recently, corruption and the weak capacity of Kabul Municipality to implement development work have resulted in many of the projects (roads, water supply, etc.) funded by donors ending up not properly implemented either due to weak capacity or high-level corruption.⁴²

This has created many kinds of challenges, for example environmental. According to a representative of Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) interviewed by Al-Jazeera in July 2019, Kabul is facing issues like air pollution, access to clean water and waste management, of which air pollution is by far the biggest problem.⁴³

As many houses in Kabul are makeshift shelters and do not have water or sanitation, access to proper standards of hygiene is limited.⁴⁴ Access to clean water is especially a problem in Kabul. People are drilling their own wells. Otherwise they have to buy bottled water from the streets, which is not sustainable.⁴⁵ According to the Al-Jazeera July 2019 article, although there are wells and taps in some informal settlements, water is scarce and not available every day.⁴⁶

Pollution is getting worse in Kabul. The open waste disposal is also a huge problem in terms of environment and health issues.⁴⁷ There has been no comprehensive analysis of air pollution in Kabul, but especially during winter, the air in the city becomes particularly polluted. This is caused by, for example, the use of old cars, poor quality of fuel used for heating, and burning of trash.⁴⁸

Various social problems exist in Kabul as well, first of all poverty. Afghanistan's Central Statistics Organisation's 2016-17 survey found "a sharp deterioration in welfare of the Afghan population". According to the survey "The proportion of population living below the national poverty line has reportedly increased from 34 per cent in 2007-08 to 55 per cent in 2016-17."⁴⁹ Approximately 60 per cent of the residents of Kabul are youth, many of whom are facing different challenges including the quality of education, joblessness, and uncertain future, all of which lead to negative coping mechanisms, such as joining criminal gangs, drug addiction, and leaving the country, including to reach Europe.⁵⁰

There have been reports of high levels of drug addiction among the people who have returned from Iran. The combination of alienation caused by discrimination and wide supply of narcotics at cheap prices has created vulnerability for drug addiction.⁵¹ According to Dr Sima Samar, the former chairperson of AIHCR, it is possible to see hundreds of people who are addicted to drugs and in a really bad situation around the city. There are many young people living under the bridges, and it is not only men but some

⁴¹ Foschini 03/2019, p. 3.

⁴² UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

⁴³ Al-Jazeera/Latifi 11.7.2019.

⁴⁴ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

⁴⁵ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

⁴⁶ Al-Jazeera/Latifi 11.7.2019.

⁴⁷ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

⁴⁸ UNEP 29.4.2019.

⁴⁹ Afghanistan CSO 23.9.2018, p. xxxi.

⁵⁰ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

⁵¹ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

women and children as well. This indicates the general poverty and the lack of job opportunities in Kabul.⁵²

According to a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative in Afghanistan, the humanitarian community has access to roughly half of the country. The access is very limited and changes from time to time. The recent attacks claimed by Daesh or ISKP in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces have reduced the territory that is covered even more.⁵³

The organisations working in Afghanistan fear attacks on their facilities by ISIS or the Taliban. Another fear is the increased level of criminality. Local employees do not want to be identified as NGO workers because that makes them a target. Some organisations still manage to move around without major problems. On operations outside of Kabul, there have been cases of checkpoint harassment by the police who are asking for bribes, and people have been beat up.⁵⁴

⁵² Dr. Samar, AIHCR 9.4.2019.

⁵³ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

⁵⁴ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

2. Livelihoods and living conditions of returnees

2.1. Return dynamics

Migrant returns have definitely been on the increase in 2018 and 2019, what comes to Turkey and Iran specifically.⁵⁵ Refugee returns, however, have been declining steadily since 2016.⁵⁶ In 2018 about 2000 refugees and over 770 000 undocumented returnees came back to Afghanistan from Iran and 13 600 refugees and 32 000 undocumented returnees from Pakistan. An unknown number of undocumented returnees moved back and forth between Afghanistan and Iran or Pakistan for various reasons, and it is unclear to what extent these returnees actually come back to Afghanistan permanently.⁵⁷

An expert on Afghanistan explained that there is circular migration from and to Iran, as people are repeatedly deported and the same people re-migrate again back to Iran. The numbers of returnees from Iran are extremely high because the same people come and go dozens of times. However, no in-depth research has been conducted on migration cycles to Iran as far as the expert is aware. The expert concluded that the refugee situation in Pakistan is 'okay' at the moment, as there is no political pressure. There have been few returnees from Pakistan, as expected, not nearly as many as in 2016-17.⁵⁸ The situation for those recognized as refugees in Iran is also generally favorable.⁵⁹

There has been large-scale immigration towards Turkey, and as a reaction to that the Turkish authorities have been returning Afghan migrants in large numbers.⁶⁰ In total, around 9200 Afghans have returned from Turkey and around 1200 Afghans from other European countries during the first eight months of 2019.⁶¹ No recognized refugees have been forcibly returned to the knowledge of the UNHCR.⁶²

According to UNHCR & IOM 2019 statistics the top provinces of refugee returns are Kabul, Nangarhar, and Kunduz. For the undocumented returnees from Pakistan, the top destinations are Kandahar, Nangarhar, and Kunduz, and for those from Iran they are Herat, Takhar, and Ghor.⁶³

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) mentioned that the Western region of Afghanistan is receiving the most returnees. Those regions were impacted by a severe drought in 2018 as well as conflict-driven internal displacement.⁶⁴ According to the UNHCR, the place where people are mostly returning or being displaced to is Kabul.⁶⁵

Kabul is one of the places where the services are already under stress. The absorption capacity is very limited in many parts of the country because of

⁵⁵ IOM 8.4.2019.

⁵⁶ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

⁵⁷ UNHCR & IOM 05/2019, p. 4.

⁵⁸ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

⁵⁹ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

⁶⁰ IOM 8.4.2019.

⁶¹ IOM 29.8.2019.

⁶² UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

⁶³ UNHCR & IOM 05/2019, p. 6.

⁶⁴ IOM 8.4.2019.

⁶⁵ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

the massive return from neighbouring countries. Many of the returnees have been integrated but many of them have problems.⁶⁶

The increasing number of returns from Turkey might have an effect on the situation in Kabul for returnees. There has been increasing frustration among the Afghans coming back from Turkey. In some weeks during spring 2019, over 1000 Afghans returned from Turkey to Kabul per week.⁶⁷

Not all the returnees from Turkey are staying in Kabul, some go straight through the borders and leave again, and some will go to Herat or Nangarhar, for example. A significant number of people are returning to Afghanistan and if this trend continues, it is possible that there will be more protests because people are only receiving a cash assistance upon return.⁶⁸

Those returning from Iran, Turkey or Europe are pretty much the same demographics, overwhelmingly young Afghan men whereas returnees coming back from Pakistan are families.⁶⁹

The most vulnerable returnees come from Pakistan and Iran. They may not even have any documentation. They may go to informal settlements where it takes time to get established. There has been increased begging on the streets and using women and children to get small contributions for their family economy.⁷⁰ According to IPSO, people returning from Iran are "totally lost and do not know what to do. Those with no family do not know where to go and what to do. If they can find accommodation it is helping a lot."⁷¹

However, the support networks are perhaps stronger for those coming back from Pakistan in some sense, because they are families. That said, they might have not lived in the country for years, if at all, and they may or may not be able to go back to their province of origin and may or may not still have access to land.⁷²

The percentage of returnees who are originally from Kabul is very low. Kabul is among the top provinces of destination but many of those returning to Kabul are not from Kabul.⁷³ While some returnees are originally from Kabul, many others come from the provinces or were born in Iran or Pakistan. They have no safety net or extended family in the capital. Returnees without family, which serves as a safety net, are lost in environments like Afghanistan, because there are no governmental services on which they can rely.⁷⁴

2.2. Support services upon return

UNHCR provides various services for returnees in encashment centers but these services are only for refugees. The returnees who are found not to be refugees are usually the worst off because they do not have access to those

⁶⁶ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

⁶⁷ IOM 8.4.2019.

⁶⁸ IOM 8.4.2019.

⁶⁹ IOM 8.4.2019.

⁷⁰ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

⁷¹ IPSO 11.4.2019.

⁷² IOM 8.4.2019.

⁷³ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

⁷⁴ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

services. UNHCR has the whole-of-community approach, but the needs are just astonishing, so access is a challenge.⁷⁵

IOM is providing needs-based immediate humanitarian assistance for migrant returnees crossing the borders from Iran and Pakistan, and also for eligible returnees from Europe or a non-European state coming back through Kabul airport. That said this is also currently funding-dependent, with operations likely coming to an end in December 2019 if no additional funding is secured.⁷⁶ A UNHCR representative pointed out that the IOM only assists migrant returnees who are found to be particularly vulnerable⁷⁷.

In Kabul IOM used to refer returnees to a government-owned accommodation center for returnees, which was later replaced with a hotel. In April 2019 and based on needs, IOM decided to move to cash assistance for the returnees. The current reception assistance is 12 000 AFS, which is equivalent to 147 EUR. At least those migrant returnees who are found to be vulnerable will get that. If the non-refugee returnee cannot rely on their family in Kabul, they will not receive any services besides the cash assistance.⁷⁸

UNHCR does post-protection and returnee monitoring of those people who return for example from Pakistan or Iran.⁷⁹ For other returnees there is no systematic monitoring due to funding limitations. For IOM, it is impossible to monitor the current caseload without any additional funding. The IOM follow-up only lasts for a couple of days until people move forward.⁸⁰

According to AMASO, Afghanistan Migrants Advice and Support Organisation, many returnees end up living under the bridge as there are no governmental services or support system for them. AMASO is worried that although some returnees receive reintegration assistance packages provided by the countries they repatriate from, they have to wait for three to six, or even up to nine months, to receive the assistance, as there has been difficulties with the contractor providing the service. The AMASO representative emphasized this is a long time to live with no social or economic network and no job opportunities.⁸¹

Other sources agree with the importance of social networks for returnees. According to the IOM representative, if a person has an ability to go to a community and social network, then their chances of having a softer landing are higher.⁸² Especially those who are not from Kabul or who do not have support from family members cannot support themselves, and many of those people are living on the streets.⁸³ The extended family and tribal support play an important role, and returnees lacking such support will not be able to find jobs or even rent accommodation.⁸⁴

⁷⁵ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

⁷⁶ IOM 8.4.2019.

⁷⁷ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

⁷⁸ IOM 8.4.2019.

⁷⁹ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

⁸⁰ IOM 8.4.2019.

⁸¹ AMASO 9.4.2019.

⁸² IOM 8.4.2019.

⁸³ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

⁸⁴ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

2.3. Access to housing

Access to land and its ownership are big issues in Afghanistan, which has an effect on how possible it is for returnees to establish themselves.⁸⁵

The majority of Afghans, at least 75 per cent of the population and even 80 per cent of Kabul residents, are living in informal housing arrangements.⁸⁶ There are two types of informal settlements in Kabul: informal settlements that can be described within the wider concept of an informal settlement and then “Kabul informal settlements” (KIS) which are basically camps for internally displaced people (IDPs).⁸⁷ Most returnees end up in peri-urban areas in the outskirts, but basically one can end up anywhere where one can find a place to build a shelter.⁸⁸

Land grabbing by warlords, who are either themselves government officials or have affiliation with high-level officials, is a phenomenon which impacts the implementation of the master plan and the creation of informal settlements.⁸⁹

2.3.1. Formal housing

Only a minority of people in Kabul live in formal houses. This is partly because there is a shortage of housing, which makes the situation difficult for new people moving in. Formal housing is also expensive. In most cases people move in with their relatives. Afghanistan is a very communal society and people tend to have someone. Because of the overcrowding, people are sharing accommodation, which exposes them to protection concerns.⁹⁰

There is a major divide between formal and informal housing in Kabul. After the collapse of the Taliban rule construction sector boomed in the city and many new housing projects called *shahraks* were built. These newly built residential areas are inhabited by the new Afghan elite. Rural newcomers have ended up in the unplanned parts of the city in the outskirts.⁹¹

There are hardly any places available to rent for people living on their own. To rent a place in Afghanistan, people need family and other connections that the landlords will trust. Landlords are not eager to rent places to people they do not know because there have been, for example, cases where the Taliban has been firing rockets from rented places in Kabul. People need friends and a network to find some place to go to. Afghanistan is all about many kinds of networks, mostly based on relatives and extended family ties.⁹²

2.3.2. Informal settlements

The majority of areas called ‘informal settlements’ in Kabul are any areas of land which are inhabited informally and are located within the planned area, after the city plan was adopted, or violate the city plan in some way. Informal settlements are larger and more dispersed than the KIS camps and accommodate a mixture of host community and IDPs. They are generally

⁸⁵ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

⁸⁶ Al-Jazeera/Latifi 11.7.2019; The Guardian/Glinski 13.5.2019.

⁸⁷ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

⁸⁸ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

⁸⁹ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

⁹⁰ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

⁹¹ Foschini 03/2019, p. 2–3.

⁹² AMASO 9.4.2019.

located in the outskirts of Kabul City, and they are older than the settlements hosting displaced families within the city.⁹³ Informal settlements have been formed when many new residents built their houses wherever they could find empty land. This also means that there is not enough infrastructure or services available.⁹⁴ An article by the Guardian estimates the rent for a house in this kind of a settlement to cost around 600 Afghanis (about 10 euros) a month.⁹⁵

The problem with informal settlements is that no one has properly assessed them⁹⁶, and that is why there is no information available on informal settlements in Kabul City⁹⁷.

The settlements are growing so rapidly that an assessment done two years ago would be dramatically different now. For example, in PD 6 where 85-90 per cent of the households have electricity, the situation can change rapidly in the next couple of years as more people settle there and the government is unable to keep up with the population growth.⁹⁸

According to an expert on Afghanistan, the Afghan land authority *Arazi*, which recently merged within the Ministry of Urban development, in cooperation with the UN Habitat, has started a registration project of the informal settlements in Kabul City, but there is currently no information available on the registration. However, there is a plan to register everyone in Kabul City and collect data.⁹⁹

According to The Guardian May 2019 article, 80 % of the residents of Kabul are living in informal, unplanned settlements and there are more than one million properties that are not officially registered. Some residents have obtained a legal right to their property, but often their rights are not recognized by authorities or powerful warlords, which have led to evictions of people.¹⁰⁰

2.3.3. Kabul Informal Settlements

A 2019 Norwegian Refugee Council research paper called "Stuck in the Mud" by Mohammad Abdoh and Anna Hirsch-Holland, found that there were at least 55 KIS informal settlements in Kabul. They varied in size from dozens to hundreds of dwellings. They accommodated internally displaced people and refugee returnees in mainly tents or mud brick and tarpaulin shelters.¹⁰¹

It is not a very big population that lives in the Kabul informal settlements¹⁰²; one estimate is about 55 000 residents¹⁰³. The residents include both recently displaced and those in protracted displacement. The settlements offer a shelter and basic services for their residents. Mainly IDPs and returnees from

⁹³ Abdoh & Hirsch-Holland 2019, p. 4

⁹⁴ The Guardian/Glinski 13.5.2019.

⁹⁵ The Guardian/Glinski 13.5.2019.

⁹⁶ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

⁹⁷ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

⁹⁸ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

⁹⁹ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

¹⁰⁰ The Guardian/Glinski 13.5.2019.

¹⁰¹ Abdoh & Hirsch-Holland 2019, p. 4

¹⁰² NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹⁰³ Abdoh & Hirsch-Holland 2019, p. 4

Pakistan and Iran have settled in the informal settlements. Less than two percent have come from Europe.¹⁰⁴

Those people who are in the lowest rank of the society end up in these informal settlements. They are the people who are not able to pay for accommodation, and instead are using tents and plastic to build temporary shelters.¹⁰⁵ Returnees from Europe are unlikely to end up in this situation. It is usually a better-off family that sends their member to Europe. They may have debts but they are still unlikely to end up in the informal settlements.¹⁰⁶

According to the Abdoh and Hirsch-Holland research paper, the most demanding challenges in these settlements are poor physical conditions of the shelters and infrastructure and the insecure tenure of the residents. As the settlements are seen as temporary, the landlord or the city has forbidden any improvements in most settlements. The residents do not have a formal rental agreement and many are receiving eviction threats. However, despite the poor infrastructure and tenure insecurity, most people are not planning to find another place, as they might not afford it or would not have access to livelihoods there.¹⁰⁷

NRC works in the settlements. NRC is targeting people recently displaced regarding land issues and security of tenure. NRC provides legal assistance on how to settle and buy land, and how they can document the process so they do not get evicted.¹⁰⁸

There are many internally displaced people in Afghanistan nowadays. They are in very bad shape in the camps, and they cannot find very basic means to survive. IPSO provides community based psychosocial care with awareness programs, support groups, life skill groups and individual counseling for those people. They teach them to work and to use their own capacities.¹⁰⁹

2.4. Access to livelihoods

The current employment situation in Afghanistan is difficult. UNHCR and the World Bank Group have found in their 2019 report that the security transition from the international community to the Afghan security forces in 2014 caused a clear deterioration in the employment situation and also in the living conditions.¹¹⁰

The job market is exhausted. The economy is not growing as fast as the population is growing. The population growth in Afghanistan is so huge that the job market cannot keep up. During the president Karzai's administration (2001–2014) more formal jobs were created, but now you mostly see people selling on the street corners. A huge economic package is needed, but at the moment the economic conditions do not look good.¹¹¹ There have been so many young Afghan men returning that their chances of accessing

¹⁰⁴ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹⁰⁵ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹⁰⁶ International organisation B, 11.4.2019.

¹⁰⁷ Abdoh & Hirsch-Holland 2019, p. 4, 11–12.

¹⁰⁸ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹⁰⁹ IPSO 11.4.2019.

¹¹⁰ UNHCR & WBG 06/2019, p. 24–25.

¹¹¹ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

employment opportunities are getting more and more reduced.¹¹² The main problems for people in Kabul are insecurity and joblessness.¹¹³

UNHCR and the World Bank Group (WBG) found in their 2019 report that there is a difference in the job situation between the pre- and post-2013 refugee returnees. Those who have returned to Afghanistan after 2013 are mainly day labourers who suffer from high job insecurity and gain low earnings. However, although the employment and the salaries of returnees have decreased after 2013, the school attendance of returnees has improved.¹¹⁴ Some Kabul residents who were interviewed during the mission estimated that a day labourer makes an average of 500 Afghanis a day which equals to approximately 5.5 euros. An average government job salary is 6000 Afghanis (70 euros), and teachers earn 9000-12 000 Afghanis (100-140 euros) per month.¹¹⁵

The most common job in Kabul is casual or day labour, without a permanent contract, doing whatever job is available to support the families.¹¹⁶ One estimate assesses that around 50-60 % of employed people are daily labourers.¹¹⁷ People are waiting to dig trenches. For people in the informal settlements, this is what they will be doing.¹¹⁸ Day labourers and self-employed people suffer from high job insecurity in Afghanistan and this applies also to returnees.¹¹⁹ In Kabul the biggest formal employer is the government.¹²⁰

Finding meaningful work is very difficult for everyone in Afghanistan.¹²¹ But especially if the returnees are not from Kabul or they do not have support from their family members in Kabul, people cannot support themselves.¹²² While returnees face particular problems, it is important to note that the limited job market affects all Afghans, including recent university graduates.¹²³

According to the UNHCR & WBG report, the majority of the refugee returnees have found jobs through their network (friends, family, neighbours) or on their own. Only 2 per cent have used formal channels, such as agencies or job advertisements, to find a job. It can also take a long time to find a job after return. Of these returnees, 44 per cent have been unemployed for more than six months, 44 per cent found a job within three months, and only 12 per cent within one month after return.¹²⁴

Those who came back from other countries with skills might have better chances to support themselves.¹²⁵ According to an international organisation, some returnees from Europe learned English and could do technical work.¹²⁶

¹¹² IOM 8.4.2019.

¹¹³ IPSO 11.4.2019.

¹¹⁴ UNHCR & WBG 06/2019, p. 24–25.

¹¹⁵ Kabul residents A, B & C 11.4.2019.

¹¹⁶ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019; UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹¹⁷ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹¹⁸ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹¹⁹ UNHCR & WBG 06/2019, p. 20.

¹²⁰ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹²¹ IPSO 11.4.2019; UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹²² UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹²³ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

¹²⁴ UNHCR & WBG 06/2019, p. 21.

¹²⁵ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹²⁶ International organisation B 11.4.2019.

Another source says that skills acquired in Europe, for example in restaurants or car wash services and such, are not useful in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan everything is about referrals, and this applies even for the educated people.¹²⁷ Also some Kabul residents interviewed during the mission noted that nobody looks at your degree and everyone needs connections to get hired.¹²⁸

Many international organisations facilitate reintegration possibilities by capacity building, offering training, supporting livelihoods and developing infrastructure. There are a lot of projects going on, but "it is just a drop in a pocket in terms of needs, and a lot of work just scratches the surface in terms of what the needs are."¹²⁹

2.5. Access to health care

2.5.1. Health services

For health care, people would be accessing their local clinic which is not always near. They have to pay a nominal fee, according to the government's Basic Package of Health Care. But if a person has a major health issue, they have to go to a private hospital.¹³⁰ Afghans normally go to public provincial hospitals, which are free of charge, some to private hospitals and some go to Pakistan or India. Quality of health care is a major issue in Afghanistan.¹³¹

The large numbers of people coming to Kabul from across the country have caused mass urbanisation which has restricted access to basic services, especially for those who cannot afford to go to a private hospital.¹³² People are not excluded from accessing services because of their background. An internally displaced person from Helmand is able to go to a clinic, as long as they have some form of identification.¹³³

The health care facilities are available in Afghanistan, but they are not good as the hospitals and clinics are severely understaffed and underfunded. Most of the facilities do not have proper diagnostic equipment and getting medication is often a challenge. Also, healthcare institutions and healthcare workers are often targeted by AGEs. Anyone who can afford it goes to another country for treatment.¹³⁴

Medicine quality is nowadays a big challenge in Afghanistan. There are both good and bad qualities of medicine in the country. Low quality medicine is provided for people who cannot afford better, but for those who are able to pay more, good quality medicine is available. Still it cannot be guaranteed that a person can always access good quality medicine. For big operations people go to Pakistan, India or Iran. Distant clinics in Afghanistan do not have much equipment or qualified staff.¹³⁵

¹²⁷ AMASO 9.4.2019.

¹²⁸ Kabul residents A, B & C 11.4.2019.

¹²⁹ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹³⁰ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹³¹ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

¹³² UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹³³ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹³⁴ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹³⁵ IPSO 11.4.2019.

2.5.2. Mental health

According to a Human Rights Watch report on the situation of mental health care in Afghanistan, there is a need to expand mental health services and outreach campaigns in the country. Based on the report, more than half of the Afghan population suffer from depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress, but less than 10 per cent receive adequate psychosocial support from the state.¹³⁶

Mental health has a stigma all over the world, and also in Afghanistan. People do not have much information about psychosocial issues. The facilities in Afghanistan are not so good. There is only one mental health institution in Kabul, which is governmental. In the other places people have to pay for mental health care. Mental health is, however, included in the governmental Basic Package of Health Services and is available at clinics and health posts. Revised mental health policy from 2010 insisted that all clinic staff should also be trained about mental health problems. The governmental Essential Package of Health Services is currently under revision and psychosocial services should be included there.¹³⁷ According to another source, mental health care is pretty much non-existent. People with mental health problems can be added to groups that are being discriminated within the community and by non-state actors.¹³⁸ While such individuals are often discriminated within communities, there is no evidence of them being specifically targeted by non-state actors.¹³⁹

The International Psychosocial Organization IPSO has a psychosocial and mental health centre in Kabul which provides services for all Afghans including returnees. The centre provides psychosocial and mental health support for around 500 people per week. IPSO also provides online psychosocial counselling¹⁴⁰ in 10 provinces through easily accessible Internet points, but people all over the country can reach IPSO counsellors via the website.¹⁴¹

The problem with the return of persons with health, mental health, and psychosocial issues is that they need a guardian. Everyone who has been admitted to a hospital or facility needs a guardian and a family member is needed to meet the person upon return.¹⁴²

2.6. Support for women and children

According to Dr Samar, the conflict causes around 45 000 military casualties and 2000 civilian casualties every year. Many people enlisted in the military forces are killed, and every casualty leaves 6-7 family members without support. The conflict causes a lot of widows and orphans, and there is no mechanism for the protection of widows.¹⁴³

According to UNHCR, there are some governmental services but they are very limited, as the government relies on the international community with these

¹³⁶ HRW 7.10.2019.

¹³⁷ IPSO 11.4.2019.

¹³⁸ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹³⁹ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

¹⁴⁰ www.ipso-ecare.com (accessed 4.10.2019).

¹⁴¹ IPSO 11.4.2019.

¹⁴² IOM 8.4.2019.

¹⁴³ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019.

cases.¹⁴⁴ There are some governmental orphanages in Afghanistan, but they are very low quality. There is corruption and abuse of children in some orphanages.¹⁴⁵ UNHCR further added that the children in the orphanages are barely being fed and they cannot access health care or education. The orphanages may even make children more vulnerable than they were in the first place.¹⁴⁶

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) coordinates support for women who have escaped their families because of fear of honour-related violence. AIHRC does not support any of the women's shelters financially. The shelters are run by NGOs.¹⁴⁷ IPSO is active in 45 women's protection centres.¹⁴⁸ Dr. Samar is also calling for better social system for the rehabilitation of the victims of honour-related violence.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁴⁵ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019.

¹⁴⁶ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁴⁷ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019.

¹⁴⁸ IPSO, 11.4.2019.

¹⁴⁹ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019.

3. Societal treatment of returnees

3.1. General attitude of the society on returns

The concept of returning is a part of life in Afghanistan, as approximately 40 per cent of Afghans have been forced to leave their country at some point in their lives.¹⁵⁰ There have been no reports of community tensions related to returns rising in Kabul or other parts of the country, in general.¹⁵¹ The number of returnees in Kabul is much lower than in border provinces, like Herat, Kandahar and Nangarhar, where thousands of people are coming back a day, whereas in Kabul it can be only what the airport can accommodate, which is some hundreds, and many people are going onwards to the provinces. With the cross-border returns from Iran, when the drought came along in Herat in 2018, the government was very hesitant to establish any formal camps or sites because they did not want the camps to become a pull factor for people to stay in Herat.¹⁵²

According to an IOM representative, Afghans might start to protest against government institutions because of the returns, and it is surprising that this has not really happened yet in Kabul, as the conditions around the returns are quite bad.¹⁵³

UNHCR noted that many people who have returned from Europe have faced discrimination because they are accused of doing things that are seen immoral in Afghanistan and because they were in a non-Muslim country.¹⁵⁴ These can be simple things, such as a different haircut or the way they dress. This makes them easy to be recognized.¹⁵⁵

Another issue with returns from Europe is that the returnees are perceived as wealthy and people think that they are just trying to take advantage of the support provided by the international community. Those coming back from Iran and Pakistan, who form the majority of returnees, do not have to deal with similar accusations.¹⁵⁶

Generally returning from Europe is seen more as a failure than return from Iran or Pakistan. Most of the returnees have problems with their family because the family has sold all their resources to send their family member all the way to Europe¹⁵⁷. If this fails, the family cannot pay their debts.¹⁵⁸ Returnees may feel humiliated because they could not secure a permit in Europe and the family has lost their assets. That is why the returnees are not fully accepted and welcomed by their families.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁰ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁵¹ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

¹⁵² IOM 8.4.2019.

¹⁵³ IOM 8.4.2019.

¹⁵⁴ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁵⁵ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019.

¹⁵⁶ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁵⁷ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019; NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹⁵⁸ NRC, Country Director, Afghanistan 11.4.2019.

¹⁵⁹ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019.

People may also be suspected of committing a crime while they were abroad because they were deported.¹⁶⁰ Return may be perceived as a kind of a shame both for the person and the family.¹⁶¹

Return is a lengthy process that varies for different groups. It is easier for those who were in Afghanistan before and who are used to the conditions. It is more difficult for newcomers, families, women heads of household, and also for those returnees who left from the provinces but who return to Kabul.¹⁶²

Many people who return seem to face problems if they have not been in the country for many years. These people may not have a community in Afghanistan. For them Afghanistan is an alien environment, as it would be for anyone else who is not from Afghanistan.¹⁶³ Reestablishing themselves is more problematic for somebody born in Iran or in Pakistan. They have been already subject to continued harassment during their stay abroad, and after return they are in a very vulnerable position.¹⁶⁴ It would also be more difficult for those returning from European countries after long periods, and for those who are not originally from the province of return, but returnees can often get some sort of support from the community if they return to their areas of origin.¹⁶⁵

3.2. Targeting of returnees by anti-government elements

When someone returns or relocates to Kabul, the person must tell the whole story of their life to the community. People are going to be questioned and interrogated about who they are and what they or their relatives have been doing before moving to Kabul.¹⁶⁶

Newcomers are welcomed by the community to a certain extent and many share houses with each other. As a result, it is difficult to hide in Kabul because newcomers will be recognized by the existing community.¹⁶⁷

It is possible that someone who has lived in some other part of the country could integrate in Kabul without telling their whole story. However, according to UNHCR, there have been a lot of cases where people have been targeted because the community found out who they were before they left.¹⁶⁸

It is hard to distinguish how much of the targeting faced by individuals is politically or criminally motivated or has a local dispute at the background. Middle class Afghans are targeted because they might have money. Middle class, moderately affluent Kabulis of all ethnic groups risk being targeted by criminal gangs. Politically motivated targeting can be related to the person's former job for teachers, interpreters, international community employees and governmental workers. The information networks of the Taliban are strong

¹⁶⁰ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019; AMASO 9.4.2019.

¹⁶¹ Dr. Samar, AIHRC 9.4.2019.

¹⁶² AMASO 9.4.2019.

¹⁶³ An Expert on Afghanistan 9.4.2019.

¹⁶⁴ International organisation B 11.4.2019.

¹⁶⁵ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

¹⁶⁶ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁶⁷ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁶⁸ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

even in Kabul.¹⁶⁹ The targeted groups also include UN employees, human rights activists, women right's activists, and other such groups of individuals.¹⁷⁰

In a 2019 study a number of deported Afghans from Germany reported having experienced violent incidents after their return. These incidents consisted of conflict-related violence, criminality, and threats from the Taliban and the community because the returnees were considered as Westernized.¹⁷¹

3.3. Targeting of returnees by family members or other individuals

Women and couples escaping from their families are more likely to be hunted down because they are targeted by their family, not by the Taliban or other AGEs. There are often cases where people contact the UNHCR and ask for resettlement because of being targeted by their family as a result of an unacceptable relationship. The potential for honour killings is very high, especially in a situation where couples have married without the agreement of the families. A lot of Afghans have family networks across the country that can give information about these people's whereabouts. Hiding from the family is often challenging.¹⁷² This applies to communities as well. There have been cases where women have been stoned as a result of establishing an acceptable relationship.¹⁷³

Young couples that have married against the will of their families try to escape to Kabul or other big cities, or usually to Pakistan or Iran. They are not hard to find even in Pakistan and Iran because there are a lot of Afghan refugees. When someone leaves the country, they usually first go to the refugee settlements where they are easy to find. Communication networks make it really easy nowadays.¹⁷⁴

The Afghan police are not able to deal with these cases because the police are busy tackling the Taliban and ISIS terrorism. The police are not able and not interested in dealing with personal cases.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁷⁰ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

¹⁷¹ Stahlmann 2019.

¹⁷² UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁷³ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

¹⁷⁴ Dr. Samar, AIHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁷⁵ AMASO 9.4.2019.

4. Hazaras in Kabul

4.1. Background

Afghanistan is a very divided society. According to some, Hazaras tend to have more problems than others. There are the historical injustices, and recently most attacks that happened targeted them.¹⁷⁶ The Hazaras are generally more at risk from ISIS and the Taliban than other groups, because of both their ethnicity and religion (Shia Islam). There are reports that ISIS has attacked Shia mosques and gatherings among other places.¹⁷⁷

The Hazaras are described as a particular group of Afghans that are being persecuted across the country. The level of persecution for Hazaras is much more obvious than for other groups. They are predominantly Shia Muslims, so they are a religious minority in addition to being an ethnic one. Religion and ethnicity are very big issues in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁸ A part of the Hazara community in Kabul has been originally formed as a result of this persecution. Followed by the Hazara wars in 1891–1893 thousands of Hazaras from the *Hazarajat*¹⁷⁹ region were taken or sold to Kabul into slavery, and some of the current Hazara residents are their descendants.¹⁸⁰

Most of the Hazaras in Kabul live in the southwest of the city in Police Districts 6 and 13¹⁸¹, and also PD 5, and the majority live in the Dashti Barchi neighbourhood¹⁸², which belongs to PD 13¹⁸³. According to Foschini, there is Hazara population also in PD 1, PD 3, PD 5, PD 7, PD 14, PD 16, and PD 18.¹⁸⁴

Hazaras are estimated to comprise at least 25 % of the population in Kabul, which equals to 1.5 million people. The population of PD 13 is approaching one million residents and the population of PD 6 is about 400 000. However, exact population figures are not available. Estimates are problematic given the rapidly expanding population, informal settlements, and lack of census data.¹⁸⁵

According to AMASO, West Kabul, inhabited by Hazaras, used to be the safest area in Kabul, but after ISIS gained ground in 2016–18 the most dangerous attacks have occurred in the west targeting Shias and Hazaras.¹⁸⁶ The reason why the Hazara-majority areas are located in the southwest is because it is roughly the direction where people arrive first when they have fled their home provinces, when coming to Kabul from the Hazara-inhabited Central Region of Afghanistan. If something happens in Kabul, they are able to go back to their home area.¹⁸⁷

¹⁷⁶ International organisation B 11.4.2019.

¹⁷⁷ UNHCR 30.9.2019. UNHCR added this comment during the review of the report.

¹⁷⁸ UNHCR 9.4.2019.

¹⁷⁹ Hazarajat is the name of an area in Central Afghanistan traditionally inhabited by the Hazaras. For history of Hazaras, consult e.g. Ibrahimi 2017.

¹⁸⁰ Ibrahimi 2017, s. 82.

¹⁸¹ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁸² Hazara residents of Kabul A, B & C 11.4.2019.

¹⁸³ Foschini 03/2019, p. 18.

¹⁸⁴ Foschini 03/2019, p. 5, 7, 9, 11, 19, 21, 23.

¹⁸⁵ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁸⁶ AMASO 9.4.2019.

¹⁸⁷ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

4.2. Targeting of the Hazaras

Sectarian attacks against the Shias and the Hazara communities in Kabul have increased over the last three years. Most of these attacks have been claimed by Daesh (ISIS).¹⁸⁸ According to Tolo News, there have been at least 10 large-scale attacks against Shias in Kabul in the past three years.¹⁸⁹ Hazaras are targeted for a religious and ethnic reason. They also have been marginalized for the same reasons and have responded by becoming a cohesive community.¹⁹⁰

ISIS has claimed attacks on for example Shia mosques, schools and recreation centers. The risk of having this kind of attack against the Hazaras in the future is high, but the security situation is constantly developing.¹⁹¹ The latest attack claimed by ISIS took place in PD 6 in August 2019, killing at least 63 and wounding 180 others.¹⁹² An NGO representative noted that in Dashti Barchi, people have started to be afraid of new attacks against schools, hospitals, mosques and gatherings.¹⁹³

Some Hazara residents of Kabul mentioned that the security in Dashti Barchi used to be good during 2001-2014, but this has changed completely. There have been many tragedies and nobody knows what happens next to the Hazara people. Hazaras are scared of the peace talks because they might lose rights that have been achieved.¹⁹⁴

The attacks have had a long-lasting psychological impact on the community. This has affected children in particular. The trauma and fear has dropped the school attendance. There has been a significant reduction of 50 per cent in attendance to some schools as people do not want to send their children to the schools out of fear of attacks. The availability of psychosocial services is scarce in this community. In general, the Hazara community has a feeling that they are not protected against threats and targeting as well as the other communities, which they interpret as discrimination.¹⁹⁵

There has been dissatisfaction within the Hazara community towards the security authorities because of these attacks. There has been a meeting with the Hazara community and security agencies to improve the security situation. As a result, there are now 500 informal Hazara security personnel to protect around 100 mosques in Kabul. In total there are 500 Shia mosques in Kabul. It cannot be said how effective this protection is against a suicide attack. They cannot prevent attacks happening, but they can prevent attackers from getting inside a mosque. Nevertheless, the attacker can still detonate the bomb outside a mosque and cause a lot of damage.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁸ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁸⁹ Tolo News/Hamid 18.8.2019.

¹⁹⁰ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁹¹ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁹² Tolo News 18.8.2019.

¹⁹³ AMASO 9.4.2019.

¹⁹⁴ Hazara residents of Kabul A, B & C 11.4.2019.

¹⁹⁵ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁹⁶ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

4.3. Living conditions and livelihoods of the Hazaras

The Hazara areas can be described as informal settlements, but Hazaras are never found in the Kabul informal settlement (KIS) IDP Camps. The primary reason that the Hazaras are not found in the KIS settlements is that the Hazara community is cohesive and they tend to look after new arrivals through a range of social networks. There is a convincing argument to be made that this high level of cohesion is significantly due to the collective experience of discrimination and sectarian violence.¹⁹⁷

Most Hazara returnees coming to Kabul end up living in PD 13. The returnees usually seem to know where they are going to and are absorbed into the community. The networks can be characterized as rather sophisticated. Some end up living in other people's houses when coming to Kabul from abroad or the Hazara-inhabited Central Highlands of Afghanistan.¹⁹⁸ Many Hazara newcomers to Kabul are originally from the nearby Wardak and Ghazni Provinces.¹⁹⁹ In general, it is hard to assess how well returnees can integrate to the Hazara communities.²⁰⁰ Housing should be relatively easy to find in the Hazara neighbourhoods, where it should be relatively easy for someone to get a house.²⁰¹

The Hazara settlements in PD 6 and PD 13 are characterized as mostly informal with limited public infrastructure.²⁰² There has been increased concern that the current absorption capacity of PD 6 and PD 13 is reaching a breaking point, although these areas are well-organized. These areas have been struggling with environmental management issues, especially PD 13. There is for example no waste disposal and there are a lot of public health concerns. There are no public services in those districts.²⁰³

Hazaras tend to face more difficulties than others. A lot of this is not looked at systematically because it is difficult to deal with these issues in Afghanistan. When the head of a department is Tajik, the whole team tends to be Tajiks. There have been difficulties for the Hazara minority in general to be employed. Government jobs are not very accessible to Hazaras. If the minister is not a Hazara, it is going to be difficult for Hazaras to be employed under that ministry.²⁰⁴

However, the Hazara community itself is more organized and cohesive than any other settlement and can provide some services. The Hazaras are not relying that much on services provided by the government or international community but instead they look after themselves. For example, there are 500 privately funded Hazara community-run education centers in Kabul.²⁰⁵ Some Hazara residents of Kabul mentioned that many Hazaras are well educated and they send their children to school even though they have low income. There are plenty of educational institutes and English courses available, but

¹⁹⁷ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁹⁸ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

¹⁹⁹ Foschini 03/2019, p. 18.

²⁰⁰ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

²⁰¹ International organisation B 11.4.2019.

²⁰² Foschini 03/2019, p. 6. 18.

²⁰³ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

²⁰⁴ International organisation B 11.4.2019.

²⁰⁵ International organisation A 8.4.2019.

these schools are mostly non-governmental and private. The private schools are run by local people.²⁰⁶

NGOs are able to move around in the Hazara neighbourhoods. The Pashtun areas are more difficult to go to. If you send women there, they have to bring a man with them. The Pashtun neighbourhoods are more restrictive compared to the Shia areas.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Hazara residents of Kabul A, B & C 11.4.2019.

²⁰⁷ International organisation B 11.4.2019.

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Cover picture: Country Information Service.

Annex. Terms of Reference

1. Living conditions in the informal settlements of Kabul, focus on Hazara-dominated neighbourhoods

- Have the living conditions in Kabul's informal settlements deteriorated during the recent years?
- Are there differences in living conditions between the neighbourhoods?
- In which areas of Kabul do returnees from Europe usually end up?
- How are basic services (housing, sanitation, schools, health care, job market) arranged in those neighbourhoods?
- Are there NGOs or government institutions that offer assistance in those areas?
- How is the security situation in Dashti Barchi and other Hazara-majority neighbourhoods?
- Prices of housing, education, medication, and average salaries/income of local residents
- Conditions for vulnerable groups (women, children, mentally or physically ill, newcomers without a social network)
- The functioning of police and courts in those neighbourhoods

2. Documentation (will be covered in a separate report)

- Update on tazkira issuance: situation of e-tazkira and digitalization process
- Citizenship law