

Forced to Flee, Forced to Return:

*Migration, Return and Post-Return Experiences
Among Hazaras Returned or Deported from Iran to
Afghanistan prior to and after August 2021*

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**EDUCATION AND
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Introduction

Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the dynamics of Afghan migration have changed significantly. More than 122,000 Afghans were evacuated prior to 31 August 2021¹ while much higher numbers fled to neighboring countries and further afield via irregular journeys. For example, in Iran alone, over one million new Afghan arrivals were recorded by officials from August 2021 to end of September 2022.² In Europe, the number of Afghan asylum applicants in 2022 rose by 29% from 2021 to about 129,000.³ Additionally, after August 2021, the number of certain groups at risk seeking to leave the country has significantly increased such as women and ethnic and religious minorities.⁴ The interruption of regular pathways of movement has forced many to resort to more dangerous and irregular routes, exposing them to further risks and abuses.⁵ The use of smuggling services and costs of irregular journeys also has increased significantly in the country.⁶ In terms of returns to the country, deportations from Iran and Turkey continue in high numbers; around 400,000 Afghans were deported from Iran⁷ and 66,534 Afghans were sent back from Turkey⁸ to Afghanistan in 2022.

Hazaras, a predominantly Shia ethnic group in Afghanistan, are one of the highly at-risk groups in Afghanistan whose situation in the country has become even more precarious since the Taliban takeover, becoming even more vulnerable to marginalization and discrimination practices by Taliban as well as other armed groups in the country such as ISIS-Khorasan. There are already reports of increased attacks, targeted killings, kidnappings, forced displacements, and rights restrictions against them throughout the country.⁹ Given this ongoing discrimination and human rights violations against them, many Hazaras have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in neighboring countries, mainly to Iran (and Pakistan). However, in the context of increased pushbacks at the borders and deportations from Iran, many of the journeys are failed and they are forced to return to a situation where their lives continue to deteriorate.

This report, drawing from both quantitative and qualitative data collected in Afghanistan, primarily aims to understand migration, return and post-return experiences among Hazaras who returned from Iran to Afghanistan prior to and after August 2021 as well as to document human rights violations they are experiencing on migration and return journeys and upon arrival in Afghanistan. It also aims to provide relevant recommendations to the various stakeholders working to increase access to protection and services for Afghans on mixed movements in general and Hazaras in particular.

¹ Afghanistan Evacuation & Resettlement Efforts | U.S. Representative Chellie Pingree (house.gov)

² EUAA reports on the situation of Afghan refugees in Iran | European Union Agency for Asylum (europa.eu)

³ Latest Asylum Trends - Annual Overview 2022 | European Union Agency for Asylum

⁴ The Changing Dynamics of Afghan Migration after August 2021 | Mixed Migration Centre (MMC)

⁵ The impact of the Afghanistan crisis on migration: Increasingly securitized borders will only make migration riskier and more dangerous | Mixed Migration Centre

⁶ Afghan smugglers hike prices grow networks after Taliban takeover | Context

⁷ Over 800,000 Afghans Returned From Iran Last Year: MoRR | ToloNews

⁸ Kılıçdaroğlu calls on military to prevent Afghans from illegally entering Turkey | Turkish Minute

⁹ For example, see: The situation of the Hazara in Afghanistan (2022) | The Hazara Inquiry

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methodological approach. The findings presented in this report are based on 942 in-depth survey interviews and 12 semi-structured interviews conducted among Hazara returnees from Iran to Afghanistan, to gather information on the profile of Hazaras en route to Iran, and their forced migration, return, and post-return experiences, as well as protection risks they faced. The survey interviews were conducted in four provinces of Afghanistan – in Herat, Kabul, Balkh, and Nimruz, in the time period between April 2021 to March 2023.

Conducting research and collection data from a vulnerable and marginalized group such as Hazaras in post-August 2021 context posed several challenges to the researchers, such as access to specific vulnerable profiles, negotiating with community leaders or other gatekeepers, security concerns, and gaining trust, among others. All respondents and interviewees were asked for their informed consent.

The interviews were conducted in two phases: before the Taliban takeover from 5 April 2021 to 14 August 2021 (560 surveys); and after the Taliban takeover from 22 February 2023 to 31 March 2023 (382 surveys). The surveys were collected by a network of 20 field enumerators (12 men, 8 women). The majority of respondents were young men between 18-35 years old (78%), both single (56%) and married (40%), mainly from urban areas (64%) within Afghanistan, having completed secondary or high school to the least prior to their departure.¹⁰

In addition, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Hazara returnees and deportees in Kabul, Herat, Balkh, and Zaranj.¹¹ The research team used networks within local communities (that is, returnees and potential migrants, community elders, and the existing network of field enumerators) to identify potential Hazara interviewees who returned or were deported to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. Five interviews were conducted by the lead researcher via WhatsApp calls and seven interviews were conducted in-person by two field enumerators. The interviewees were all Hazaras, 9 men and 3 women, between 18-35 years old, all returned or deported to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in August 2021.¹²

Research Ethics and Limitations

Principles of 'do no harm' were at the core of the methodological framework of this study. The enumerators and interviewers received training prior to conducting data collection activities in conceptual aspects of research ethics, as well as practical guidance on approaching respondents/interviewees, obtaining and recording consent, and posing questions on sensitive topics related to protection risks en route and upon return. The study adapted the following

¹⁰ For a detailed table of surveyed respondents' profile, see: Annex I.

¹¹ For the list of interview questions, see: Annex II.

¹² For a detailed table of interviewees' profile, see: Annex I.

principles around research ethics put together by the Mixed Migration Centre:

- Non-identification: all interviews were anonymised. Datasets do not include any identifying characteristics of participants;
- Respect for the autonomy, decision-making, and dignity of participants: Data collection proceeded only following the undertaking of informed consent. Participants had the right to withdraw from the research process and to refuse to answer questions. Consent was recorded in the oral format to guarantee anonymity;
- Minimising risks and maximising benefits to participants: Protection, safety and security were considered priority in making decisions about data collection;
- Justice: participants were selected from groups of people whom the research may benefit;
- Respect for communities: The study prioritised protecting and respecting the values and interests of the community as a whole.

The study has key limitations:

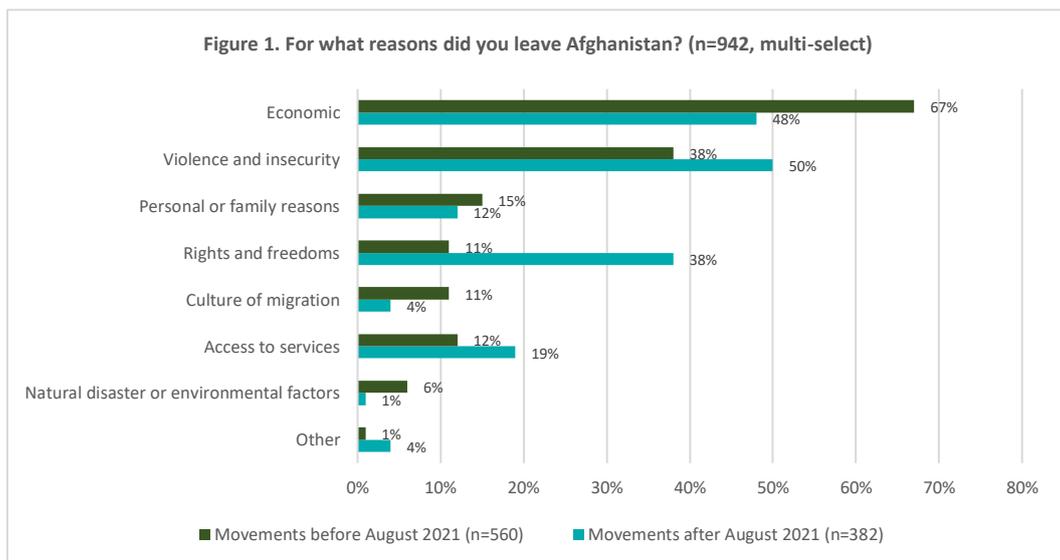
- As the sampling was not randomized, the survey responses do not represent the entire population of Hazara returnees and deportees in Afghanistan. However, despite this, important inferences can still be made. Additionally, the responses of survey participants in the survey cannot be independently verified, and response bias may be a factor.
- Qualitative interviews with Hazara returnees and deportees from Iran are also not representative of the population. Nonetheless, the findings provide important insights into post-return experiences among Hazara returnees and deportees.
- The limited timeframe for collecting qualitative data (5 weeks) also had an impact on the research, as the scope of data collection and analysis were adjusted to fit the research timelines.

Findings

1. Movements to Iran among Hazaras: Drivers, Influencers, Journeys, and Experienced Risks En Route

While economic factors have been important in Hazaras' decision to migrate pre- and post-August 2021, other notable trends can be observed. There is a considerable increase in the proportion of those who left Afghanistan after August 2021 mentioning 'rights and freedoms' and 'violence and insecurity' as the main drivers of migration compared to those who left and returned prior to August 2021. There have been reports on continued discrimination and intensification of suicide bombings and unlawful attacks against Hazaras after Taliban takeover – a development that has potentially pushed more Hazaras to flee Afghanistan now than before.¹³

The data also highlights some variations in movements in terms of age group and the level of education among respondents. A majority of young, single men reported violence and insecurity as the main driver among those who left after August 2021. Historically, the migration of Afghan men and young boys of all ethnicities to neighboring countries, mainly Iran and Pakistan, has been a common coping mechanism in times of crisis in Afghanistan¹⁴. However, post-August 2021, as the security situation became fragile and the economic infrastructure came close to a collapse, sending men away from imminent dangers to a safer place where they can work and remit money to the family back in the country has been a survival strategy for most households.



¹³ For example, see: The Hazara Inquiry (August 2022): The situation of the Hazara in Afghanistan.

¹⁴ IOM (2014): Transition, crisis and mobility in Afghanistan: Rhetoric and Reality; also: Monsutti, Alessandro (2008): Afghan Migratory Strategies and the Three Solutions to the Refugee Problem, in *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 58-73.

This was reflected in the collected surveys where 40% of respondents were between 18-25 years old and also in in-depth interviews with seven respondents who expressed that they were sent to Iran following consultations with family members, so that they could be safe.

The relatives gathered and they decided to send us to Iran to be safe... I was accompanied by 11 other young boys from my relatives and we went to Nimruz to meet our Qachaghbar [=smuggler].

Interviewee # 5, Male, Kabul

Everybody was afraid that the massacre of Mazar in 90s will repeat again. That time, when Taliban entered the city, they took all the men and killed them on sight... My father remembered those days and was afraid for our lives that the same thing will happen again.

Interviewee # 1, Male, Kabul

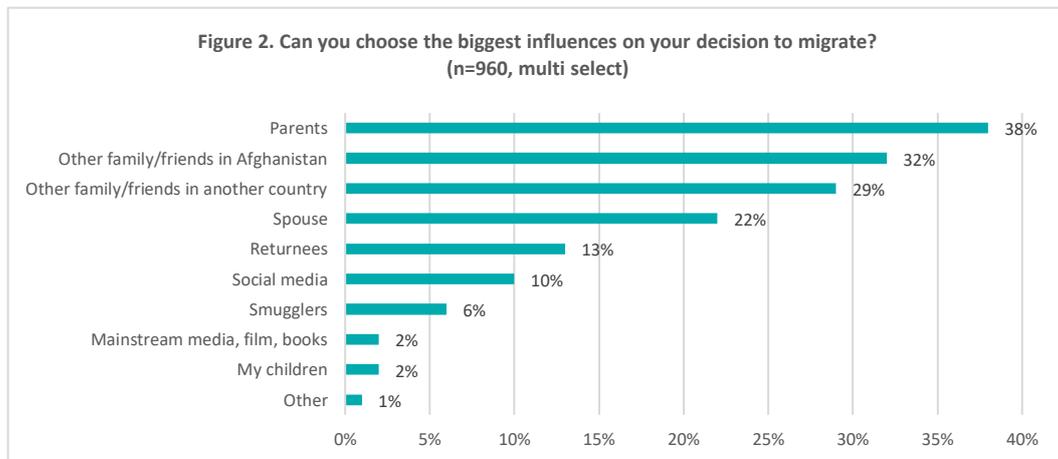
Among surveyed respondents who reported lack of rights and freedom as the main drivers, a significant share had finished higher levels of education prior to their departure such as those with university degrees. This can be partly explained by the longstanding and widespread discriminatory practices in pre- and after August 2021 to limit the access of ethnic and religious minorities to government and public service positions.¹⁵ In terms of gender, a higher share of female respondents (21%) reported lack of access to services compared to male respondents (11%) in post-August 2021 data. Since August 2021, Taliban officials have issued several decrees banning Afghan women from schools, universities, workplaces and public spaces like parks and gyms.¹⁶ This is likely to push an increasing number of Hazara women to consider fleeing from Afghanistan in the face of increasing lack of rights and freedoms in the country.

Afghanistan is the worst place for a woman, especially for a Hazara educated women like me, because I cannot work or get educated, not only that I am a woman but also because I am Hazara and a Shia.

Interviewee # 10, Female, Mazar e Sharif

When asked about the sources of influence on their decision to migrate, respondents reported close social connections including family and friends in Afghanistan or abroad as the main influencers. Most respondents cited parents (38%), spouse (22%), or other family and friends in Afghanistan (32%) or abroad (29%) as the main influencer on their decision to migrate while the share of other influencers like social media and smugglers were low (respectively, 10% and 6%).

A majority of respondents who left Afghanistan after August 2021 reported that they did not see other alternatives to migration. The overall majority of respondents (76%) who left the country after August 2021 reported that they opted to migrate after failing to have an alternative to their



¹⁵ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/afghanistan/>

¹⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/18/afghanistan-taliban-deprive-women-livelihoods-identity>

deteriorating situation in the wake of the Taliban takeover. In comparison, among respondents interviewed prior to August 2021, only 46% reported viewing migration as the only viable solution to their situation in Afghanistan.

There was no choice but to run, if they [Taliban] caught me I would be prisoned and tortured like my colleagues.
Interviewee # 4, Male, Zaranj

Limited access to regular migration pathways forced the majority of respondents (87%) to travel irregularly to reach Iran, mainly overland via Pakistan. Historically, those leaving Afghanistan have traveled by two main irregular routes: the 'Mashkil' or 'Raja' routes, both via Pakistan. However, Hazara respondents who travelled irregularly after August 2021 reported the development of new routes across Afghanistan-Iran border, mainly from Kang, Zabol, Makagi, and Pashmaki routes (see Map 1). Due to the fear of being targeted by militia and criminals in areas around the Afghanistan-Pakistan border on account of their ethnic and religious backgrounds, Hazaras fleeing Afghanistan are increasingly avoiding the Mushkil and Raja routes and opting for new routes post August 2021 on the advice of their smugglers.

Map 1. The most prevalent routes taken by Hazaras to Iran, before and after August 2021 (n=960)



The Qachaghbar [smuggler] said that it's better to take Zabol route across Iran border as it is safer for Hazaras. There was more risk of arrest by Iranian guards along the Zabol route, but there is no Afghan or Pakistani Taliban en route.

Interviewee # 2, Male, Kabul

I heard from many people that Jundullah is cutting the heads of Hazaras and Shias on Mushkil route. The name is on it, Mushkil [hard] route, and it is most Mushkil [hard] for us Hazaras.

Interviewee # 12, Male, Herat

In terms of protection risks en route, Afghans in general, and Hazaras particularly, have always been vulnerable and subject to abuse on irregular and unsafe journeys they take to Iran. The prevalence of which has increased significantly after the Taliban takeover. Among respondents, 75% reported that they had either directly experienced one or multiple abuses during their journey, including physical violence (36%), detention (29%), robbery (24%), bribery/extortion (24%)

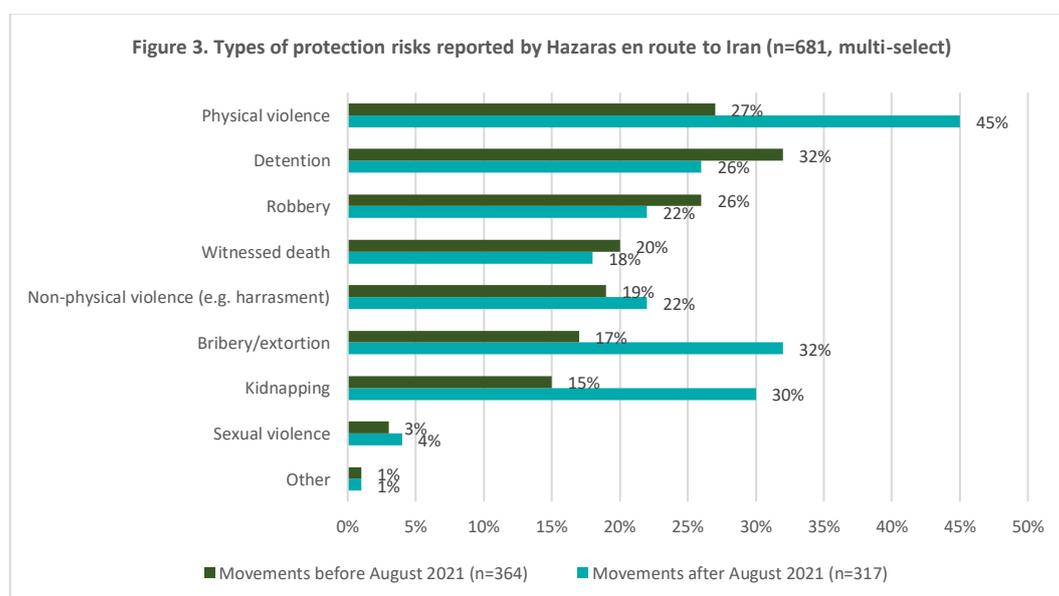
or witnessed death (19%), among others. Some respondents might have experienced the same abuse more than once during the entire length of their journey. When the data collected pre-August 2021 was compared with the data collected post-August 2021, it was observed that the overall exposure to Hazaras face en route increased significantly from 65% (in movements before August 2021) to 83% (in movements after August 2021).

There has also been a shift in the types of abuses Hazaras en route to Iran are exposed to after August 2021. As shown in Figure 3, the main increases are seen in physical violence (from 27% in movements before August 2021 to 45% in movements after August 2021), bribery/extortion (from 17% to 32%) and kidnapping (from 15% to 30%).

At the checkpoint Qumandan [=commander] took two younger Hazara boys in our group and let the rest of us go. I never saw or heard about those two boys. The smuggler said that the Qumandan was very famous in Bachabazi¹⁷.

Interviewee # 8, Male, Zaranj

While physical violence against Hazaras were mostly committed by smugglers (42%) and government officials (police, border guards or military) (38%), bribery/extortion and kidnapping were mostly committed by armed groups/militias (37%) and criminal gangs (35%). The extortion and kidnapping of Hazara migrants en route to Iran have been highlighted in the past,¹⁸ yet the scale and scope of the violations remain unknown. Several of the interviewees referred to 'local militia' related to Taliban forces and local commanders around Chahar-borjak as well as 'Jundullah' in Pakistan as perpetrators, emphasizing again, that Hazaras are particularly vulnerable to abuses en route due to their ethnic and religious backgrounds. As reported by respondents, it is common for Hazaras to be forced in manual labour by local Taliban militia or Iranian Police to, for example, "he [commandant] pointed to a half-finished wall and said: First finish this wall and then you can go." (Interviewee #6, Male, Herat) or to be 'kidnapped' and become 'hostage' for ransom in the hand of militia groups and criminal gangs along Mushkil and Raja routes in Pakistan as the perpetrators are aware their actions will not invite criticism from within the country.



¹⁷ Bacha bazi is a local term referred to a custom in Afghanistan involving child boys abuse by older men. The child boys abused in this practice are called 'dancing boys'.

¹⁸ For example, see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/opinion/refugees-migrants-afghanistan.html>

After they [Jundullah militia] stopped us, one of them ordered all the Hazaras to step down of the pick-up. Once we stepped down, he apologized to the smugglers for wasting their time and let the others to go, but kept us there. I was in their prison for two weeks until my brother paid the ransom in Nimruz and then, I was released.

Interviewee # 3, Male, Herat

It is ordinary for smugglers or militia to take Hazaras hostage for ransom. It is a common trade among people living in border areas as they know no one will question them or fight them, because Hazaras has no one. No one cares about Hazaras life, especially when a Hazara is on an illegal route.

Interviewee # 2, Male, Kabul

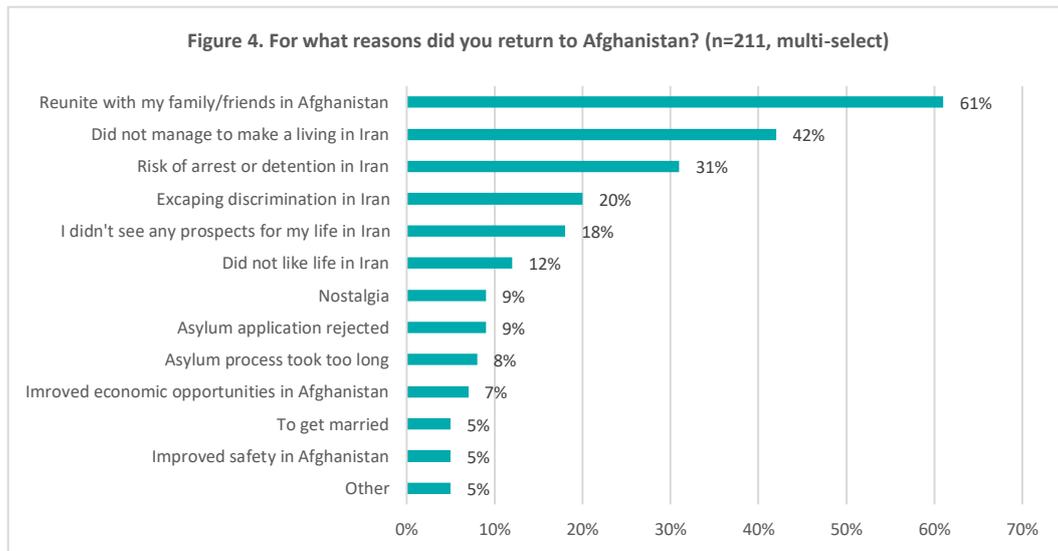
As shown in Map 2, while abuses against Hazaras were experienced along all the routes to Iran, incidents seem to cluster in certain locations. This is especially true of areas along borders or in areas that are distant and socially isolated or are under limited control from central authorities. Hazaras are more likely to be exposed to abuse while crossing those areas. In pre-August 2021 movements, areas around the Pakistan-Iran border, Kerman and Zahedan were the top three dangerous locations for Hazaras en route to Iran. After August 2021, the reported occurrence of abuses among Hazara respondents increased significantly along the Mushkil route, areas around the Afghanistan-Iran border and around Chahar-borjak (close to Afghanistan-Pakistan border).

Map 2. Top 10 dangerous locations reported by Hazaras en route to Iran for movements before and after August 2021 (n=942)



2. Returns of Hazaras from Iran: Decision-making, journey, and risks experienced on return journey

The respondents interviewed for this study often reported not having the opportunity to make a proper decision whether to stay in Iran or return to Afghanistan both before and after August 2021. Even among those who returned independently or through assistance, nearly half of them reported that push factors had a role in their decision to return (see, Figure 4). While reuniting with family/friends in Afghanistan as pull factor was mentioned by 61% of respondents, a considerable proportion reported the impossibility of making a living (42%) and the risk of arrest or detention in Iran (31%) as other factors influencing their decision to return.



During in-depth interviews, interviewees expressed that the rising instances of violence against Hazaras in their areas of residence in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover often caused them to worry about family members who had stayed back, and eventually led to them returning to ensure the safety of these family members.

In terms of difficulties Hazaras face with making a living in Iran, most interviewees recounted making a decision to return from Iran to Afghanistan given how near impossible it was for them to find livelihoods in Iran. According to respondents, a downturn in Iran's economy in the last years, aggravated by the recent fall of the Iranian currency's value have hit Afghan refugees and undocumented migrants in Iran the hardest. They now find it difficult to generate enough income to settle in Iran and are unable to send remittances to their families back in Afghanistan. In the face of rising costs for basic necessities like food and accommodation in Iran, many respondents reported having fewer alternatives than to return to Afghanistan.

Whatever we worked and earned in Toman, after converting it to Afghani, it was almost nothing. My salary was not even enough to pay for food and rent.

Interviewee # 6, Male, Herat

The dollar's value was rising and the value of the Iranian Toman was dropping hour by hour... With more Afghans keep coming to Iran, the rents went high and Afghans with or without document couldn't afford the high prices.

Interviewee # 11, Female, Herat

In addition, respondents referred to a rise in deportation campaigns and xenophobic political discourses which put Afghans in general and Hazaras in particular at risk of arrest and detention in Iran. The facial characteristics of Hazaras render them as distinct from other Afghans in Iran,

leaving them more prone to arrest or mistreatment by the Iranian police and security forces.¹⁹ Respondents confirmed instances of discrimination from Iranian police and locals as a reason that influences their decision to return.

The rent for all houses here had gone up because many new Afghan families arrived after Taliban took the country and Iranian landlords ask for more money from Afghan tenants... my landlord asked for 900,000 Tuman while the other tenant, who was an Iranian, was paying only 600,000 Tuman. The monthly costs of electricity and water that the landlord charged us with was higher than what we used and whenever I asked him to show us the bills, he was yelling and saying bad words like 'How an Afghani can read or understand a bill'.

Interviewee # 8, Male, Herat

Respondents also emphasized the lack of access to basic services such as healthcare, education and housing as a key factor influencing their decision to return to Afghanistan. Hazara migrants and refugees in Iran often do not possess adequate documentation, especially those who arrived after Taliban takeover. Being undocumented in Iran significantly impacts the access refugees have to basic services. 10 out of 12 respondents who participated in in-depth interviews were undocumented or had overstayed their visas at the time of return or deportation and six of them mentioned the lack of access to basic services as directly shaping their decision to return to Afghanistan. Two respondents also reported attempting to regularize their migration status in Iran, but found it impossible to do:

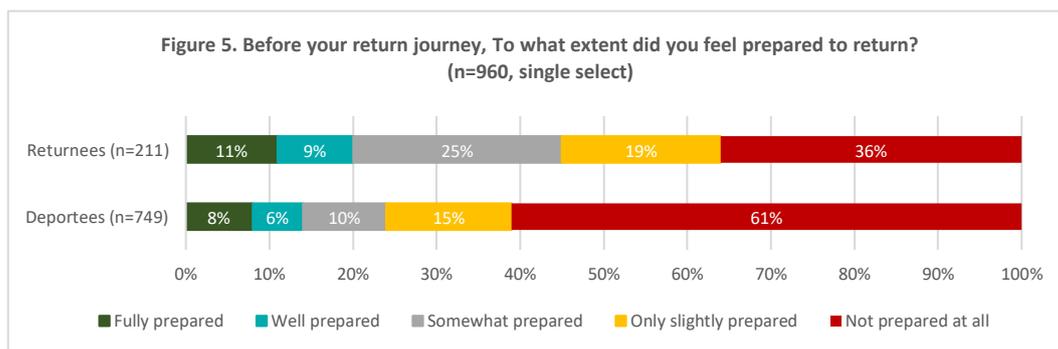
I extended my visa twice, each time for a month and after that, whatever reason I brought, they didn't accept to extend my visa.

Interviewee # 7, Female, Mazar e Sharif

There is a black market for visa extension in Iran. Many Afghans are in Iran with expired visas, but the police don't extend the visas. So, people have to pay a large amount of money to intermediaries to get extension.

Interviewee # 3, Male, Herat

The majority of respondents who returned to Afghanistan independently or through assistance entered the country at the Islam Qala entry point. Only 2% of respondents reported taking direct flights from Tehran or Mashhad in Iran to Kabul in Afghanistan. Among respondents who returned independently or through assistance, 36% reported that they were not prepared at all while another 19% were only slightly prepared (see: Figure 5).

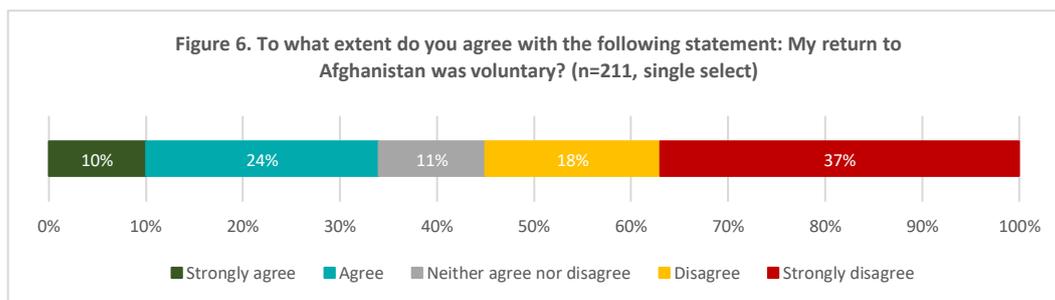


Among respondents who were deported from Iran to Afghanistan, the levels of preparedness to return prior to the deportation affected their return experience. A majority of respondents who were deported (67%) reported that they were not prepared at all or only slightly prepared to return before their deportation. Given the forced, and in most cases, sudden nature of their return, they did not have the opportunity to prepare for their return journeys. A respondent expressed

¹⁹ Tober, Diane (2007): My body is broken like my country: identity, nation, and repatriation among Afghan refugees in Iran, in *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 263-285.

being forced to return, with no time or money on hand to even purchase a backpack. This highlights that gathering tangible resources necessary to secure the costs of return journeys has proven to be a difficulty for many Hazaras returning to Afghanistan, forcefully or voluntarily.

Low levels of preparedness for return, as well as the reported drivers for return such as impossibility of making a living or high risk of arrest in Iran, demonstrate that the circumstances under which Hazaras returned from Iran can be necessarily categorized as 'voluntary' or meeting the standards of what 'voluntary return' means as per international law. In fact, more than half of returnees (55%) reported that they do not consider their return to be voluntary (see, Figure 6).



Deportations were all carried out by the Iranian police and authorities. The majority of respondents who were deported were undocumented migrants and refugees (72%) or those who had overstayed their visas (21%) and were arrested on streets, in the public transportation or at work sites across the country. Once arrested, they were sent to one of the deportation camps and from there to mainly Sang-e Sefid or Zahidan Camps to be deported to Afghanistan through the Islam Qala and Milak border points.

The access to assistance respondents had on the return journey from Iran to Afghanistan was extremely limited. Only 5% of respondents mentioned receiving some form of assistance on their journey back to Afghanistan, mostly in the form of food and cash provided by family and relatives in Iran (50%) and fellow returnees/deportees (22%). Only 10% of respondents reported receiving assistance from NGOs (UN bodies, INGOs, and local NGOs) and government officials.

The guards gave us food only once a day and the amount of food was so small that half of people in the hall couldn't get anything to eat. There was a small store in the (deportation) camp, but the prices for items was at least thrice the normal prices and no one could afford to buy food from there.
Interviewee # 9, Male, Kabul

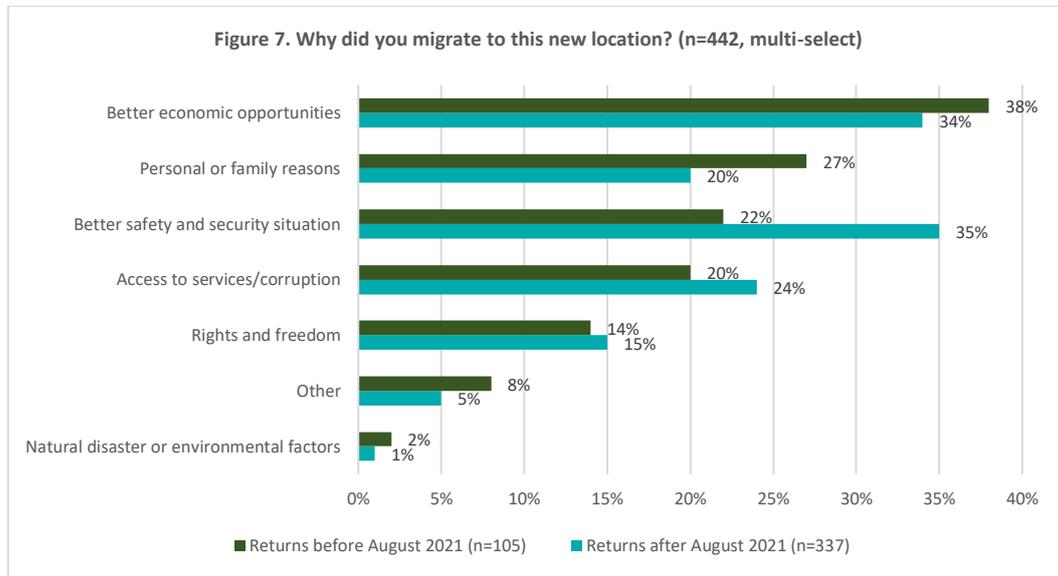
When they put us on the bus, one of the soldiers shouted that everyone should pay 200,000 Tuman for the cost of transportation and overnight accommodation in the camp. They were deporting us forcibly but asking for money like we are traveling voluntarily. I didn't have the money and I had to borrow the money from one of the fellow returnees on the bus.
Interviewee # 1, Male, Herat

3. Post-return Experience Among Hazara Returnees

a. Internal movements

Upon their sudden return to Afghanistan, half of Hazara returnees and deportees (54%) reported going directly to their province of origin or to the province they resided in prior to their departure from Afghanistan. The remaining 46% of respondents reported that they migrated internally to a new location, either directly upon return (19%), or shortly after (27%). Among those who returned prior to August 2021, respondents made the decision of migrating to a new location within

Afghanistan for better economic opportunities (38%) and personal or family reasons (27%). Among those returned after August 2021, better safety and security situation (34%), better economic opportunities (34%) and access to services/corruption (24%) were reported as the main reasons for choosing to migrate to a new location upon return (see, Figure 7). Respondents who returned post-August 2021 also expressed that following the Taliban takeover, many business owners shut up shop and fled the country, pushing returnees to opt for new locations instead of returning to provinces where they had resided prior to their departure.



b. Living conditions

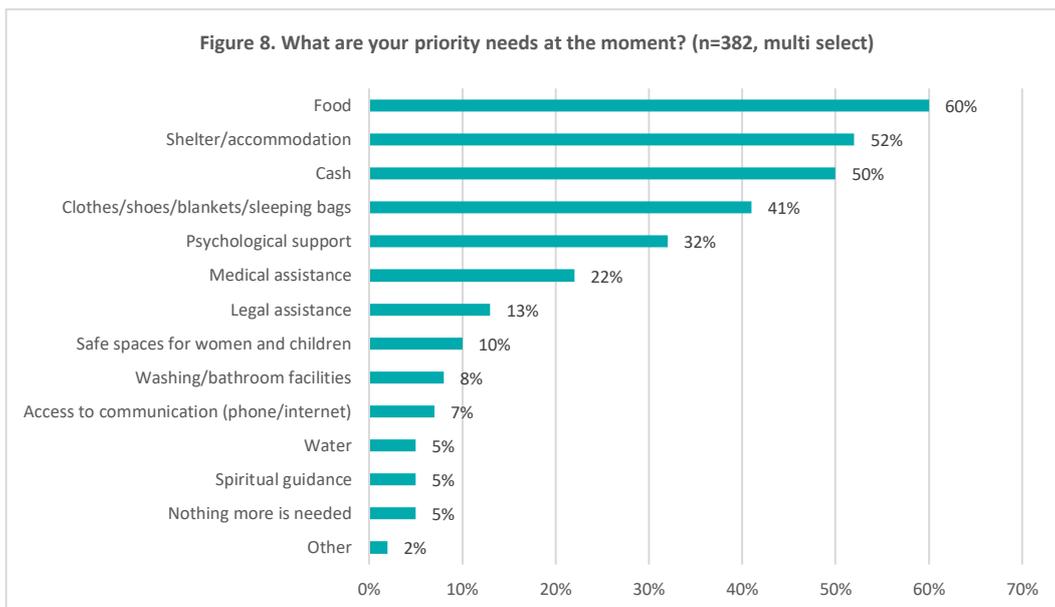
Among respondents who returned post-August 2021, the majority of respondents (92%) reported that their living conditions after return have worsened compared to their conditions prior to their departure from Afghanistan. In terms of access to work, respondents who returned post-August 2021 (71%) reported that they have been unable to find a job since their return, compared to 55% for those who returned to the country prior to August 2021. Among those who were employed, more than half were employed in casual/occasional jobs (60%), as opposed to regular work (12%). Though a majority of respondents who were employed reported that they were fully (65%) or partly (35%) financially responsible for their household, more than two-third (69%) reported that their income did not meet the needs of their household.

In the absence of adequate income, though the level of assistance needed was high, the reported access to assistance and basic services remained low among the Hazaras. More than half of them mentioned food, shelter/accommodation and cash as their top three priority needs (see: Figure 8). Yet respondents, during in-depth interviews, emphasized that they do not have regular and adequate access to food or proper shelter due to a lack of income and rising costs of living in Afghanistan.

In addition to basic needs of food and shelter, respondents also expressed the need for psychological support. 32% of respondents experienced increased levels of stress and anxiety in the period following their return to Afghanistan after August 2021. However, the access to assistance remains limited, and is potentially shrinking. Only 3% of respondents who returned post-August 2021 received some form of assistance, compared to 12% of respondents who returned before August 2021.

We need food for our children just to stay alive and I don't ask for anything else.

Interviewee # 11, Female, Herat



In instances where assistance was available, the providers of assistance were family and friends of respondents who helped them with providing cash and food upon their return. Only 1% of respondents reported receiving assistance from NGOs, government offices or agencies affiliated with the United Nations (UN). Respondents also reported facing discrimination when accessing assistance provided by the government bodies and NGOs. According to four interviewees, NGO workers prefer or are forced by local officials to give preference to certain ethnicities over others. Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity has been reported previously in the allocation and distribution of humanitarian assistance under the Taliban rule.²⁰

They [officials] make a list of all local residence and told us that they want it for a foreign NGO to distribute wheat, oil and warm clothes but at the end, they only gave the helps to Pashtun residents. No Hazara got any food or cloth.

Interviewee # 8, Male, Zaranj

I went to the MoRR office twice and handed over the letter from IOM, but they ignored me and when I insisted, one of the employees shouted that get lost Hazara.

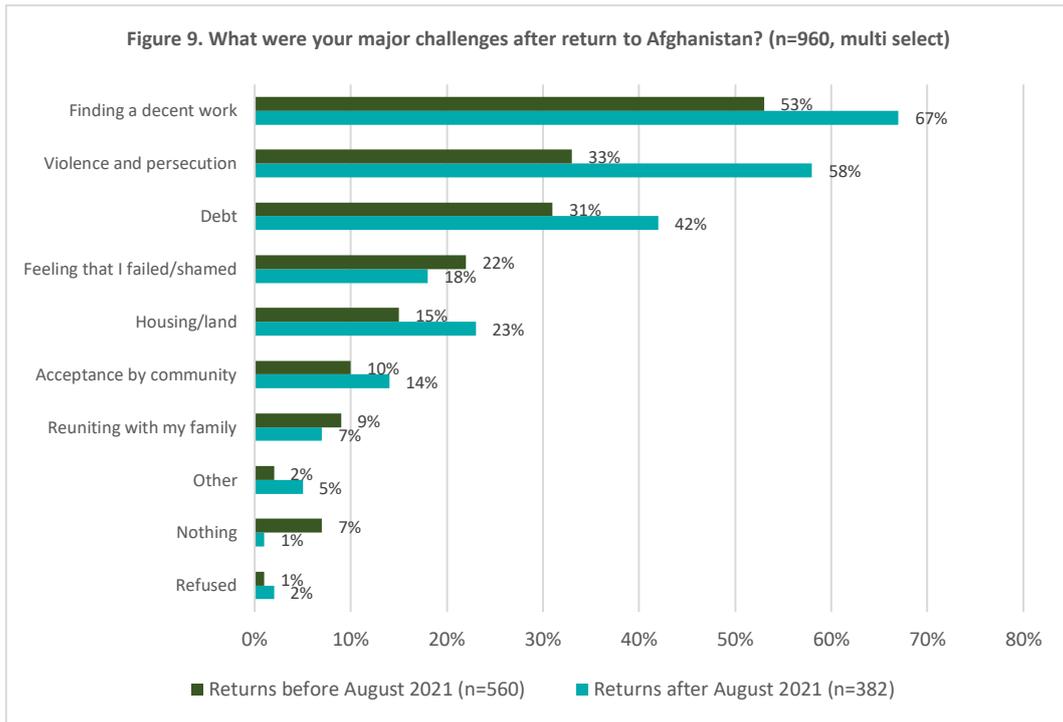
Interviewee # 11, Female, Herat

In the absence of assistance from external actors, respondents were forced to rely on friends and family upon their return to Afghanistan. However, given the country's economic collapse post August 2021, that too was difficult as often their friends or family members were themselves struggling to make ends meet. This was also the case with Afghans abroad, who were forced to suddenly take on added responsibilities of assisting fleeing family members and therefore were unable to provide adequate financial assistance to respondents who were in need in Afghanistan.

c. Main challenges after return

Hazara returnees and deportees reported key challenges with respect to finding decent work (60%), facing violence and persecution (45%) and debt (36%), among others. However, the significance of challenges increased in almost all categories after Taliban takeover (see: Figure 9).

²⁰ For example, see: <https://gchumanrights.org/gc-preparedness/preparedness-conflict/article-detail/the-talibans-interference-in-the-delivery-of-humanitarian-aid-in-afghanistan.html>



Access to decent work

The proportion of those who mentioned finding decent work in Afghanistan following their return as a challenge increased from 53% for those who returned prior to August 2021 to 67% for those who returned post-August 2021. This was particularly the case among respondents with higher levels of education. In addition, with the increasing number of restrictions imposed on women's participation in the public sphere after the Taliban takeover, especially on their access to education and the right to work, female respondents expressed having shrinking access to job opportunities.

I used to work as a university lecturer in Katib University, but when I came back after a year, there was no class because there was no student in the classes. All students are without hope and don't know why they should continue their studies... All private universities are bankrupting and people like me are losing our jobs.

Interviewee # 12, Male, Herat

Interviewees shared serious concerns over the ability of Hazaras to continue working in government offices, educational institutions and civil offices following the Taliban takeover, an issue which has been reported since August 2021.²¹ One of the interviewees, a former employee in a government office in Kabul, shared:

After I returned from Iran, I went to the office in Kabul, but I noticed that someone else is sitting behind my desk. One of my Pashtun colleagues approached me and laughingly said: 'why did you come back? Aren't you afraid of your life?'. He explained to me that most of the Hazara and Tajik employees have got fired. I went to my boss, but he didn't let me in his room. They didn't even pay my delayed salary.

Interviewee # 8, Male, Zaranj

Interviewees expressed that following the Taliban takeover, Hazaras will refrain from applying for jobs in the public sector as they are unlikely to be shortlisted for the positions. These concerns and experiences of discrimination were uniform across the board among Hazaras, including those with lower level of education who were employed in the informal sector:

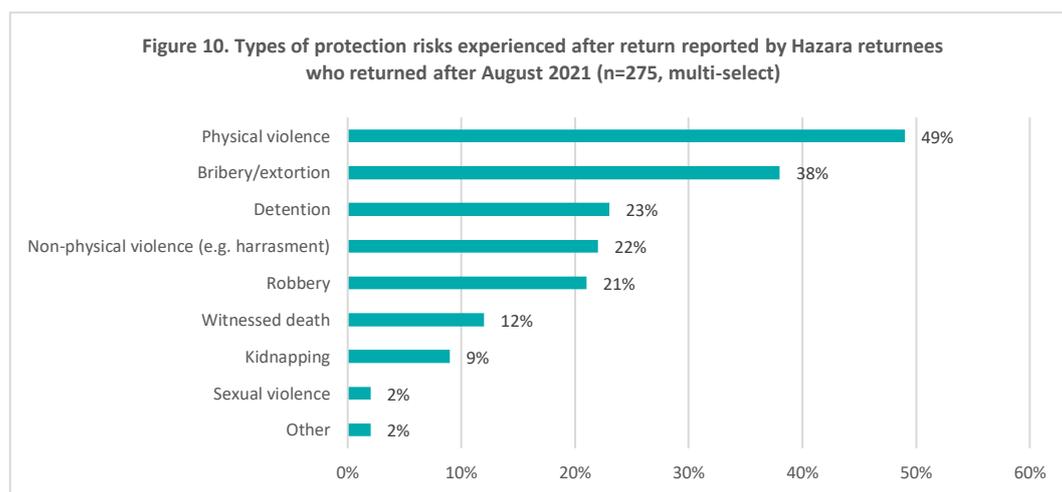
²¹ e.g., see: <https://www.vidc.org/en/detail/6-life-under-the-taliban>

I took my brother's car to drive around as a taxi and ferry passengers from Barchi lin West Kabul] to Zir Zamini lat the center of Kabul], to earn money. However, at the taxi stations on both ends, in Barchi and Zir Zamini, Taliban militia or their agents come to us every morning and every afternoon to collect money. They call it tax, but what kind of tax is it if it is not recorded anywhere? We see that they take the money and then go to restaurants. It is not tax but extortion. They took 50 Afghani per travel from other taxi drivers and 70 Afghani per travel from Hazara taxi drivers.

Interviewee # 1, Male, Kabul

Violence

The fear of being targeted and violence was the second most commonly cited challenge respondents faced after their return to Afghanistan. To the extent that the share of violence as a major challenge has almost doubled among respondents who returned post- August 2021 (58%) compared to among those respondents who returned prior to August 2021 (33%). Data on the types of protection risks experienced by respondents who returned post-August 2021 confirmed the high level of violence Hazara returnees are exposed to following their return. More than two-third of respondents (72%) reported that they experienced one or several types of protection risks after their return. Respondents reported experiencing physical violence (49%) and bribery/extortion (38%), detention (23%), non-physical violence (22%) and robbery (21%). When asked about the profile of perpetrators, respondents reported that these acts of violence were carried out by armed groups/militias (30%) and the military/police (26%).



Near Islam Qala, the Talib soldier at the checkpoint ordered me to unlock my phone and pass it to him. He checked my contacts and gallery of pictures and suddenly stared at one of the pictures. Then, he ordered me to out of the taxi and started beating me, pushing me to his station. He found a picture of mine with one of the Hazaras' politicians in Karzai Government and thought that I might be an important Hazara. I was in their prison for three days and beaten every day before my brother released me in exchange of money.

Interviewee # 2, Male, Kabul

I know of two returnees in our neighborhood who were killed after they returned from Iran. Their bodies were hanged from the electricity pole. One of them was a former soldier of the ANSF, the other I don't know what was his profession. We know that the local Talib killed them because they were former military, but they announced they were killed by Daesh. Everybody knows that Daesh is just a cover.

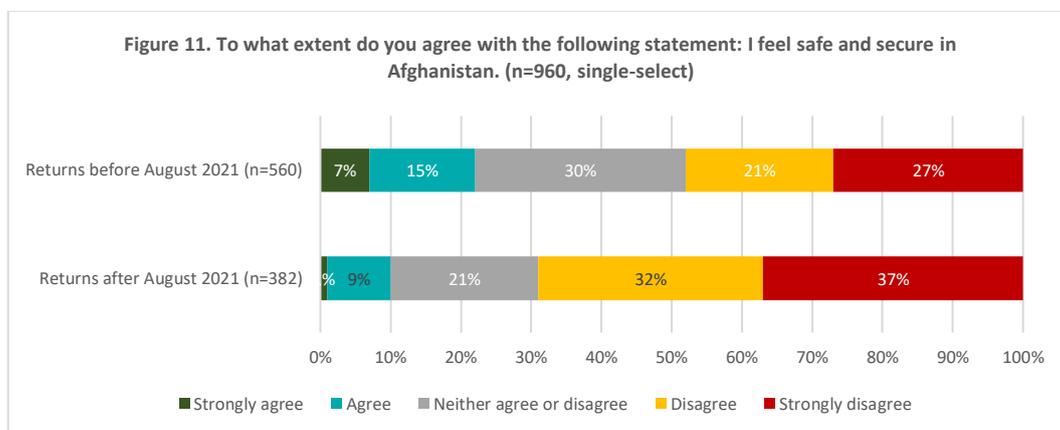
Interviewee # 10, Female, Mazar e Sharif

A rise in instances of targeted attacks against Hazaras after August 2021 has been widely documented, including bombings and unlawful attacks,²² extrajudicial killing,²³ forced

²² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/06/afghanistan-isis-group-targets-religious-minorities>

²³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/>

displacements,²⁴ severe restriction of rights.²⁵ The prevalence of an environment of violence and discrimination against Hazaras negatively affected on the feeling of safety and security respondents experienced in Afghanistan, especially following their return post-August 2021. 69% of respondents who returned following the Taliban takeover reported that they do not feel safe and secure in Afghanistan (see, Figure 11).



Debt

Among respondents who returned to Afghanistan, 37% expressed concerns around having to pay off debt. In Afghanistan, borrowing money from friends and relatives is one of the main sources of financing migration journeys out of the country.²⁶ In other cases, potential migrants might travel abroad to seek work to pay off debt that they already owe in Afghanistan, as expressed by four respondents who mentioned during in-depth interviews that they migrated to find work in Iran and pay their debts in Afghanistan. This, coupled with a lack of livelihood opportunities and financial support upon return, resulted in returnees having to deal with stacking debt.

There was no one else who could lend us money anymore. Everyone I knew, I already borrow some money and I couldn't go to them again and again. The only way for me was to go to Iran and work.

Interviewee # 4, Male, Zaranj

After Taliban took Kabul, all the businesses stop and mine too. My bookshop was open only for two months. After the Taliban took Kabul, no one would buy books, so I had to close my store and I became bankrupt. Every day, people call me and ask for their money. So, I planned to go to Iran to work with my brother and slowly pay my debts.

Interviewee # 9, Male, Kabul

The manner in which debt disrupts lives of migrants becomes more severe when they fail in their migration aspiration and are forced to return. Among respondents who were surveyed, the proportion of those who reported debt as a challenge was twice as much among deportees (69%) in comparison to respondents who returned voluntarily (31%). The burden of having to pay off debts, but not being able to, could potentially result in returnees becoming vulnerable to psychological distress and negative coping mechanism, as expressed by a respondent.

When a man cannot pay his debts, it is normal to send his daughters or sisters for marriage to repay the debts.

Interviewee # 3, Male, Herat

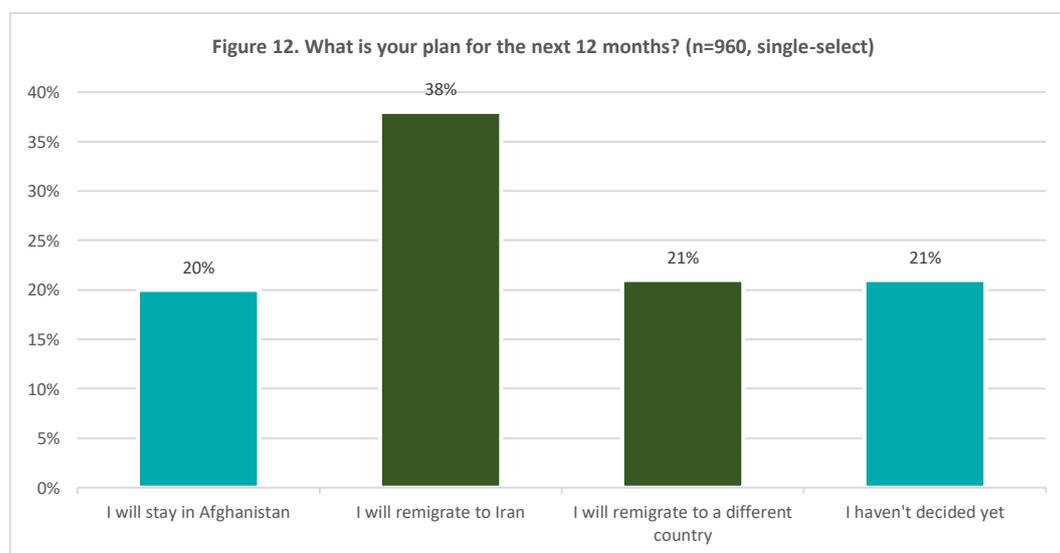
²⁴ https://www.hazarainquiry.com/_files/ugd/525f48_c697e483f02c4c10a7eb04947eefb72b.pdf

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ e.g., see: <https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ms-asia-1803.pdf>; and https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/Survey_on_Drivers_of_Migration_Round%202.pdf

4. Future intentions: The peril of staying, the gamble of (re)migrating

Given the state of socioeconomic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and increasing forms of discrimination and targeted attacks against Hazaras in particular after the Taliban takeover, it is expected that many Hazara returnees will seek to re-migrate. Among respondents surveyed in this study, more than half of respondents reported their intentions to remigrate in the next 12 months, either back to Iran (38%) or a different country (21%) (see, Figure 12). Only 20% of respondents indicated their intention to stay in Afghanistan. The rest of the respondents (21%) expressed being undecided about their intentions to re-migrate. The likelihood being, that those who are undecided will consider the situation in the near future and the resources they have at hand before deciding to stay in Afghanistan or remigrate.



The intention to re-migrate among the respondents is tied to the fact that staying in Afghanistan is not a safe option for Hazaras as they are more prone to discrimination, abuse and violations of their rights in the wake of the Taliban takeover, more than ever. Referring to a high level of vulnerability and the 'uncertain' future, respondents highlighted that the risk of staying outweighs their aspiration to migrate, with re-migration being their only viable option even though they might not have succeeded in a previous attempt.

However, not all of those who aspire or intend to re-migrate will be able to do so. Two factors are crucial in the ability of respondents to remigrate: availability of resources and access to (regular or irregular) migration channels. In terms of access to resources, returnees who have access to the required financial and social capital are more likely to remigrate. In cases where returnees don't have the financial capital, their support network, that is, their relatives and friends in Afghanistan and in the diaspora will likely assist them gather funds required to re-migrate.

I don't have all the money needed for the journey, but I will arrange with the smuggler to get paid by my relatives in Tehran after he took me there.

Interviewee # 4, Male, Zaranj

My sister from Germany promised if I can get myself to Turkey, she will provide the rest of the costs to Germany.

Interviewee # 11, Female, Herat

For those seeking to migrate or re-migrate via regular channels, the options are limited. After August 2021, only two countries, Iran and Pakistan, have consular services in Afghanistan. But

applying for visas at these consular services is extremely difficult due to the disproportionately high number of applicants in comparison to the capacities of the consular services to cater to the need. In addition, for many Hazara returnees, the cost of travelling to Iran and Pakistan via regular channels are unaffordable as they struggle to find work and pay off debts as it is. For the remaining few, journeys into Iran and Pakistan via irregular channels is not a preferred option having experienced the journey one time before and being aware of the risks en route:

Whenever talking to my friends about migrating again to Iran from Zaranj, I remember all the cruelties I faced from the smugglers, militias and police, and my body starts to shake. I don't know what to do. Staying is like a constant torture. I cannot go to the university and teach again. There is no hope for my future here and it doesn't make sense to stay. But I know that migrating is to put my life again at risk.

Interviewee # 4, Male, Zaranj

Conclusion

This report sheds light on the migration, return, and post-return experiences among Hazaras who were forced to flee to Iran and subsequently returned to Afghanistan, both prior to and after August 2021. The findings reveal important trends and dynamics in the decision-making processes, journeys, and risks faced by the Hazara population.

One key finding is the increase in the proportion of Hazaras citing "rights and freedoms" and "violence and insecurity" as the main drivers of migration after August 2021, compared to those who left and returned prior to that period. The Taliban takeover and the subsequent discrimination and violence against Hazaras in Afghanistan have pushed more Hazaras to flee the country in search of safety and a better future. The research also highlights variations in movements based on age and education levels. Young, single men reported violence and insecurity as the primary driver for migration, while those with higher levels of education cited the lack of rights and freedoms. Discriminatory practices and limited access to government and public service positions have contributed to this disparity.

Gender differences were also observed, with a higher percentage of female respondents reporting lack of access to services in post-August 2021 data. The Taliban's restrictions on women's rights and freedoms have further exacerbated the challenges faced by Hazara women, leading to an increased likelihood of them considering migration, however, their ability to move is again restricted significantly by the discriminatory practices imposed by Taliban on women in the country.

Hazara migrants faced significant protection risks en route to Iran, with a substantial increase in abuses experienced after August 2021. Physical violence, bribery/extortion, and kidnapping were among the main abuses reported. Hazaras were particularly vulnerable due to their ethnic and religious backgrounds, with militia groups, armed gangs, and even government officials identified as perpetrators.

The findings also highlight the complex decision-making decision among Hazaras who often reported not having the opportunity to make a well-informed decision regarding their stay in Iran or return to Afghanistan. Push factors such as the risk of arrest or detention in Iran and the impossibility of making a living were significant factors influencing their decision to return. The lack of preparedness among Hazaras to return to Afghanistan, combined with the drivers for returns, questions the voluntary nature of their return and raises concerns regarding compliance with international standards for voluntary returns.

The post-return experiences of Hazara returnees highlighted the worsened living conditions and limited access to work and basic services in Afghanistan. The majority of returnees reported being unable to find a job, and their income often did not meet the needs of their households. Access to assistance and psychological support was limited, further exacerbating the challenges faced by the Hazaras.

Emphasizing the complex and multifaceted nature of Hazara migration, return, and post-return experiences, the findings underscore the urgent need for improved protection measures, access to basic services, and livelihood opportunities for Hazaras both in Iran and Afghanistan. Therefore, this report suggests a series of recommendations focusing on the underlying drivers of migration among Hazaras, including discrimination, violence, and limited rights and freedoms, the conditions they face in migration and return journeys, as well as the challenges they face upon return.

Recommendations

To the Government of Iran:

- Respect the principle of non-refoulement: The Government of Iran should not deport Afghans – specifically Hazara refugees - without reviewing their cases for protection;
- Regularize the status of undocumented Afghans in Iran through a proper mechanism to identify them, such as the headcount exercise implemented in 2022;
- Extend fee waivers for all Afghans who have overstayed visas and regularize residence;
- End the practice of arresting and deporting undocumented Afghans merely due to their legal status;
- Expand the access of Afghans in Iran to labor market beyond the pre-defined sectors in which Afghans can work;
- Facilitate access of undocumented Afghans to public services such as health and education;
- Provide psychological support services for Hazaras who have been victims of violence and abuse on route to Iran;
- Ensure that accurate information about the situation in Afghanistan and conditions in areas of return is delivered to Afghans seeking voluntary return, including information about the levels of violence, economic situation, and access to humanitarian aid and reintegration support.
- Reduce the fees for Iranian visa and ease the requirement for obtaining it for Afghan nationals in Afghanistan who want to travel to Iran through legal pathways to reduce irregular journeys.

To the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):

- Ensure that voluntary return of Afghans from Iran are not promoted or encouraged so long as conditions for safe, sustained and dignified return are not in place;
- Provide the government of Iran and the Afghan community in Iran up to date and accurate information about the conditions in Afghanistan on return and reintegration challenges;
- Monitor the situation of vulnerable groups, especially Hazaras, in Afghanistan and challenges they face upon and after their return and report accordingly on human rights violations that these returnees and deportees face in the country;
- Facilitate impartial access of humanitarian organisations to Hazara returnees and deportees as a vulnerable group in Afghanistan;
- Ensure adequate distribution of humanitarian aid and reintegration support among Hazara returnees and deportees who are facing with systemic discrimination in Afghanistan.

To Donor Governments:

- Advocate for accessible legal pathways for at risk Hazaras to seek asylum, especially those who are at risk of persecution due to ties to the previous government, national Army, etc.;
- Ensure that funds provided for programs in Afghanistan are used properly by the local authorities and do not contribute to the abuse of rights of Hazaras or other vulnerable groups of returnees and deportees;
- Ensure that funding for programs in Iran and other neighboring countries are not focused on push to return, but give the Afghans accurate and up to date information about conditions in Afghanistan in order to make a safe and conscious decision to return;
- Provide adequate financial support to Iran and other neighboring countries to enable them to provide adequate public services to Afghan refugees and asylum seekers including health and education services;
- Advocate with the government of Iran to respect the principle of non-refoulement;
- Expand funding to allow for a strategic, multi-year response;
- Offer resettlement, subsidiary protection or other forms of humanitarian admission to the most vulnerable Hazara refugees in Iran.

Annexes

Annex I. Respondents and interviewees' profiles

a. Respondents' profiles (Quantitative Survey)

Variables	Categories	%
Gender	Male	83%
	Female	17%
Age	18-25	40%
	26-35	38%
	36-45	15%
	+45	7%
Marital status	Single	56%
	Married	40%
	Other	4%
Level of education	Did not complete any schooling	17%
	Primary school	20%
	Primary school (religious)	5%
	Secondary or high school	44%
	Vocational training	2%
	University degree	12%
Living area prior to migration	Urban	64%
	Rural	36%
Way of return	Deportation	78%
	I travelled independently (voluntary)	18%
	Assisted voluntary return (by IOM or UN)	4%

b. Interviewees' profiles (Quantitative Survey)

Profile	Gender	Age	Marital status	Level of education	Way of return	City of interview
Interviewee 1	Male	21	Single	High school	Deported	Kabul
Interviewee 2	Male	29	Single	University degree	Deported	Kabul
Interviewee 3	Male	34	Married	Primary school	Deported	Herat
Interviewee 4	Male	30	Single	High school	Deported	Zaranj
Interviewee 5	Male	18	Single	Primary school	Deported	Kabul
Interviewee 6	Male	42	Married	No education	Voluntarily Returned	Herat
Interviewee 7	Female	28	Single	High school	Voluntarily Returned	Mazar e Sharif
Interviewee 8	Male	30	Married	University degree	Deported	Zaranj
Interviewee 9	Male	50	Married	Primary school	Deported	Kabul
Interviewee 10	Female	22	Single	High school	Deported	Mazar e Sharif
Interviewee 11	Female	25	Married	University degree	Voluntarily Returned	Herat
Interviewee 12	Male	31	Married	University degree	Voluntarily Returned	Herat

Annex II. Qualitative interview questions

Interview Facilitator's Guide		
Starting the Interview		
<p>Introduce yourself: Hello, thanks for agreeing to take part in this research. My name is [name]. I need to ask a few preliminary questions to make sure you are eligible for the interview.</p>		
Screening question	Response	End question if
How old are you? [end interview if under 18]		17 or younger
Are you a Hazara from Afghanistan?		If other ethnicity
Have you been forcibly returned from Iran to Afghanistan in the past 17 months?		No
Before deportation, when do you left Afghanistan?		If before August 2021
Do you have any questions about the interview?		
Do I have your permission to conduct the interview?		No
Do I have your permission to record the interview?		-
<p>Purpose: The aim of the research today is to understand more about why you left the country, what was your living experience in Iran, why and how you returned to the country, and what challenges you have faced after return. The research today is supported by CAPRS and we hope that this research will help to improve awareness about the situation of Hazaras in general and the risks and problems facing Hazaras when they are forced to return to Afghanistan in particular.</p> <p>Run through logistical aspects: The discussion will last around one hour. If you want to stop the interview for any reason (restroom, breaks, drinking water) please ask me to do so. We can also pause the interview and continue later or on another day.</p> <p>Reiterate confidentiality: In today's interview your name will not be mentioned in any of the notes, but we would like to record the interview to make sure that we don't miss important information. If there is anything you say that you don't want us to write down, let us know after the interview and we will delete it. When the research is finished, in about two months, we will delete the recording.</p>		
General and Demographic Questions		
Question	Response	
Year and month of departure from Afghanistan		
Year and month of return/deportation to Afghanistan		
Returned/deported alone or with family members		
Current city of residence		
Voluntarily returned or forcibly deported		

Interview Questions		
Q#	Question	Follow up / tips
Migration experience		
1	Why did you leave Afghanistan? - Was it because of Taliban takeover? - Did you have plans to leave the country prior to August 2021? Why did you choose Iran?	Was it because of the economic situation? Security? More than one reason? If you were planning to leave before August 2021, what were the reasons? Why had you not left sooner? Did you consider other destinations?
2	How did you leave the country? With visa or irregularly?	If with visa: how did you obtain the visa? If irregularly: from which route? With or without assistance from smuggler(s)? Could you explain how did you get to Iran? How much did you have to pay? Where did you get the money?
3	Was anyone was involved in your decision to leave Afghanistan? (like family, friends, social media, etc. in Afghanistan or Iran, or other countries)	If yes, who? Please explain how they affected your decision? What were the different factors you considered (to stay, or to go)?
4	Did you travel alone or with your family members?	If travel with family, Who did you travel with? Did you have to leave people behind (parents, siblings, wife, children)? Why? Was that difficult?
5	What happened after you reached Iran? How was life there? Did you stay with family and relatives? Did you work?	If you did not have papers, how did that affect you? Were you stopped by the police? Arrested? Detained?
Return Experience		
6	(For returnees) Why did you return? Did you take the decision alone or others were involved in your decision? (For deportees) How did you get caught and deported? Where?	Was it because of issues in Iran or Afghanistan? Did you feel you had a choice? Were you detained? Where? Were you deported in a group? How many?
7	Before return, did you feel prepared for return to Afghanistan? (yes or no: Why?)	If yes, how did you prepare for return? Were you nervous? Did you have family waiting for you? What were they telling you? If no, why? And what would have made you better prepared for return? How did you feel when you realised you were being sent back? Were you able to contact anyone to tell them what was happening?
8	How was your return journey?	(need details about the route, situation on the journey) for deportees: have you experienced any risks or violation of your rights on deportation journey? If yes, please explain, what risks, where and by whom Were you able to bring anything with you (phone, money, papers?) Was it the first time you experienced detention/deportation?
9	Along your journey, have you received any assistance like food, shelter, medicine, etc.? Did you have access to NGO or government services on your return journey, for example, at the border?	On which side? Did you know there was help available? If you didn't access it, why not?
Experience after return		
10	How did you feel when you arrived?	What did you expect on arrival? Were you nervous? Were you worried about anything (getting home? Security? If things would have changed?) Could you find family or friends?

11	After arrival to Afghanistan, where did you go? To your previous location of residence or a new location?	If new location, why?
12	Are you currently working?	If yes, what sector? Is it the same sector you worked before? If not, why not? If no, why?
13	Since your return, have you received any assistance like food, shelter, medicine, etc.? Did you have access to NGO, government services? What about support from family, friends, and relatives in Afghanistan or other countries?	If received, please explain the types of supports and services as well as how you get them? If no, explain why? (Also if not access to NGO or government services, will be good to know why? Is there any discrimination factor here because of ethnicity or something else?)
14	What were your major challenges upon arriving in Afghanistan?	Do you feel the situation is different? How? Is it different for Hazara in particular? How?
15	Do you feel safe and secure in Afghanistan now?	If no, please explain why? If yes, why? Also, do you think your ethnicity is a factor in feeling not safe? Why?
16	How is your life after August 2021 in Afghanistan is different from your life before August 2021?	
17	What is your intention for future? Are you going to stay in Afghanistan or remigrate? Why?	
Space for notes (expand)		
Closing		
After the interview, read the list to the participant: Thank you for your time today. Again, if you are uncomfortable with any of the answers you have given, please let me know and I can delete that from our notes.		