

Can Afghans Reintegrate after Assisted Return from Europe?

Insights from the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration'

Governments present the assisted return of rejected asylum seekers and other 'unwanted' migrants as the cornerstone of an effective migration management policy. However, it is also a practice criticised by migrants' rights advocates for being a form of coerced, rather than voluntary, return. One response to critiques is to highlight the potential such programmes have in the successful reintegration of returnees. But what is meant by 'successful' reintegration? Based on research in Afghanistan with returnees from Norway and the United Kingdom, we highlight the extreme difficulties faced in achieving reintegration.

Brief Points

- Most Afghan research participants did not want to return to Afghanistan; although those with secure residence status in Europe were willing to visit.
- Insecurity, lack of livelihood opportunities and distrust of the Afghan government were stated reasons for not returning.
- The term 'reintegration' should be questioned; our research showed that reintegration could be just as complicated as migrant integration.
- Reintegration is particularly difficult to achieve when returnees did not want to return in the first place.

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Figure 1. Afghanistan, Norway, the United Kingdom and other countries in the PREMIG project

Managed migration and return

Managed migration is a controversial topic. Viewed positively, it is as an acceptance that in a globalised world people want to be mobile, and they should be enabled to be so in an ordered and safe manner. However, for most Afghans managed migration means restrictions on mobility. European managed migration policies mean being unable to get a visa, entering in an irregular manner (e.g. with the assistance of smugglers) after a costly and dangerous journey, and undergoing an often drawn-out asylum process with the risk of detention and removal.

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) considers return policy a cornerstone of effective migration management, alongside border controls and visa regimes. According to the IOM's training guide, *Essentials of Migration Management*, an asylum-related returns policy requires effective border controls, a timely asylum adjudication system and a combination of voluntary return programmes and enforced returns for those whose asylum claims are rejected. This last aspect is seen as essential to ensure the integrity of international refugee protection: in other words, if people are deemed to not be in need of protection then they should not be allowed to stay, else why have an asylum determination pro-

cess at all? Whilst this may be legitimate in policy terms, for Afghans, many of whom have borrowed tens of thousands of dollars to reach Europe, their case being rejected is a dismal prospect.

For Afghans without leave to remain in Norway or the UK, there are four options:

- 1 use their own resources to return to Afghanistan or migrate elsewhere;
- 2 agree to return to Afghanistan through an assisted return program;
- 3 wait to be 'removed' (forcibly returned), sometimes following a period of detention;
- 4 go 'under the radar' and try and evade the authorities, whilst either working outside the formal sector or facing destitution.

Political, physical and economic insecurity in Afghanistan make the first option extremely unlikely for all but a tiny number of Afghans in Europe. Option four is unsupportable both in terms of mainstream public opinion and the potential risks to migrants' health, security and rights, which leaves options two and three available to migration policy-makers. Forced removals are expensive – more so than assisted return¹ – especially when the cost of detention prior to removal is included. They are also politically costly due to the potential damage they can do to European countries' reputations as protectors of human rights. In contrast, assisted return can only take place with the consent of the returnee, so it can be publicly presented as voluntary return.

The language of assisted return

Does consenting to assisted return really constitute *voluntary* return? What is the meaning of the word voluntary here? Despite calling their programs Assisted Voluntary Return, in the *Essentials of Migration Management*, IOM makes the distinction between 'voluntary [return] without compulsion' and 'voluntary [return] under compulsion', the latter referring to those who have no legal permission to stay. Assisted voluntary return programs have been criticized by scholars, migrants' rights advocates and UNHCR, who point out that 'voluntary return' should imply that there is a plausible legal alternative to returning, rather than return in the face of a total lack of regularized alternatives. Notably, the Norwegian Directorate of

Immigration (UDI) has recently dropped the word 'voluntary' from their assisted return programmes.

The coincidence of forced and 'voluntary' return programmes has, and should, also be questioned by critical scholars. In both Norway and the United Kingdom, assisted return programs to Afghanistan have been established at around the same time as enforced removal commenced. Is the fact that some Afghans 'choose' return used to justify the forcible return of others?

Migration policy-makers have responded to criticisms of return policy by highlighting the potential that reintegration assistance (built in to assisted return to Afghanistan) has in supporting returnees' contributions to post-conflict reconstruction. In the United Kingdom the term reintegration is explicitly built into return policy, through the cross-governmental Return and Reintegration Fund. The inclusion of reintegration allows for the involvement of the Department for International Development in what could otherwise be considered a domestic matter.

Afghans' views on possible return

Prior to fieldwork in Afghanistan, we conducted research in Norway and the United Kingdom with Afghans on their thoughts about, and experiences of, return. This provides important contextual information.

Firstly, although some research participants were interested in returning eventually, most were not planning to do so in the near future. Nevertheless, many with European passports had made short-term visits, mostly for family reasons.

Secondly, those considering assisted return were only doing so because their legal options for staying in Europe had been exhausted. Assisted return was preferable to forced removal, because of the financial assistance. However, financial assistance was not enough to encourage return if they had a feasible option of staying in Europe. We expected that assisted return might be chosen as a 'more dignified' alternative to forced removal, perhaps mitigating potential stigma after return; however, research participants were unsure friends and family in Afghanistan would recognise the distinction between the two.



Housing extends up the hillsides on the outskirts of Kabul. Finding accommodation is among the challenges faced by returnees to Afghanistan. (Photo: Carol Mitchell, Flickr.)

Thirdly, we observed mistrust of assisted return programs, particularly in regard to reintegration assistance, with some suspicious that they would not receive promised assistance once they returned to Afghanistan, as they saw the return program's primary aim as removing them from Europe.

Afghans' experiences post-return

For most research participants, life after returning to Afghanistan had been difficult. This was compounded by the fact that most had not wanted to leave Europe in the first place. Most of them wanted to leave Afghanistan again, if the opportunity arose, similar to findings from a study of 120 returnees from the United Kingdom, which found 74% wanted to leave Afghanistan². Our research participants described a number of difficulties.

Firstly, a small minority had faced specific threats after returning, usually in the form of violent demands for money, perhaps – as one interviewee suggested – because people who had been in Europe were assumed to be

wealthy, although in reality most had returned with little or no savings. Another assumption returnees faced was that they had become 'westernised' or 'anti-Islamic' in Europe. One was even threatened that he had to give money to an insurgency group to prove his non-western credentials. For a larger proportion, it was fear of (rather than direct) violence, that was affecting them, resulting in being unable to leave the house and gain employment. Some moved regularly from family member to family member – partly to avoid outstaying hospitality but also for security reasons and to avoid 'settling in', which would disrupt plans to re-migrate.

Secondly, un/underemployment was a major problem. The nature of hiring practices in Afghanistan means those who did not have strong social connections, or were trying to keep a low public profile, could not find work. For others, the corrupt working environment was unbearable. Here, the livelihoods component of reintegration assistance (managed by IOM) could help. However, many of the research participants who had received IOM

assistance were unhappy with it. In part, their unhappiness can be related to the fact that most did not want to be back in Afghanistan, and no assistance was going to change that. Nevertheless, there were specific problems that multiple research participants noted, such as rushed meetings with IOM caseworkers, and/or a feeling that caseworkers took a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to business-planning advice rather than a tailored response to their individual needs and skills. Also, sometimes face-to-face follow-up by caseworkers did not take place due to security constraints.

Thirdly, many felt they had disappointed their family, who had saved or borrowed money to pay for their migration. Now, rather than being a source of remittance income, the returnees were often a drain on household resources, and consequently, felt disempowered within the family structure. A noticeable trend amongst younger research participants was that one of the first things they did after return was get married – could this be a way of trying to renegotiate membership (and adult identity) in Afghan social and cultural life?

Why is reintegration difficult?

If returns are taking place, reintegration should be part of return policy. It would appear to be beneficial to all involved, particularly the returnee themselves and the society they are returning to. Migration policy-makers aiming to reduce immigration might also hope that successful reintegration of returnees will lessen re-migration. But what is really meant by the term reintegration? Is it just a buzzword used to justify returns or is it a process that can be enabled by assisted return programs? The prefix 're' suggests that returnees are going back to something known to them, but is this really the case? There are number of practical reasons why this may not be the case for Afghans.

Firstly, some are rejected because Kabul is deemed safe for them even if their province of origin is not. This can mean re-integrating to an urban area and lifestyle they have little or no experience of. Secondly, the conflict in Afghanistan is over 35 years old. Many Afghans have spent much of their life outside of Afghanistan, particularly in Pakistan or Iran. Thirdly, even for those who grew up in Kabul, they and Afghanistan will have changed in their absence. All this makes reintegration not straightforward. Given this, we suggest that it is useful to re-examine the term 'reintegration' by looking at the term 'integration'.

There is an established literature on integration (in contrast to limited literature on reintegration). We consider integration to be the process whereby migrants negotiate membership in their new places of settlement; in social, economic, cultural and political terms. It is a two-way process, which recognises the important role of non-migrants. Secondly, whilst there are many practical elements (finding accommodation, employment,

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learning languages, civic involvement) we should also consider socio-cultural and emotional aspects (feeling 'at home', being accepted, making friends). Consequently, reintegration can also be considered a process of (re)negotiating membership in both practical and socio-cultural terms.

Is (assisted) reintegration possible?

It is clear that our research participants are struggling to (re)negotiate their membership in Afghan society. Practical aspects of reintegration (protection, accommodation and employment) were contingent on social networks. Socio-cultural reintegration was also challenging, especially for those who do not have local social networks. Even those with family struggled, due to their perceived failure in Europe and inability to financially support their household.

Those providing reintegration assistance face a difficult task. Considering reintegration equivalent to integration – a long complex process – shows why it is difficult. For example, assistance provided tends to be short-term. Migrants would not be expected to integrate in six months, so why returnees? Assistance is also hampered by a narrow understanding of what reintegration means. That reintegration is a process that could start prior to departure is not recognised; instead, assistance is only given in Afghanistan. Social capital seems to be the most important resource available to returnees; yet activities that strengthen networks (including with family,

and potentially, other returnees) are not prioritised. Reintegration assistance provided focuses on business-planning and finding employment, but is not based on labour market or skills assessment, with most research participants being advised to start a small business, whatever their skills and experience.

However, ultimately, the reintegration of Afghan returnees is shaped by the fact that even those who consented to assisted return mostly do not want to be in Afghanistan. They look outwards, towards future migration, as they do not trust the Afghan government to provide them with services or a stable secure environment. This will make reintegration difficult whatever assistance is provided.

For further reading

Kuschminder, K.; Majidi, N.; Oeppen, C. and Siegel, M. (2013) Complexities and challenges in Afghan Migration, *IS Academy Policy Brief*, No. 14.

Schuster, L. and Majidi, N. (2013), What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans, *Migration Studies*, 1 (2), 221-240.

Notes

1 National Audit Office report (2008) Final report: costing work stream – NAO asylum study, NAO: UK. 2 Majidi, N. (2009) 'Understanding the return and reintegration process of Afghan returnees from the UK' for Altai Consulting, commissioned by DFID Afghanistan.

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THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is part of the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration' (PREMIG), a large-scale research project that explores return migration from Norway and the United Kingdom. The project is led by Research Professor Jørgen Carling. For more information, see www.prio.org/premig.

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