



POLICY BRIEF

Impact of the Situation in Afghanistan on the Central Asian Countries: Implications for Migration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2021, the radical Taliban movement took control of almost the entire territory of Afghanistan. Fearing for their lives, many Afghan citizens want to flee the country. The prospect of a migrant influx from Afghanistan greatly concerns the Central Asian countries, since radical Islamists may also cross the border along with the displaced population. To effectively counter and be prepared for different scenarios, the Central Asian countries have been strengthening their borders and enlisting the support of fellow member states of regional associations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This publication describes the situation in Afghanistan and the related policies of the Central Asian countries in terms of possible forced displacements.



CURRENT CONTEXT

Afghanistan has been at war for the past forty years. The Western model of democracy, Soviet socialism, and the ideas of colonization have never taken root in the country. All attempts to bring peace to this land ended in protracted bloodshed and withdrawal of the external reformers' troops. This always provoked high numbers of internally displaced persons and significant migration flows to the neighbouring states and EU countries, which have been the final destination for many young Afghan men.

Following the withdrawal of the US and NATO troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, the radical Taliban movement took control of almost the entire territory of the country, except the Panjshir province. According to the UN, 18 million people – more than half of Afghanistan's population – are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Poverty is growing, the agencies providing basic social services are close to collapse, and people are left homeless with winter coming. UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that Afghanistan could soon face a humanitarian disaster.

Since the beginning of 2021, 630,000 Afghans have been displaced from their homes.¹ Based on past experience, the destinations targeted by migrants within the country and abroad strongly depend on tribal, linguistic and religious ties. Today's Afghanistan is comprised of over 20 nationalities and 5 ethnic groups. Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, account for 40% of the country's population. Tajiks make up about 25%, Hazaras 15%, and Uzbeks about 10%. Typically, about 95% of Afghan asylum seekers head for Pakistan and Iran. Pashtuns cross the border to Pakistan, and Hazaras try seeking refuge in Iran. A relatively small share of ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks choose Central Asia for temporary resettlement.

While many Afghan citizens want to flee the country, most of them have neither passports nor visas, which makes it impossible to leave in a regular way or even travel within Afghanistan. Despite Taliban assurances not to stop those who want to leave, the new Afghan authorities have set up checkpoints on the roads leading to the borders to screen out people without identity documents. As a result, thousands of Afghans might try to reach the neighbouring countries by alternative routes. They will have to walk bypass mountain trails for several days, pay smugglers for transportation, water and food, and bribe the Taliban when encountering them. For those who previously lived in or were deported from the EU, an encounter with the Taliban in an attempt to cross the border may be fraught with punishment up to the death penalty. In addition, Afghans trying to escape to the neighbouring countries irregularly are in danger of tripping a land mine and unexploded ordnance, which are rampant in almost all of Afghanistan's border regions. Speaking of migration flows from Afghanistan, it is also important to highlight that women, children and minor girls make up the majority of internally displaced persons. The hostilities in Afghanistan and the new rules of conduct in society established by the Taliban may affect them adversely.

¹ According to UNHCR estimates, the total number of IDPs in Afghanistan is 3.5 million. More information is available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2021/09/15/un-high-commissioner-for-refugees-completes-three-day-visit-to-afghanistan/>

AFGHAN REFUGEES IN CENTRAL ASIA

Given the current situation, the Central Asian countries consider to what extent refugee flows from Afghanistan are to be expected. Despite the well-founded fears, no mass movements of Afghan migrants to the borders of the Central Asian states have occurred thus far. In early September, Ylva Johansson, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs and Migration, also stated that there has been no large-scale exodus of Afghans from the country yet. This is due to several factors.

The Taliban control the borders

Currently, all the land borders are controlled by Taliban forces, who are in constant exchange with Tajik and Uzbek warlords who have flipped to their side. Such agreements with local warlords will allow the Taliban to control the movement of the local population.

The Central Asian countries are not attractive to Afghans

The Central Asian countries are not particularly attractive for resettlement or transit due to the implemented policy of deterring and countering the penetration of “undesirable persons” to the Central Asian countries, as well as of preventing mass entry of asylum seekers.

UNHCR statistics clearly reflect a significant decline in the flow of Afghan refugees to all five Central Asian countries over the past twenty years. In Uzbekistan, the number of Afghan refugees decreased from 8,348 in 2000 to 13 persons in 2020. Similarly, a 100-fold decrease in the number of refugees from Afghanistan occurred in Turkmenistan over the same period. In addition, both countries have not had a single Afghan asylum seeker registered in over a decade. A six-, four- and three-fold decrease in the number of Afghan refugees also occurred in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, respectively.

Table 1. Number of refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan in the Central Asian countries, 2000-2020

	Kazakhstan		Kyrgyzstan		Tajikistan		Turkmenistan		Uzbekistan	
	R	AS	R	AS	R	AS	R	AS	R	AS
2000	2460	0	804	87	15354	233	1450	128	8348	1235
2001	2353	10	922	98	15336	376	1515	89	9569	1316
2002	2250	0	871	104	3427	355	1263	0	5716	1060
2003	657	0	648	109	3304	433	1224	0	5470	928
2004	670	0	258	128	1816	0	1030	0	5238	426
2005	760	0	251	117	1006	22	749	0	4740	534
2006	588	21	256	201	917	238	710	0	1415	0
2007	404	5	277	344	1126	142	85	0	1047	0
2008	493	56	267	425	1790	41	46	0	809	0
2009	429	20	323	318	2673	1510	29	0	546	0
2010	593	22	415	232	3126	1607	30	0	304	0
2011	556	36	418	130	3270	2011	31	0	211	0
2012	525	35	377	150	2196	2122	19	0	173	0
2013	537	32	405	147	2004	2253	19	0	138	0
2014	578	24	386	133	1975	123	19	0	123	0
2015	644	49	258	118	1950	286	18	0	106	0
2016	599	87	242	72	2711	431	19	0	26	0
2017	561	164	236	46	2516	440	14	0	20	0
2018	538	164	223	34	2649	315	14	0	13	0
2019	491	181	227	104	3783	1413	14	0	13	0
2020	408	198	219	41	5573	408	14	0	13	0

Source: [UNHCR](#). R – refugees, AS – asylum seekers

Afghan asylum seekers who managed to make it to the Central Asian countries may live without refugee status for years. At the end of August 2021, during rallies outside the US Embassy in Bishkek, Afghan asylum seekers, who had been living in Kyrgyzstan for several years, noted that they had been stuck in the country without benefits nor any prospects for obtaining citizenship or the possibility to leave for Europe or America. According to them, about 150 Afghan citizens, whom Kyrgyzstan refused to grant refugee status, have documents confirming the status under the UN refugee mandate, while over 200 Afghans do not have even this. Due to their undefined status and lack of documents, they cannot leave the country.

The policies of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in relation to refugees from Afghanistan greatly resemble the rather reserved position of Kyrgyzstan. According to the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, some 600 Afghans found refuge in Kazakhstan as of the end of August 2021. While Bishkek and Nur-Sultan declared their readiness to accept only ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, these are just a few hundred families. At the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2021 the President of Kyrgyzstan proposed Bishkek to host the UN agencies evacuated from Afghanistan and announced his readiness to accept 500 students from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan, the only country in the region that did not adopt the 1951 Refugee Convention, allowed Western countries to use its territory for transit evacuation of their citizens from Afghanistan following the recent Taliban takeover. While Uzbekistan has been hosting hundreds of Afghan pilots and their families who secretly fled Afghanistan, it also returned 150 Afghans following an agreement with the Taliban.

Turkmenistan adheres to an even more restrictive refugee policy. Since the witnessed escalation of the conflict, the Turkmen government has returned all asylum seekers back to Afghanistan, including ethnic Turkmen, with some Turkmen families offered to move to Tajikistan. According to Alexander Knyazev, a Russian expert on Central Asia and the Middle East, Turkmenistan is unwilling to accept ethnic Turkmen refugees from Afghanistan as they could claim their rights to lands that their ancestors left in Soviet times. These territories contain the largest gas fields, such as Galkynysh in the Mary velayat.

Of the five countries in the region, only the Republic of Tajikistan continued receiving a significant number of refugees from Afghanistan in recent years. Furthermore, their number increased considerably in 2020 exceeding 5,500 people. However, Afghan refugees in Tajikistan face those challenges that are common to Tajiks themselves, including unemployment and the inability to receive an education. Moreover, according to the Government Decree 325 of 2000, refugees and asylum seekers are neither allowed to live in large cities nor in the border regions of the country, while finding work in rural areas is even difficult for the local population.

The Central Asian borders are closed

As of end of September 2021, all the Central Asian countries have closed their borders to refugees from Afghanistan. Tajikistan, despite its recent announcement to accept refugees, was no exception and closed its borders based on the principle of collective security in the region. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, unable to secure their borders entirely on their own, rely on the Russian military contingent located in both countries. Russia actively helps its allies and continuously provides military and technical assistance that has multiplied over the past few years due to the threats coming from Afghanistan. In the event of a humanitarian crisis, Russia commits to make every effort to prevent refugees from Afghanistan from entering Central Asia and then Russia. This position was reaffirmed on 15 September 2021 in Dushanbe at a meeting of the Foreign and Defence Ministers, as well as security secretaries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) countries².

Although Uzbekistan is not a CSTO member, the Uzbek Foreign Ministry has repeatedly denied information about its alleged readiness to open its borders to people fleeing the Taliban regime. Official Tashkent, having stopped accepting transit flights with asylum seekers from Afghanistan, made it clear that it does not intend to become a long-time transit country for the NATO states. Moreover, on the eve of the presidential elections, Uzbekistan warned that any attempts to cross the border, regardless of their reasons, would be suppressed in accordance with the law.

Turkmenistan also refused to accept Afghan refugees, but unlike its neighbours, the leader of Turkmenistan referred to the difficult epidemiological situation associated with the spread of COVID-19. Although Turkmenistan has always been neutral and had no issues with the Taliban, the Ministry of Defence purchased modern weapons to guard its border to Afghanistan, pulling heavy weaponry and military aircraft to the border. In recent years, Ashgabat has significantly increased the number of troops at the Afghan border and is launching fortification projects to erect concrete fences.

In general, the Central Asian countries, being members of regional organizations such as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, CSTO, and Commonwealth of Independent States, as well as a buffer zone for Russia, on which they strongly depend both economically and politically, most likely will not change their policies regarding the reception of Afghan refugees.

WHY ARE THE CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES UNWILLING TO ACCEPT REFUGEES FROM AFGHANISTAN?

The Central Asian countries name *security* as one of the main reasons for sealing off their borders to refugees from Afghanistan. There is a threat that members of radical Islamist militias may try to enter the neighbouring countries disguised as refugees. This scenario is quite realistic given the growth of a whole generation of supporters of non-traditional Islam foreign to the region and inclined to radical measures aimed at overthrowing the secular system, which happened under the influence of Pakistani, Afghan and Middle Eastern curators in Central Asia and the North Caucasus over the past decades. Suffice it to recall Takhir Yuldashev, the leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the civil war in Tajikistan, the terrorist attacks in southern Kazakhstan and the Batken events in Kyrgyzstan when thousands of armed Islamists were to enter the Fergana Valley. The main goal, as seen by Islamic activists earlier and today, is the building of a Sharia state throughout Central Asia.

The second important reason to deny Afghan refugees is the *lack of necessary resources*. For example, the leadership of Tajikistan, having the longest border with Afghanistan in Central Asia, has repeatedly asked for assistance from donor organizations and the UN to build the necessary infrastructure in the border areas. However, over the past 20 years, no international structure has provided practical assistance in creating an infrastructure for receiving refugees and asylum seekers.

Finally, the third reason relates to *the risks of an increased illegal turnover of weapons, ammunition, explosives, psychotropic substances and narcotic drugs* that can travel with the flows of refugees from Afghanistan to the Central Asian countries. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 6.7 tons of opium were produced in Afghanistan in 2019, an increase of 21% over 2018. Drug traffic is growing every year. All of Afghanistan's neighbours in South and Central Asia are sounding the alarm.

¹ The Collective Security Treaty Organization includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan. See here: <https://odkb-csto.org/>



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The situation assessment shows that no refugee crisis has yet occurred in the border regions of Central Asia since the recent Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the countries of the Central Asian region need to collectively prepare for any possible scenario.

Like 40 and 20 years ago, the situation in Afghanistan is unpredictable and not a local problem. Further developments will depend on the nature of the actions of the new political elite of Afghanistan and of the countries that have already established contacts with them or are in a process of doing so. Primarily, this concerns global players such as the United States, China and Russia, as well as regional stakeholders – Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, India, Saudi Arabia, and the Central Asian countries. It is important for states to have a dialogue with all stakeholders in the region, despite their principle positions favouring a political resolution of the armed conflict in Afghanistan.

If the Central Asian countries open their doors to asylum seekers from Afghanistan, it will be important to create the appropriate infrastructure for receiving refugees in the border areas. In this regard, the support of developed countries of the West and Asia, which have the experience and means to implement such initiatives, will be essential. The EU could consider channelling financial and diplomatic assistance proactively through humanitarian non-governmental organizations, regional structures, international organizations, and global units such as the UN. In addition, the EU MS and other Western countries should consider the possibility of accepting and resettling Afghan refugees.

Referring to existing security concerns, the Central Asian countries shall adequately apply international legal regulations, which provide for the identification of refugees as opposed to persons posing a threat to national security. Together with the UN agencies, other international organizations, and with the participation of the mentioned stakeholders' governments, the Central Asian countries could develop a unified methodology to identify radical terrorist elements at their borders.

The development of such methodology primarily foresees an analysis of the Central Asian countries' legal frameworks for unification and compliance with international human rights law, which is just as important for the areas of security and antiterrorism as for refugee protection. For example, the national regulations and constitutions of the Central Asian countries may implement the non-refoulement principle in relation to refugees or asylum seekers in different ways. The interpretation of laws may also take different forms and approaches. Some acts explicitly mention refugees and asylum seekers. Others, with reference to certain reasons, prescribe expulsion that endangers the expelled person. Here it is important to use global best practices in the development of regional legislation on refugees and common standards for their protection.

In fairness, it should be noted that in 2012 Turkmenistan hosted a ministerial conference of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, where its member-states adopted the Ashgabat Declaration, which recognizes that "over 14 centuries ago, Islam laid down the bases for granting refuge, which is now deeply ingrained in the Islamic faith, heritage and tradition". However, everything remained on paper, and the provisions of this declaration have not achieved the same significance and legal value as instruments in other regions, such as the Latin American Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. Although this declaration is not legally binding, since 2016 some fourteen Latin American states have incorporated its expanded 'refugee' definition into their national legislation. The courts of these countries have accordingly ruled that the regional definition is part of the national regulations and that it should be

incorporated into the national legal framework. Thus, there occurred synchronous, unanimous unification of legal concepts for the avoidance of disagreements. This experience is undoubtedly useful for the countries of the Central Asian region.

Finally, it is important for countries not only to be guided by Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution”, but also to place special emphasis on the protection of women, children and minors among asylum seekers. All the Central Asian countries are obliged to abide by the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Central Asian governments should also follow the UNHCR guidelines for the protection of refugee women, prevention and response to sexual violence against refugees. It is also essential to take the necessary preventive measures to protect and provide care for minor refugees and to keep humanitarian corridors open at least for this category of refugees, who do not pose a threat from a security standpoint.

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