



## POLICY BRIEF

# Displaced Afghans in Central Asia: Barriers, Risks and Future Prospects

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than two years since the Taliban takeover, Central Asian states have hosted a small, but overlooked population of displaced Afghans. While the fears of an exodus from Afghanistan into Central Asia did not materialise, those Afghans who fled to Central Asia face a precarious future with limited opportunities for permanent settlement or onward migration. This policy brief provides an overview of the situation around Afghans exiled in Central Asia, the responses of local governments and the international community. Looking towards the future, the brief also outlines what policy responses are needed to address the needs of Afghans in the region.



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## CURRENT CONTEXT

The roots of the existing Afghan diaspora in Central Asia can be traced to the late Soviet period. In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, many Afghan nationals who had studied or received military training in the Soviet Union remained in the newly independent Russia, Ukraine and the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. At the height of the Afghan Civil War between 1992 and 1996, it is estimated that over 100,000 Afghans resided on the territory of the former Soviet Union although accurate numbers from that period are not available.<sup>1</sup> While most Afghans from this time period eventually either resettled abroad or obtained citizenship in their respective countries of residence, some are still living as temporary asylum seekers unable to obtain citizenship or permanent residency status.<sup>2</sup>

For decades, Central Asian governments and Western partners have expressed concerns about the potential of a massive influx of Afghans into the region as the result of continued violence and instability in the country. As the Taliban gradually retook control over Afghanistan in 2020 and 2021, culminating in the capture of Kabul and the ousting of President Ashraf Ghani, Central Asian states braced for the arrival of Afghan refugees.

In the summer of 2021, about a month before the fall of Kabul, Tajikistan announced it was ready to host up to 100,000 displaced Afghans on its territory.<sup>3</sup> Despite promises by Tajik President Emomali Rahmon of support to co-ethnic Tajiks, who make up around 40 percent of Afghanistan's population, fleeing the Taliban regime, this assistance never materialized.<sup>4</sup> Instead, citing national security concerns and pressure from Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states, including the Russian Federation, Tajik authorities have kept their 1,357-kilometer border with Afghanistan closed, preventing the arrival of any potential Afghans seeking international protection.<sup>5</sup>

Since the Taliban takeover, it is estimated that approximately 19,000 Afghans fled to neighbouring Uzbekistan (13,000) and Tajikistan (6,000).<sup>6</sup> While there are no data available for new arrivals in Turkmenistan, around 500 Afghan university students were relocated from Afghanistan to Kyrgyzstan where they are completing their studies.<sup>7</sup> Plans by Kazakhstan to host several hundred Afghan refugees in the city of Shymkent were scrapped in August 2021 in response to public discontent on Kazakh social media.<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to forecasts of an Afghan refugee crisis in Central Asia, the region did not become a major destination for Afghans fleeing persecution and reprisals at home. This is partly explained by the heavily militarised border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to the north, which acts as a deterrent for any potential migrant crossings. In the 2010s, cross-border incidents, including kidnappings of Tajik villagers and border guards, were a frequent occurrence on the Tajik-Afghan border, forcing Tajik authorities to request security aid from the international community.<sup>9</sup> Mounting security concerns over the presence of ISIS-Khorasan in some areas of Northern Afghanistan are only reinforcing the securitisation of the border area.

Moreover, since 2021, the Taliban gained control over all border crossings with Central Asian neighbours, a development that may prevent those opposed to the regime from fleeing. In addition to that, once in Central Asia, possibilities for onward migration through Kazakhstan and Russia are limited due to the ongoing war with Ukraine, which had served as a transit country in the past for Afghans headed to the EU. Worsening relations between the EU and Russia have also had an impact on border surveillance. In late 2023, for example, Finland announced that it would be closing its border with Russia in response to a spike in asylum seeker crossings.<sup>10</sup>

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Despite their proximity to Afghanistan, the five Central Asian states are not considered as viable destinations by Afghan migrants due primarily to the lack of employment opportunities, access to protected status, and enduring stigma towards Afghan nationals. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, UNHCR has voiced concerns about decreasing refugee recognition rates and cases of refoulement to unsafe countries of origin.<sup>11</sup> As part of the Global Compact on Refugees, the Kyrgyz government has promised to work towards providing asylum seekers with access to basic social and health services, but these changes have yet to be implemented.<sup>12</sup>

Even in Tajikistan, where there is no language barrier between Afghans and Tajiks, displaced Afghans find themselves in a precarious position with limited prospects for the future.<sup>13</sup> Based on the Tajik government's Resolution #325, asylum seekers are only allowed to settle in designated districts, a law that limits their freedom of mobility within the country.<sup>14</sup> Forced returns of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan by Tajik authorities in recent years have only increased concerns within the Afghan refugee community about their long-term security in the country<sup>15</sup>.

Fleeing the Taliban regime, Afghan families have found themselves dispersed across the region. Iran and Pakistan remain by far the most important destinations for Afghans fleeing the country given their long history of hosting Afghan refugee populations. Iran, in particular, is not only home to a large Afghan diaspora, but serves as the starting point of established irregular migration routes in the direction of Europe via neighbouring Türkiye.

In 2023, however, both Iran and Pakistan have increased deportations of Afghan nationals with over 500,000 of them being forcibly returned to Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> Most of the 600,000 Afghans who arrived in Pakistan since the Taliban takeover have been unable to regularise their stay with Pakistani authorities, who have prevented UNHCR and local NGOs from issuing registration cards, leaving new arrivals undocumented.<sup>17</sup> The vast majority of displaced Afghans in Central Asian countries have family members stuck in precarious legal and financial situations in Pakistan, Iran and Türkiye, with no avenues for onward mobility or family reunification.

Afghan nationals currently in Central Asia find themselves in a liminal state with limited prospects of legalisation, integration, or resettlement.

## POLICY MEASURES

### Dim prospects for resettlement

While comparatively small in size, the Afghan refugee population in Central Asia faces many of the same constraints as their compatriots in Pakistan and Iran. The primary concern is the lack of resettlement opportunities from Central Asian countries.

In October 2022, Germany announced a federal humanitarian admission program for Afghans who face persecution at the hands of the Taliban, with a monthly resettlement quota of 1,000 persons.<sup>18</sup> Displaced Afghans currently in Central Asia – even those who were affiliated with the German government or worked with German humanitarian organisations – are excluded from this program, which only applies to applicants from within Afghanistan or Pakistan.<sup>19</sup>

The United Kingdom also operates two resettlement programs for Afghans: the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). While ARAP is reserved for Afghans who worked with the UK military, ACRS offers resettlement to human rights and democracy activists as well as vulnerable minorities, including women and



Many of these Afghan students evacuated to complete their studies at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek have received P-1/P-2 referrals. The process is, however, cumbersome and lengthy, lasting up to two years, exposing Afghans to the possibility of overstaying their student visas while waiting for a decision.

LGBTQ+.<sup>20</sup> Within ACRS, there are two pathways for resettlement: referral by UNHCR or association with several accredited UK organisations. The pace of resettlement remains very slow, with just 107 Afghans resettled by 2023 under ACRS since the completion of the evacuation of UK-affiliated Afghans from Kabul in 2021.<sup>21</sup> According to UNHCR, referrals to the resettlement program will focus on Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran, without any mention of Central Asia.<sup>22</sup>

The United States administers several resettlement programs for Afghan nationals who are residing in third countries. Afghans formerly employed by the United States government are eligible for the Special Immigration Visa (SIV) program and more than 26,000 SIVs were issued at US diplomatic missions abroad, including in Central Asia countries.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the United States runs the P-1 and P-2 resettlement pathways that are designed to provide protection to Afghans who cooperated with US government organisations and contractors, NGOs, and media outlets. Afghans cannot apply to be considered for the program but must receive a referral from a US federal employee or an accredited institution or organisation.<sup>24</sup> According to the most recent public data available, around 45,000 have received such referrals, an unknown number of whom are in Central Asian countries.<sup>25</sup>

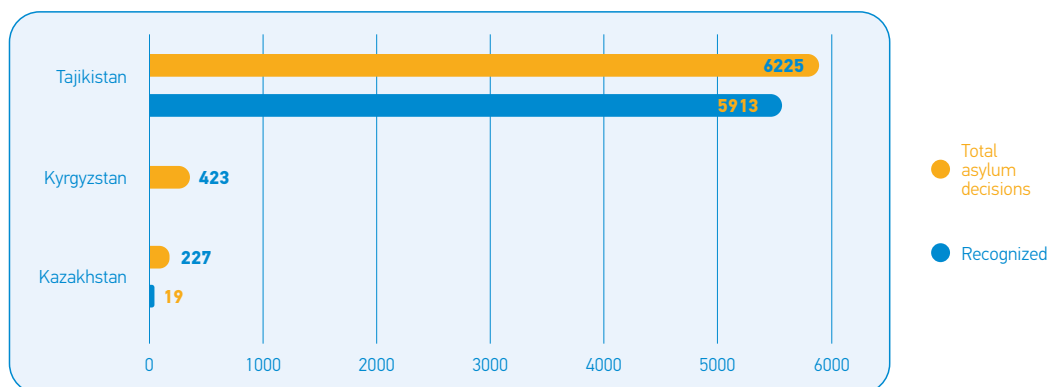
Since the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, more than 500 Afghan nationals have arrived in Kyrgyzstan on student visas to complete their university studies, primarily at the American University of Central Asia.<sup>26</sup> Upon graduation, however, these students can neither remain in Kyrgyzstan nor return to Afghanistan where many of them could face reprisals. Many of these Afghan students evacuated to complete their studies at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek have received P-1/P-2 referrals. The process is, however, cumbersome and lengthy, lasting up to two years, exposing Afghans to the possibility of overstaying their student visas while waiting for a decision.

Canada, which has resettled 40,000 Afghans since 2021 – the most of any Western country – provides an important avenue for protection, but the demand exceeds Canada's current capacities.<sup>27</sup> For Afghan nationals in Central Asia, Canada is the only country that allows them to be privately sponsored by Canadian citizens or organisations, even in cases where they are not under the UNHCR mandate or have been recognised as refugees by the host country. The application and nomination process remain difficult to access, particularly for Afghans looking for sponsorship opportunities, without any personal or professional ties to Canada.

Finally, Brazil offers a humanitarian visa program for Afghans but requires applicants to appear in person at a Brazilian diplomatic mission, of which there are none in Central Asia.

## LIMITED ACCESS TO PROTECTION IN COUNTRY

**Chart 1. Asylum applications by Afghan citizens in Central Asia (2021 to mid-2023)**



Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder

While awaiting resettlement, displaced Afghans face significant hurdles in accessing international protection and regularising their stays in the Central Asian states where they currently reside. Since the Taliban takeover, Central Asian countries have allowed a very limited number of displaced Afghans to seek shelter within their borders. Upon arrival, Afghan asylum seekers have faced a diverse set of hurdles in each country from the absence of an asylum procedure in Uzbekistan, to low recognition rates in Kyrgyzstan, and the lack of a path to permanent residency in Tajikistan.

Tajikistan, which hosts the largest population of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers (over 10,000) in Central Asia, allows Afghans to remain in the country but bans them from residing in the capital city of Dushanbe. Several generations of Afghan refugees currently live in Tajikistan, but they are effectively prevented from obtaining Tajik citizenship, forcing them to regularly renew their residency documents in the country.<sup>28</sup> There have been multiple media reports of Afghan nationals having to pay bribes to extend their residency permits and visas.<sup>29</sup> Currently, the Afghan embassy in Tajikistan is under the control of the deposed government and cannot issue valid travel documents, which means Afghan nationals cannot renew their expired Afghan passports.

In Kyrgyzstan, while the overall number of Afghan asylum seekers remains low, those who have sought international protection have been confronted with low recognition rates, bureaucratic hurdles, and long waiting times. Between 2021 and 2023, not a single Afghan asylum seeker was recognised out of a total of 423 decisions involving Afghan citizens.<sup>30</sup> When applying for asylum in Kyrgyzstan, asylum seekers are issued temporary three-month residency permits that must be renewed while the application is being processed. While the procedure is supposed to take up to six months, many Afghan asylum seekers are left in limbo for well over a year. During this time, they have no access to the labour market or social services, leaving them exposed to discrimination and harassment.<sup>31</sup> Some Afghan asylum seekers have, for example, been unable to obtain Kyrgyz birth certificates for their children born in the country.

Situated the farthest away from Afghanistan's borders, Kazakhstan hosted just over 300 refugees in 2023 with most being Afghan citizens who have been in the country for a long period of time.<sup>32</sup>

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There is little willingness to host an Afghan refugee population, even with assistance from Western donors, on the part of Central Asian states that lack the economic, infrastructural and logistical capacities to provide adequate support to Afghans in need.

Similar to other countries in the region, refugees in Kazakhstan live on renewable one-year temporary residence permits with fewer rights to education, employment, and healthcare than Kazakh citizens and other foreign citizens with permanent residency permits.<sup>33</sup> Recognition rates have remained low during the past decade, but changes to the asylum procedure enacted in 2022 severely limit the ability of new Afghan asylum seekers to obtain international protection. Since 2021, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Labour and Social Protection has been tasked with processing asylum claims instead of the Ministry of Interior as had been the case in the past. Internal ministry rules now dictate that asylum seekers must present documentary evidence of persecution at home and these documents can only be issued by the official government bodies of their country of citizenship.<sup>34</sup> Under these rules, Afghan asylum seekers must obtain official letters proving their persecution from the very Taliban government they had fled in the first place. As a result, the likelihood of an Afghan citizen's asylum case receiving a positive verdict in Kazakhstan is minute.

The situation is particularly difficult in Uzbekistan, the only country in Central Asia that is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. Since 2018, Uzbekistan has been reviewing the recommendations to accede to the Convention as outlined by the UNHCR and Uzbekistan's National Human Rights Centre (NHRC), but no changes to existing legislation are currently being developed.<sup>35</sup>

In the absence of national asylum legislation, Afghan nationals in Uzbekistan are left in a precarious position with few legal protections. Many live in Uzbekistan on temporary visas that must be renewed multiple times a year for a heavy fee without access to education, healthcare and the formal labour market.<sup>36</sup> In Uzbekistan's Surkhandarya region, bordering Afghanistan, the EU and UNDP have launched a programme to finance vocational education and entrepreneurship initiatives for over 400 displaced Afghans in the area.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, Afghan migrants currently residing in the region complain about the lack of a clear pathway to citizenship despite long-term residency.<sup>38</sup>

Overall, Central Asian governments are reticent to extend international protection to those Afghans already in the country due to fears that granting asylum or other forms of permanent residency would incentivise new arrivals. Moreover, the Afghan refugee issue is perceived to be the responsibility of Western countries and Central Asian states continue to perceive Afghan migrants as a burden and security liability.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, Central Asian states have maintained a close-door policy towards Afghan refugees and asylum seekers. Central Asian governments usually cite security concerns as one of their primary motives for keeping displaced out of the region. In addition, Central Asian policymakers believe that the United States and NATO member states that were part of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan since 2001 should be responsible for the well-being of Afghan citizens affected by the Taliban's return to power. There is little willingness to host an Afghan refugee population, even with assistance from Western donors, on the part of Central Asian states that lack the economic, infrastructural and logistical capacities to provide adequate support to Afghans in need.<sup>39</sup>

Keeping this political reality in mind, the key to addressing the needs of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers currently in Central Asia is in the expansion of resettlement programs. The launch of WelcomeCorps by the U.S. Department of State in 2023, which allows private US citizens to sponsor refugees for resettlement, is a welcome step in the right direction.<sup>40</sup>

Resettlement pledges by EU countries for the humanitarian admission of Afghans at risk have remained low and underfilled.<sup>41</sup> At-risk groups, such as women, children, and ethnic minorities need to be prioritized in the resettlement process since they face the risk of violence in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Currently, Canada administers resettlement programs for human rights defenders and allows for the private sponsorship of Afghan refugees, but its processing capacity is limited. While Canada's commitment to resettle 136,000 refugees through 2025, as expressed at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, is laudable, other countries should also contribute to the effort of protecting vulnerable Afghans. This would require countries to expand eligibility requirements and consider the barriers to accessing existing pathways as experienced by Afghans in Central Asia, Pakistan and Iran.

Sweden, Denmark and Finland all announced in 2022 and 2023 that they would be extending international protection to all Afghan women and girls, but this only applies to those who are already on their territory. No mechanisms were put into place to assist with the resettlement of Afghan women and girls currently stranded in and out of Afghanistan. Such statements do not extend any meaningful protection to Afghan women at risk abroad, but in fact incentivize them to use irregular – and often perilous – means, with the help of smugglers, to reach these EU countries.

The number of Afghans who fled to Central Asia may be small, but their situation remains precarious. While much of the focus of policymakers is on Pakistan and Iran, the Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in Central Asia face an equally uncertain future. Central Asian states are also gradually establishing diplomatic relations with the Taliban government, a development that could have negative consequences for Afghans exiled in Central Asia.<sup>42</sup> Such cooperation could facilitate the deportation or extradition of vulnerable groups to Afghanistan where they may face persecution. In 2023, the Adilet Legal Clinic, a NGO assisting asylum seekers with access to international protection in Kyrgyzstan, released a report criticising proposed legislation that would allow for the deportation of asylum-seekers in defiance of international law. While in Kyrgyzstan, these legal changes are still pending, these proposals show that the right to asylum and international protection is under threat in Central Asia.

Considering the prevalence of negative prejudices towards Afghans in the region, it is crucial to invest in public awareness campaigns that humanise refugees and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan. On social media and within society, Afghans are often caricaturised as terrorists, drug traffickers and Islamic fundamentalists – an image that sows fear and distrust among the local population. More efforts should be made to counter these narratives and sensitise the host societies about the need for refugee protection, support and solidarity.

Finally, the EU nations and other Western donors to Central Asia should continue supporting capacity-building efforts in the region, to bolster local asylum procedures and increase the ability of states to process displaced populations, including Afghans. When paired with sincere commitments to resettlement, such support would be welcomed by local authorities.

Existing EU initiatives to support education for Afghan women in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan represent much needed forms of assistance, but they must be followed up by either resettlement opportunities abroad or pathways to permanent residency within the region. If asylum recognition rates remain as they are in Central Asia and no new resettlement programmes are put into place, the Afghan population currently in exile in Central Asia will face the choice of deportation, irregular migration or life as an undocumented migrant.

The number of Afghans who fled to Central Asia may be small, but their situation remains precarious. While much of the focus of policymakers is on Pakistan and Iran, the Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in Central Asia face an equally uncertain future.

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