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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Implementing the Pact – strengthening comprehensive migration partnerships with priority countries: – Afghanistan

1. **AFGHANISTAN: STATE OF PLAY**

Recent data and migration trends

Afghanistan is a major country of origin for migration routes towards the EU, particularly in terms of **irregular migration and mixed migration flows**. Afghan nationals were the largest group of illegal arrivals in 2019, and the fifth largest in 2020, following the decrease in the use of the Eastern Mediterranean route. The main countries of transit/destination are Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, with Greece being the first point of entry into the EU. This trend decreased by 70 % in 2020, with 10 140 Afghans detected compared to 34 154 in 2019. Afghan women and children – including unaccompanied minors – account for an increasingly significant proportion of illegal arrivals. Notably, while in 2019 more than 80 % of all Afghan nationals' illegal border crossings were reported along the Eastern Mediterranean route, in 2020, 50 % were via the Western Balkans route and around 40 % via the Eastern Mediterranean route, reflecting a shift in trends due to COVID-19-related border and travel restrictions.

Furthermore, Afghans are among the top three nationalities submitting **asylum** applications in the EU, with an average EU asylum recognition rate of around 46 % in 2019 and 51 % in 2020.

In terms of **returns**, Afghan citizens were among the top four nationalities receiving a return decision in 2018 and 2019, although there was a steady decrease in return rates from 30 % in 2016 to 8 % in 2019. In 2019, out of 30 080 return decisions, only 2 375 Afghans were effectively returned (7.9 %)ⁱ. Nonetheless, return and readmission practices are well established with Afghanistan, following the signature of the Joint Way Forward (JWF) agreement in 2016. Afghanistan has a high number of returnees from neighbouring countries: 9.3 million in the period 2012-2020, with 5.7 million former internally displaced persons (IDPs) returning home. Returnees from abroad are primarily from **Iran and Pakistan**, with nearly 932 000 undocumented Afghans returned either voluntarily or forcibly between 1 March 2020 and 25 February 2021.ⁱⁱ These two countries continue to host very significant numbers of Afghans, with some formally recorded as refugees, and others not.

Turkey is now emerging as a destination country for Afghans (top nationality of irregular migrants in Turkey, since 2018) with a peak in 2019 of 201 437ⁱⁱⁱ, and 22 606 international protection applications in 2020 – more than three times higher than any other nationality.

According to the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix, the number of IDPs in Afghanistan as at June 2020 is estimated at 4.7 million.

Developments in policy and practice

For Afghanistan, **economic and conflict-related factors** are important drivers for emigration and internal displacement, yet **climate change and disaster-induced displacement** (e.g. flooding, drought) factors are increasing. Afghanistan is experiencing a complex and deteriorating humanitarian crisis, due to violence against civilians and infrastructures^{iv}. 18.4 million people (45 % of the population) are expected to be in need of humanitarian aid in 2021^v.

The spread of COVID-19 has also had a significant economic and social impact on the country, with households reporting difficulties in relation to basic needs and remittances. A recent study warned that coping mechanisms may include child labour and exploitation (including child begging and child marriage). The number of Taliban targeted attacks on Afghan activists, media workers, judges and government officials has increased significantly, despite the launch of peace talks in September 2020 in Doha. The decision by NATO Allies to start withdrawing forces from the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, starting on 1 May, **might** have consequences on the country's **political** stability, the peace process, and the international community's civil activities, including **those of** the EU and **its** Member States. This volatile situation is likely to have an impact on migration.

The Afghan government recognises the importance of migration management within the context of its broader political and economic goals. The **Comprehensive Migration Policy for Afghanistan (CMP)**^{vi}, under development since 2018 (currently pending adoption), defines more than ninety policy measures across four main areas (return and reintegration, regular migration, prevention of irregular migration, and migration and development) whilst also prioritising climate-induced migration. In line with these developments, Afghanistan is developing and implementing a border management strategy.

2. **EU COOPERATION WITH AFGHANISTAN AND THE REGION**

In 2021, based on the lessons learned from the Joint Way Forward (JWF) that expired in October 2020, the Commission successfully concluded the new Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation (JDMC) with Afghanistan. This arrangement aims at preventing irregular migration, countering migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, facilitating the return process for Afghan nationals who do not qualify for international protection, and providing support for the sustainable reintegration of returnees, whilst identifying key actions (i.e. use of scheduled or non-scheduled flights; acquisition of travel documentation; information-sharing; and awareness-raising) to be carried out by the EU and the government of Afghanistan^{vii}. Furthermore, through the 'Reintegration and Development Assistance in Afghanistan' (RADA) project, implemented by the IOM, the EU has assisted in the voluntary return and reintegration of Afghan migrants returning to their home country from other third countries (including Iran and Pakistan), whilst also supporting the sustainable reintegration of those returning home from the EU.

The EU's relationship with Afghanistan is also guided by the 2017 EU Strategy for Afghanistan, which is aimed at strengthening the country's institutions and economy. The 2017 EU-Afghanistan Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development (CAPD) supports a mutually beneficial relationship in areas such as human rights, the rule of law, health, rural development, education, science and technology, the fight against terrorism, regional aspects of migration and forced displacement, organised crime and narcotics. In 2020, the EU and its Member States linked their future political and financial support to delivery on the commitments agreed at the Geneva Ministerial Conference, and to a series of principles outlined in the '*Key elements for sustained international support to peace and development in Afghanistan*'^{viii}.

Between 2014 and 2020, EUR 1.4 billion in EU cooperation funding focused on three core sectors to ensure better opportunities for the Afghan people (peace, stability and democracy; sustainable jobs and growth; basic services). Since 2016, the EU has also spent more than EUR 225 million in development aid to address the challenges of migration and forced displacement^{ix}, mostly in Afghanistan, but also in Iran and Pakistan^x.

Afghanistan is an active member of the Budapest Process, and the EU is currently funding two regional projects on improving migration management and integrated border management along the Silk Road, both of which cover Afghanistan (implemented by ICMPD^{xi}). Additionally, Afghanistan benefits from regional programmes on preventing and fighting trafficking in human beings and the smuggling of migrants, as well as a project on law enforcement cooperation between the EU and relevant third countries along the Silk Road.

The EU strategy on Central Asia and the EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan support regional economic integration and connectivity, whilst supporting refugees within the region.

Bilateral cooperation

Afghanistan has continued to seek opportunities for bilateral labour mobility channels with its neighbours, as well as mechanisms for remittances to its economy (such as signed memoranda of understanding with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates to enable temporary labour migration to these markets)^{xii}. Several Member States have concluded agreements with Afghanistan (Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands and Sweden) aimed at improving cooperation on a range of issues, chief among which is the issue of returns.

Global approach to cooperation

The Afghan refugee situation is a challenge both for the region and globally. In 2012, in view of the high number of Afghans hosted by Pakistan and Iran, the three countries, together with UNHCR, concluded the *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries* (SSAR), which is aligned with the national priorities and policies of the respective governments. This strategy considers international solidarity and collective responsibility to be vital aspects of refugee protection, requiring durable solutions (resettlement, voluntary return and local integration) and resilience-based development. It operates as a platform upon which UN agencies, humanitarian and development organisations and NGOs build their interventions. Subsequent global agreements (the 2016 Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees) were built on the SSAR, to promote responsibility-sharing by engaging states, international finance institutions, humanitarian and development actors, the private sector and civil society^{xiii}. The EU has taken a leading role in this by becoming the first Chair of the Core Group in 2021^{xiv}.

Durable solutions that focus on policy development and (international) financial support should remain a priority.

3. WAY FORWARD: AREAS TO EXPLORE/TOPICS FOR DEBATE

- Engaging Afghanistan on all aspects of migration, as part of the **implementation of the external dimension of the Pact on Migration and Asylum**, and taking into account the complex and sensitive political environment in the country and the region, including the regional dimension of Afghan refugees, remain a priority for the European Union and its Member States.
- The **‘Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation’** represents a continuous joint commitment to step up cooperation on issues of mutual concern: preventing irregular migration, countering migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, facilitating the return process for Afghan nationals who do not qualify for international protection, and providing support for the sustainable reintegration of returnees.

- Internal security, socio-economic and political developments, the global pandemic, and political developments in the surrounding region may have an **impact on migratory movements within and outside of Afghanistan**.
- The Afghan government will continue its efforts to establish a governance framework for the Comprehensive Migration Policy (CMP) at national, regional and local level. Given the rates of return over the course of 2020, there is a strong need for sustained reintegration support to ensure adequate opportunities for returnees and IDPs in origin, host and return communities. The lack of such a framework will impact negatively on unemployment, social cohesion, trafficking in human beings and other risks related to irregular migration. Conversely, access to safety nets, basic health, education and livelihood opportunities, and reliable information via awareness-raising campaigns are crucial as the country recovers from COVID-19.
- In the coming year, mobility is expected to become increasingly linked to vaccination. Continued support and burden-sharing with Iran and Pakistan in sectors such as health, education and livelihoods is vital, as is ensuring that both countries have a vaccination plan in place that includes vaccinating Afghan refugees/migrants. **Migrant health will undoubtedly be a growing topic of interest in the region.** The inclusion of vulnerable groups, undocumented migrants, and the need for multiple doses, will require international support, which the EU and Member States could provide within the framework of the SSAR Support Platform and the Core Group.

Guiding Questions

- What should the priorities for strengthened cooperation on migration and forced displacement be, taking into account the regional dimension and regional links to Central Asia, Pakistan and Iran?
- What specific policies and tools should be used to ensure that all aspects of EU migration policy, including return and readmission, are fully implemented?
- What current bilateral and multilateral cooperation actions do Member States have with Afghanistan, including actions addressing Afghans in Pakistan and Iran?
(Delegations are invited to indicate their current actions)

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- i https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_EIORD_custom_959864/default/table?lang=en
- ii <https://dtm.iom.int/afghanistan>; <https://afghanistan.iom.int/pakistan-returns>.
- iii <https://en.goc.gov.tr/irregular-migration>.
- iv <https://www.pri.org/stories/2021-02-12/afghan-returnees-struggle-unemployment-violence-home>
- v <https://gho.unocha.org/>
- vi Supported by the EU and with technical support from ICMPD
- vii 12191/16
- viii https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet_eu_afghanistan_november-2020_final_final.pdf
- ix https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet_eu_afghanistan_november-2020_final_final.pdf
- x https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet_eu_afghanistan_november-2020_final_final.pdf
- xi Other regional projects funded by the EU: the Global Action against Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants – Asia and the Middle East (GLO.ACT), which covers Afghanistan and is implemented by UNODC; the IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM).
- xii Efforts in this regard are supported by the EU through the Budapest Process.
- xiii <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/article/afghanistan-refugee-situation>.
- xiv Current members: Denmark, EU (chair in 2021), Germany, Japan, Korea, Switzerland, Qatar, Turkey, UK, USA, Asia Development Bank, UNDP, and World Bank. Information on the SSAR Support Platform: <https://ssar-platform.org/>