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Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Afghan Migration to Europe From Iran

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Abstract

Afghans have consistently been one of the largest groups of refugees arriving in Europe, with more than 600,000 Afghan asylum applications in European countries over the past ten years, second only in number to Syrians. Afghan migration to Europe is a response to both the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and protracted displacement in countries hosting the vast majority of Afghan refugees, including Iran, where there is a well-documented lack of protection, rights, and opportunities. Drawing on interviews undertaken in Turkey and Greece during the last three months of 2015, this article examines the experiences of Afghans who travelled to Europe from Iran, where they had been living for many years, and in some cases had been born. Their experiences, particularly when seen in the context of Afghan mobility historically, complicate dichotomies between “forced” and “voluntary” migration, and “origin” and “destination” countries, which underpin the Common European Asylum System. It is clear that mobility forms an important survival strategy for Afghans and others living in situations of protracted displacement, for whom efforts to provide durable solutions have been largely unsuccessful. Harnessing this mobility by facilitating and supporting—rather than preventing—onward migration is the key to unlocking protracted displacement.

Keywords

Afghanistan; categories; Europe; Iran; migration; mobility; protracted displacement; refugees

Issue

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1. Introduction

Khalil Hussaini (not his real name) was just five years old when his family left Afghanistan. He doesn’t remember much about his time in Afghanistan but recalls all too clearly the difficulties of building a life in Iran: the constant search for security; the harassment and discrimination; his failed attempts to become an engineer. Life for the family was hard without papers establishing their right to be in the country. Khalil met an Iranian, and together they opened a garage, but when Khalil’s friend left Iran, a rival garage owner, who knew he didn’t have a work permit, had his business closed down. Khalil took up construction work to support the family, including his mother, who was suffering from poor health and needed to make frequent, expensive trips to the hospital.

“An Afghan can only become a manual worker in Iran” he told us, “all the dirty jobs are done by Afghans, and their salaries are much lower than the Iranians.” Worse still, he said, there are no rights, no freedoms: “Afghans don’t have a right to drive a motorcycle or a car. You cannot buy a SIM card if you are an Afghan in Iran.” Then there was the violence: “Iranians treat Afghans as if they are animals. I was stabbed twice while working at a construction site in Iran.” However, it was only when Khalil talked about his fiancé and their desire to get married that his sense of hopelessness became apparent and he started to cry. “Our lives,” he said, “slipped through our hands in Iran.” Faced with a lifetime of poverty and with no hope for a better future, the family sold everything they had, crossing the Iranian border to Turkey and onwards to Greece.

We interviewed Khalil, a 20-year-old Hazara Afghan, while he was waiting for a ferry at the Greek island port of Mytilene with his fiancé, parents, two brothers, and their children. It was October 2015, and Khalil and his family were nearing the end of a difficult and dangerous journey that had taken them many months. They were not alone. This was the height of the so-called “migration crisis” in Europe, when more than a million people crossed the Mediterranean (Crawley et al., 2018), among them 178,000 Afghans who claimed asylum (Eurostat, 2016). During the last three decades, Afghans have consistently constituted one of the single largest groups of asylum seekers in European countries, with more than 600,000 Afghan asylum applications in Europe over the past ten years, second only in number to those arriving from Syria (Eurostat, 2021).

One of the main reasons for the arrival of Afghans in Europe is the volatile security situation in Afghanistan and the limited success of the reconstruction effort (Donino et al., 2016). Afghanistan has been marked by war, conflict, and displacement for over 40 years, beginning with the Soviet invasion in 1979. The refugee population peaked at more than six million in 2002 and stood at 2.6 million registered refugees and a further three million undocumented Afghans at the time of our research, 85% of whom were hosted by neighbouring Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, 2016). The Taliban, which captured much of Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, has been steadily rebuilding its power base after being overthrown in 2001. This process accelerated in 2014 following the withdrawal of NATO forces and events in neighbouring countries, most notably Pakistan, which dislodged thousands of mainly Uzbek, Arab, and Pakistani militants, who then travelled into Afghanistan, swelling the Taliban’s ranks. In February 2020, the United States signed a peace agreement with the Taliban pledging to withdraw troops in 2021. Ahead of their departure, the Taliban laid claim to large swaths of Afghanistan, culminating in their return to power in August 2021.

But increased violence and insecurity in Afghanistan is not the only reason why Afghans move to Europe. Just as importantly, there are limited opportunities for protection in the region where the vast majority of displaced Afghans live. Afghans living in Iran are among a growing number of refugees living in situations of protracted displacement for whom there are no immediate prospects of a “durable solution,” defined as safe and dignified return, local integration, or resettlement to another country (UNHCR, 2020). Although Iran has been praised for hosting millions of Afghans with virtually no assistance from the international community, most have limited rights (Human Rights Watch, 2013). For those who were born in Iran or arrived with their parents when they were very young, the incentives to remain in the country are in rapid decline. They see no prospects for their future, no hope of securing education or meaningful employment, or of establishing their own families. The incentives to go to Afghanistan are also low: This is a coun-

try to which many have never been, in which they have few established links and where, particularly for groups such as the Hazara, discrimination and ethnic violence is on the rise. Meanwhile, it has become increasingly difficult for Afghans to secure protection elsewhere. Afghans arriving in Europe have come to be seen as “second class” asylum seekers (Ruttig, 2017a; Skodo, 2017), often viewed as “economic migrants” rather than as being genuinely in need of protection (Schuster, 2011), with recognition rates often significantly lower than those of asylum seekers from Syria and other conflict zones.

This article draws on data gathered through semi-structured interviews with 56 Afghans, mostly men, who were interviewed in Greece and Turkey as part of the MEDMIG project. All of our respondents arrived during the last three months of 2015, when the so-called European “migration crisis” was at its peak. Detailed information about our methods, including reflections on the ways in which methodological issues can inadvertently reinforce and amplify policy narratives about the nature of migration flows to Europe, can be found elsewhere (Crawley et al., 2018; Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Crawley & Jones, 2020; Crawley & Skleparis, 2017). For the purpose of this article, it is important to note that we understand the “migration journey” as a social and analytical category rather than simply the movement from one country to another. Methodologically, this means not only asking people about their migration decisions and journeys, but also about their experiences in the places where they had lived outside their country of origin, and exploring the meanings of these place(s) for their everyday lives and mobility decisions (Crawley & Jones, 2020). This approach brings to the surface experiences of protracted displacement that might have otherwise remained hidden.

One of the most striking aspects of the data from our Afghan respondents was the significant period of time that most had been living *outside* Afghanistan prior to their arrival in Turkey and Greece. Nearly half (43%) had left Afghanistan more than five years before our interview with them and, of these, a significant proportion (39% of the total) had been living outside Afghanistan, mainly in Iran, for more than ten years. Seven respondents had not been to Afghanistan for more than 20 years, and some for as long as 35 years. In addition, nearly a quarter had never been to Afghanistan at all, having been born in either Iran or Pakistan. That means that two-thirds of our Afghan respondents had either never been to Afghanistan or had not lived there for a considerable period of time. Most were young, less than 30 years of age, and just under half (45%) were Hazara. Most had left their homes in Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Qum because the discrimination they faced in Iran had become intolerable, and because they feared being deported to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, including targeted discrimination and persecution of the Hazara, who, unlike the majority population and Taliban, are Shia Muslims.

These findings raise important questions about the ways in which the experiences of Afghans living outside of Afghanistan who arrive in Europe are conceptualised and understood, with implications for approaches to protracted displacement more generally. Afghans arriving in Europe are typically assumed to have travelled directly from Afghanistan, overlooking the complex interplay of factors that underpin Afghan mobility. There is a long history of migration between Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, particularly Iran: Afghans have historically made their way to Iran for work, travelling via networks that have formed over time, and made easier by the fact that large numbers of Afghans share a language (Dari), and religion (Shia Islam), with the Iranians. In addition, successive waves of conflict following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, means that hundreds of thousands of Afghans have also sought refuge in Iran, arriving either directly across the Afghan border or by taking a long detour through Pakistan. This has resulted in highly mixed flows of refugees and labour migrants (PRIO, 2004).

In unpacking the reasons why Afghans decided to leave Iran and travel to Europe, this article's focus on mobility in contexts of protracted displacement contributes to a growing body of literature that complicates ideas around "the journey" of refugees and migrants. It does so by de-exceptionalising migration and de-stabilising the presumed sedentary optics of migration studies that tend to frame people's pre-departure and post-arrival lives as predominantly immobile (Schapendonk et al., 2021). It also builds on related research that challenges dominant forms of categorisation, including the dichotomy between "refugees" and "migrants" (Crawley & Skleparis, 2017), and the use of associated policy categories to marginalise and exclude those whose experiences and needs for protection are not seen to "fit." Finally, it challenges the dichotomy of country of origin and destination by drawing attention to the lengthy and circuitous journeys of Afghans (Kaytaz, 2016; Monsutti, 2008), and their ongoing precarity and deportability on arrival in Europe (Rytter & Ghandchi, 2020).

Our analysis begins with a brief overview of the issue of protracted displacement, before turning to the experiences of Afghan respondents who had been living in Iran prior to their arrival in Europe. It is clear that the three solutions to protracted displacement—return, local integration, and resettlement—are incapable of resolving protracted displacement for Afghans in Iran. This is partly because of the constrained political contexts in which these solutions operate, but also because of the failure to recognise that mobility has long been employed as a survival strategy in contexts of protracted displacement (Long, 2011; Monsutti, 2008). Next, we turn to EU failings when it comes to addressing issues of protracted displacement, arguing that simplistic understandings of refugee and migrant journeys exacerbate protracted displacement, including within Europe. We conclude by

proposing a new approach to protracted displacement, one which harnesses the potential of refugee mobility to unlock situations of protracted displacement, including for Afghans in Iran.

2. The Problem of Protracted Displacement

According to UNHCR (2021), an estimated 82.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2020, of whom 86% are hosted in the countries of the Global South. Of these, around 15.7 million refugees are living in situations of protracted displacement. Protracted displacement is defined by UNHCR (2020) as a situation in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same country have been living in exile for at least five consecutive years in a given host country, and find themselves in a state of limbo, unable to return home but without rights to live permanently elsewhere. Protracted displacements are, by definition, displacements for which there are "no solutions in sight" (Long, 2011). Over 12 million Afghans have been displaced internally or abroad over the past 40 years, making this one of the largest and longest crises of protracted displacement.

As noted elsewhere (see, for example, Etzold et al., 2019; Long & Crisp, 2010; Zetter & Long, 2012), dominant conceptualisations of protracted displacement take a sedentarist approach, representing protracted displacement as a static situation in which refugees are "stuck." Such approaches fail to take account of the agency of those living in situations of protracted displacement, and the ways in which mobility is strategically employed by them in order to create a future. Unlocking protracted displacement requires the development of approaches that acknowledge, and respond to, the agency of refugees and the structural factors and power relations that result in their displacement becoming protracted. Reflecting this, Etzold et al. (2019) re-define protracted displacement as a "figuration," in which multiple structural forces constrain refugees from using their capacities and making free choices for prolonged periods. These forces include: *displacing* forces that cause refugees to leave their homes and hinder return; *marginalising* forces that prevent local integration in the country of stay, for example by restricting access to citizenship and putting refugees at a social and economic disadvantage; and *immobilising* forces, which hinder onward mobility, for example, restrictive visa regimes and limited resettlement quotas (Hyndman & Giles, 2017; Long & Crisp, 2010). The operation of these three forces can be seen in the experiences of Afghans living in Iran.

3. The Experiences of Afghans in Iran

3.1. The History of Afghan Migration to Iran

Migration from Afghanistan to Iran has a long history that includes: seasonal movements of nomads bringing their

herds to better pasture lands and trading with sedentary farmers; mountain people who go to urban centres or lowlands in order to find work; and pilgrims, soldiers, and refugees (Long, 2011; Monsutti, 2008; Olszewska & Adelhah, 2007; Safri, 2011). Research by Monsutti (2008) has shown that Afghan transnational regional migration to Pakistan and Iran is an important structural component of the Afghan economy. This migration pre-dates the modern cycles of conflict in the area but has become increasingly important to Afghan livelihood strategies due to compounded, and protracted, displacements. Large-scale forced migration from Afghanistan to Iran began with first the Marxist coup d'état in Kabul in 1978, followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Approximately three million Afghan refugees had arrived in Iran by 1989 (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2015). In the 1990s, a new wave of Afghan refugees began arriving primarily to escape the rule of the Taliban, some of whom returned after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. At the time of our research in 2015, Iran was the fourth largest refugee-hosting country in the world with nearly one million registered Afghan refugees, and a further two million Afghans who were undocumented (UNHCR, 2016). According to the 2011 census, more than half of registered Afghan refugees were born in Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2015).

For the purpose of this article, it is important to understand that Afghan migration is not simply one outward flow of migrants, but rather involves multi-directional flows (Safri, 2011). Elsewhere, we have drawn on the MEDMIG project data, to challenge the use of categories to differentiate between those arriving in Europe and the legitimacy, or otherwise, of their claims to international protection (Crawley & Skleparis, 2017). This “categorical fetishism” is generally problematic but perhaps nowhere more so than in relation to Afghans and others who have been living in situations of protracted displacement. As noted by Monsutti (2008, p. 59), the complex history of migration between Iran and Afghanistan, combined with competing conceptions of Afghans in Iran over time, renders these categories meaningless:

The concepts of “economic migrant,” “political refugee,” “country of origin,” “host country,” “voluntary” or “forced” migration, or even “return,” appear singularly reductionist in the Afghan context. All these categories overlap with a combined presence of political, cultural, economic and ecological factors.

This is a point to which we will return.

3.2. Insecurity of Residence

As with many other countries of first asylum, the Iranian government will not consider the permanent integration of refugees (Hyndman & Giles, 2017). Until 1992, Afghan refugees could obtain residency in Iran based

on their nationality as *mohajirin*. By 1997, however, the Iranian government had mostly stopped granting residency status to newly arrived Afghans (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Since 2003, the primary way for Afghan refugees to obtain residence in Iran has been through the *amayesh* system, a form of temporary protection that requires Afghan refugees to re-register for a fee. Whilst there have been several registration exercises, the latest of which took place in 2021, it is clear from our respondents that registration costs are prohibitive, especially given limited rights to employment and education. As one woman told us:

The first year was okay in Iran. Afterwards, things got hard. My husband has been arrested and deported to Afghanistan many times. Every six months we had to pay a lot of money in order to renew our residence permit. We didn't have the money. And we couldn't move from one city to another in Iran. It wasn't allowed. The last few years in Iran were even harder. Our salaries were not enough to survive, not even to mention renewing our residence permits. And we couldn't afford going to the doctor. There was no money. (female, Hazara, aged 28, married, no children)

Undocumented Afghans experience an array of protection concerns, from their initial experience out-migration through to experiences living irregularly in countries of transit and destination. Moreover, the challenges of registering as a refugee and the lack of options for regularising status renders the majority of Afghans living in Iran liable to removal. The first mass deportation programmes from Iran started in 2007, and have continued since that time. In November 2012, for instance, the government ordered the deportation of 1.6 million undocumented Afghans by the end of 2015 and the repatriation of a further 200,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2013). At the time of our research in 2015, Iran was deporting around 25,000 Afghans from the border point Islam Qala in addition to a further 30,000 who were returning voluntarily each month. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM), estimates that more than half of the 912,000 Afghans arriving from Iran between 1 January and 22 September 2021 had been forcibly removed (IOM, 2021). These deportations are often associated with violence (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Kaytaz, 2016).

3.3. Hostility and Discrimination

In the last two decades, the humanitarian space for Afghans in Iran has shrunk considerably due to the restrictions placed on registered refugees, the poor living conditions for all Afghans, and increased deportations. The mood towards refugees has also shifted, with Afghans now referred to as *panahandegan*, a word carrying a pejorative connotation of impoverishment (Safri,

2011). The Iranian government has helped turn this into a reality by withdrawing subsidized health service, primary and secondary education, transport, fuel and other subsidies, and restricting refugees to designated residential areas and refugee camps, as well as preventing them from opening bank accounts or owning businesses (Hyndman & Giles, 2017). Today, Afghan refugees are socially positioned as having introduced a host of ills into society: terrorism, arms proliferation, drugs, environmental degradation, polio, high unemployment, and conflict are all allegedly the fault of Afghan refugees. Afghans in Iran live with hostility and discrimination—in their everyday lives, in the workplace, and from public institutions—with no possibility of challenging the injustices committed against them (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Even those Afghans able to secure the resources needed to register have limited rights to employment, education, and freedom of movement, rights that are regularly subject to change. Afghans are prevented from working in particular sectors and have to pay to attend university. Travel restrictions on Afghans, and foreign nationals in general, mean that registered refugees can only work within their designated cities when they have permits to do so. Most Afghans in Iran are forced to undertake low-paid employment under exploitative conditions: Their education, skills, and class prior to arrival have little to do with their choice of livelihood (Hyndman & Giles, 2017). As Khalil told us, Afghans in Iran do “all the dirty jobs.” They experience abuse and hostility in all walks of life, with numerous examples provided by our respondents:

In Iran, I was afraid to go out. They are treating Afghans as if they are dogs. Afghans are going to Iran because they share the same language and the same religion, and they are expecting that everything will be good, but actually these are all lies. The Iranians are torturing the Afghans. When I went to another city in Iran in order to work, they arrested me and wanted to deport me, because Afghans are not allowed to move cities. (male, Sayyid, aged 32, divorced, no children)

Life in Iran was very hard. We were living in a very small house. Iranians were racist towards Afghans. And my boss still owes me 50% of [my] money. He never gave it to me. Afghans [are] worth nothing in Iran. I was threatened and beaten up by my bosses many times whenever I went to ask them for my money....My wife was also not getting paid often. She was working at a restaurant. Even when I was holding my wife’s hand on the street Iranians were swearing at me. They were swearing at me in front of my wife, and I couldn’t respond a single word. Once, Iranians forced me to get in a car. They swore at me, they hit me, and they stole my money and mobile phone. (male, Sayyid, aged 32, married, two children)

3.4. Precarious Inclusion

Scholars of Afghan migration have portrayed the treatment of Afghan refugees in Iran as paradoxical. Olszewska (2015, p. 21) writes, for instance, that Afghans:

Have been welcomed as oppressed co-believers and yet excluded as noncitizens; appreciated for cheap labour and yet blamed for stealing jobs; lauded as fellow Persian speakers and yet mocked as primitive country cousins; allowed to settle in cities and integrate into Iranian society and yet discriminated against in most aspects of public life.

Rather than being seen as a paradox, however, the treatment of Afghans in Iran can also be understood as part of a deliberate government strategy of “precarious inclusion” (Karlsen, 2021). This is reflected in comments made by our respondents:

Iran doesn’t give Afghans any opportunities on purpose. The Iranians are using Afghans as a ladder in order to climb higher. The Iranians don’t want the Afghans to leave Iran, because they need them. That’s why they don’t let Afghans leave Iran legally. (male, Sayyid, aged 32, divorced, no children)

Meanwhile, the ongoing conflict in Syria has had ripple effects across the region, including for Afghans living in Iran. According to Human Rights Watch (2016), Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps has recruited thousands of undocumented Afghans living there to fight in Syria, some of whom have reported coercion. At the time of our research, there was emerging evidence of Afghans being actively recruited into the Iranian army with threats of deportation and promises, usually false, that their status would be regularised in return (Human Rights Watch, 2016). One of our respondents, a 16-year-old boy, experienced this himself. The police threatened him with deportation unless he fought in Syria:

They told me that I will get a permanent residence permit in Iran if I go and fight in Syria. I rejected their offer. They threatened me that they will put me in prison if I am arrested again. And they arrested me again. They threatened me with deportation. They told me again to go and fight in Syria. Finally, they sent me to Syria, together with many other young people....Long story short, I went two more times to Syria. Yet, they never gave me a permanent residence permit. When they told me to go a fourth time, I accepted their offer, but I decided to flee. So I fled as fast as I could and I took my mother with me. (16-year-old son of a Sayyid woman aged 38, widowed with seven children)

It is clear that years of marginalisation and discrimination prevented our Afghan respondents from living their lives

in Iran (see also Grawert & Mielke, 2018; Hyndman & Giles, 2017). The diminishing prospects of a durable solution in Iran, combined with a lack of trust in the government and fears of being forcibly conscripted or removed, were all factors that played a part in the decision of our respondents to leave Iran and travel onwards to Europe. Mobility provides the possibility of a durable solution where no other is available.

3.5. Mobility as a Response to Protracted Displacement

Migrants like me, whatever they dream or plan, they cannot be successful, they are always disappointed. We are just continuing living on a daily basis. In a normal situation when you ask a child what they want to be in [the] future, because they trust the family, the[ir] environment, they can say that they will be a doctor or an engineer, they can achieve their goals. But people from our country, even the ones who are doctors and engineers, they cannot find a job, they need to work as labourers in [a] factory or tailor. Me, my father, and my brother, we all want to plan for our future and build our life according to our own plans and dreams. I want to get married and have my own family....Maybe it is late for me, my father, and my brothers, but my nephew is eight years old, he needs a place to learn sports and a place [where] he can improve his skills. [Children] are like pigeons, they have wings but they cannot fly. (male, Tajik, aged 32, single)

Afghans in Iran find themselves between a rock and hard place, unable to return to Afghanistan but unable to make a life in Iran. Moreover, structural inequalities in the right to move means a lack of opportunities to migrate legally elsewhere. Those in search of protection often have no legal travel routes, and are barred from using regular means of travel due to carrier sanctions (Costello, 2018). As noted by Hyndman and Giles (2017), protracted displacement is exacerbated by states in the Global North when they externalize asylum and refuse access to their borders. In the context of Iran, Afghans find ways to counter these *immobilising* forces (Etzold et al., 2019), moving as they have done historically, often taking significant risks to reach destinations where they perceive a potentially better future for themselves and their families.

As noted earlier, refugees living in situations of protracted displacement exert their agency by employing diverse strategies to cope with difficult situations, mobilising whatever social, economic, and political assets they are able to access in order to navigate through governance regimes of aid and asylum (Etzold et al., 2018; Monsutti, 2008; Vancluysen, 2022; Zetter & Long, 2012). Mobility is a widespread livelihood strategy requiring no donor resources and a crucial component of people's response to their protracted displacement (Scalettaris, 2009). Indeed, "in terms of unlock-

ing protracted displacement crises, migration can perhaps be best described as the deliberate and strategic employment of movement to maximize access to rights, goods and opportunities" (Long, 2011, p. 12). Acknowledging that refugees have agency means accepting that those who are displaced may also choose to migrate in order to create a future for themselves and their families (Crawley & Skleparis, 2017; Long, 2011; Vancluysen, 2022). That decision does not—and should not—preclude the possibility of securing access to international protection. However, because mobility does not fit within the "durable solutions" proposed by the international refugee regime, it continues to be seen as a problem (Scalettaris, 2009).

4. The EU Response to Afghan Refugees

4.1. Failure to Address Protracted Displacement

The EU response to Afghans seeking asylum in Europe is shaped by the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which is the legal and policy framework developed to guarantee harmonised and uniform standards. The CEAS was born out of the recognition that, in an area without internal borders, asylum needed harmonised regulation at the EU level. Its aim was to enhance practical cooperation on asylum matters between EU member states whilst ensuring that states fulfilled their European and international obligations, providing protection to those in need (EASO, 2016). There are, however, significant gaps within the CEAS when it comes to addressing livelihood (in)security and immobility associated with protracted displacement situations (Ferreira et al., 2020). Most notably, European resettlement and relocation schemes, which provide legal migration opportunities for those living in contexts of protracted displacement, have fallen dramatically below the current needs. The "good refugee" is expected to wait to be resettled, even if there is virtually no possibility of that actually happening. In addition, there is a lack of humanitarian visas and private sponsorship schemes at a European level (Ferreira et al., 2020; Hyndman & Giles, 2017).

The failure to address protracted displacement also extends to the impact of its policies on what happens outside Europe. For example, the EU emphasises the need to facilitate access to durable solutions and enhance the self-reliance of displaced populations whilst promoting policies that are oriented primarily towards preventing migration to Europe, including through returns (Etzold et al., 2019). And there is a misplaced emphasis on returning Afghans whose claims for protection are unsuccessful. In 2016, at the height of the so-called "migration crisis" in Europe, the EU and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan signed the Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues (2016), which was extended in 2021 by the Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation (2021). The Joint Way Forward essentially makes continued development assistance contingent upon the "return" to Afghanistan

of Afghans refused protection or settlement in the EU by way of either deportation or “assisted voluntary returns” (Quie & Hakimi, 2020; Ruttig, 2017a). This approach to returns ignores the fact that, for many Afghans who move to Europe, the notion of “return” to Afghanistan is meaningless because they were born in Iran or left the country decades previously. In so doing, it may exacerbate protracted displacement rather than addressing it. Afghans who are deported from Europe arrive with no assets, no family, no legal rights, and an absence of opportunities, risk becoming internally displaced or even being forced to re-migrate due to insecurity and a lack of family and/or livelihood opportunities (Pitonak & Beşer, 2017; Quie & Hakimi, 2020; Schuster & Majidi, 2013).

4.2. Afghans as “Second Class” Asylum Seekers

Although the CEAS aims to improve the quality of asylum decision making in Europe, it has been widely criticised for its shortcomings in terms of fairness and responsibility-sharing. As noted by Quie and Hakimi (2020), hardening popular attitudes towards immigration and the rise of populist narratives in Europe have encouraged restrictive EU policies that—while framed as beneficial in treating displacement holistically—are often harmful to refugees and migrants. These problems are highlighted by the experiences of Afghans (Parusel, 2018; Schuster, 2018). Firstly, in the absence of an EU-wide distribution system, most of the roughly 400,000 Afghan asylum seekers that reached the EU between 2014 and 2016 lodged their claims in Germany (168,000), Hungary (65,000), Sweden (46,000), and Austria (41,000). Other countries (such as Latvia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Portugal) received less than 100 applications from Afghan asylum seekers during the same period. In countries where there are large numbers of applications, Afghans can face considerable delays in receiving a decision (Parusel, 2018).

Secondly, refugee recognition rates for Afghans claiming asylum vary hugely between different EU countries: In 2016, for example, 97% of Afghans were granted protection in Italy, 82% in France, and 60% in Germany, compared with 34% in the Netherlands and just 2.5% in Bulgaria (ECRE, 2021). Since 2016, more than half of all Afghan asylum applicants have been denied protection in the EU despite a worsening security situation in Afghanistan. While an overall rejection rate of 52% is comparable to the average rate for all first time asylum applicants, it is high when compared to rejection rates from other conflict zones (Pitonak & Beşer, 2017), such as Syria (5%), Yemen (5%), or Eritrea (7%). These differences are striking given that the EU has worked towards the harmonization of national asylum decision-making standards for more than two decades. And they have consequences—not least they were used to disqualify Afghans from the refugee relocation programme put in place to address the so-called “migration crisis” by moving those who had arrived in Greece to other EU mem-

bers states because they had an average refugee recognition rate of less than 75% (Crawley et al., 2018).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, EU decision making takes no account of the fact that, as our research has shown, many Afghans claiming protection in Europe have not travelled directly from Afghanistan but rather have been living in situations of protracted displacement for many years. As argued by Foster (2007), many claims based on socio-economic harm properly fall within the scope of the Refugee Convention. This would include the forms of discrimination experienced by Afghans living in Iran. The failure to find out about, let alone engage with, the experiences of Afghans in Iran means that these issues are simply not taken into account during the determination process. Providing meaningful protection for Afghans requires EU decision-makers to take into consideration the experiences of Afghans who have been living in Iran, a country in which there is systematic discrimination and hostility, and where it is virtually impossible for Afghans to obtain secure residency and build their lives. These failures, combined with delays in EU decision making, huge variations in outcomes between EU member states, and the focus on returns, lead to the protracted displacement and exclusion of Afghans, this time in Europe (Parusel, 2018; Ruttig, 2017b; Rytter & Ghandchi, 2020).

5. Conclusion

This article reflects on the migration of Afghans to Europe from Iran, raising important questions about the ways in which protracted displacement is conceptualised and responded to under the CEAS. The CEAS presupposes that those who are in need of protection fall neatly into a number of legal and policy-orientated categories (Crawley et al., 2018). It also assumes that those in need of international protection are able to move directly to Europe from their country of nationality. Both of these assumptions are challenged by the arrival of Afghans from Iran. Their stories highlight the complexity of Afghan migration histories and the realities of protracted displacement, bringing into question the relevance of dichotomies between “forced” and “voluntary” migration, and between countries of “origin” and “destination,” for those who are forced to seek protection in the region but find it impossible to build meaningful lives, and eventually move on.

Although the data on which this article is based was gathered during the so-called “migration crisis” of 2015, our findings are relevant to the situation facing Afghans today. The rising trend in Afghan applications has not only continued since 2015 but accelerated: Afghans constituted 14.5% of all new asylum applications in Europe between October 2020 and September 2021, becoming the largest group of applicants for asylum for the first time on record after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021 (EASO, 2021). At the time of writing, the situation in Afghanistan remains fluid and

uncertain. The rapid seizure of the country by the Taliban in 2021 has raised fears of human rights violations, creating an immediate risk of persecution for different groups, such as human rights defenders, former government employees and soldiers, journalists, and persons belonging to religious, ethnic, and other minority groups (ECRE, 2021). Meanwhile, there are escalating humanitarian needs and a deteriorating protection environment for civilians, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, subsequent economic downturn, and drought, which was officially declared in June 2021 (IOM, 2021). These factors are driving a large volume of internal displacement and cross border movements between Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and other countries in the region. It is important to acknowledge that the EU has responded to this situation by increasing the protection available to Afghans arriving in Europe: Afghans had the highest recognition rate on record in October 2021 (EASO, 2021). However, it is also important to recognise that most of those granted refugee status since the return of the Taliban to power travelled directly to Europe from Afghanistan as part of the evacuation effort and were therefore likely to “fit” within dominant conceptualisations of a refugee. It is important that protection claims made by those arriving from situations of protracted displacement, some of whom have been in Europe for many years, are not overshadowed or “leap-frogged” by these more conventional claims.

There is clearly an urgent need for new and innovative approaches that move beyond the narrow frame of the conventional durable solutions—return, local integration, and resettlement—and “unlock” protracted displacement facing Afghans and other populations arriving in Europe (Long, 2011). These approaches should reflect four important conclusions drawn from our research. Firstly, those responsible for assessing asylum claims under the CEAS need to understand the importance of history and, in particular, the ways in which Afghans have always used mobility as a livelihood strategy. Migration between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran is an ongoing historical phenomenon, the scale of which has dramatically increased with war but which will continue, as it did before, even in the absence of military and political crises (Monsutti, 2008). In nearly all regions of protracted displacement, migration has played an important role in economic, social, and cultural relations before any crisis of governance, and such movements continue to occur alongside displacement, and will continue after any crisis of displacement has been unlocked. Recognizing the long historical trajectory of protracted displacement is useful because it underlines the need for new approaches that may help to break the impasse in facing old—but still unresolved—problems of displacement (Long, 2011).

Secondly, it is important to recognise that protracted displacement is rarely the consequence of a one-off event, rather it reflects a landscape of recurring crisis and the existence of multiple structural forces that constrain refugees from using their capacities and making

free choices for prolonged periods of time (Etzold et al., 2019). This includes marginalising forces that prevent Afghans from building a meaningful social and economic life in Iran and immobilising forces that hinder mobility. These immobilising forces include EU policy under the CEAS, which fails to provide protection for Afghans who arrive in Europe, leading to the continuation of their protracted displacement (Long, 2011). Understanding the intersection of displacing, marginalising, and immobilising forces in different displacement contexts will help international actors to develop appropriate policies that address the causes of protracted displacement.

This links to the third lesson from our research, namely the need to de-exceptionalise mobility and move away from the normative “sedentary bias” that derives from nation-state agendas (Schapendonk et al., 2021). As noted by Monsutti (2008), the three solutions to the problem of the refugees promoted by the UNHCR—return, local integration, and resettlement—are based on the idea that solutions are found when movements stop. Yet in many contexts of protracted displacement, mobility is a key strategy employed by refugees to address a lack of rights and their precarious inclusion into the country of stay (Vancluysen, 2022). Although migration is not a solution in itself, it is an important means of connecting and facilitating the access of the displaced to meaningful citizenship.

Finally, we need to rethink refugee mobilities, recognising its potential to address situations of protracted displacement as part of a well-functioning system of international protection (Aleinikoff & Zamore, 2018; Crépeau, 2018; Ferreira et al., 2020; Long, 2011; Long & Crisp, 2010; Scalettaris, 2009; Zetter & Long, 2010). Mobility is increasingly recognised as central in combating the human rights violations that frequently occur as a result of irregular or secondary movements from the first country of asylum, often in search of effective protection, and as offering a possible solution to refugees’ displacement in itself. As noted by Aleinikoff and Zamore (2018), the current refugee regime—including CEAS—gets agency wrong in both directions, failing to recognize agency where it exists and tolerating structures and practices that severely restrict it. An important first step towards formulating alternatives, then, is to recognise and effectively build upon displaced people’s own preferences as well as their local and translocal networks (Etzold et al., 2019). People with protection needs will move—and should be able to move—in order to find effective protection. Indeed, “this principle is central to the very concept of the international refugee regime” (Long & Crisp, 2010, p. 57). Harnessing this mobility by letting refugees move to where they believe they can best rebuilt their lives is the key to “unlocking” protracted displacement (Crépeau, 2018). That such a simple idea should seem so radical is, as Aleinikoff and Zamore (2018) suggest, an indication of how far we need to go in listening to the experiences of those living in situations of protracted displacement and understanding mobility as a “fourth solution.”

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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