

The Challenges of Afghan Migrants in Türkiye

Türkiye’de Afgan Göçmenlerin Sorunları

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Abstract

Migration of an individual or a group occurs as a result of aggravating socio-economical, politic or security-based conditions. Migration isn't simply a pickup-and-go process, but it comes with some challenges and opportunities for both migrants and relevant countries.

Ongoing war and conflicts for five decades in Afghanistan have forced Afghans to emigrate at various times. But this unplanned migration movements have seemed to create much more challenges than opportunities because of the large number of Afghan population settling down illegally in the host countries, including Türkiye.

The daunting economic consequences of the global Covid-19 pandemy in Türkiye as well as increasing massive surge of Afghan asylum seekers have brought about social disturbance and several problems in some local cities, which forced the government to have taken special precautions about outlawed asylum seekers in order to calm down the public reaction and to ensure the social stability.

Furthermore, Afghans, who constitute the largest part of the total population of migrant community in Türkiye, have faced some risks and challenges both on the way of, and after, the migration -such as, security, deportation and so on. Therefore, this article aims at making some new contribution about migration studies by throwing light on the painful circumstances of the displaced Afghans, especially after the Taliban took over the power in the country.

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Öz

Bir birey ya da grubun göçü, kötüleşen sosyo-ekonomik, politik ve güvenlik temelli koşulların sonucu olarak meydana gelir. Göç, basitçe bir toparlanıp gitme meselesi değildir; beraberinde göçmenler ve ilgili ülkeler için zorluklar ve fırsatlar da getirir.

Afganistan'da 50 yıldır süregiden savaş ve çatışmalar, çeşitli zamanlarda Afganları göç etmeye mecbur bırakmıştır. Fakat bu plansız göç hareketleri, -Türkiye dahil- ev sahibi ülkelerde çok sayıda Afgan nüfusun yasa-dışı şekilde yerleşmesi nedeniyle fırsatlardan daha çok zorluklar yaratmış görünmektedir.

Artan kitlesel Afgan sığınmacı dalgasının yanı sıra, küresel Covid-19 salgınının Türkiye'deki yıpratıcı ekonomik sonuçları bazı şehirlerde sosyal huzursuzluğa ve çeşitli sorunlara neden oldu ve bu durum, halkın tepkisini yatıştırmak ve toplumsal istikrarı sağlama almak için hükümeti yasadışı sığınmacılar hakkında özel önlemler almaya mecbur bıraktı.

Dahası, Türkiye'ye göç eden toplam nüfus içindeki en büyük payı oluşturan Afganlar hem göç yolunda hem de sonrasında, güvenlik, sınır dışı edilme vb. bazı riskler ve zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadırlar. Bu nedenle, bu makale, özellikle Taliban'ın ülkede iktidarı ele geçirmesinden sonra, yerinden edilen Afganların acı verici koşullarına ışık tutmak suretiyle, göç çalışmalarına yeni bir katkı yapmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afganlar, Sığınmacılar, Göç, Zorluklar, Türkiye

1. Introduction

Generally, humans migrate in two circumstances of peace and war. In former circumstance, migration is the movement of people from one place to another in search of Job, high income, good living conditions. In later circumstance, movement of people is as strategic survival-scaping life threatening, prosecution ve human right abuses, war and violent conflict. “Movements are developing in response to economic, political and cultural change, and violent conflicts” (de Haas, Hein; Castles, Stephen; Miller, Mark J, 2020, s. 9). Cross-border migration and movement faces challenges and obstacles and creates opportunities for migrants as well as host countries. Human mobility creates socio-economic pressures and opportunities (Khory, 2012). “Until now, migration research has primarily been carried out by the social, political, and economic sciences. It focused on socio-economic factors as the main cause of migration movements” (Dogramaci & Mersmann, 2019, p. 9).

Stephen Castles et al (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014) believe that reasons for migrating are various. Migrants who move mainly for economic purposes may often be politically repressed. It is difficult to distinguish social from the economic, political and cultural causes of migration.

In case of Afghan migration, the main reason for the mass migration of Afghans [was] is the war and conflict in Afghanistan at different times of history. In other words, escape/migration has been a necessity rather than a choice. “Movements of the population in and out of Afghanistan have been almost entirely the result of insecurity engendered by war” (Rubin, 1996).

The first wave of Afghan mass migration taken place after Soviet invasion in 1979. “Throughout the late 1980s, almost one-third of the Afghanistan people were forced into exile as refugees. The majority of these refugees settled in Pakistan and Iran” (Runion, 2007, p. 8).

The nation of Afghanistan is always on the move and has experienced 5 waves of migration and reverse migration. The second wave of Afghan migration was reverse migration after the Soviet Union left Afghanistan in 1989, more than 1-2 million refugee returned to Afghanistan.

The third wave of migration occurred when the 1992 civil war broke out. The fourth wave of migration was from 1996 to 2001, when the radical Taliban came to power in Kabul.

The fifth wave of migration occurred when the Taliban regained power in Kabul in August 2021 and is still people fleeing massively by any route and means. “Every day, thousands of people are fleeing the Taliban through the last open route out of Afghanistan” (Reuter & Busch, 2022).

Türkiye was mainly a transit country for Afghan migrants to European countries, but recently Türkiye has become a destination country. As the number of Afghan illegal migrants in Türkiye increases, they face many challenges, including deportation, which will be examined in this article.

2. The Research Data

This Essay is based on quantitative and qualitative research conducted between February and June 2021 in the cities of Istanbul, Konya and Trabzon, which have the largest Afghan refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in Türkiye respectively.

In-depth interviews with 25 Afghans were conducted in three cities of Istanbul, Konya and Trabzon, and the respondents were Afghan migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and transit migrants. Meanwhile, 300 questionnaires with 35 questions were randomly distributed among Afghans in Istanbul, Konya and Trabzon for data collection. The questionnaires were arranged in Turkish with Persian subtitles for those who does not know Turkish.

3. Challenges Of Afghan Migrants In Türkiye

After the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, migration is the last resort to survive for Afghans. The Gallup Institute in its survey reported (Ray, 2022) that a majority of 53% of Afghan potential migrants prefer to flee Afghanistan after the Taliban come to power and their main destination is Türkiye, Germany, Canada and USA respectively. “Migration is often a collective action, arising out of social, economic and political change and affecting entire communities and societies in both origin and destination areas” (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 42).

Migration brings challenges and opportunities, but for Afghans migrating from the poorest and most war-torn countries, the challenges outweigh the opportunities. As Van Hear (2014) claims, migration and its results are “shaped by the resources that would-be migrants can muster and that in turn the capacity to mobilise such resources is largely determined by socio-economic

background or class” (Van Hear, 2018, p. 100). According to the data², 94% of Afghan migrants entering Türkiye illegally through Iran's border and illegal migrants generally lack of any access to social services.

de Haas in his recent article (de Haas, A theory of migration: the aspirations capabilities framework) argues that in the poorest countries Asia and Africa legal migration opportunities to western wealthy countries possible for those who possess financial resources to pay for their migration while others cannot migrate legally remained in immobility and resort to exploitative ve dangerous forms of (mostly undocumented) migration.

Türkiye is a migrant-friendly country, (UNHCR, 2020), hosting 3.7 million Syrian refugees since 2014. At the same time, the post-Covid-19 economic crisis has also affected the Turkish economy, and part of the society expressed their unhappiness due to a wave of widespread illegal migration

At the same time, the post-Covid-19 economic crisis has also affected the Turkish economy, and part of the society has expressed dismay at the widespread wave of illegal migration to Türkiye in bad economic conditions. In a recent study (Morales, 2018) Elias Naumann, Giuseppe Pietrantonio and Lukas Stoetzer conducted survey in 15 European countries before and after Syrian civil war refugee crisis, argue that financial burden not wage competition caused anti-immigration sentiment in Europe.

Today, Afghan irregular migrants face with many challenges in Türkiye, such as deportation, exploitation in the workplace, the problem of access to health care and the uncertainty of UNHCR refugee status.

4. Deportation Of Irregular Migrants

In recent months, irregular Afghan migrants have faced deportation, Every week (TRT, 2022) hundreds of undocumented Afghan migrants are being deported from Türkiye to Afghanistan after a long time cease.

² Source: 300 questionnaires of Afghan migrant and refugee participants in three cities of Istanbul, Konya, and Trabzon between March-June 2021.

It is noteworthy that 56% of Afghans have received a residence permit in Türkiye by June 2021. The remained 44% were undocumented migrants.

Since Kabul fell to the Taliban in mid-August 2021, deportation became the worst nightmare for undocumented Afghan migrants. Deportation is the most difficult issue as many undocumented Afghan migrants in Türkiye have not had residence permits for many years, but recently the police have started to carry out identity checks in major cities due to large number of irregular migrants and irregular migrants face the challenge of freedom of movement and, if caught, transfer to deportation centers.

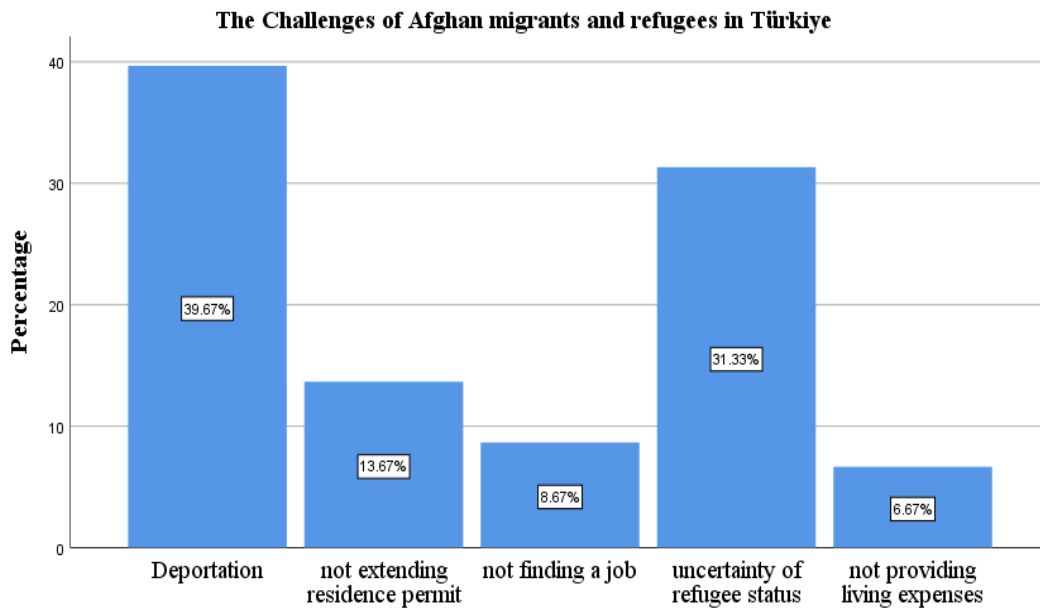
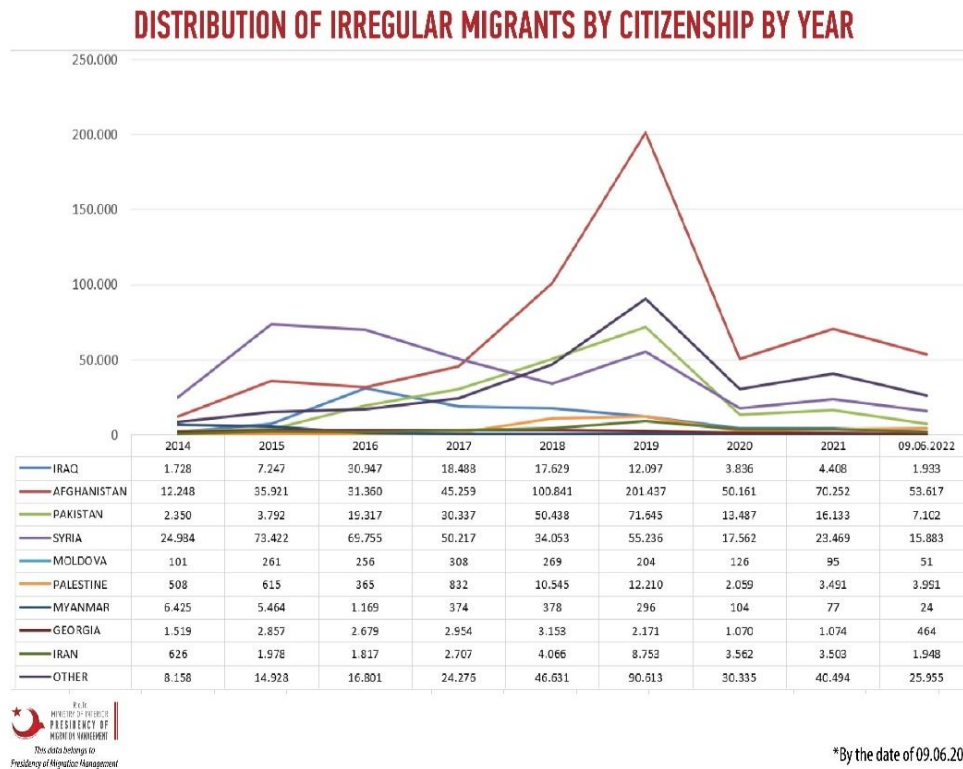


Figure 1. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya, And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

As Figure 1. shows, less than 40% of Afghan migrants and refugees considered the deportation their serious challenge in Türkiye. In the Istanbul metropolis, Afghan illegal migrants were in afraid of being detained in important public places (in and out entrances) and to be sent to deportation centers. In Konya and Trabzon, on the other hand, Afghan illegal migrants enjoyed better freedom of movement at time of data collection no reports of detain or deportation. It is worth noting that due to the overpopulation and the economic and tourist hub, the police always check ID cards in Istanbul.

According to Mr. Süleyman Soylu Türkiye's Ministry of interior, since 2016, more than 1 million 450 thousand (Ulu & Demir, 2022) of irregular migrants were detained across Türkiye. Afghans are the largest number of undocumented detained migrants in Türkiye.

Table 1. Source: Türkiye Migration Management Office



According to the data (Migration Management Office, 2022) more than 201,000 undocumented Afghan migrants were detained in 2019 alone, the highest number among all nationalities. More than 53,000 irregular Afghan migrants have been detained so far this year (2022), awaiting deportation.

Table 2: Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

Can you travel in your city without fear of being stopped or asked ID Card by the police?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	167	55.7	55.7	55.7
No	133	44.3	44.3	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

In a questionnaire of 300 Afghan migrant participants were asked whether they could travel in their city without fear of police, the result shows that 167 out of 300 respondents said "yes" we can travel in our city without fear of the police and 133 respondents said "no" we cannot travel in the city without fear of the police.

5. Residence Permit Challenge

Having a residence permit (In Turkish Kimlik) in Türkiye is a dream for all Afghan illegal migrants. After applying for Kimlik, the migrant must go to the Immigration Office every month to sign the paper in some cases the issuance of Kimlik takes years. After receiving Kimlik, migrants must go for signing a paper once a month to notify their presence in the province as well.

“I have been going to the Immigration Office every month for three years to sign paper, but so far I have not been issued Kimlik yet” (Kimlik means ID in Turkish), (M, 2021) The name of the interviewee was not mentioned due to his request.

In 2021, the issuance of Kimlik cards was more for married migrants than single Afghan migrants, and in 2022, the issuance of Kimlik cards for newly arrived migrants has been restricted, in some provinces it is totally stopped. In some cases, their Kimlik was even stripped by Immigration offices.

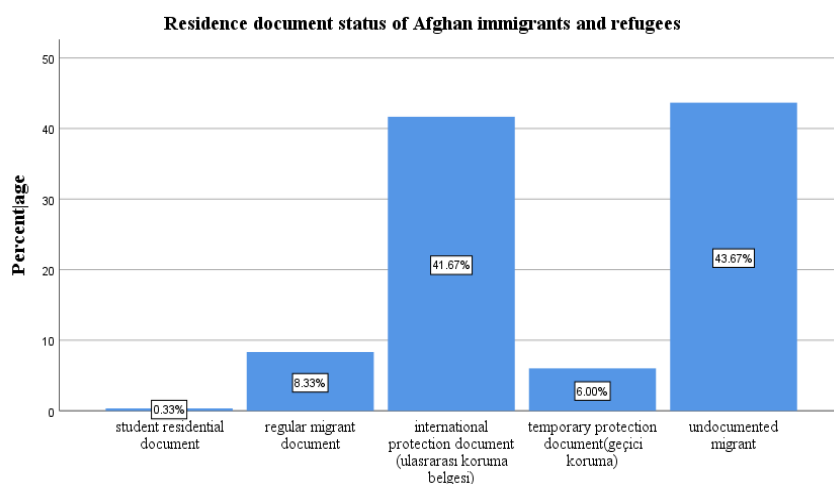


Figure 2. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

Contrary to the public opinions in Türkiye that all Afghans migrants are undocumented, Figure 2 data shows less than 44% of respondents are undocumented migrants while 56% of Afghan respondents have (Kimlik) residential permit. More than 42%, the largest number of Afghan refugees, hold international protection identity Card. International protection document is for those applicants who are entitled to refugee status according to the refugee law with the determination of (GDMM, 2022) General Directorate of Migration Management of Türkiye. According to the data, 6% of Afghan respondents granted temporary protected refugee status in Türkiye. Moreover, over 8% have a short-term residence permit, as regular migrants.

6. Ambiguity of Refugee Status

After Afghan migrants worry about their deportation, the uncertainty of refugee status is the second challenge they face in Türkiye for many years like other host countries. Refugee uncertainty is due to the tiny fraction of quota for a large number of applicants awaiting for long and slow resettlement process. According to the recent ‘Global Resettlement Needs Assessment’ for 2023, more than 2 million refugees in need of resettlement by next year (UNHCR, 2022).

“By country of origin, Syrian refugees (around 777,800) represent the population with the highest global resettlement needs (UNHCR, 2022). Refugees from Afghanistan – forcibly displaced during different periods of the country’s turbulent history – are estimated to have the second highest resettlement needs globally (around 14 percent, or some 274,000 individuals)” (UNHCR, 2022).

Table 3. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

The challenges of Afghan migrants and refugees

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Being deported	119	39.7	39.7	39.7
Not extending residence permit	41	13.7	13.7	53.3
Not finding a job	26	8.7	8.7	62.0
Uncertainty of refugee status	94	31.3	31.3	93.3
Not providing living expenses	20	6.7	6.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

According to Table 3 data, more than 32% of Afghan respondents see the ambiguity of their refugee status as a second challenge in Türkiye, and the majority of Afghan refugees have been waiting more than 5-7 years for resettlement - transfer to a third country.

7. Exploitation of Labor or Benefits

“Migration can be a very empowering experience but can, in other cases, take more exploitative forms” (de Haas, 2021, p. 9). At the macro level, some Afghan migrants, especially those working in 3D (Dangerous, Dirty and Difficult) jobs, can be considered exploitative as they work for the lowest wages in Türkiye, while at the micro level it is beneficial for migrants and their families who are left behind in Afghanistan in terms of financial support.

Table 4. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

Working fields of Afghan migrants in Türkiye

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Construction	30	10.0	10.0	11.3
Production	59	19.7	19.7	31.0
Shops/markets	47	15.7	15.7	46.7
Other sectors	111	37.0	37.0	83.7
Jobless	49	16.3	16.3	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

According to field data collected, 10 percent of Afghan respondents work in the construction sector, which is the hardest labour. Less than 20% work in production, more than 15% work in Shops/Markets and the majority of 37% work in other sectors. Data collection time coincided with the Covid-19 restrictions, and the unemployment rate among Afghan migrants was more than 16%, while among their Turkish counterparts the unemployment rate was 18.5%, (TÜİK, 2022) with little difference.

Due to the concentration of the Afghan population and the high demand for work, Afghan migrants were working for half national wages especially in Zeytinburnu-Istanbul compared to Konya and Trabzon, the majority of Afghan migrants were engaged in seasonal labor in these two cities.

Table 5. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

Payment and non-payment of wages/salary

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
yes	127	42.3	42.3	42.3
no	173	57.7	57.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

300 Afghan migrant respondents who participated in the survey were asked whether they received their wages/salaries from the employees, more than (42%) said yes, we got our wages, and less than (58%) said we did not receive our salaries and wages once a time from our Turkish employers.

It is worth noting that all Afghan regular and irregular migrants work in Türkiye without any work permit. Afghan migrants lack of work permission and insurance puts them in an exploitative situation.

“I injured my leg while working 8 months ago, now I have no job and my boss fired me when my leg got under the machine” (Karimi, 2021).

8. Challenges of Access to Health Care

Although there are many reports and studies on the health problems of refugees and migrants, it should be emphasized that according to international researches, migrants are the average healthy population (Rämer & Fischer, 2019). “The so-called “healthy migrant effect” is based on observations that migrants arriving in a host country are often healthier than the comparable native population” (Rämer & Fischer, 2019, p. 10).

There are no comparative studies on the health status of native and migrant population in Türkiye, but Afghan migrants based on field data and interviews had more health problems on average because there was no access to health services in rural Afghanistan as most of migrants came from there. After the Taliban came to power, the World Health Organization (WHO,

2022) has recently warned that Afghanistan's primary health care system is on the verge of collapse.

Table 6. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

Afghan migrants ve refugees health insurance status in Türkiye

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Have	56	18.7	18.7	18.7
Have nots	244	81.3	81.3	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

According to the table above, more than 18% of Afghan refugees and migrants in Türkiye have health insurance, while the majority of 82% of others do not have health insurance. Afghans with refugee status at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Türkiye have full insurance cards and can easily receive free medical treatment at their city's public hospitals.

Table 7. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

Challenges of Afghan refugee ve migrant's health insurance

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Faced with health challenges	149	49.7	49.7	50.0
Not faced with health challenges	150	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

According to the data, out of 300 participants in the questionnaires, 149 responded that they had faced health care challenges during their stay in Türkiye and 150 respondents did not have any health problems.

In Afghanistan, complicated medical operations are impossible, and hundreds of thousands of financially capable Afghans travel to India and Pakistan for treatment each year, and during the data collection, encountered with many Afghan migrants who came to Türkiye only for treatment as Türkiye has one of the best health care system.

9. Afghan Migrants In Desperate Need

At the time of Covid-19 and lockdown in Türkiye, Afghan migrants especially single migrants, were in dire need because no one helped them as majority of single migrants are undocumented with not addresses and traces to be tracked.

In comparison to single migrants, married migrants/families in need were fully supported by various charities and the Turkish Red Crescent. Most of Afghan migrants work for minimum wages and without savings, at the time of unemployment and emergency situations, they faced with many life challenges. Afghan migrants do the lowest paid jobs while taking the risk of capture and deportation by the Türkiye Police (Gall, 2021).

Table 8. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

Organizations	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Turkish Red Crescent	58	19.3	19.3	19.3
Foundations	10	3.3	3.3	22.7
UNHCR/IOM	2	.7	.7	23.3
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Government	2	.7	.7	24.0
Associations (Dernekler)	18	6.0	6.0	30.0
No financial support	210	70.0	70.0	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

According to Table 8, 70% of Afghan refugees and migrants did not receive any financial assistance and aids during their stay in Türkiye. Over 19% of Afghan refugees and migrants are supported financially and other basic necessities of life by Türkiye Red Crescent which is the biggest supporters of Afghans all the time specially during the Covid-19 lockdown. 6% received aids from Civil Associations (dernekler). More than 3% of Afghan migrants and refugees were supported by charity foundations (Vakıflar). Of the 300 participants in the questionnaire, only two were supported by the then Government of Afghanistan. In contrast, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees must provide more support than any other organization, with only two person received assistance from UNHCR.

10. Life Satisfaction In Türkiye

Despite the fact that Afghan refugees and asylum seekers are living in Türkiye at the time of the Covid-19 and the high inflation looming in Türkiye, majority of Afghan migrants and refugees are satisfied with their lives based on the data collected. Moreover, Afghanistan is a war-torn country with long conflicts and poor economic conditions, for Afghan migrants living in Türkiye is best choice for them, especially after the Taliban group ruling Afghanistan since mid-August 2021.

Table 9. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

Afghans's satisfaction with living in Türkiye

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Satisfied with life	173	57.7	57.7	57.7
Not satisfied with life	96	32.0	32.0	89.7
Undecided	31	10.3	10.3	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

According to the data in the table above, more than 57% of respondents are satisfied with their life in Türkiye, despite the data collected during the Covid-19 restriction. 32% of respondents

are dissatisfied with their living conditions in Türkiye .More than 32% of respondents to the questionnaire are undecided whether they are satisfied or are dissatisfied with their living conditions.

11. Return to Afghanistan

The main reason for the migration of Afghans in all stages is insecurity because whenever there is conflict and war, people flee the country in large numbers and after establishing security in Afghanistan, they start to return. “There have been waves of refugee flows and returns from and back to Afghanistan since the Communist coup in April 1978, broadly paralleling the phases of conflict in that country” (Koser, 2014, p. 10).

Table 10. Source: 300 Questionnaires Of Afghan Migrant Participants In Three Cities Of Istanbul, Konya, And Trabzon Between March-June 2021

Repatriation to Afghanistan

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Prefer to return to Afghanistan	227	75.7	75.7	75.7
Not prefer to return to Afghanistan	73	24.3	24.3	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

As Table 10 shows, 300 Afghan refugees and migrants in Istanbul, Konya and Trabzon were asked whether they would return to Afghanistan if security and peace were established in Afghanistan. According to the data, more than 75% of respondents said they would prefer to return to Afghanistan after maintaining peace and security. Less than 25% of respondents said they would not prefer to return to Afghanistan even peace and security established in Afghanistan.

It should be noted that the data collected between March and June 2021 during the rule of government over Afghanistan, and after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in mid-

August 2021, no one would prefer to return to Afghanistan, As the economy collapsed, the Taliban continue to hunt down former members of the security and its opponents who resist them.

12. Conclusion And Recommendations

People migrate generally under two conditions: peace and war. In the former condition - in search of job, high incomes and good living standards, and in later condition, fleeing conflict and war as a last resort for survival. Regarding the migration of the Afghanistan's people, they migrate in times of war and peace, although Afghanistan has never seen lasting peace and socio-political stability. The people of Afghanistan have experienced five waves of migration since the beginning of the war and conflict in different periods of its history, from the invasion of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union in 1987 to the re-emergence of the radical Taliban to power in Afghanistan in mid-August 2021, which caused millions of Afghans to flee their country.

The main reason of Afghan migration is insecurity in Afghanistan and migration is a necessity for them rather than a choice. For some Afghans, migrating to Türkiye through illegal border crossing created more challenges than opportunities, even after reaching their destination in Türkiye. For the majority, migration to Türkiye has created opportunities and started a new peaceful life, and they are satisfied with their living conditions.

As a recommendation, the opportunities of Afghan migrants and refugees in Türkiye should be examined in another article.

In case of challenges, irregular Afghan migrants are still vulnerable to deportation, uncertainty in refugee status at UNHCR, bad economic situation as the number of undocumented Afghan migrants increased in the last couple of years. Afghan migrants face challenge as long as there is no political stability and security in Afghanistan.

Türkiye's history is intertwined with hosting of migrants and refugees from the Ottoman Empire to the current republic. The Republic of Türkiye has not only hosted hundreds of thousands of illegal and regular Afghan migrants for years, but it has played an important role in Afghanistan within the framework of NATO for 20 years and has supported Afghans in the fields of education, reconstruction, military and stability.

It is a fact that Türkiye hosts 3.6 million Syrians and hundreds of thousands of Afghan migrants, along with other nationalities, which is a big challenge for Türkiye that needs a comprehensive research to find lasting solution.

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