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Brain Drain from Afghanistan After the Taliban Takeover: A Multidimensional Analysis of Political, Social and Educational Impacts

Taliban'ın Ele Geçirmesinden Sonra Afganistan'dan Beyin Göçü: Siyasi, Sosyal ve Eğitimsel Etkilerin Çok Boyutlu Bir Analizi

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Abstract

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has witnessed an unprecedented exodus of its educated and skilled workforce. This phenomenon—commonly referred to as “brain drain”—has implications that go far beyond the mere loss of human capital in critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and governance. This study conducts a multidimensional analysis of the political, social, and educational impacts of post-Taliban brain drain, while identifying the principal push and pull factors driving this trend. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, the research integrates secondary data—including international reports, academic publications, and official statistics—with illustrative case studies. The large-scale departure of professionals has significantly weakened state institutions, reduced governance capacity, and increased reliance on foreign aid. On the societal level, the migration has caused intergenerational fragmentation of families and led to a sharp decline in female participation in both education and the workforce. In the educational sphere, the outflow of academics and students has undermined the quality of higher education and resulted in the suspension of numerous research initiatives.

Keywords: Brain Drain, Afghanistan, Migration, Education, Diaspora, Policy.

Öz

Taliban'ın Ağustos 2021'de iktidara dönmesinin ardından Afganistan, eğitimli ve yetenekli iş gücünün benzeri görülmemiş bir şekilde göçüne tanık oldu. Genellikle “beyin göçü” olarak adlandırılan bu fenomenin, eğitim, sağlık ve yönetim gibi kritik sektörlerde insan sermayesinin kaybının çok ötesine geçen etkileri vardır. Bu çalışma, Taliban sonrası beyin göçünün politik, sosyal ve eğitimsel etkilerinin çok boyutlu bir analizini yürütürken, bu eğilimi yönlendiren başlıca itme ve çekme faktörlerini belirlemektedir. Araştırma, tanımlayıcı-analitik bir yaklaşım kullanarak, uluslararası raporlar, akademik yayınlar ve resmi istatistikler de dahil olmak üzere ikincil verileri açıklayıcı vaka çalışmalarıyla bütünleştirmektedir. Mesleklerinde ihtisaslaşmış kişilerin büyük ölçekli ayrışışı devlet kurumlarını önemli ölçüde zayıflatmış, yönetim kapasitesini azaltmış ve dış yardıma olan bağımlılığı artırmıştır. Toplumsal düzeyde, göç ailelerin nesiller arası parçalanmasına neden olmuş ve hem eğitimde hem de işgücünde kadın katılımında keskin bir düşüşe yol açmıştır. Eğitim alanında, akademisyenlerin ve öğrencilerin dışarı akışı yüksek öğrenimin kalitesini düşürmüş ve çok sayıda araştırma girişiminin askıya alınmasına neden olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Beyin göçü, Afganistan, Göç, Eğitim, Diaspora, Politika.

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INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan a country with a protracted history of war, political instability, and foreign interventions entered yet another critical phase of upheaval following the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021. This abrupt political shift reversed many of the developmental gains made over the past two decades in education, human rights, civil liberties, and institutional governance. It also created an environment of fear, repression, and uncertainty, triggering a massive wave of migration among professionals, academics, medical personnel, and students. This phenomenon, widely referred to in development literature as “brain drain,” has significant implications for the country’s future (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012) has since intensified to alarming proportions.

Brain drain denotes the large-scale emigration of highly educated and skilled individuals from one country to others, typically due to unfavorable political, economic, or security conditions in the home country (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Although Afghanistan has previously experienced waves of brain drain during the Soviet invasion, the civil wars, and the first Taliban regime, the magnitude and rapidity of the post-2021 exodus are unprecedented. Its implications for Afghanistan’s socio-political structure, institutional capacity, and long-term development are profound and multifaceted.

This study adopts an analytical approach to examine the political, social, and educational dimensions of brain drain in Afghanistan after 2021. It aims to identify the key push and pull factors driving this migration and to propose multi-level policy recommendations to mitigate its adverse effects. Ultimately, the phenomenon represents not only a development challenge but also a humanitarian and global equity concern—demanding coordinated efforts from the international community, host countries, and the Afghan diaspora alike.

The term brain drain refers to the emigration of highly educated, skilled, and professionally trained individuals from their home countries—typically low – and middle-income or conflict-affected nations—to more developed and politically stable ones. This phenomenon usually arises when qualified professionals seek better career prospects, academic freedom, personal safety, and improved living conditions abroad. Although the movement of talent across borders has historical roots, the term gained academic prominence after World War II, particularly in the context of the migration of European scientists and intellectuals to the United States and Canada (Kuptsch & Pang, 2006).

From a developmental standpoint, brain drain may offer short-term relief by reducing labor market saturation in countries of origin. However, in the long term, it depletes human capital, weakens institutional capacity, and hinders intergenerational knowledge transfer (Beine, Docquier, & Rapoport, 2008). Numerous studies have highlighted that the mass emigration of essential professionals—such as doctors, engineers, researchers, and educators—can lead to systemic gaps in governance, healthcare, and education (Carrington & Detragiache, 1999).

In many low-income and conflict-affected contexts, brain drain is further exacerbated by deteriorating public infrastructure, restrictions on academic and professional autonomy, and pervasive political repression. The departure of highly skilled individuals—many of whom were educated through publicly funded systems—represents not only a developmental challenge but also a form of indirect economic loss for their home countries (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Consequently, brain drain has become a persistent obstacle to sustainable development and institutional resilience in countries such as Afghanistan

A significant body of research has shown that brain drain intensifies in contexts affected by war, political upheaval, and prolonged insecurity. Armed conflicts often result in the erosion of state capacity, the deterioration of public services, and widespread human rights violations. Under such circumstances, skilled professionals—especially academics, healthcare workers, and civil servants—are among the first to emigrate in search of safety, freedom, and career continuity (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Conflict-induced migration typically leads to substantial losses in human capital, which severely undermines post-war reconstruction and national resilience. Docquier et al. (2009) argue that the outflow of educated individuals from conflict

zones disrupts institutional continuity and delays economic and social recovery. In this context, human capital flight becomes both a symptom and a catalyst of state fragility.

Historical and contemporary examples—such as Syria, Iraq, and South Sudan—demonstrate similar trends of elite emigration driven by violence, political repression, and systemic collapse (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Afghanistan, with its decades-long exposure to internal conflict, regime change, and weak institutional governance, conforms closely to this global pattern. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has further accelerated this trend, prompting a renewed and intensified brain drain among the country's educated and professional classes.

The phenomenon of brain drain in Afghanistan is not merely a contemporary issue but a structural and historically embedded process that has evolved over four decades of political upheaval, armed conflict, and shifting regimes. From a historical standpoint, the first major wave of elite migration began during the Soviet occupation (1979–1989), when a large number of academics, doctors, and engineers fled repression, ideological control, and growing insecurity (IOM, 2020).

The second wave occurred during the civil wars of the 1990s, as public infrastructure collapsed and the state disintegrated, making continued professional and academic activity nearly impossible. During the first Taliban regime (1996–2001), a third wave emerged, primarily driven by political repression, ideological impositions, and widespread restrictions on civil liberties, particularly for women (Barakat & Strand, 2021).

From a sociological perspective, brain drain in Afghanistan has reflected a deep distrust between the intellectual class and state institutions. This disconnect—exacerbated by recurring political crises, lack of meritocracy, and limited academic freedom—has weakened social cohesion between the professional elite and governance structures. Professionals often find themselves trapped between state coercion and structural limitations, prompting many to opt for exile as a means of survival and self-actualization (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Geographically, Afghan brain drain has followed specific spatial patterns. In earlier waves, neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan were primary destinations due to proximity, cultural similarities, and historical migration ties. However, over time, Afghan professionals have increasingly resettled in Western nations such as Canada, Germany, the UK, and Australia, driven by factors including job prospects, educational opportunities, and stronger refugee protection mechanisms (IOM, 2020).

The fall of the Afghan Republic in August 2021 and the subsequent Taliban takeover triggered an unprecedented exodus, both in scale and depth. This latest wave includes highly skilled professionals from strategic sectors such as law, medicine, higher education, and information technology. Particularly notable is the gendered nature of this migration: many women academics and professionals have been forced to flee due to both their professional identity and gender status under a regime that systematically restricts female participation (HRW, 2023).

Analytically, this mass departure of intellectuals and specialists constitutes more than a developmental setback. It represents a crisis of state capacity and national identity, depriving Afghanistan of the human capital needed for institutional continuity, innovation, and cultural regeneration. Moreover, the widening generational gap between exiled intellectuals and those growing up under the current regime may produce long-term societal fragmentation (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Barakat & Strand, 2021).

Problem Statement

Although brain drain is a recurrent phenomenon in Afghanistan's modern history, the magnitude and intensity of skilled emigration following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 are historically unparalleled. The abrupt political shift has triggered a significant outflow of educated individuals, including academics, healthcare professionals, engineers, and civil servants. This exodus has severely compromised the country's political functionality, weakened public institutions,

and disrupted essential services. Moreover, it poses long-term risks to Afghanistan's socio-economic development and the sustainability of its educational infrastructure. Despite the urgency of the situation, comprehensive academic analysis on the post-2021 brain drain remains limited, necessitating a multidimensional investigation into its root causes and consequences.

Research Questions

This study aims to address the following core research questions:

- What are the political, social, and educational impacts of brain drain in post-2021 Afghanistan?
- What are the main push and pull factors influencing the migration of skilled and educated Afghans after the Taliban takeover?
- In what ways does brain drain affect Afghanistan's capacity for post-conflict reconstruction and sustainable development?

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To analyze the political, social, and educational implications of brain drain in Afghanistan following the 2021 Taliban takeover.
- To identify and evaluate the key push and pull factors driving the migration of educated and skilled individuals.
- To propose evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at mitigating the adverse impacts of brain drain and strengthening human capital retention in Afghanistan.

Structure of the Paper

This paper is structured into nine main sections. Section 1 provides an introduction to the study, outlining the problem statement, research questions, and objectives. Section 2 offers a comprehensive literature review and presents the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. Section 3 explains the research methodology. Sections 4, 5, and 6 examine the political, social, and educational impacts of brain drain, respectively. Section 7 presents empirical evidence and case studies to support the analysis. Section 8 discusses the findings in light of the theoretical framework. Finally, Section 9 provides policy recommendations and concludes the study with reflections and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The large-scale emigration of skilled professionals from Afghanistan after the 2021 regime change presents a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical lens. To facilitate a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding, this study employs a multi-theoretical framework incorporating four key perspectives: Push and Pull Factor Theory, Human Capital Theory, Migration Systems Theory, and Global Talent Market Theory. Each framework offers a distinct yet interrelated explanation for the motivations, mechanisms, and long-term consequences of skilled migration from conflict-affected societies such as Afghanistan.

Push and Pull Factor Theory – Everett Lee (1966): In his seminal work *A Theory of Migration* (1966), Everett Lee conceptualized migration as the result of dynamic interactions between unfavorable conditions in the country of origin (push factors) and attractive conditions in the destination country (pull factors). In the case of Afghanistan, push factors include persistent insecurity, suppression of basic freedoms, the closure of universities, and targeted threats against academics and professionals. In contrast, pull factors such as access to higher education, physical safety, legal protection, and better career prospects in host countries strongly influence migration decisions (Lee, 1966). While this theory provides a valuable structural lens to analyze the root causes of migration, it tends to understate the role of individual agency, transnational networks, and broader global political-economic dynamics.

Human Capital Theory – Gary Becker (1964): Gary Becker, in his pioneering work on Human Capital Theory (1964), conceptualized migration as a rational economic choice through which individuals aim to maximize the returns on their education, training, and professional experience. Within this framework, migration becomes an investment strategy designed to improve one's productivity and income potential. In the Afghan context, especially after the Taliban's return to power in 2021, professionals found it increasingly impossible to practice their professions, pursue academic aspirations, or meaningfully contribute to public life. Under such circumstances, migration emerged not only as a means of survival but as a strategic effort to safeguard their human capital and secure future prospects. While Human Capital Theory provides a clear explanation for the economic logic behind skilled migration, it often underestimates the influence of sociocultural attachments, emotional factors, and forced displacement dynamics (Becker, 1964).

Migration Systems Theory – Douglas Massey et al. (1993): Douglas Massey and his colleagues (1993) developed Migration Systems Theory to explain how migration is shaped by dynamic interactions between origin and destination countries. This theory highlights the importance of migrant networks, international organizations, colonial or historical linkages, and cumulative causation mechanisms that reinforce migration flows over time. In the case of Afghanistan, the persistence of skilled migration is influenced not only by internal conditions—such as insecurity and institutional breakdown—but also by external factors including international scholarship programs, Afghan diaspora initiatives, and the labor needs of host countries. These interconnected elements form a self-sustaining system that continues to facilitate the outflow of human capital. This perspective is especially valuable in capturing the structural and relational aspects of migration that extend beyond individual choices (Massey et al., 1993).

Global Talent Market Theory – Saskia Sassen (1998): Saskia Sassen (1998) conceptualizes the migration of skilled labor within the broader context of globalization and global labor market restructuring. She posits that talent migration is not merely a function of personal choice but part of a deliberate structural mechanism whereby developed countries actively recruit and absorb skilled workers from the Global South. In Afghanistan's case, this perspective sheds light on how Western countries have profited from the emigration of Afghan professionals—particularly in healthcare, academia, and technology—while Afghanistan's own educational, research, and governance institutions have experienced further degradation. This theory is particularly insightful in revealing global power asymmetries and systemic labor imbalances that sustain and deepen brain drain patterns (Sassen, 1998).

Together, these four theoretical perspectives provide a robust analytical framework for understanding skilled migration from Afghanistan. The Push and Pull and Human Capital theories explain individual motivations and rational decision-making, while the Migration Systems and Global Talent Market theories place these decisions within broader systemic, structural, and transnational contexts. This integrated approach not only enriches our understanding of the Afghan experience but also enables comparative insights applicable to other fragile or conflict-affected states.

Historical and Structural Context of Afghan Brain Drain

Afghanistan has experienced several waves of brain drain, each closely linked to political upheaval, conflict, and instability. The first major outflow of educated elites began in the 1970s following the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic. Although the educated population was limited at that time, this political transition marked the beginning of intellectual migration.

The Soviet invasion in 1979 triggered a second, more substantial wave of skilled emigration. Thousands of Afghan professionals—including doctors, engineers, academics, and bureaucrats—fled to Western countries in search of security and stability. Over the following decades, chronic insecurity, civil wars, and economic collapse further accelerated this pattern.

During the post-2001 period, following the fall of the first Taliban regime and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Afghanistan witnessed significant institutional development. The educational sector saw major reforms; universities aligned with international

academic standards, and graduate programs at both master's and doctoral levels expanded. A new generation of Afghan scholars—many of whom had studied abroad—began contributing to the country's academic, administrative, and civil sectors.

The military sector also experienced remarkable growth. Supported by international aid, military academies were established, and Afghan security forces were trained and equipped to operate at a high level of sophistication. Despite persistent threats from insurgency and terrorism, the state apparatus was gradually consolidating, and Afghanistan increasingly participated in international forums as a recognized partner.

However, the sudden collapse of the Republic and the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 brought these achievements to an abrupt end. The reversal of democratic gains, widespread fear, repression, and the dismantling of academic and institutional autonomy triggered the most acute wave of brain drain in the country's history. This latest exodus is unparalleled in terms of both scale and the strategic importance of those leaving—encompassing highly trained professionals from education, law, health, technology, and security sectors.

The phenomenon of brain drain has received considerable attention in global development and migration studies. Numerous scholars have explored the causes, consequences, and policy implications of skilled migration from developing countries to more developed ones (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012; Beine, Docquier, & Rapoport, 2008). However, when narrowing the scope to Afghanistan, the academic literature becomes notably sparse, especially in the context of recent political developments.

Some earlier studies, such as Monsutti (2005), have examined migration patterns among Afghans, particularly focusing on the Hazara population, while reports by international organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR have occasionally highlighted concerns related to the emigration of Afghan professionals. These documents, however, tend to offer descriptive overviews and lack in-depth academic analysis specifically on the brain drain phenomenon.

To date, no peer-reviewed, comprehensive study appears to have focused solely on the brain drain from Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 2021 Taliban takeover. This absence underscores a significant gap in the existing literature. The current research aims to fill this void by providing empirical insights into the scope, characteristics, and implications of this most recent wave of skilled migration from Afghanistan. Given the unprecedented scale and the strategic importance of those leaving—particularly professionals in education, healthcare, media, and governance—this study contributes valuable knowledge to an area that remains largely unexplored.

METHODOLOGY

This study is designed as a case study within a qualitative research approach to examine the dynamics and consequences of brain drain in Afghanistan, particularly following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. The qualitative approach allows for a detailed examination of the lived experiences and socio-political contexts that influence skilled migration. Qualitative research is preferred for in-depth studies on a specific group, phenomenon, or situation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013). In qualitative research, the researcher is in the role of collecting, interpreting, and analyzing the data of the study (Cooper & White, 2012). The case study design is a qualitative research model that examines a current phenomenon within its own reality, seeking answers to “why or how” questions (Yin, 2003; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In case study research, data is examined in depth using multiple data collection sources such as observation, interviews, and document analysis (Creswell, 2020; Merriam, 1998).

Study Group

The study group consists of 51 educated and skilled individuals who chose to leave Afghanistan in response to the political turmoil in August 2021 and the resurgence of the Taliban, or who are currently residing in refugee camps. Participation is entirely voluntary and based on informed consent. The participants' ages range from 25 to 56, and they have academic qualifications ranging from a bachelor's degree to a doctoral degree. Data belonging to the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Profession (Field data collected by the researcher, 2025)

Profession/Role	Number of Participants	Gender (if applicable)
University Professors	3	Male
Engineers	7	Male
School Teachers	2	Female
Medical/Health Professionals	3	Male
Judges and Prosecutors	6	Male
Army Personnel	19	Male
Ministry of Interior Personnel	6	Male
National Directorate of Security	3	Male
Presidential Security Guards	2	Male
Administrative Staff	(Remaining) ~0	Mixed
Total	51	

Almost all of the participants are male, with only three women among them: two school teachers and one administrative staff member. Professionally, the participants represent a wide range of fields, including university professors, government officials, expert military personnel, prosecutors and judges, medical doctors and healthcare professionals, and school teachers. The study also ensured ethnic diversity with the participation of participants from various ethnic groups across Afghanistan, reflecting the country's pluralistic social structure. This diversity in terms of age, gender, education level, and professional background has provided rich and multifaceted data, offering a comprehensive understanding of the causes and effects of the ongoing brain drain from Afghanistan.

Data Collection

Document analysis and interview methods, which are data collection methods of qualitative research, were used to obtain the research data.

Documents

The existing academic literature, policy reports, and statistical data on brain drain in Afghanistan, conflict-induced migration, and political instability have been comprehensively reviewed. Among the primary sources are publications from international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Human Rights Watch (HRW), as well as peer-reviewed academic journals. These documents provide valuable historical context and quantitative trends regarding skilled migration. Document analysis was used as a systematic data collection method, involving a detailed examination of academic literature, policy reports, and statistical data related to brain drain in Afghanistan, conflict-induced migration, and political instability. Document analysis allows researchers to interpret existing information and contextualize it to inform their studies (Pallant, 2020; Creswell, 2013). During the document review process, researchers identified, examined, and analyzed key documents through collaborative work. Additionally, expert opinions were consulted to verify the comments and increase the reliability of the review.

Semi-Structured Interview Form

Research data were collected using a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers. The semi-structured interview form consists of two parts. The first section contains participant data, while the second section includes 10 open and closed-ended questions. The questions aim to explore participants' personal experiences, motivations for migration, and perceptions of the broader socio-political environment. This mixed-methods approach has allowed for both in-depth qualitative insights and limited quantitative analysis. The interviews were conducted with 51 educated and skilled Afghan citizens who had migrated due to the political turmoil in 2021 or are currently living in refugee camps. The interview questions are designed to capture personal narratives, migration motivations, and perceptions of socio-political dynamics.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, which examines the effects of brain drain in Afghanistan after the political turmoil in 2021, data were obtained from document reviews and interviews. The interviews were collected from fieldwork conducted at a refugee camp in Germany. The data obtained from documents and interviews were subjected to descriptive and content analysis. This methodological approach has enabled both descriptive statistical analysis of closed-ended responses and thematic analysis of open-ended responses and interview recordings. Dual reading was performed during the document review, and the points agreed upon were presented in the findings section. In the study, the participants' statements about the topic were presented in the findings section with their names coded as "P1, P2, P3." Thus, an attempt was made to ensure the validity and reliability of participants' thoughts on the effects of brain drain in Afghanistan. The interviews, which were conducted with the participants' consent and recorded, lasted between 20-25 minutes. Interview data was transcribed into text on a computer and analyzed thematically. Direct quotes and comments from participants have been included in the findings to support the claims. Researchers worked closely throughout the study on the development of data collection tools, the analysis of documents and interview recordings, and the cross-validation of findings. Additionally, expert support was sought, particularly during the document analysis phase, to ensure the comments were contextually accurate and methodologically sound. The data obtained in the study are presented in the findings section in the form of tables, graphs, and direct quotations.

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express their personal experiences, motivations, and concerns regarding migration in response to Afghanistan's changing political environment. These discussions provided rich and insightful data and included direct quotes from the participants. Additionally, the participants' demographic backgrounds and professional connections provided valuable data on the reasons for migration.

FINDINGS

The Impact of Brain Drain on Key Sectors in Afghanistan

The large-scale migration of skilled professionals has had a profound and devastating impact on Afghanistan's most critical sectors. The data obtained through semi-structured interview questions provided rich insights into the perceived effects of brain drain in Afghanistan after 2021. Participants from various sectors such as education, security, healthcare, and engineering shared their firsthand experiences related to professional disruption, personal risk, and loss of hope. To illustrate the human dimensions of this crisis, some selected narratives are presented.

The academic, technical, military, and other qualified human resources available in Afghanistan before 2021 decreased significantly after August 2021. This is clearly seen in Table 2, which compares qualified professionals before and after August 2021.

Table 2. Comparison of Skilled Professionals in Afghanistan Before and After August 2021

Professional Field	Estimated Number Before 2021	Estimated Number After 2021	Approximate Decline (%)
University Professors	9,000	4,500	50%
Medical Doctors & Specialists	5,500	3,200	41.8%
Engineers	7,000	3,800	45.7%
School Teachers	65,000	47,000	27.7%
Government Administrative Staff	28,000	16,000	42.8%
Prosecutors	1,200	500	58.3%
Judges	1,450	600	58.6%

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from IOM (2022), UNHCR (2023), Ministry of Higher Education Afghanistan (2020), and Human Rights Watch (2022).

Education Sector

The loss of academic personnel was widely felt. Several university professors and schoolteachers noted the collapse of educational standards and institutional memory. One former Kabul University professor, now seeking asylum in Europe, reflected:

“We spent years working to improve the quality of education in the country, but now everything has reverted to how it was before the past two decades. There was no motivation left to stay.” (P12-University Professor)

Military and Security Sector

Respondents with military backgrounds expressed feelings of betrayal and vulnerability after the fall of the Republic. Their withdrawal from national service was driven by existential threats and disillusionment. A former officer in the Afghan National Army explained:

“We surrendered to the enemy. Continuing to serve was no longer possible; escaping was the only option.” (P23 – Military Officer)

These exits have left a significant void in Afghanistan’s defense and policing institutions, further weakening national stability.

Healthcare and Engineering Sectors

Skilled professionals in health and infrastructure sectors shared concerns over halted projects and deteriorating work environments. According to one engineer involved in national infrastructure programs:

“Most of the projects were suspended, and there was no guarantee of continuation. Staying made no sense under such conditions.” (P34 – Civil Engineer)

The departure of medical professionals and engineers has led to gaps in essential services and delays in critical infrastructure development.

Political and Economic Impacts

The large-scale emigration of political elites, civil servants, and specialized security personnel has had a profound and destabilizing effect on Afghanistan’s political structure. The key political consequences of this brain drain include the following:

- **Institutional Collapse:** The departure of experienced professionals in diplomacy, the judiciary, and public administration has severely undermined the government’s capacity to manage both internal governance and external relations.
- **Erosion of International Legitimacy:** The loss of trained diplomats and Ministry of Foreign Affairs personnel has contributed to Afghanistan’s increased diplomatic isolation and has hindered the Taliban-led administration’s efforts to gain international recognition.
- **Leadership and Policy Vacuum:** The absence of technical experts and qualified decision-makers has resulted in a significant decline in evidence-based policymaking and long-term political planning.
- **Public Distrust in Governance:** The migration of intellectuals and professionals is widely perceived as indicative of deep-seated political instability and the lack of credible prospects for reform. This perception has further diminished public confidence in the ruling regime.

The brain drain phenomenon in Afghanistan—particularly after the political shift in 2021 has inflicted a profound blow to the country’s productive, managerial, and developmental capacities. This outflow of skilled human capital has not only depleted the workforce but has also created structural and long-term challenges for the country’s economic recovery. The key economic impacts can be summarized as follows:

- **Decline in Economic Efficiency and Productivity:** The emigration of professionals from key sectors such as engineering, finance, agriculture, and planning has significantly reduced the efficiency of Afghanistan's economic system. The absence of adequate technical expertise at executive levels has led to poor decision-making and considerable delays in project implementation.
- **Loss of Accumulated Human Capital:** Over the past two decades, Afghanistan with substantial international support—invested heavily in the education and professional development of its workforce. The departure of these individuals represents the loss of long-term national investments, creating a vacuum in the country's knowledge production, technological advancement, and institutional management.
- **Suspension of Infrastructure and Development Projects:** Major national projects in construction, energy, healthcare, and rural development have either been suspended or significantly delayed due to the shortage of skilled labor. These interruptions have occurred at a time when Afghanistan is in urgent need of reconstruction and modernization of its infrastructure.
- **Increased Dependence on Foreign Aid:** The weakening of internal capacities for planning and implementation has made the de facto administration increasingly dependent on foreign aid and international organizations. This growing reliance undermines the country's economic sovereignty and limits its ability to formulate and execute long-term strategies for sustainable development.

In sum, brain drain in Afghanistan is not merely a social or human capital issue; it constitutes a multidimensional economic crisis. If the outflow of skilled professionals continues unchecked, the country's prospects for sustainable development in the coming years will be seriously compromised.

One former Kabul University professor, now seeking asylum in a European country, stated: *"We spent years working to improve the quality of education in the country"* (P12)

According to a 2022 report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Afghanistan witnessed a 65% decline in skilled professionals post-2021 (IOM, 2022).

Social and Cultural Impacts

The consequences of brain drain in Afghanistan extend far beyond formal institutions, deeply affecting the country's social fabric and cultural dynamics. These changes carry long-term implications for national cohesion, cultural identity, and societal resilience. (P4, P7)

- **Erosion of the Educated Middle Class:** The mass migration of educated elites has effectively dismantled Afghanistan's emerging middle class—an essential driver of modernization, civic engagement, and social stability. Their absence has created a significant vacuum in social leadership and cultural life.
- **Rising Despair Among Youth:** A lack of job opportunities, political uncertainty, and social constraints have fostered a sense of hopelessness among the youth. Many educated young people have either migrated or become disillusioned and disengaged from public life.
- **Silencing of Intellectual and Cultural Spaces:** The departure of writers, artists, journalists, and civil society activists has led to a noticeable decline in cultural production and public discourse. This intellectual silence poses a serious threat to the preservation of progressive values and the circulation of ideas.
- **Fragmentation of National Identity:** With weakened cultural institutions and the dispersal of intellectuals abroad, a disconnection from collective identity has emerged. Among Afghan migrants—especially the second generation raised in the diaspora—there is a growing detachment from their language, traditions, and cultural heritage.

Overall, the social and cultural dimensions of brain drain represent a less visible yet deeply consequential crisis. They not only undermine Afghanistan's development trajectory but also erode the society's ability to maintain cohesion, solidarity, and cultural continuity.

Disruption of Social Cohesion and Civil Society

Mass migration significantly undermines the social fabric of the origin country. The departure of a large number of professionals and civil society actors weakens societal structures, erodes civic institutions, and diminishes collective solidarity. The absence of key individuals hinders sustainable development and exacerbates social inequality.

Gender-Based Consequences (e.g., Migration of Female Professionals)

Female professionals who migrate often face compounded challenges, including gender-based discrimination in host countries and cultural pressures. Their departure reduces gender diversity in academic, managerial, and professional fields in the origin country, thereby weakening women's equal participation in social development.

Generational Gaps and Family Fragmentation

The migration of family members—particularly in extended families—leads to weakened familial bonds, diminished intergenerational interaction, and emotional disconnects. Children and elderly individuals left behind are especially affected. Furthermore, cultural and identity gaps often emerge between the first generation of migrants and their descendants, leading to significant value and identity shifts.

Educational Impacts

Educational and Scientific Impacts

The collapse of Afghanistan's academic infrastructure following the Taliban's return has significantly undermined two decades of educational and scientific development. The impacts are multi-layered and extend beyond immediate disruptions, threatening long-term national intellectual capacity. *"We spent years working to improve the quality of education, but now everything has reverted to how it was before."* (P4)

- **Severe Shortage of Academic Professionals:** The emigration of professors, lecturers, and researchers has resulted in a substantial decline in instructional quality at universities. In many cases, departments have been downsized or fully closed due to the inability to recruit qualified staff, disrupting the academic progression of thousands of students.
- **Disruption of Graduate-Level Education:** Newly established master's and doctoral programs—considered milestones in Afghanistan's academic modernization—have been suspended or dismantled. This has not only derailed the academic careers of promising students but also halted the growth of specialized knowledge critical to national development.
- **Decline in Domestic Research Capacity:** The outflow of researchers and scientific experts has caused a sharp reduction in indigenous knowledge production. As a result, Afghanistan has grown increasingly dependent on foreign academic outputs, thereby weakening its autonomy in setting research agendas relevant to local challenges.
- **Exclusion of Women from Higher Education:** The systematic exclusion of women from universities and research institutions under the Taliban regime has slashed the country's academic potential by half. Beyond the immediate violation of gender rights, this exclusion significantly curtails the diversity and inclusivity essential for a robust academic environment.

Together, these developments represent not only a loss of human capital but also a dismantling of the intellectual foundations necessary for Afghanistan's long-term social, scientific, and economic recovery.

Migration of University Professors and Students

One of the most significant consequences of migration in Afghanistan has been the large-scale departure of university professors and students. A considerable number of academic professionals have sought refuge in neighboring and Western countries. Many remain in uncertain conditions or are entangled in lengthy and arduous asylum processes. Others have been forced into low-skilled jobs far beneath their academic qualifications, rendering them unable to contribute to scholarly activities.

Female students have faced the most severe restrictions. The Taliban's policies have forced many into educational isolation, essentially confining them to their homes and suspending their academic pursuits. Male students, in turn, have migrated due to the absence of educational and professional prospects within the country. This widespread migration has resulted in the significant depletion of skilled human capital and poses a serious threat to the future of Afghanistan's education system.

This phenomenon can be interpreted through the lens of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which suggests that the migration of educated individuals is often a rational response to adverse local conditions, undertaken in pursuit of better returns on their investment in education and skills.

Brain Drain from Educational Institutions

Educational institutions—especially universities—have suffered from intellectual and professional gaps due to the emigration of academic elites. This brain drain has directly diminished the quality of teaching, reduced the volume and impact of research activities, and lowered the academic standards of institutions. In the absence of qualified faculty and researchers, universities have lost their competitiveness and are struggling to sustain their core academic functions.

Collapse of Research and Innovation Sectors

The departure of researchers and innovators has led to stagnation in the fields of science, technology, and innovation. Many research initiatives have either been abandoned or left incomplete, severely disrupting the country's knowledge production systems. This not only undermines Afghanistan's global scientific competitiveness but also threatens its long-term technological sovereignty and self-sufficiency.

From the perspective of Global Talent Market Theory (Sassen, 1998) and Migration Systems Theory (Massey et al., 1993), the outflow of academic and scientific professionals from Afghanistan is not merely an individual decision but part of a larger structural dynamic. Developed countries strategically absorb high-skilled talent from the Global South, leaving origin countries like Afghanistan increasingly dependent on external knowledge systems. Without strategic intervention, reversing this loss and rebuilding a sustainable academic infrastructure will become increasingly difficult in the foreseeable future.

Case Studies / Empirical Findings

Testimonies and Interviews with Afghan Experts in the Diaspora

Personal testimonies and interviews with Afghan professionals living abroad offer a vivid depiction of the realities of skilled migration. Despite holding substantial academic qualifications and extensive professional experience, many of these individuals face challenges in their host countries, including difficulties securing appropriate employment, bureaucratic obstacles, and cultural adaptation.

Figure 1 presents the personal narratives of Afghan professionals who migrated after 2021 and participated in the study, demonstrating the profound impact of recent political changes on their lives and careers.

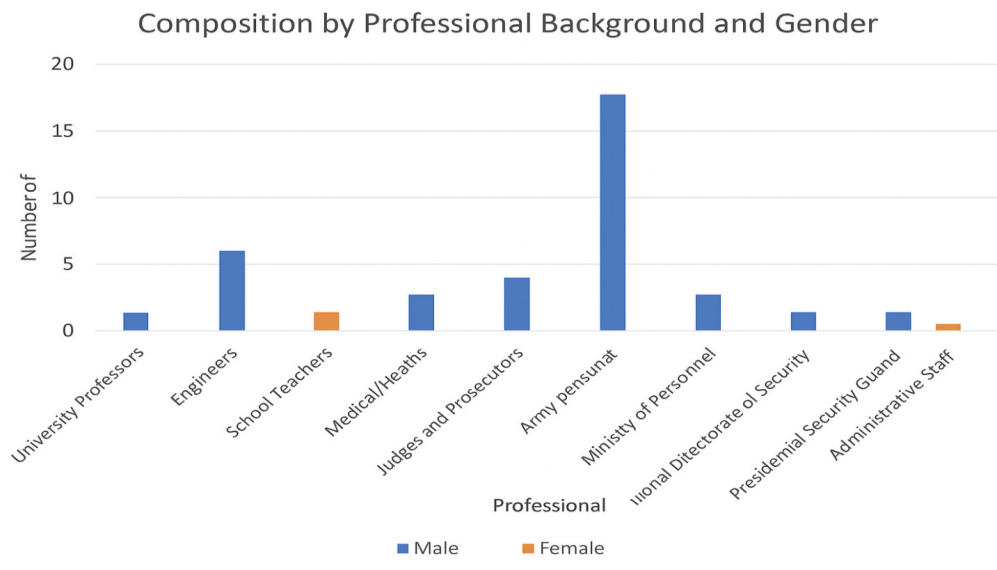


Figure 1 The proportion of Afghan professionals who migrated after 2021 and participated in the study. Source: Prepared by the authors based on qualitative interviews, 2025.

- *Male engineer, 41 years old:* “After the fall of the government, it became impossible to continue working in Afghanistan, as both our personal safety and our ability to work professionally were under threat.” (P21)
- *Female school teacher, 35 years old:* “Girls’ schools were closed, and I effectively lost my job. There was no future left for women’s education.” (P3)
- *Male judge, 48 years old:* “With the change in regime, judicial independence was completely lost, and we were forced to leave the country.” (P15)

The demographic and professional characteristics of this group reveal a relatively diverse but predominantly official and specialized workforce from Afghanistan. These features provide a strong basis for analyzing the impact of recent political changes on the lives and professional trajectories of skilled Afghan migrants.

These narratives not only highlight the emotional and psychological burdens of migration but also provide deeper insight into the root causes and consequences of brain drain, as well as the evolving needs of the Afghan diaspora. Furthermore, these accounts emphasize the latent potential of these professionals to contribute to Afghanistan’s reconstruction, should conditions for their safe and dignified return be ensured.

Statistical Data on Skilled Migration Post-2021

Following the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has experienced an unprecedented wave of skilled migration. According to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2022), thousands of doctors, university professors, engineers, and civil servants have left the country. Additionally, estimates suggest that nearly 8 million Afghans have fled the country since 2020, a significant portion of whom are highly educated professionals (Harici, 2023).

This large-scale exodus has critically undermined Afghanistan’s essential infrastructure, particularly in higher education, healthcare, and public administration, thereby disrupting the country’s long-term developmental capacity.

The departure of skilled professionals has led to gaps in essential services and delays in critical infrastructure development. This is clearly illustrated in Table 2, presented earlier. This Table 2 includes all major occupational fields and their approximate declines since August 2021, providing a clearer picture of the impact on the country's institutional capacity.

Comparative Analysis with Other Conflict-Affected Countries

A comparative analysis of brain drain in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected nations such as Syria, Iraq, and Sudan reveals both common patterns and context-specific differences. In all these cases, prolonged conflict, political instability, and human rights violations have forced skilled professionals to flee.

However, contextual differences such as geopolitical positioning, levels of international support, and national policies regarding the return and reintegration of experts have shaped the extent and impact of skilled migration differently in each case. Learning from these international experiences can help identify effective strategies for voluntary return, remote engagement, or reintegration of Afghan professionals and mitigate the long-term consequences of this crisis.

Other Findings

The research reveals both quantitative and qualitative trends related to skilled migration in Afghanistan and its social, political, and educational impacts, based on data obtained from both documentary analysis and interviews.

Quantitative Findings

As seen in Table 2 presents the estimated number of skilled professionals in Afghanistan before and after August 2021, illustrating the scale of the migration across multiple sectors. The data highlight significant reductions in higher education, healthcare, and public administration.

Key insights:

- The most critical shortages are in judicial and administrative sectors (declines exceeding 50%).
- Healthcare and engineering sectors also show substantial losses, jeopardizing essential services and infrastructure projects.

Qualitative Findings

As seen in Table 2, Table 3 and Figure 1 provide a qualitative perspective on the broader socio-political and educational impacts of skilled migration.

Table 3. Comparative analysis of skilled migration rates in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq

Factor	Afghanistan	Syria	Iraq
Onset of Crisis	2021 (Political Shift – Taliban Takeover)	2011 (Civil War)	2003 (Military Invasion & Political Instability)
Focus of Skilled Migration	Professors, Doctors, Students	Doctors, Engineers, Intellectuals	Academics, Researchers, Activists
Social Impact	Family fragmentation, social discontent	Refugee crisis, social tensions	Brain drain, leadership vacuum
Efforts for Repatriation	Very limited and inactive	Limited international initiatives	Ineffective government programs

- Political shifts (Taliban takeover) triggered mass migration.
- Social consequences include family fragmentation, community discontent, and brain drain.
- Educational impacts are evident in the reduced capacity of universities and loss of academic leadership.

Key qualitative insights:

- Skilled migration in Afghanistan mirrors patterns seen in other crisis-affected countries but with unique political triggers.
- Loss of highly educated professionals amplifies both institutional fragility and social disruption

Integrative Analysis

Combining quantitative and qualitative data illustrates the profound impact of skilled migration:

- Numbers demonstrate the scale of human capital loss.
- Conceptual and comparative data show interconnected social, political, and educational consequences.
- Policy efforts for repatriation remain largely ineffective, highlighting the urgency for targeted interventions.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Key Findings

The research findings reveal that the migration of Afghan professionals is not merely a reaction to the political changes following 2021, but rather the outcome of a complex interplay of political repression, economic collapse, social insecurity, and cultural regression. The widespread departure of university professors, students, and specialists has significantly weakened Afghanistan's educational infrastructure, drained intellectual resources, and obstructed long-term human development. This migration trend is largely involuntary, driven by systemic instability, coercion, and a lack of future prospects, rather than a deliberate or opportunistic choice.

Interconnections Between Political, Social, and Educational Impacts

The study underscores the deeply interwoven nature of political, social, and educational crises in post-2021 Afghanistan. Political transformations especially the repressive policies of the Taliban have had immediate consequences on civil society and academia. The banning of girls' education, the closure of academic programs, and the forced displacement of professionals have disrupted existing intellectual and social networks. These disruptions, in turn, reinforce one another, creating a cyclical dynamic in which political repression exacerbates social fragmentation and educational decline.

Broader Regional and International Implications

The mass exodus of Afghan professionals is not only a national tragedy but also a challenge with transnational implications. Neighboring countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey as well as European host nations face growing pressure to integrate highly educated Afghan migrants into their labor markets, educational systems, and social structures. While this influx may offer potential for knowledge exchange and professional contributions in host societies, it simultaneously risks cementing a permanent loss of human capital for Afghanistan. The long-term consequence could be a widening developmental gap and increased dependency on external aid, further weakening the country's sovereignty and self-reliance (Figure 2).

Figure 2 illustrates the interrelated impacts of political, social, and educational factors on human capital and the development process. Political changes such as regime shifts, restrictive policies, and the collapse of institutions lead to social consequences, including the decline of the middle class, youth disillusionment, and family disintegration. Meanwhile, the closure of universities, the suspension of research, and the loss of future capacities reduce the quality of the education system. As shown in Figure 2, these three domains, through a cycle of mutual influence, result in reduced human capital, slower development, and greater societal dependency.

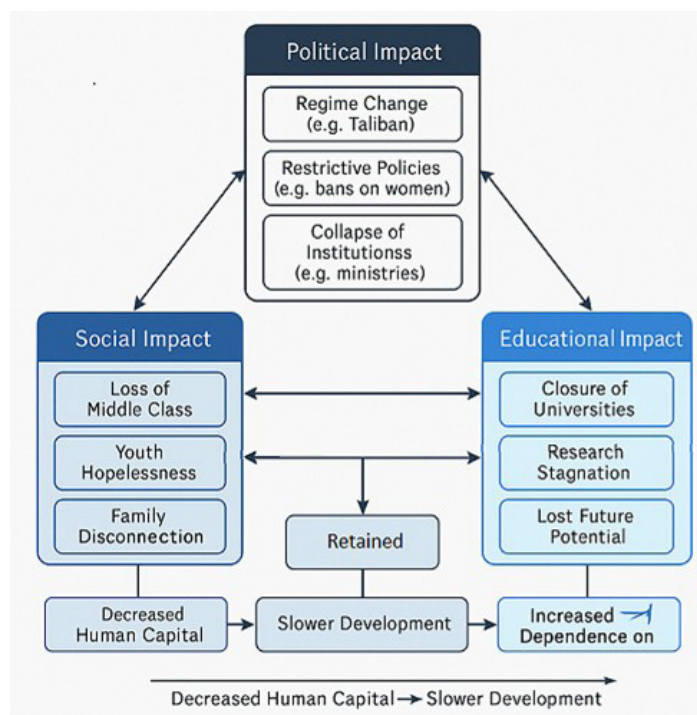


Figure 2. Conceptual Map of the Interconnections Between Political, Social, And Educational Impacts. (Source: Prepared by the authors based on data analysis and field observations, 2025.)

CONCLUSION

The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data demonstrates a pronounced and accelerating trend of brain drain in Afghanistan, particularly following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. Quantitative findings show substantial reductions across key professional sectors, including university professors, medical doctors, engineers, school teachers, and government administrative staff. Qualitative insights reveal interconnected political, social, and educational consequences resulting from this skilled migration.

A large proportion of Afghan migrants are highly educated individuals, including military professionals, university lecturers, medical staff, engineers, and other technical experts. Migration motivations are multidimensional, driven by political repression, economic collapse, deteriorating security conditions, restrictions on academic and professional freedoms, fear of persecution, and limited future prospects.

The combined data underscore the severe consequences of this brain drain, particularly in critical sectors such as education, healthcare, judicial systems, and national security. The outflow of human capital has significantly weakened Afghanistan's capacity for reconstruction, governance, and service delivery, thereby deepening its developmental and institutional crisis.

This large-scale and abrupt brain drain is a direct consequence of political instability, suppression of academic freedoms, and closure of educational and professional opportunities. The three core sectors politics, society, and education are deeply and interdependently affected. If this trend continues unmitigated, it will severely undermine Afghanistan's long-term capacity for recovery, institutional rebuilding, and sustainable development.

However, there remains significant untapped potential within the Afghan diaspora, international organizations, and even inside the country should genuine reforms take place. By examining the multidimensional interlinkages of this phenomenon,

this study provides a holistic understanding of Afghanistan's brain drain crisis, outlining both consequences and practical, policy-oriented solutions.

Ultimately, Afghanistan's future will depend on its ability to harness the knowledge and commitment of its skilled population both those who remain and those in exile not merely as displaced individuals, but as agents of transformation and hope. Timely and inclusive interventions, coordinated between domestic actors, the international community, and the Afghan diaspora, are essential to reverse this trend and prevent the permanent loss of the country's most valuable human assets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Afghan Diaspora

The Afghan diaspora—comprising thousands of professionals, academics, and skilled individuals—represents a vital reservoir of human capital for the country's future development. In the absence of functional scientific and educational institutions within Afghanistan, transnational networks of Afghan professionals abroad can play a critical role in sustaining intellectual continuity and facilitating knowledge exchange. These networks help preserve academic and cultural identity while serving as platforms for remote collaboration, mentorship, and digital knowledge transfer. Strategies such as virtual teaching, collaborative research, and diaspora-led conferences on Afghanistan can contribute meaningfully to this goal. However, these efforts must be driven by a deep sense of social responsibility and a nuanced understanding of the complex realities on the ground.

For Host Countries and International Organizations

Host countries and international organizations play a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of skilled migration from Afghanistan. It is essential to reconceptualize Afghan professionals not merely as asylum seekers, but as valuable contributors to host economies and intellectual systems. Fast-tracking work visas, offering academic integration programs, and supporting entrepreneurship can prevent the underutilization or marginalization of their potential. Furthermore, international organizations should actively support structured, targeted initiatives aimed at restoring Afghanistan's education and research systems—even remotely. Priority areas should include the continuation of girls' education, the enhancement of academic standards, and institutional partnerships between Afghan and foreign universities.

For Long-Term Recovery and Talent Retention

At the national level, any long-term development strategy for Afghanistan must include a clear plan for talent retention and repatriation. A comprehensive national policy should encompass economic incentives, security assurances, and attractive employment or research opportunities for returning professionals. Nonetheless, these initiatives will only be effective if political institutions uphold academic freedom and guarantee fundamental human rights. The rebuilding of scientific and educational infrastructure must also be inclusive emphasizing gender equity and the participation of marginalized groups. Without inclusive engagement from all sectors of society, sustainable development will remain unattainable, and the outflow of Afghan professionals may become a permanent and irreversible trend.

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