



An “Afghan Exodus”: Facts, figures, trends

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Published: 14 November 2015

Downloaded: 15 November 2015

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The on-going “exodus” of Afghans – now the second largest group entering the EU – has contributed to the increasing refugee numbers across Europe. This, in turn, has led to heated debates and an increased political polarisation between pro- and anti-refugee movements and parties. As governments and citizens struggle to handle the influx of refugees, their numbers – real and perceived – have become an instrument in domestic politicking. Several countries have tightened their laws and tried to close their borders, while others are considering doing so. Germany, whilst it initially generally welcomed refugees, has begun to take a much tougher line, for example, declaring it will deport Afghan asylum seekers whose applications are rejected. AAN co-director, Thomas Ruttig, pulls together figures, looks at trends and disentangles categories of refugees that are often mixed in the political debate. He also refers to an extensive interview with Richard Danziger, head of the office of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Afghanistan, which can be listened to exclusively here (link at the end of the text).

Europe has been facing an enormous influx of refugees (1) this year. Most have been coming from Syria, whilst Afghans make up the second largest group. Social services in the receiving countries are increasingly strained, particularly at the local level. Citizens, politicians and governments are more and more split about whether to welcome the refugees or to increase the legal and practical hurdles for their entry. Xenophobic political groups are becoming more vocal as they try to push governments to take a more restrictive stance, but their impact on recent



election results has been mixed so far: a win in the [Swiss general election](#) and gains lesser than predicted in [the Danish one](#) and in [the Vienna mayoral elections](#). (The Austrian capital is on a major transit route for refugees travelling to Germany and northern Europe.)

Several countries, including Germany and Austria, have amended laws to try to deter more refugees from entering. Sweden became the latest country to re-introduce [temporary border controls](#) on 11 November. In late October, Germany as the first country announced specifically that it considers deporting Afghan refugees who have had their asylum applications rejected; the [statement](#) came from interior minister Thomas de Maizière whose portfolio includes refugee affairs. A final decision, though, has not been taken yet, and foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier has [reportedly called](#) such deportations “barely possible” given a “dramatic” deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan. (2) There is also the suggestion by the interior ministry to deny Afghan refugees access to German language courses, which are key to integration arguing that refugees from countries with an acceptance quota below 50 per cent had “no prospects to stay” in Germany. (46 per cent of Afghan asylum seekers, on average, were [given a refugee status or some other form of protection in 2014](#); the latest available data, [for October 2015](#), indicated a 44.9 per cent acceptance rate.)

The EU has failed so far to come up with a system of burden-sharing that is acceptable to all member states. At the same time, large numbers of volunteers continue to work to accommodate the refugees and help fill the gaps when authorities are either unable or, sometimes, even unwilling, to find ways to cope.

With the increasing political polarisation, refugee figures have become a tool in mainstream domestic politics. Figures are sometimes exaggerated and often mixed up, and categories confused (see footnote 1 again). For example, the number of people entering Europe differs from the number of asylum requests. At the same time, the numbers of asylum requests are also higher than that of the actual asylum seekers, as many refugees request asylum [in several countries](#) during their odyssey through Europe. Similarly, in August 2015, of the 11,522 Afghans who entered Germany, [only 2,270 requested asylum](#).

The deportation debate: Germany

Germany, once considered one of the EU countries with the softest line on refugees, was the first country where the government has confirmed that it has plans to deport large numbers of Afghan refugees whose asylum application had been rejected after years of allowing them to stay. According to Pro Asyl, the largest non-governmental organisation in Germany working in this sector, [7,000 Afghans might be affected](#) by this threat of deportation.

Other European countries have already deported rejected Afghan asylum seekers, including [Norway](#) and [Sweden](#). In Great Britain, the deportation of 60 Afghans as part of a larger group, was stopped in August 2015 at the last minute, after the Lord Chief Justice ruled it was only safe to return Afghan asylum seekers if sent to the three provinces of Kabul, Bamiyan and Panjshir ([read here](#) and [here](#)).



As is the case in many countries, the deportation debate in Germany focuses on whether the security situation in Afghanistan allows for deportations and whether there are, at least, 'safe areas' within the country to which people could 'return'. The government says yes, while commentators, even on mainstream government-funded media, have, in an unprecedented way, sharply attacked the government's arguments. [One commentator](#), on Germany's TV channel for the world, Deutsche Welle, called the generally overly positive portrayal of the security situation in Afghanistan by the government "untenable," particularly after Kunduz, the former main base of the German ISAF troops, fell into the hands of the Taliban for two weeks in September/October this year. Up until 2009, the German government did not even accept that a "war" was going on in Afghanistan. After the Taliban takeover of Kunduz, interior (and former defence) minister de Maizière only [commented](#) that "of course, in Afghanistan security is not as good as elsewhere." (3)

Meanwhile, a report by the German Embassy in Kabul quoted in the media has come to more grave conclusions. The report speaks about an "extension" of Taliban influence, a "highly" or "extremely" dangerous situation in half of the country's districts and a "rapid" deterioration of the security situation even in areas so far considered safe and ([cited here](#), in German). According to conflict and peace research institutes ([see, for example, here](#)), the conflict in Afghanistan is still a "high-intensity internal armed conflict". This is also proven by the rising rate of civilian casualties ([AAN analysis here](#)).

Another [remark by the minister](#) – that "as large amounts of development funds are sent to Afghanistan, one can expect that Afghans remain in their country" – was called "particularly cynical" by [another commentator](#) on the leading TV network, the ARD.

One point of debate is how the large numbers of Afghans leaving their country would further increase the burden on Germany. According to a report by the German Joint Analysis and Strategy Centre for Illegal Migration (in German: Gasim) up to 100,000 Afghans currently leave their country every month. (4) Gasim reports are not usually publicly available, and its figures were [first published](#) in the right-wing daily newspaper Die Welt on 28 September 2015. It seems that, in this case, the report had been intentionally leaked, possibly to influence the heated political debate taking place, even within Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition.

According to Richard Danziger, head of the Afghanistan office of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), his organisation does not have figures on the number of Afghans leaving the country:

Yes, I think we can talk about an exodus, [but] to be frank, we cannot talk about numbers. We know the numbers on arrival in Europe. Now we have been looking at all possible sources of information: passport applications, we talked with the [authorities at the] airport; we have offices at the border with Iran, so we looked to see whether there had been more deportations, which could mean more people on the way to Europe. We haven't been able to piece anything together that could really give us the [full] information.



We do know the people are selling more bus tickets to Nimroz [province bordering Iran] for example. We know from the people at the airport – there are not many flights to Iran but – that flights to Iran are full of young men but return flights are definitely not full at all, so that’s an indicator. So, yes, I think we can talk about an exodus but we cannot put a number on it.

With regard to the often-cited increase in passport applications at the Afghan interior ministry’s passport office, Danziger urges caution, even though the indications are that numbers are increasing. The number of passport applications had indeed increased from about 3,000 per month earlier in the year to almost 8,000 by late September 2015, as [reported](#) by German broadcaster ARD quoting the office’s head General Sayed Omar Sabur from Kabul.

According to Danziger, the rush to obtain a (new) passport has also been attributed partially to the government implementing [an international aviation regulation](#) in May 2015 that no longer allows Afghans to use their old handwritten passport for travel abroad. This decision is almost certainly, or at least in part, the result of pressure on the Afghan government by western countries, where such passports have not been used for a long time and are looked upon with suspicion. Given the already difficult situation and lengthy procedures in Kabul to obtain a visa for nearly any country, this has put many Afghans into a state of near panic, as they fear they may no longer be able to travel in the future. This includes, in particular, students and post-graduates who have received overseas fellowships, and families who need to take relatives abroad for medical treatment (for Afghans, the most popular destination is India). Other applicants hope to obtain a passport in order to look for work in Iran, Turkey or the Gulf states.

Furthermore, not everyone who leaves Afghanistan necessarily arrives in Europe (let alone Germany). There are many stories of Afghans, who were discovered and detained by Iranian authorities, either at the Afghan, or the Turkish border, and then sent back to Afghanistan. Those who do eventually make it to Europe often do so only after a long and arduous journey, as Danziger also points out:

You have to consider that those people arriving in Europe now may not have left this year, because a lot of people move in stages. They may go to Iran, work to get enough money, go to Turkey, work [again]. They might have left in the past year, or two years ago.

The Afghan Ministry for Refugees and Returnees [estimated](#), in a statement published on 2 November 2015 that, altogether, 120,000 Afghans have left the country this year, both “legally and illegally.”

General refugee figures

According to the [latest UN estimates](#) nearly 800,000 refugees crossed the Mediterranean into Europe this year. More than 218,000 did so in October 2015 alone — which is a record monthly tally and higher than the overall figure for the entire year of 2014, which was 216,000. By far most of them [crossed the sea](#) from Turkey to Greece, which is the preferred route for Afghan refugees, who usually travel via Iran and Turkey. Others crossed the Turkish-Greek or Turkish-



Bulgarian land borders.

An incident at the border between Bulgaria and Turkey on 15 October 2015 was the latest “milestone” (as [stated](#) by Bulgarian President Rossen Plevnelyev) in the drama that refugees go through: a young Afghan – his name continues to remain unreported – became the first refugee shot dead at an EU border. The authorities of Bulgaria, where the incident happened, claim he was hit by a stray warning shot fired at a group of about 50 young Afghans trying to cross the border illegally. Many more refugees, among them many Afghans, have lost their lives when their boats have sunk in the Mediterranean. (5)

According to the latest available official EU figures, there were 399,000 “first-time asylum seekers” in the first half of 2015 in all EU countries combined. These figures, and all the following ones, are based on the first and second quarter reports by Eurostats, an EU agency ([see here](#) and [here](#)), unless otherwise sourced.

Germany had the highest number of asylum applications in the first half of 2015 (154,000 = 39 per cent of all submitted in Europe), followed by Hungary (65,400), Italy (30,100) and France (29,800). Taken by per capita of their population, Hungary, Austria, Sweden and Germany were at the top during that period. By October 2015, the total number of asylum seekers in Germany for that year had already increased to 331,226, [according to official national figures](#). [Sweden](#) had 120,000 asylum applicants at the same point, compared to 75,000 [in 2014](#).

The Afghans among the refugees

Over the first and second quarters of 2015, Afghans became the second largest group among the asylum seekers after the Syrians. According to the UN estimates, 19 per cent of the nearly 800,000 refugees that [crossed the Mediterranean](#) were Afghans, some 150,000 people.

In the first three quarters of 2015, 88,205 Afghans requested asylum in all EU countries. In the first quarter, they represented seven and in the second quarter 13 per cent of all EU asylum seekers (third quarter figure not yet available). At the end of the second quarter, the number of Afghans was 39,900 altogether, showing that the third quarter number was more than double that of the first two quarters together. By comparison, 37,810 Afghans had requested asylum across the EU [in 2014](#) and 22,580 [in 2013](#).

Most Afghans requested asylum in Hungary and in Germany in the first half of 2015. Hungary registered 17,660 Afghan asylum seekers – almost half the overall EU figure. [Germany received](#) 20,434 asylum requests (6.2 per cent of all asylum seekers in the country in this period) from January to October 2015, while 82,817 Afghans arrived there in the same period, 31,051 [in October alone](#) (up from 11,522 in August). According to these figures, Afghans were still only the fourth largest group of asylum seekers in Germany. In the first and second quarters, Afghanistan was not even among the top ten countries of origin.

The relatively low number of asylum seekers, compared to the number of arrivals, in Germany



reflects the fact that only a relatively small portion of the incoming Afghans actually remain in the country. Only one in four Afghans coming to Germany asks for asylum there. Many travel to other countries, or are sent back to other EU countries (based on [the Dublin Regulation](#) that stipulates that a refugee must apply for asylum in the first EU country of entry). Alternatively, the choice is to go underground without applying. (6)

The situation in Sweden, for example, is different. According to Swedish officials, almost all refugees arriving in the country also apply for asylum there; only a few travel on to Norway. By 1 November 2015, [Sweden had](#) 21,551 asylum applications by Afghans. Between 2 and 8 November only, [Sweden had](#) over 10,000 incoming refugees, 42 per cent of them (4,333 individuals) Afghans. Of those, 2,299 were unaccompanied minors. In [January this year](#), only 350 Afghans arrived in Sweden.

In [70 per cent of all Afghan asylum cases](#) registered in the EU in the second quarter of 2015, a refugee or other protection status was granted. [Germany's overall acceptance rate for Afghans](#) was 44.9 per cent from January to October 2015, based on 4,929 cases decided in this period. In 1,361 of these cases (27.6%), the applicants were recognised as refugees; only 37 of them (0.75%) were granted full political asylum, which would allow for full integration. 853 (17.3%) received a 'non-refugee' status of protection. 574 (11.6%) applicants were rejected; the other applications were solved in other ways, mainly by handing over the cases to other countries based on the Dublin agreement. [By comparison](#), the number of cases decided in 2014 was almost three times higher, with 12,999, at a 46.9 per cent recognition rate. Also, the percentage of Afghans granted full political asylum in general is very low but was higher in 2014, with 1.2 per cent (87 cases).

In practice, most Afghans have been staying on, regardless of their status, as the German government (and many others in the EU) had exempted them from deportation for humanitarian reasons due to the on-going war in their country. These Afghans have now become increasingly vulnerable to deportation, particularly in Germany.

Historically, Europe has absorbed at least three earlier large waves of Afghan refugees: first, after the Soviet invasion in 1979, second, after the mujahedin victory in 1992, and, third, after the Taliban takeover in 1996 ([read here](#) and [here](#)). The [Afghan community in Germany](#), the largest in Europe, grew from 51,370 in 1994 to 126,334 in 2009 (49,081 of them holding German citizenship). Afghan refugee communities – some of them significantly larger than in Germany – exist in Pakistan, Iran, Russia, Gulf countries, the US and Canada.

Reasons for the Afghan exodus

German ambassador Markus Potzel, in an [interview with IRIN news agency](#) published on 10 November 2015, remarked that Germany understood the reasons people were leaving Afghanistan to be “bad security, bad economy, bad prospects, no trust in the National Unity Government” but also added that his country’s authorities were “overwhelmed” with processing the growing number of asylum requests and that “the mood among the [German]



population has changed. Instead of welcoming them, people are more and more afraid.”

A central element in the current debate is whether the refugees arriving now represent asylum seekers, civil war refugees or economic migrants. In the case of Afghans, at least, this distinction is often difficult to make. Danziger, in his interview, spoke of reasons related to: “a mixture of insecurity and the poor economy. One feeds into the other. [...] There isn’t anyone saying I am just leaving because of the insecurity or I am just going for an opportunity to make a living or a better living.” He also mentioned the “family pressure on young people,” who are sent abroad as an “anchor” in case the situation deteriorates further. This is not surprising: the older generation of Afghans have witnessed no less than nine mostly violent regime changes since 1973.

Danziger in his interview also discusses the “brain drain” that is harming Afghanistan, given the many young Afghans among the refugees who could be a key resource for any reconstruction of the country. He mentions also that many of them may not be fully aware of the obstacles they are likely to face on their journey to Europe:

Every Afghan knows what is going on in the Mediterranean, the deaths and so forth. I think what they are unaware of is what is awaiting them in Europe – that you do not automatically get asylum, that in each country the laws are different, that while your asylum application is up you cannot work, that you are not put up in a great flat. So, it is really about telling them what they need to expect. Then they have to make their own decision.

In terms of stemming the tide of the “exodus,” he outlines several possible paths for action: donor countries must “put Afghanistan back on the radar,” “live up to the commitments they made on financial support for the government,” and, also, “really face up to the fact that they have to completely review their migration or immigration policies.” He pointed out finally that “Afghans actually have a very good reputation as immigrants, in terms of not being happy to [rely on] hand-outs, getting on finding jobs, opening businesses etc.”

The interview with Richard Danziger, recorded by ARD South Asia correspondent Sandra Petersmann, has been [partly published by the ARD](#). AAN has acquired the full version, which can be listened to [here](#), with the kind permissions of both interviewer and interviewee.

(1) Article 1 of the Geneva Refugee Convention, as amended by the [1967 Protocol](#), defines a refugee as:

A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to



return to it.

In this text, the author uses the term “refugee” in this meaning.

At the same time, “refugee” is also a legal term under national law. In Germany, this term is used for people whose application for political asylum has been accepted. This group is divided into two sub-categories: (a) those who have received political asylum (they can stay for an unlimited time); and (b) those who have been recognised as a “refugee”, which grants them temporary protection and their cases are reviewed after a certain period. Persons who do not qualify as a “refugee”, but are threatened by the death penalty, torture or other grave violations upon return to the country of origin, can be granted “subsidiary protection” according to [EU law](#). There is also the option of “protection from deportation” to particular countries, including provisions for rejected asylum seekers. Status (c) and (d) can be terminated at any time. After a recent change of law, a deportation does not need to be pre-announced. This means that the refugee cannot employ legal means to contest the deportation.

For those granted the status of refugee or any other status of protection, the term “refugee” will be qualified in this text.

(2) This statement, given through his political director to the CDU/CSU (the largest governing party) group in the Bundestag, was reportedly based on an internal assessment of the security situation of the German embassy in Kabul.

(3) Members of the German government spoke about a “stabilisation mission” (Defence Minister [Franz Josef Jung](#), 2009) and “war-like conditions” (his successor [Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg](#), also in 2009). In 2010, [Guttenberg switched the terminology](#) to a “civil war with international participation,” saying it was “colloquially a war,” but not in legal terms. The UN, when mandating the ISAF troops with Resolution 1386 (2001) of the Security Council, avoided such a definition and made ISAF a peace-enforcing mission under [Chapter VII of the UN Charter](#). According to [the Rule of Law in Armed Conflict \(RULAC\) project](#) of the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, the conflict in Afghanistan is a “high-intensity internal armed conflict” between the Afghan government “assisted” by international forces and “non-state armed groups.”

(4) The following institutions contribute to Gasim reports: the Federal Police (formerly Federal Border Police), the Federal Criminal Police Office (the ‘German FBI’), the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the foreign and domestic intelligence services (BND and Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution) and the foreign office.

(5) There are at least three projects that try to document, by name, the refugees killed on their way to Europe: the [“List of Deaths”](#) of the Amsterdam-based NGO United against Racism, the [blog Fortress Europe](#) by Italian journalist Gabriele del Grande and [The Migrant Files](#), a journalist consortium that tries to merge the former two. Neither has the name of this Afghan.



(6) Moreover, decision-making on asylum cases is [lagging behind](#). In the second quarter of 2015, 117,800 applications were decided upon in all EU countries. 46 per cent of them received a positive answer, granting the applicant either refugee or another protection status. Among the cases on which decisions were taken were only 2,500 who were Afghans. [In Germany](#), by the end of 2014, Afghans, on average, had to wait more than 13 months for their cases to be decided. [Austria](#) – which is among the top four countries taking in arriving Afghan refugees (10,500 in the first eight months of 2015) – just changed its law so that Afghans have to wait for a decision, possibly up to three years. [Finland](#) recently stopped processing asylum claims from Afghans for 'security concerns'. (The country had [9,276 asylum-seekers this year so far](#).)