

October 2023

A New Exodus

Migrant Smuggling from Afghanistan after the Return of the Taliban

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Suggested citation

Mahadevan, P., Khoruk, M. & Mohmanzai, A. M. (2023). *A new exodus: Migrant smuggling from Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban*. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 23. University of Birmingham.

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SOC ACE is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
Europol	European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
GI-TOC	Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IVTS	Informal Value Transfer Systems
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
US	United States

Summary

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021 triggered what some observers have deemed a fourth wave of distress migration out of Afghanistan in the last half-century. Outward mobility from Afghanistan has been broadly steady during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001-21), but the Taliban takeover and the ensuing economic and humanitarian crisis have increased its scale.

This research paper presents the results of the fieldwork conducted in Afghanistan and coordinated by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). It identifies common features of migrant smuggling out of Afghanistan and reveals the implications of the Taliban's return to power for the dynamics of human mobility. Based on interviews with migrants who succeeded in escaping the country, those who tried to do so but failed, as well as the smugglers and financiers who were instrumental in their journeys, this paper paints a picture of an illicit economy that will continue to be important to Afghanistan, the broader region, and the Global North.

This research study has a twofold objective. Firstly, it analyses the preliminary research findings produced by the field research team in Afghanistan to better understand the dynamics of human mobility after the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021. Secondly, it attempts to fill the gap in the literature by examining the role of informal value transfer systems (IVTS) in facilitating clandestine migration from Afghanistan. This study does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of irregular migration from Afghanistan. Rather, it paints a complex, at times impressionistic, picture of the contemporary clandestine movement of Afghans, based on the experiences of migrants and their families, and those who provided them with migrant smuggling services. The areas it highlights set the stage for a future research agenda.

Key takeaways:

- The market for irregular migration in Afghanistan is volatile and requires a high degree of adaptability from the people seeking a way out.
- The IVTS such as hawala play a significant role in the human smuggling economy in Afghanistan. Trust and credibility enjoyed by the hawala brokers provide additional legitimacy to human smugglers.
- In irregular migration hotspots, IVTS form an integral part of human smuggling infrastructure.
- Shared ethnic background forms the basis of a trust relationship and is often leveraged by human smuggling and money transfer service providers.
- The enhanced barriers to migrations are unlikely to prevent further migration when it is driven by perceived economic and security necessity, but do increase the costs and risks associated with it. The dependence of migrants on the services provided by smugglers also increases under such a scenario.

1. Introduction

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021 triggered what some observers have deemed a fourth wave of distress migration out of Afghanistan in the last half-century. Outward mobility from Afghanistan has been broadly steady during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001-21), but the Taliban takeover and the ensuing economic and humanitarian crisis have increased its scale.

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The paper provides a short overview of the literature and offers to place itself within it. We found some grey literature but almost no academic publications addressing migrant smuggling from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in 2021. A more recent study by Hoang (2022) provides a focused and comprehensive overview of reasonably contemporary human trafficking trends in Afghanistan. This paper is intended as a complement to, and further development of, Hoang's work, looking at recent migration of Afghans to foreign destinations, including the link to illicit financial flows. The link is not highlighted in published accounts of migrants' journeys, but behind-the-scenes investigations establish that hawala networks are the lifeblood of irregular migration from Afghanistan.¹

Human trafficking and migrant smuggling cover a variety of crimes, with varying responses needed depending on circumstances. Human trafficking is widely predicated on exploitation of people through various forms of duress including overt threats of violence (UNODC, 2000). Migrant smuggling, on the other hand, represents an

¹ Research interviews with individuals who used the services of smugglers, their families, and individuals affiliated with smugglers and money exchange service providers linked to migrant smuggling networks.

arrangement between client and service provider whereby the latter helps the former overcome geographic, legal or political obstacles to movement (UNODC, n. d.). Consent is an ambiguous concept in both trafficking and smuggling arrangements as there may be forms of consent in the former, while the latter may be driven by desperation and necessity which undermine the agency of the clients. Meanwhile, trafficking and smuggling often share similar modalities, including the routes, forms of transportation and criminal actors involved. Further, smuggled individuals may experience trafficking and similar exploitation on their journeys, further blurring the lines between both concepts (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

1.1. Background

In 2021 Afghanistan was third in the world for the number of refugees – approximately 2.7m (UNHCR, 2022). Two decades of war, economic collapse, and the subsequent re-emergence of the Taliban regime, with its concomitant economic consequences, as well as a lack of legal migration options, have left people seeking ever more risky ways out of the country, fuelling a ‘mass-transit bulk trade’ business in migrant smuggling. These often operate under ‘travel now, pay later’, or ‘pay-as-you-go’ models which only increase exploitation risks. Further, these risks are magnified by their potential interaction with corrupt border guards or police along the way. The main destinations for Afghan migrants include Iran, Pakistan, Greece, Türkiye, the Gulf States and Europe (Hoang, 2022). The Taliban’s recapture of Kabul in August 2021 further exacerbated the mass exodus as individuals feared reprisals.

The fall of Kabul triggered yet another wave of distress migration out of Afghanistan. The conflict-induced displacement which started after the Soviet military invasion in 1979 can be viewed as the first wave of Afghan migration in the country’s recent history. More waves of migration followed, prompted by the outbreak of civil war in 1992 as the formerly Soviet-supported government collapsed, and by the NATO intervention in Afghanistan between 1996–2001. Susanne Schmeidl (2019) identifies seven major migration phases which had occurred between the Soviet intervention and the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021. Beginning with 1981 and for over thirty years since, the majority of refugees in the world were Afghans – a trend which was only interrupted by the mass migration prompted by the Syrian civil war (Iqbal & McAuliffe, 2022). Mobility has thus been a constant – and perhaps defining – feature of Afghan society for decades.

On 1 May 2021, the US began a withdrawal of its last remaining forces in the country. The Taliban surged to occupy new areas. Since the withdrawal of the US troops, United Nations staff observed a 40% increase in the number of Afghans crossing over into Pakistani territory (Ellis-Petersen, Baloch & Tondo, 2021). Among the more common crossing points were Chaman and Chaghi, two towns far apart from each other in Pakistani Baluchistan and facing the Afghan province of Kandahar. Many of those crossing over were members of Afghan ethnic minorities such as Shia Hazaras or Tajiks. Both identity groups had reasons to fear violence at the hands of the ethnically Pashtun, Sunni Taliban who had targeted them during a civil war in the 1990s. They sought help from their respective ethnic groups in Pakistan – individuals with a shared ethnic

background who were already settled in large cities like Quetta or Karachi (Times of India, 2021).

Following the Taliban seizure of Kabul in August 2021, the Afghan economy neared collapse. Prior to this, 75% of government spending had been enabled by foreign aid money, which had also constituted 43% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Amnesty International, 2021). This flow of money dried up virtually overnight. The economy contracted by almost 21% (World Bank, 2022). What began in summer 2021 as an exodus of political refugees became, by the autumn of that year, a surge of economic migrants as well. An estimate by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) held that 44% of all Afghans who emigrated from the country between 2012 and 2022 did so in a 15-month period between January 2021 and April 2022 (IOM, 2022, March-April). Afghans were seeking ways out of the country as the Taliban was gaining control over more of its territories, while the humanitarian situation in the country deteriorated. By June 2022, 47% of the Afghan population were facing a degree of food insecurity that had reached a 'crisis level' (EUAA, 2022, September, p. 2). As an Afghan proverb says, 'Every pain passes except the pain of hunger' (Aikins, 2022).

Based on interviews with 23 Afghan smugglers in 2018, researchers from IOM found that smugglers perceived themselves as an integral part of Afghan society and had facilitated traditional migration for the purposes of education, trade, and religious pilgrimage (Mohammadi, Nimkar and Savage, 2019, p. 6). This role was only reinforced by decades of conflict and instability and became especially indispensable in the 1980s and 1990s, following the Soviet invasion. Smugglers provided a way to escape the country in crisis and to maintain contact with family members abroad. They facilitated the transfer of people, money, and information across borders (Mohammadi, Nimkar & Savage, 2019, p. 7).

Alessandro Monsutti's extensive study (first published in 2005) on the mobility strategies of the Hazaras – the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan – provides an important basis for understanding human mobility in Afghanistan. The anthropologist based his analysis on the fieldwork he conducted in the country between 1993 and 2001, during the Afghan civil war and the first Taliban government, revealing 'the existence of multilocal families and the transnational networks created by the Hazaras' (2005, p. 246). Monsutti emphasises the profound impact of informal value transfer systems (IVTS) such as hawala on all aspects of Afghan people's lives. However, Monsutti's analysis of hawala is limited to its role as a tool for transferring remittances rather than its use in human smuggling activities.

There is a gap in research on the role of IVTS in Afghanistan in outward migration. The hawala system has been present in the country for hundreds of years, facilitating trade between different regions (Zagaris, 2007) and providing a reliable and affordable alternative to the formal financial sector which has been disrupted by decades of conflict (Maimbo, 2003, p. 1; Trautsolt & Johnson, 2012). However, the link between hawala and migration was mainly studied in relation to remittances from migrant workers, which represented a legitimate use of hawala: see, for example, Faqeerzai and Jawad Faryad (2018); Muse and Rodrigo Mena (2022). Given the large proportion of the Afghan population abroad who maintain ties to relatives in the country, remittances have been an important lifeline (Ross & Barratt, n. d.) for many Afghans and potentially amounted

to 15-18% of Afghan GDP. The number is based on unofficial estimates, given the large number of hawala dealers who are not formally registered (Garrote-Sanchez, 2017). Scholars have argued that remittances made through hawala constituted a larger and better-distributed sum than humanitarian aid (Monsutti, 2005, p. 242). However, in their study on the motivation behind remittance behaviour in the Afghan context, Craig Loschmann and Melissa Siegel (2015, p. 47) found that sending household members abroad may be a strategy to hedge against future security risks, providing a location to escape to in case of deterioration of the security situation (for example, through legal migration channels for the purposes of family reunification), rather than a way to establish an alternative source of income. As Monsutti showed, in Afghanistan, '[V]ery few families have not left their country at some point [between the 1980s and early 2000s]' (2005, p. 146). The return of the Taliban on 15 August 2021 provided yet another trigger for Afghans to use their networks abroad.

The link between the informal financial system and clandestine migration has been explored by scholars in other geographical contexts – specifically, in response to the expansion of migrant smuggling activities into Europe in the context of the Arab Spring, civil wars, and insurgencies in the Middle East and North Africa in the mid-2010s (via the eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes) (Rahman, 2019). According to Europol data from 2015, the two key forms of payment for migrant smuggling services were cash (in 52% of cases) and hawala (in 20% of cases) (Europol-INTERPOL, 2016). In 2022, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) found hawala to be the most common method of transferring funds generated from migrant smuggling between jurisdictions (FATF, 2022). As early as 2005, Monsutti argued that informal money transfer networks 'structure[d] Afghan transnational society' (Monsutti, 2005, p. 174). With every new crisis, the importance of such networks was arguably increasing. However, despite the acknowledgement of the significant role of hawala in facilitating clandestine migration, the research on the issue remains limited.

Hawala

Hawala is an ancient informal value transfer system (IVTS) – the use of letters of credit was first recorded in the Muslim world in the eighth century (Monsutti, 2005, p. 174) – which emerged to facilitate long-distance trade, and is widely used for the transfer of funds domestically and internationally. The term loosely translates from Arabic as 'debt transfer' (Razavy, 2005, p. 279). A standard example of the use of hawala for international transfers is outlined below:

An individual who wishes to transfer money to a family member gives the money (plus a commission) to a hawala broker and receives from the broker a unique code. The broker contacts another hawala dealer from the country where the beneficiary of the transaction is located. The second broker will give the amount of money requested to the designated person, who must present the same code to collect the money. Therefore, the transfer takes place without the actual movement of money.

1.2. Methodology

This research analyses the dynamics of human movement out of Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul in August 2021 and is based on over 40 semi-structured interviews. These were conducted in February 2023 by a research team consisting of two interviewers in Kabul, one interviewer in Jalalabad and one in Herat. The team interviewed individuals who used the services of smugglers to escape from Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban, and with the family members who facilitated their migration. Seven interviews were conducted across three locations with money exchange service providers, also known as sarafi, with links to migrant smuggling networks.

Informants were selected through the snowball sampling method, drawing on the interviewers' networks. The interviewers' close ties to the local communities and elders, and their decade-long experience in conducting surveys and assessments in the country allowed them to establish a relationship of trust with the informants. Given the highly dangerous environment in which the interviews were conducted, the research team took additional measures to ensure the informants' safety and protect the confidentiality of their identities. Most interviews were conducted orally and were not recorded – accounts of the interviews were written down as soon as possible after they took place. The research team did not request formal written consent to conduct the interviews but instead sought informed verbal consent. The interviewees were informed that no identifying information would be disclosed. In addition to oral interviews conducted in the three Afghan cities, the research team conducted phone interviews with individuals who used the services of migrant smugglers and with their family members. The use of this primary qualitative research was underpinned by a review of academic and grey literature collected through public and academic databases and media reports.

Researching the dynamics of clandestine human mobility is complicated by the high degree of politicisation of the issue and the risks of overrepresenting some viewpoints and underrepresenting others (Bird Ruiz-Benitez De Lugo, 2022). The experiences of migrants are often analysed either on the macro-level of global trends and the trajectories of human mobility – in which the migrant is often represented a passive actor – or on the micro-level of personal experiences of refuge (D'Angelo, 2021, p. 488). This research paper views those inside the service area, both on the demand and supply side, as actively shaping the market for human smuggling in Afghanistan and directly affecting the regional and global dynamics of human mobility. Their accounts serve as testimonies to the volatile market for irregular migration in Afghanistan and the high degree of adaptability required from the people seeking a way out.

2. Departures

2.1. Before the takeover

Although migration, in its many forms, has been a constant feature of Afghan society, this paper considers the Soviet intervention of 1979 as a starting point of mass distress migration from Afghanistan, which was to some extent organised by and relied on the services of human smugglers and hawala brokers. The Afghans interviewed by the research team in 2022 identified three main strategies used by migrants seeking to reach western countries between the late 1970s and the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001:²

- 1 Arranging for document forgers to replace the identification photograph in a genuine passport.

Prior to the September 11 attacks, document checks were not as thorough, and the holders of doctored passports were sometimes able to get through immigration formalities. The passports were allegedly doctored in Pakistan or Iran, where most Afghan refugees lived.

- 2 Arranging for student visas or scholarships on a bona fide basis, but with no intention of returning to Afghanistan upon completion of academic studies abroad.

Those who were able to enrol at universities abroad sought work opportunities in violation of the original terms of their student visas.

- 3 Sponsorship for resettlement by a family member who was already settled abroad.

Family reunification programmes represented a legal migration pathway, but some applicants were allegedly exaggerating the closeness of family ties to their sponsors abroad. This strategy persisted: in Zaranj, a town which has become a hotspot for irregular migration from Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul in 2021, smugglers loosely describe migrants who originate from the same region as their ‘relatives’ (Rasmussen, 2017).

Several developments that occurred during the two-decade existence of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001-21) have had a significant impact on the dynamics of human movement out of Afghanistan. While the UN has been present in Afghanistan since the 1950s, a new phase of enhanced international engagement in Afghanistan began with the end of the first Taliban government and the presence in the country of an international military force mandated by the UN (Mohr, 2015). This was also reflected in the significant increase in the number of international NGOs, from 53 in 2000 to 269 in 2011 (Mitchell, 2017). This resulted in an increased exposure of Afghans to the ‘west’. While the inflow of large amounts of money for reconstruction purposes resulted in an economic boom, which motivated thousands of Afghan citizens to return from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan, thousands more were applying for asylum in EU

² Multiple informants identified some or all of these techniques as common pathways to migration between 1979 and 2001.

countries each year (Barlas, 2022). In order to build capacity for good governance, western embassies provided visas for short-term training courses and seminars to Afghan civil servants, security officials, aid workers and private sector employees. It has been anecdotally suggested that some or even many Afghans who exited the country on such visas chose not to return to Afghanistan.³ These claims have not been cross-checked against official government data.

Afghans made up the second-largest number of irregular migrants arriving in Greece (after Syrians) in the massive influx of refugees and migrants through south-eastern European countries in 2015-16 (Smith, 2022). Some eventually managed to remain in the country legally, while others were ordered to return to the last country they had travelled through, Türkiye. However, Türkiye was and remains reluctant to accept Afghan refugees, leaving them trapped in Greece (European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), 2023). The area around Victoria Square, a once-affluent neighbourhood in Athens that had seen hard times over many years, became a meeting place for irregular migrants looking to continue across the Balkans and further into the EU. In this context, an infrastructure for human smuggling services began to emerge. There were a number of Afghan restaurants in the square's vicinity, and also kiosks offering money transfer services. The restaurants served as places where introductions were made and prices agreed (Stamouli, 2016).

2.2. Use of hawala

The way hawala worked was that a migrant's family gave money to a money exchanger, known as sarafi, to hold in safekeeping until the migrant reached their agreed destination. The family would be given a code number which the migrant would share with the last smuggler in the chain who helped them complete the final leg of the journey. This smuggler would, in turn, share the code number with a contact back in Afghanistan, who would approach the sarafi and, upon stating the number, would receive the money deposited by the family (Skodo, 2018, p. 5).⁴ For his services as an intermediary, the sarafi would be paid a certain amount by the family (to hold the money) and an equal amount by the smuggler's contact (to release the money) (Banic & Smith, 2018). It was a system built on both sides' trusting the sarafi, while not trusting each other.

Although it worked for many years, the system began to break down towards the later part of the 2010s. As increasing numbers of Afghans fled abroad, fearing a future Taliban regime, false information began to creep into the communications between migrant and smuggler, on a case-by-case basis. Reports suggested smugglers were perceived as having either cheated their 'customers' or as being cheated by them when payment was not made. This eventually led to a more direct approach: the smuggler would hold onto the migrant as human collateral until the family paid the full amount owed. There was no need for a sarafi. Meanwhile, the money exchangers themselves became more wary

³ Multiple informants expressed this view, although it could not be substantiated by official data.

⁴ Our local contacts in Afghanistan also confirmed that these procedures are used by money exchangers involved in migrant smuggling.

of being involved in ‘bad deals’ between migrants and smugglers. While the latter were practically impossible for the police to trace if the family made a complaint, the sarafi, operating from a fixed location usually in a public area, would be easily identified and harassed by the police (Amiry, 2020, pp. 4-5). As smugglers are perceived by local communities to be prone to violence (Mohammadi, Nimkar & Savage, 2019, p. 8), the interactions with them were putting sarafi at heightened risk.

2.3. Migrant smuggling infrastructure in Zaranj

Zaranj was the first provincial capital to fall on 6 August 2021, a psychological blow to the collapsing government in Kabul that had not been felt for many years. Within nine days, Kabul itself was occupied by the Taliban. The US hurriedly evacuated tens of thousands of Afghans who had helped American soldiers fight the Taliban. Eventually, around 88,500 were settled on American soil (Rosenberg, Cooke & Botts, 2023). An estimated 78,000 who were also eligible for evacuation due to the mortal danger they faced from Taliban reprisals were not extracted (Green, 2023).

Located in the remote south-west of the country, bordering Iran and Pakistan, Nimruz province became a gateway for many poorer Afghans who could not afford to pay for forged documents or visa applications to flee grinding poverty and/or the Taliban. Some journeys involved a combination of legal and illegal travel (that is, with and without visas, depending on the countries being travelled through to the final destination). Many migrants arrive in Zaranj having travelled twenty hours on a bus from Kabul, often having sold their families’ possessions to fund the journey. Their expectation of an easy onward journey are likely to be as limited as their economic alternatives. Zaranj has become an important hub for overland migration, and relevant infrastructure has begun to emerge.

Zaranj is right on the border with Iran and has a population of around 160,000 (Rasmussen, 2017). Its downtown area has over 150 hotels, many clustered around the main bus terminus, with names that explicitly mention an Afghan province or ethnic group (Mogelson, 2012). Signs such as ‘Center of Hazaristan’, ‘Kunduz Hotel’ and ‘Logar Restaurant’ serve as reference markers for would-be migrants, pointing to where they might find a smuggler who shares their ethnicity and will perhaps be less likely to overcharge them (Babst, 2022). Trust, in many cases stemming from shared identity markers such as ethnicity or nationality, is a crucial element of migrants’ journeys. Migrant smugglers often leverage their related backgrounds to recruit migrants and facilitate their journeys (FATF, 2022). Trust also forms the foundation of the informal financial system used by smugglers. Hawala dealers benefit from ethnic affiliations and often form close bonds with their clients and their families – in some cases throughout generations (Razavy, 2005, p. 285). Hawala can thus be viewed as a socially-embedded phenomenon which has a profound effect on Afghans in the country and abroad (Monsutti, 2005, p. 174).

The hotels in Zaranj are usually owned by smugglers, allowing demand and supply actors to make connections in discreet rooms. The smuggler will arrange illicit transportation into Iran, either directly westward or via a southward detour through Pakistan. Both options are hazardous. Pickup trucks that ferry migrants to the Pakistan

frontier, an eight-hour drive away, are called 'Kabulis'. They are operated by ethnic Baluch businessmen who serve as a key link in the migrant smuggling industry out of southern Afghanistan. From offices in the upmarket Shahr-e-Naw commercial area of Kabul, Baluch financiers are believed to control the flow of money that enables the industry (Notezai & Waseem Ashraf Butt, 2018). Down in Zaranj, smugglers coordinate prospective migrants at the so-called 'Baluch Market' in preparation for a long journey (Khan, 2022).

Figure 1: Zaranj lies in south-western Afghanistan on the border with Iran and is the capital of the Nimruz province



Source: OpenStreetMap contributors, <https://www.openstreetmap.org>

Commercial garages are often fronts for the smuggling business, which in reality often operates unimpeded out in the open (Goldbaum & Akbary, 2022). Each pickup truck previously carried 30 migrants, but Taliban regulations have reduced this to 20, probably driven by a revenue impetus. A fee per vehicle roughly equals the bus fare from Kabul – 1000 afghanis – and 500 more is collected at the final checkpoint before the trucks cross into Pakistan (Reuter, 2022). The convoys can be as large as 50 vehicles. A decade ago, there were 300 drivers, each working one day a month, plying the route between Zaranj and the disputed frontier with Pakistan (Mogelson, 2012). No one can say with authority how many drivers are active now. A recent report claimed that 300 vehicles, each with around 20 migrants, were seen ready to leave Zaranj on a single day, totalling 6,000 migrants. The Taliban, however, rejected these estimates (France24, 2022).

When the migrants reach the frontier, passing through a flat and scorching hot desert known as Dashti Margo ('desert of death'), they enter Pakistan's Baluchistan province.

Awaiting the migrants are drivers from the Baluch community who live on the southern side of the frontier. Taking over from their Afghan counterparts at a place called Duk, the Pakistanis transfer the migrants to other vehicles and ferry them to the border with Iran, for a fee equivalent to US\$20, plus an additional US\$30 paid to an organiser (Notezia & Butt, 2018; RFE/RL, 2022). There, the migrants have two choices: a seventeen-hour trek over the Koh-e-Moshkil ('mountain of misery') or a six-hour one, costing an additional US\$20. Both lead into the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan. At this stage their realities intersect with the international migration control regime. If they are lucky, they will be discreetly met by Iranian Baluchis who will take them deeper inside the country. If not, they will be intercepted by Iranian border guards and deported, perhaps experiencing mistreatment along the way. They also risk being shot dead while trying to make the crossing (Babst, 2022).

Figure 2: Afghan migrants cross the Dashti Margo desert in the southern provinces of Nimruz and Helmand to enter the Baluchistan province of Pakistan



Source: OpenStreetMap contributors, <https://www.openstreetmap.org>

The migrants take a circuitous route, despite Zaranj being a border city facing Iran, because entering Iran from Afghanistan requires a valid Afghan passport and Iranian visa (many have neither). The official border point, just across a bridge that spans a curve in the Helmand river, is tightly controlled by Iran. An Iranian border guard told journalists that prior to the Taliban takeover of Kabul, between 1,000 and 2,000 Afghans would attempt to cross daily. Following the takeover, the number jumped to between 3,000 and 4,000. Since entry was granted only to those with valid visas, a mere 500-600 were permitted to enter Iran (EUAA, 2022, December, p. 14). Given that the border around Zaranj was both walled off and heavily patrolled, the only option left was to take a detour via Pakistani Baluchistan, where security was less tight.

3. Journeys

Based on accounts of Afghan migrants who used the services of human smugglers to escape the country since the Taliban takeover, this section considers the new migration routes that have emerged since August 2021. It further suggests that the rise in prices for human smuggling services is linked to the greater security risks associated with border crossings.

Before the Taliban takeover, prices for reaching Europe (via the Balkan route or by air) varied from 4,000-6,000 euros per person (according to 2017 data). For the UK, the prices ranged between 8,000-10,000 euros; for Canada, it was estimated at 16,000 euros. These prices were revealed after a joint investigation by the Greek national police, Europol, and the UK's National Crime Agency led to the dismantling of a human smuggling network operating from a 'mini market' store in Athens. Two of the group's leaders operated an illicit hawala business in Athens and cooperated with hawala operators in Afghanistan, Iran, Türkiye, and Germany (FATF, 2022).

Prior to August 2021, Afghans who had sufficient financial means were able to apply for visas at the Turkish embassy in Kabul. It was not uncommon for families to sell off all their property to raise funds for the journey. The visas would not be applied for directly, but through the facilitation of smuggling syndicates. For example, smugglers might provide documentation demonstrating the migrant owned an apartment in Türkiye and thereby had an investment interest in the country, and the visa would be issued on this basis. Having received visas, the migrants would fly to Türkiye legitimately. The smugglers' local representatives in the country would then arrange for small sea-going vessels to take the migrants to Italy.⁵ The cost of this journey from Türkiye to Italy can be over US\$8,500 per person (Ellis-Petersen, Baloch & Tondo, 2021). A cheaper possibility is to travel to Greece. Once in Greece, the migrants would proceed to the rest of the EU via the Balkan states.

The village of Lojane, which lies in North Macedonia less than one kilometre from the border with Serbia, has been identified as a smuggling hotspot. It has many obscure trails which connect it to the Serbian village of Miratovac just across the border, and familial ties span the political boundary that separates the two settlements. Even in this remote corner of Europe, Afghan- and Pakistani-origin individuals act as organisers of migrant smuggling. Some of them are well-integrated into the local community and speak the local language. They arrange for migrants to be guided through woodlands at night across the border. Their network extends all the way from the North Macedonian-Serbian border across the length of Serbia to the northern border with Hungary (van Bijlert & Bjelica, 2017).

For migrants who do not have the funds to arrange for travel to Türkiye by air, a cheaper option is to apply for an Iranian visa in Kabul. This allows them to enter Iran

⁵ Information about this route has been corroborated by interviews with Afghan migrants based in Europe and their family members.

legally and then they can travel onward using the services of smugglers. At least half of the Afghans entering Iran, however, do not have a passport and therefore enter illegally through the overland route via Zaranj. Their inability to obtain travel documentation comes down to the fact that following August 2021, Taliban officials as well as their relatives have reportedly found a lucrative side business in selling scarce passports to those who are willing to pay between US\$800 and US\$1,000 for one.⁶

The prices charged for migrant smuggling services vary depending on the routes and distances to be travelled, often charged separately for each leg of the journey. The interviews conducted by the research team revealed that smugglers charge different prices for families and individual migrants. The prices for an individual journey from Iran to Türkiye range between US\$1,000–3,000, while a family of five would pay between US\$4,000–6,000.⁷ The price increases sharply if a migrant requests support in entering the European Union, which is challenging to reach due to maritime patrolling and border controls. One informant revealed that his family of six paid a total of 9,000 euros per person (or a grand total of just under US\$59,000) for the family to be smuggled from Iran to Germany via Türkiye, arriving at their destination in December 2022.⁸ The high costs resulted from tightened border security, but the conditions of the travel were often unfavourable, with the migrants being transported through remote forested areas and via country roads. When the difficulty of a border crossing and the risks associated with it increase, so does the reliance on human smugglers (Augustová & Hakimi, 2021). This allows the smugglers to take advantage of the situation and raise the prices.

One interviewee told our researchers that he and four members of his family paid US\$6,000 per person to be smuggled from Afghanistan to Greece. The journey entailed obtaining valid visas for Türkiye, which were arranged by the smugglers as part of the service being provided. The family then flew to Istanbul, where they boarded a ship and sailed to Greece. After staying in Greece for two months, they were able to travel onward to France and eventually to Germany. They complained of poor treatment by the smugglers, including a shortage of food and water. Of the total US\$30,000 spent on the trip, half was deposited with a sarafi in Kabul and the remainder was paid to the last member of the smuggling chain who delivered them to German soil.⁹

3.1. New routes

Throughout all waves of migration from Afghanistan since the late 1970s, Iran and Pakistan have been the primary destination countries. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an estimated 85% of Afghan refugees live in Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, n. d.). By 2021, there were an estimated 1.45 million Afghans living in Pakistan officially, and another 770,000 who were thought to be undocumented. Iran received a higher number: in a country with 90 million, there were

⁶ Information from interviews.

⁷ Interviews with multiple Afghan individuals who used the services of human smugglers.

⁸ Interview with a family member of an Afghan migrant based in Germany.

⁹ Interview with a family member of an Afghan migrant based in Germany.

2.25 million undocumented migrants from Afghanistan, and another 780,000 Afghans who officially had refugee status. In addition, there were around 586,000 Afghans living in Iran on legitimate visas (Augustová & Hakimi, 2021, p. 7). An IOM report estimated that 69% of the over 2.5 million Afghans who emigrated between January 2021 and April 2022 moved to Iran. Another 18% moved to Pakistan and only 11% went to Türkiye (or onward to Europe) (IOM, 2022).

Iran was one of the few to keep its embassy in Kabul open after August 2021. Over the following year, Iran recorded around one million new migrants from Afghanistan – however, 65% were deported back (EUAA, 2023). Only around 274,000 of those who had entered following the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan were expected to be allowed to remain in Iran by the end of 2022 (Tehran Times, 2022).

As part of a series of measures taken by Iran over the last ten years to prevent a further influx of Afghan refugees, it has erected a 15-foot high wall on its border with Afghanistan in Nimruz province (Augustová & Hakimi, 2021). In places, shifting sand dunes have accumulated against the wall, making its top accessible to migrants. Iranian border guards have countered this vulnerability by shooting at Afghans who attempt to cross. Thus, the favoured route still appears to be a lengthy detour via Pakistan's Baluchistan province and thereafter into Sistan-Baluchistan in Iran. The cost of a journey that ends in an Iranian city is more affordable: between US\$100 and US\$300 per person. If the destination is Türkiye, on the other hand, the cost shoots up to between US\$3,000 and US\$4,000. Migrants arriving in Sistan-Baluchistan are taken on a ten-hour road journey to Tehran, before continuing to the town of Khoy near Türkiye.¹⁰

Figure 3: Concrete wall at the border between Iran and Afghanistan, Sistan-Baluchistan, 2015



Source: Ghanbari, Shahbakhsh and Naderianfar. (2019).

¹⁰ Information from interviews.

The rising costs

Due to rising demand from prospective migrants as well as heightened border security, costs have gone up. For years prior to 2021, US\$3,000 to US\$4,000 would have sufficed to smuggle a migrant all the way from Zaranj to Germany. During this time, according to our information, Afghans also continued to use the services of Pakistani forgers to doctor passports and board Pakistan International Airlines passenger flights to EU destinations. The cost of a passage to any western European country now, following the Taliban's takeover of power, is between US\$8,000 and US\$10,000.¹¹

From Khoy, the migrants proceed to Maku, which lies less than 20 kilometres from the Turkish border. Here, the smugglers (who are not the same smugglers who ferried the migrants out of Zaranj, nor their Pakistani partners, but locals who have strong ties with border guards) bribe officials to let the migrants through. According to one report, Turkish border guards are sometimes willing to accept a bribe and pretend not to see migrants crossing over, even going to the extent of suggesting which time and place are safe for crossing. But their police counterparts further in the interior of Türkiye cannot be influenced by such local deals and will arrest irregular migrants if they chance upon any (Cookman & Caylak, 2021).

There is, therefore, an element of luck as to whether migrants make it through the border. If they do, they are met by Türkiye-based counterparts of the Iranian smugglers. These men can be of Turkish, Iranian, Pakistani or even Afghan nationality. They take the migrants initially to towns such as Dogubayazit, Çalidran and Özalp, which lie very close to the border on the Turkish side. Since the crossings take place during night time the migrants usually need to arrive in safe areas by daybreak (Bozarlsan, 2021). Thereafter, they travel to the large city of Van, on the eastern shore of Lake Van. Should they have funds to continue towards Europe, they tend to travel along routes close to either the Mediterranean or Black Sea coasts so that they can flee law enforcement officials by boat if necessary and arrive on the coastline of a different country, whose authorities might not immediately deport them back.¹²

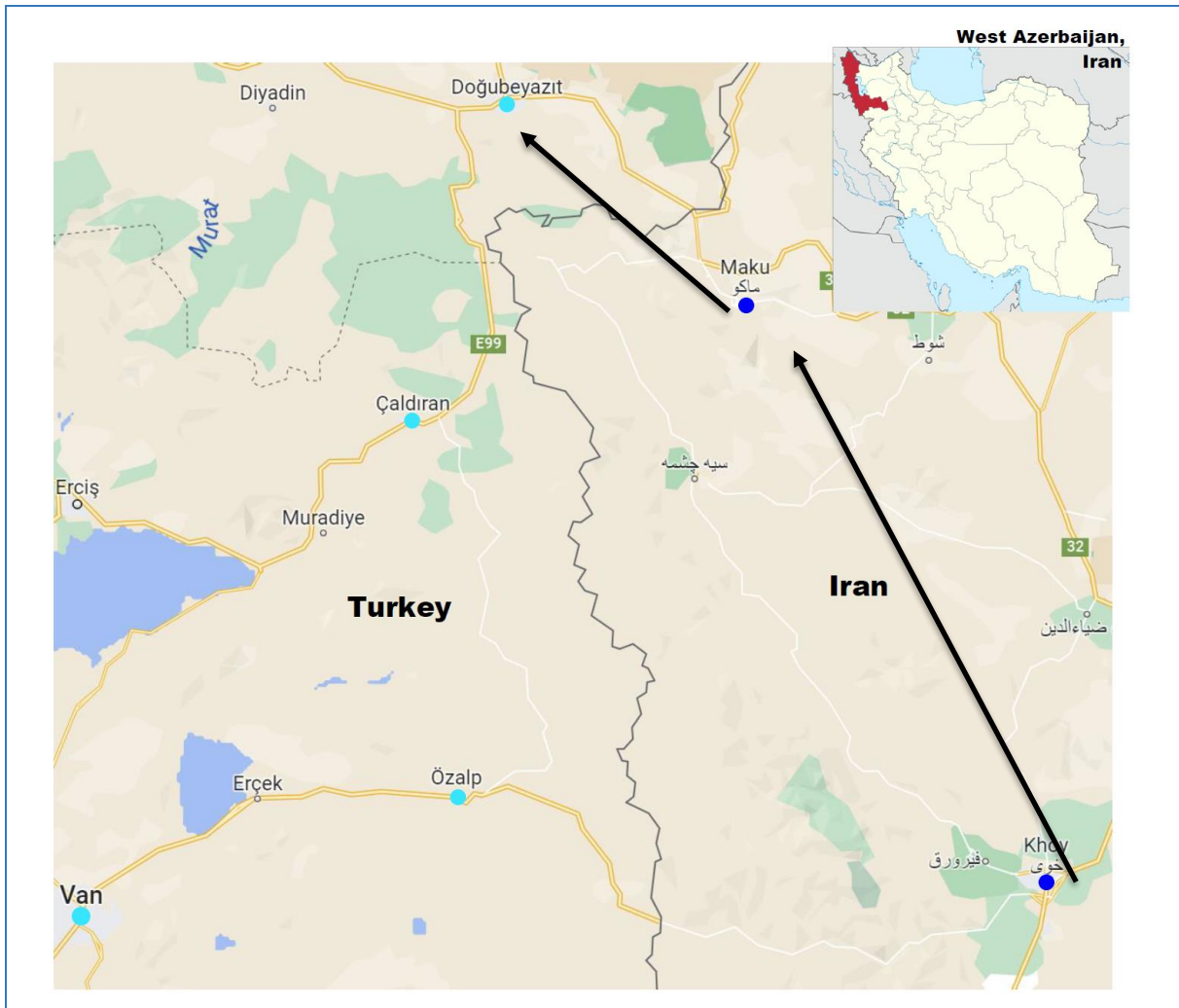
From Türkiye, there is also a more expensive option of directly travelling to Italy on private yachts. Prior to 2022, our information held that some of these vessels were captained by Ukrainian nationals. Their involvement might quite possibly have been disrupted by the ongoing conflict with Russia in the Black Sea and in southern and eastern Ukraine.¹³

¹¹ Interview with a family member of an Afghan migrant based in Germany; informal exchanges with sarafi in Afghanistan in February 2022.

¹² Information from interviews.

¹³ Based on GI-TOC fieldwork conducted in Calais, France for another study.

Figure 4: The journey takes Afghan migrants through the towns of Khoy and Maku in the West Azerbaijan province in north-west Iran, onwards to Doğubeyazıt, Çaldıran and Özalp on the Turkish side, and eventually to the city of Van



Source: Google Maps; Wikipedia Commons, Yamaha5, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:IranWestAzerbaijan-SVG.svg>

Another point highlighted by the researchers' team in Afghanistan is that Pakistani citizens are using fake identification papers to masquerade as Afghans in the hope of obtaining asylum in Europe. Shortly after seizing power the new Taliban regime announced that it would be issuing Afghan passports. To obtain one, all that was needed was handwritten information about the applicant's identity, carried on an A4-sized sheet of paper. This form of identification is called 'Tazkira' and has long served as a national ID card for Afghans. Previously, passports had been issued on the basis of machine-readable identification papers, known as e-Tazkiras, which were harder to forge. Between 2015 and 2018, the previous Afghan government experimented with issuing e-Tazkiras and from 2018 onwards, made this document necessary for obtaining a passport. However, with the return of paper-based Tazkiras, the Taliban inadvertently gave Pakistanis an opportunity to obtain genuine Afghan passports using forged Tazkiras and then travel to the West. The journey might not even involve the services of migrant smugglers. Such individuals simply try their luck at obtaining a place in a legitimate evacuation programme run by western governments to resettle persons facing a high risk of persecution by the Taliban. Our respondents suggested that a number of Pakistanis have

arrived in Germany, France and other western European nations after 2021 on the basis of fraudulently acquired Afghan passports and claimed asylum status.¹⁴

Obtaining genuine visas that would allow one (in theory) to fly into a western country on a commercial flight and pass through immigration control has always been an expensive proposition. While the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan existed, students from the country were able to use visitor and student visas for countries in both western and eastern Europe, as well as Malta, to enter the European Union. If travelling through an East European country that was outside the bloc (for example, Russia) they could hope to find smugglers who would take them via a land route to their ultimate destination. Another favoured method was to apply for medical treatment visas for India, and upon arrival in New Delhi, to file for emigration to countries in Europe and North America.¹⁵

3.2. Destination: Cyprus

A new route that has opened up after August 2021, according to our sources, is for Afghan migrants to fly to Cyprus. Smugglers arrange for false documentation showing Afghans as entering Cyprus for the purpose of buying a residence. As it is easier to enter Cyprus than to enter the rest of the EU, the Mediterranean island has become a favoured transit point. One interviewee claimed that his family of seven paid a sarafi in Kabul's Taimani area, who was in turn directly related to an Afghan smuggler based in Cyprus. This smuggler had links to influential businesspeople also based in Cyprus. The wife of one of these businesspeople was the ultimate recipient of a substantial portion of the money that was paid in Kabul.¹⁶

Our interviewee told us that payment was made in two parts: a tranche of US\$4,000 to a sarafi in the Sarai Shahzada locality of Kabul, and US\$18,400 paid to the sarafi in Taimani. After obtaining Iranian visas by their own devices, the interviewee and his family flew from Kabul to Herat and then crossed the land border with Iran legally, entering the Iranian city of Mashhad before going on to Tehran. The costs associated with this journey, including the visa fees, were borne by the family directly and not included in the amount paid to the two sarafis in Kabul. The family then stayed in Tehran for 44 days. During this time, the smuggler based in Cyprus used his ties with an influential businessman to procure documents falsely stating that the migrating family had purchased an apartment on the island. Using these documents, the smuggler booked hotel rooms for the family in Cyprus and airline tickets. The family was advised that they should land in north Cyprus before 12pm on a working day, as this was the shift when supposedly corrupt officials at the airport would be able to help the migrants get through immigration checks. Yet, when they arrived they were arrested by the police for carrying false documents. They were eventually released after the contact arrived at the airport and spoke with the police. He later claimed that the family owed him a sum of US\$450 per person to reimburse the unexpected cost he had incurred of bribing the police.¹⁷

¹⁴ Information from interviews.

¹⁵ Information from interviews.

¹⁶ Interview with an Afghan family based in Cyprus.

¹⁷ Interview with an Afghan family based in Cyprus.

The family then paid an additional US\$15,000 directly to the contact. The total amount they paid to smugglers for their journey (not counting the expenses they directly incurred while travelling to Iran and residing there for six weeks) came to US\$40,550. After three nights in an apartment in Cyprus, they were driven to an isolated area and told to wait for two taxis that would shortly arrive to collect them. The taxis were driven by Pakistani-origin migrants. For an additional fee of 30 euros for each vehicle, the drivers dropped the family off at a refugee camp in south Cyprus. The family stayed in the camp for 16 days before being able to find an apartment which they rented at their own expense.¹⁸ As their story shows, some migrants travelling illegally to the West have the resources to buy their way past border control provided they connect with the right fixers.

3.3. Destination: Canada

Another development is the emergence of a smuggling route that takes migrants from Iran (where they have arrived by whatever means) to the US via Brazil and the length of Latin America. This route has rapidly grown in demand. In early 2022, prices for a passage to Brazil alone cost between US\$4,000 and US\$5,000. By the end of the year, they had increased to between US\$12,000 and US\$13,000, with a number of prospective migrants being scammed. Even after paying the entire amount to a sarafi they would still find themselves waiting five months for a Brazilian 'humanitarian visa' which would allow them to enter the South American country.¹⁹

For those who make it to Brazil, usually through an international airport on the country's Atlantic coast, they face a tough decision. Lacking any contacts in their new host society, many choose not to stay but rather to travel overland to the US border. Between their starting point in Brazil's Amazonian region and the southern United States lie the borders of nine sovereign states. From south to north these are: Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico. The border between Colombia and Panama, known as the Darien Gap, has become notorious in the last year as a transit area for irregular migrants from multiple countries: Afghans, Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese as well as South American nations.

¹⁸ Interview with an Afghan family based in Cyprus.

¹⁹ Interview with an Afghan migrant based in Canada.

Figure 5: To reach the US, Afghan migrants who arrive in Brazil need to cross nine countries and pass through the dangerous Darien Gap border between Colombia and Panama



Source: LASA Central America, https://mobile.twitter.com/CAS_LASA/status/1195891293425225728

Between 2011 and 2021, less than 12,000 people annually are estimated to have passed through the heavily forested and dangerous area on their way to the US. In 2022, that figure shot up to 248,000 (Green, 2023). The Panamanian authorities temporarily house and feed the migrants, provided it is understood that they are not welcome to remain in the country but will continue northward. Quite how many migrants perish in the forests at the hands of bandits or through unfortunate encounters with wildlife, or through sickness or accidents, cannot be reliably estimated due to the difficulty of recovering bodies. It is believed that in 2022, over 2,200 Afghan migrants passed through the Darien Gap on their way to the US. Nearly half of this number undertook their journeys in the last two months of the year. The previous year, in 2021, just 24 Afghans are thought to have used this route (Rosenberg, Cooke & Botts, 2023). Considering that approximately 4,000 Afghans have been granted 'humanitarian visas' for Brazil in a year since the Taliban takeover, which grant them two years of residency plus the right to work, we speculate that a key purpose of travelling to Brazil on a legitimate visa is to enter the US but have limited evidence to support this.

The journey to Canada

An Afghan national interviewed by the research team described how he travelled to Canada via Brazil. After applying online for a humanitarian visa, he waited for three months until it was approved. He then went to Tehran to submit his passport to the Brazilian embassy (there being no embassy in Kabul). After three weeks he paid a bribe to an embassy worker and finally received the visa. He then flew to Brazil where he spent 25 days, during which he found a Pakistani-origin smuggler who for US\$4,500 agreed to arrange a passage to the US. The journey involved travelling through the Darien Gap, a seven-day odyssey through the Panamanian rainforest. After entering the US via Mexico's border with California, he travelled north until he entered Canada, where he claimed asylum.²⁰

Figure 6: The dangerous jungle of the Darien Gap has become a site of transit for many refugees seeking to reach the US



Source: UNHCR/Rosso, F. (n. d.)

²⁰ Interview with an Afghan migrant based in Canada.

4. Conclusion

A factor which became evident through our research is that Afghans face a handicap in the bureaucracy of international migration. Not only are they perceived as impoverished and lacking in marketable skills for western economies, there is also ignorance about the circumstances that compel them to migrate. Such ignorance is relative to other migrants from Islamic countries closer to Europe, such as Syria or even Iran, whose political circumstances and risk of persecution at home might be more familiar to European immigration officials and asylum courts. Since Afghanistan has been in a state of near-continuous civil war since the Soviet intervention of 1979, the economy has been devastated. Moreover, the poor quality of public safety in the country means that physical danger is inextricably mixed with financial hardship.

Yet, Afghan migrants to the West can struggle to tell a convincing story when applying for asylum. Unlike more educated refugees from Arab countries such as Syria, rural Afghans who seek refugee status in Europe might not communicate articulately even in their native language when asked about their reasons for emigrating. One American journalist described this best:

The N.G.O. workers I'd spoken to in Turkey told me that Afghans were known to have trouble telling the right story because of cultural norms of modesty as well as their relative lack of education as compared to, say, Syrians or Iranians. For example, an illiterate Afghan farmer who'd escaped from the Taliban-controlled countryside, where his sons were subject to forced recruitment, and his village to airstrikes, might say that the reason he and his family had fled, the last and proximate straw, was because the harvest failed, and there was nothing to eat — in other words, for economic reasons. That's the wrong answer. The right answer to the question of why you left was: Because I was forced. Because I had no choice. (Aikins, 2022.)

If and when they make it to Greece, their gateway to the wider EU, they strike up connections in the local diaspora for services such as money transfers and asylum options in Europe. In all this, those who actually arrange for migrants to be smuggled operate through layers of cut-outs. Their faces and names are not known to migrants (Stamouli, 2016). Sometimes, migrants do not know or choose not to tell their family back home where they have momentarily reached, if it is not their intended destination. This makes tracing the routes and waypoints used by smuggling networks all the more challenging.²¹

Meanwhile, according to Europol, 46% of criminal syndicates involved in migrant smuggling are also involved in other crimes including drug smuggling (Banic & Smith, 2018). While this might be true of the financiers of smuggling activity, so far in our

²¹ The GI-TOC is currently expanding its research capacity in Afghanistan to further contribute to the understanding of how the migrant smuggling economy operates in the country.

research we have found no evidence that it is true of migrants themselves who are merely availing themselves of a service, even if it is an illicit one.

Considering that Afghanistan is the source of over 80% of opiates entering Europe, one might expect to see linkages between the two illicit trades. Indeed, further systematic research on this topic is needed. The few insights on this intersection that we were able to obtain, given our more limited research focus, pointed to a distinction between the two. Migrants are vulnerable at all stages of their journey, but especially in places like the Darien Gap or Pakistani Baluchistan, to being kidnapped for ransom by armed bandits. In contrast, drug traffickers tend to be well-armed themselves and capable of fighting off any attempts to seize their produce by rivals or government agencies. Although overlap between the two crime categories is possible on a localised basis, the decentralised nature of the migrant smuggling business suggests that it should be seen as much as a socio-political phenomenon as a law enforcement problem. Drug trafficking from Afghanistan, on the other hand, as we demonstrate in another of our reports, tends to be carried out by consolidated syndicates with strong territorial control.

The Taliban regime has shown a growing propensity to restrict freedoms for Afghan women in particular. Being banned from working for the United Nations is merely the latest in a series of curbs that have been placed on access to education and employment opportunities. When contrasted with the relative freedom that Afghan women were allowed during the days of the Islamic Republic, such changes portend a climate of economic repression. In such circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that entire households are looking to leave the country, as opposed to only men and boys of working age. This research has presented an initial attempt to unpick the realities for those who become involved in the trade as well as provide linkages to broader themes and intersecting exigencies that we find within the political economy of globalised illicit markets such as finance, drugs and human exploitation as well as the transnational legal regimes that govern them.

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