

## Continued Protection, Sustainable Reintegration: Afghan Refugees and Migrants in Iran

### Overview

This briefing paper highlights the case of Afghans living in Iran, their current livelihoods and their processes of decision-making associated with returning to Afghanistan. It looks at living conditions in Iran and the return intentions of both refugee households and single labour migrants.<sup>1</sup> A number of actions are recommended that could be taken to increase the prospects of return and sustainable reintegration for Afghans in Iran, such as formalising temporary labour migration as a means of supporting return strategies in the short to medium term. Recognising that not all Afghans will make this choice in the short term, however, further recommendations include continuing the protection of vulnerable Afghans who choose to remain in Iran, and investigating mechanisms that can provide more secure and predictable residence status to Afghans who have integrated into their host country.

A Tripartite Agreement signed in 2002 by UNHCR and the governments of Iran and Afghanistan has facilitated the voluntary return of just over 833,000 Afghans from Iran to Afghanistan up to April 2006. The scale and speed of the return programme (particularly in March – September 2002 when 1.7 million Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan) provoked critical discussion about the conditions of departure and the prospect of sustainable reintegration. Attention was drawn to the issues of returnees' internal movement, their continued multidirectional movement across

### Contents

- I. Evolution of Iranian Policy towards Afghans
- II. Afghan Households in Iran
- III. Household Decision-Making about Return
- IV. Labour migration
- V. Household Perceptions about Return to Afghanistan
- VI. Ways Forward

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, "refugee" refers to documented and undocumented Afghans, usually family groups, who left Afghanistan in distinct waves, during: the Soviet occupation of 1979–89; conflict between the Najibullah government and the mujahedin in 1989–92; and interfactional fighting and the rise of Taliban movement in 1994–2001. "Labour migrant" refers to those Afghans, usually undocumented men whose families remain in Afghanistan, who work in Iran and regularly remit savings.

boundaries, and their participation in regional and transnational social networks.<sup>2</sup>

UNHCR's reintegration strategies subsequently made efforts to take into account the different types of Afghan refugees and economic migrants in Iran and Pakistan. Research has demonstrated that these strategies must also focus on the multidirectional aspect of population movements, and recognise migration not only as a reaction to war and economic hardship, but also as a key livelihoods strategy that is likely to continue well beyond the UNHCR's voluntary repatriation program.

At the end of 2004, UNHCR estimated that approximately one million registered Afghans remained in Iran,<sup>3</sup> as well as an estimated 500,000 undocumented single Afghan labour migrants.<sup>4</sup> There are no official published statistics on the substantial number of Afghans in Iran who are neither registered nor counted as labour migrants. Furthermore, based on the findings of this research, most Afghans in Iran – refugees and labour migrants – do not intend to return to Afghanistan in the medium term.

In formulating appropriate policy responses to this situation, the following recommendations are made to donors, international assistance agencies and the governments of Afghanistan and Iran:

- efforts to improve housing, education, welfare, rule of law and access to livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan should be made;
- existing processes for the reintegration and employment of skilled Afghans and their families currently living in Iran should be reviewed and improved;
- research into the nature of cross-border movements should be supported with a view to assisting the governments of Afghanistan and Iran to formulate future policies and administrative arrangements to better manage irregular migratory movements;
- a bilateral arrangement should be established that provides legal exit and re-entry documents for Afghan household heads making site visits to Afghanistan in preparation for repatriation;
- a bilateral arrangement should be established that provides a clear legal identity (such as temporary work visas) for Afghans who migrate to Iran to find work to sustain their households in Afghanistan;
- burden-sharing aid should be offered to Iran to support the protection work of UNHCR; and
- the capacity and willingness of Iranian civil society to support Afghan refugees should be investigated, and where appropriate they should be offered the technical and financial support to be able to provide the required humanitarian assistance.

<sup>2</sup> D. Turton and P. Marsden, 2002, *Taking Refugees for a Ride? The Politics of Refugee Return to Afghanistan*, Kabul: AREU.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, "Islamic Republic of Iran", in *UNHCR Global Report*, p. 347.

<sup>4</sup> US Committee for Refugees, 2004, *World Refugee Survey 2004 Country Report*.

## I. Evolution of Iranian Policy towards Afghans

### History and context

The transitory migration of Afghans to Iran motivated by economic differences has been documented since the nineteenth century, and probably also occurred earlier than this. Several hundred thousand Afghan labour migrants were said to be working in Iran during the 1970s oil-led construction boom. Afghans have also migrated to Iran as a result of impoverishment and debt brought on by drought.

Between 1979 and 2001, Afghan migration to Iran was primarily motivated by the direct and indirect effects of war, including widespread violence and insecurity, compulsory national service, insecurity, threat to female honour (*namoos*), unemployment and inflation. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan resulted in a massive influx of 2.9 million Afghans into Iran between 1980 and 1989. Based on estimates by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the movement of Afghans into Iran continued at a slower pace to reach a peak of 3 million Afghans in Iran in 1991 before declining slowly until 2000 when an estimated 1.33 million Afghans remained in Iran. Large-scale repatriation did not occur immediately after the Soviet withdrawal; it was from 1992–95, after the fall of Najibullah's regime and before the Taliban took control of Kabul, that 1.3 million Afghans returned from Iran, 76 percent of the total estimated repatriated population from Iran in the period 1992–2000.<sup>5</sup>

### Iran and the UNHCR

Iran's early policy towards Afghans seeking asylum has often been described as "open door". In a strong demonstration of Islamic solidarity, the government showed considerable generosity to Afghans fleeing communist-occupied Afghanistan, granting them access to its high quality social services (health and education) and permitting them to work. In 1985 the Iranian authorities allowed UNHCR to establish a presence in Iran, which was initially limited to refugees in designated settlements. This was later extended to both settlements and the cities – where 95 percent of Afghans reside.

Following the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Iranian refugee policy shifted to

### *Iran toughens up on Afghans*

In 2003, under Article 138 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, eleven articles entitled "Regulations on accelerating repatriation of Afghan nationals" were approved by member ministers of the Executive Coordination Council for Foreign Nationals.

- Article 3 concerned the prevention of unauthorised employment of Afghan nationals by taking legal action against Iranian employers who employed Afghan nationals without work permits.
- Article 4 prohibited Afghan nationals, except those who entered the country with a valid passport and visa and were issued with a residence permit, from the following facilities: all administrative services; activities in all parties and political, social and cultural groups of Afghan displaced persons; opening of new accounts in banks and interest-free loan associations and financial and credit institutions; and issuance and extension of any kind of insurance policy and provision of insurance services.
- Article 5 stated that the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organisation (IRIB) would promote and encourage Afghan nationals to return to Afghanistan, and would warn Iranian citizens about illegally employing or settling Afghan nationals.
- Article 8 stated that renting accommodation to Afghan nationals, except those who had entered the country with a valid passport and visa and who had been issued with a residence permit, was prohibited except with the permission of the provincial BAFIA (Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Nationals Affairs, Ministry of Interior) offices.

emphasise repatriation. In April 2000, a law was passed requiring all foreigners not in possession of a work permit to leave Iran by March 2001. Exceptions were made for those whose lives would be threatened, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was given the responsibility of determining the presence or absence of a threat to life.

In June 2001, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs made employers of illegal foreign workers subject to heavy fines and imprisonment. Many small businesses employing Afghans were shut down, and the government revoked the work permits of some Afghans.

Despite the existence of legislation restricting both tenancy and employment to documented Afghans (those who enter Iran with a valid passport and visa, and who hold a residency permit), undocumented Afghans have been

<sup>5</sup> [www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm](http://www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm)

and are still able to find employment and enter into tenancy arrangements with landlords.

After installation of the internationally supported interim authority in Kabul in late 2001, UNHCR too shifted the focus of its programme in Iran to facilitate the repatriation of Afghans. The Tripartite Agreement signed by UNHCR and the governments of Iran and Afghanistan in April 2002 planned for the return of 400,000 refugees from Iran during

the first year of operation, starting on 6 April 2002. Up to April 2006, a total of 833,317 Afghans had returned from Iran through UNHCR's repatriation programme, while 624,566 have been recorded as returning to Afghanistan without assistance. Annual return figures dropped significantly in 2005 and this pattern appears to be continuing in 2006.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Afghan Households in Iran

### **Interviewee categories and legal status**

*This research in Iran targeted two categories of interviewees: Afghan households and single labour migrants.*

- **Labour migrants** were almost definitely undocumented.
- The legal status of **households** was not established: researchers did not ask household respondents to declare their legal status as it was decided this was politically sensitive and could affect respondents' willingness to participate in the study, as well as potentially putting them at risk.

### **Household profile and tenancy<sup>6</sup>**

The size and composition of Afghan households is similar in both Tehran and Mashhad, where the average household has 5.5 members across two generations. Zahedan households are markedly larger, with the average household comprising 8.5 people across three generations, and sometimes including the household heads' siblings and parents.

According to Iranian law, property ownership by foreigners is illegal, and such ownership by Afghans is uncommon. The exception to this is Mashhad, where a system of informal property ownership has evolved that allows Afghans to informally purchase houses.

### **Property ownership in Mashhad**

**Shakhsi**, meaning private, indicates "ownership". This can be either unofficial (**gholnamei**), where a deed of title is negotiated between buyer and seller without official government registration but allows for legal recognition, or official (**sanad**), where a deed of ownership transaction is registered by the Governmental Property Registration Office.

In Zahedan and Tehran, Afghan tenants must pay a combination of monthly rent and bond.<sup>7</sup> This housing bond is the primary capital outlay for Afghans in Iran, and households must usually borrow money from relatives to cover this. The mean housing bond payment for Afghans reflects the different economies and

housing availability across the three cities: Zahedan at 909,000 Tooman (\$US1,000), Mashhad at 1.2 million Tooman (\$US1,415), and Tehran at 2.4 million Tooman (\$US2,700). Housing in both Tehran and Mashhad generally offers Afghan residents the option of better facilities (running water, electricity, gas and telephone) than their previous housing in Afghanistan.

### **Employment**

Most Afghan households in Iran have at least one income earner. The extent of occupation mobility reflects different levels of local industrialisation and labour market size. Mobility from manual occupations (simple building labouring) to more skilled occupations (tailoring, bricklaying, plastering) was found to be greater in Tehran and Mashhad than in Zahedan. Unemployment among heads of households was significantly higher in Zahedan, followed by Mashhad then Tehran. Monthly household costs per capita were highest in Tehran at 31,296 Tooman (\$US34) followed by Zahedan at 28,019 Tooman (\$US30) then Mashhad at 23,000 Tooman (\$US25). Wages are said to be generally higher in Tehran than other cities in Iran. The

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR Kabul, *Afghan Repatriation Operation 2006 Weekly Statistics Report*, Week 15, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> A total of 170 documented and undocumented households, and 45 undocumented labour migrants, were interviewed in Tehran, Mashhad and Zahedan in March–August 2005.

<sup>7</sup> In Iran, landlords invest tenants' bond (*rahn*) and keep the interest, returning the principal to the tenant at the end of the rental contract.

ability of Afghan households, both those with and without documents, to place at least one worker in the labour market illustrates that Iran's stated policy of restricting Afghan employment to those individuals with documents is not being fully enforced.

### **Social networks**

Most Afghan households establish themselves in neighbourhoods in which relatives or acquaintances are already resident, and they depend on these local social networks – which usually comprise Afghan relatives and kin but occasionally Iranian neighbours or workmates. Afghan households often borrow money from relatives (mainly brothers, paternal cousins and men's wives' brothers) for unexpected costs such as illness, accidents and funeral costs, as well as the substantial cost of housing bond. They also occasionally request assistance to pay smugglers' fees for other relatives entering Iran as labour migrants.

Some households have non-financial mutual relations with Iranians – both horizontal networks such as neighbours and workmates, and vertical networks such as landlords, shopkeepers and employers. In Zahedan, where some Afghans and Iranians share Baluch ethnicity, Iranians may even undertake illegal actions on behalf of Afghans to help them access state services, or mediate with authorities on their behalf.

Widows and divorcees may use horizontal networks (such as male siblings, nephews) to improve their situation, as their households are particularly vulnerable with monthly income and expenditure dramatically lower than other households. Most Afghan widows living in Iran do not receive any financial assistance from their deceased husbands' families, and many rely on the UNHCR to help with the costs of schooling and medical treatment. *Any new policies developed to support the return of this group must be cognisant of their dependence on aid, and the even greater difficulties they may face in reintegrating into Afghan society.*

### **Transnational networks and remittances**

Most Afghans in Iran participate in transnational networks that are social and economic in character, spanning their homeland, Iran, Pakistan and further abroad. Contact is made primarily by letter and telephone, while indirect contact is also sustained through news of relatives passed on

by acquaintances travelling to and from Afghanistan.

Documented and undocumented household respondents claimed that little money was remitted from Iran to Afghanistan, nor was it sent in the reverse direction. Households in Iran appear to expend most of their income on daily household expenses, and infrequently, if at all, remit money back to relatives or other household members in Afghanistan. The few respondent households which disclosed that they were remitting money regularly to Afghanistan said it was to provide for other relatives who had returned but been unable to find work. They did state that they would, if capable, respond to requests for specific urgent needs such as illness, funeral and marriage costs, as well as for land and business investment.

Afghans in Zahedan were more likely than those in Tehran or Mashhad to remit money, perhaps reflecting their proximity to the border which allows for frequent visiting and maintenance of family relations. Where money was remitted, it was usually arranged through acquaintances travelling back to Afghanistan rather than through remittance specialists (*hawaladar*).

Afghans use transnational networks to find women of marriageable age – identifying women in Afghanistan as brides for Afghan men living in Iran, and identifying Afghan women living in Iran as brides for Afghan men living in Europe, US, Canada and Australia. In Zahedan, almost half the respondent households stated that they or their relatives in Iran had brought women from Afghanistan to marry in Iran. Around a quarter said they or their relatives had arranged for Afghan women living in Iran to marry Afghan men living in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and abroad. Through these marriage arrangements, links are established that may become an ongoing part of the livelihood strategy of an Afghan bride's family in either Iran or Afghanistan.

Many Afghan refugee households in Iran have relatives living abroad with whom they sustain some form of contact either through letter or telephone, or occasionally email. Only a handful of respondents claimed that they received regular remittances from these relatives abroad. The vast majority said they had only ever received non-financial gifts, known as *sowghat*.

### III. Household Decision–Making about Return

Most Afghans in Iran interviewed as part of this study do not intend to return to Afghanistan in the medium term, and would prefer to remain in Iran if they are permitted to do so. However, despite the clear majority who want to remain, many express discontent at their social and economic marginalisation there. For many Afghans, both documented and undocumented, their status as migrants or refugees confines them to mainly low-status, often dangerous, heavy manual work, and in particular if they are undocumented they are constantly faced with the risk of arrest and deportation or relocation. But for most, it is apparent that the advantage of relative material comfort and opportunity in Iran compared to Afghanistan is a stronger motivating factor to remain.

#### Assessing change in Afghanistan

The perception of economic development, political stability and rule of law in Afghanistan is critical to Afghans' decision-making about return. The reintegration experience of those Afghans who have already returned from Iran to Afghanistan also heavily influences their relatives remaining in Iran. Afghans with relatives who have returned satisfactorily are significantly more willing to return to Afghanistan than those whose relatives have experienced difficulties on their return – such as unemployment and the need to spend their savings on daily living requirements. Those Afghans who had not maintained access to their land or housing, and returned without the capital to start a business or purchase land, are at the greatest risk of failure, and are more likely to return again to Iran. *Facilitating access to housing and employment in Afghanistan are key interventions required to support sustainable return.*

Visits to Afghanistan by household heads for the purpose of assessing change and future prospects there are not “authorised” by the Iranian government, but these journeys are commonly undertaken – particularly from Khorasan and Sistan and Baluchistan provinces. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some families use smugglers to cross the border illegally and return the same way after assessing the situation in Afghanistan. If such a mission was undertaken through official border crossings, the household head returning to Afghanistan would lose the right to

return to Iran to collect his family, as BAFIA requires foreigners leaving Iran to carry an exit visa (*laissez passer* or LP) and to surrender identification documentation known as “*amayesh*” (although there are some reports that *amayesh* card-holders return to Afghanistan for “site visits” but manage to keep their cards). *The policy of requiring the surrender of amayesh cards to obtain exit visas poses a legal obstacle to these preparatory visits, and to the larger return movements of families.*

#### Duration of residence, economic situation

The economic situation of Afghan households in Iran and their now-restricted access to welfare services such as education and health facilities there has been shown to have had an impact on their decision-making about return. Afghans who assess their household's economic situation to have deteriorated in Iran are significantly more willing to return than those that assess their economic situation to have improved. Those households that perceive their economic situation to be unchanged in Iran are the least willing to return to Afghanistan.

Data on repatriation implies that a correlation may exist between Afghan households' length of residence in Iran and unwillingness to return to Afghanistan. Of all UNHCR-assisted repatriated Afghans (April 2002 – February 2006), 58 percent had lived in Iran for less than 10 years, 20 percent had lived in Iran for 10–19 years, and 22 percent had lived in Iran for more than 20 years.<sup>8</sup> The longer a household is resident in Iran, the less willing they are to return to Afghanistan. However, some Afghans resident for less than ten years are also very unwilling to return to Afghanistan. This may correlate with the respective stages of households: long-duration households probably comprise adult children who have been raised, educated and socialised in Iran, and may even have a family of their own in Iran, while shorter-duration households probably comprise younger children whose more urgent education and health needs are being met – to some extent

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR Iran, *Comparative Analysis: Afghan Assisted Repatriation* (end of February, 2006), unpublished data. Note that a stronger claim could be made about this relationship if data on the number of Afghans in Iran by length of residence were available.

at least – in Iran, discouraging return to Afghanistan.

There is a minor correlation between duration of residence in Iran and economic situation. Afghans resident in Iran for over 20 years tend to assess their economic situation as improved, and those resident for less than 20 years tend to assess their economic situation as deteriorated. However, some households resident for over 25 years that perceive their economic situation to be unchanged would prefer to return to Afghanistan. Both economic situation and length of residence affect the decision to return; this is complicated by interaction between the two factors and other variations in household characteristics.

### **Gender and return intention**

Afghan women view return differently than men. Women are far more likely to want to remain in Iran, which is perceived to be less restrictive for women in terms of mobility and public participation. Iran offers more opportunities for women's independence, with more autonomous nuclear households and lighter household workloads due to the facilities of electricity and running water.

Women are also concerned about personal security and a perceived risk of violation of their own and their daughters' honour in Afghanistan. Households with daughters of marriageable age are significantly less willing than other households to return to Afghanistan. *The Afghan government, with international assistance, must work to improve service provision and make concerted efforts to ensure the perception and reality of women's security meets their requirements to return.*

### **Ethnicity and return intention**

The percentage of Hazara returns to Afghanistan compared with other ethnicities is low. While Hazaras comprise 43 percent of documented Afghans in Iran (377,036), their returns are only 25.6 percent of the total UNHCR-assisted return figures up to August 2005.<sup>9</sup> This imbalance is due both to greater economic opportunities in Iran for Hazaras, and perceptions of continued prejudice against

Shias in Afghanistan. For Hazara Afghans, disarmament of local commanders and security for Shia Hazaras as a religious and ethnic minority are critical prerequisites for sustainable return. Despite the fact that the Hazarajat was considered to be relatively peaceful in 2005, most Hazara respondents in Iran still claimed security to be an issue in their decision-making about return.

It is apparent that Afghan Hazaras in Iran lack accurate information about the state of security in their home areas and the new Constitution which legislates against religious prejudice and discrimination in Afghanistan. *Better flows of information about the situation for Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan would contribute towards encouraging a greater number of returns.*

### **The need for welfare facilities and work**

The perceived and actual severe shortage of housing as well as heating and cooking fuel in Afghanistan is considered a major obstacle to return. Ready availability of housing (and utilities such as water, gas and electricity), access to employment, and welfare (including health and education) in Iran motivate Afghans to delay return in the medium term.

Although Afghans are officially restricted to certain types of manual labour in Iran, much of this work is, at least, available all year round. Those without formal education are often concerned that work opportunities in Afghanistan would be confined to seasonal manual labour. Some Afghans with university qualifications worry that they will be unable to secure work in the government sector in Afghanistan – due in part to perceived shortage of jobs, but also because of the belief that they would need personal connections in order to access such work. In other words, in Afghanistan, like Iran, they may be restricted to manual occupations despite their level of education. *Greater efforts need to be made (along with the allocation of necessary funds) to improve service delivery and create employment opportunities in Afghanistan in order to encourage return in the short to medium term.*

<sup>9</sup> Numbers of documented Afghans in Iran in 2005 by ethnicity are: Hazara (377,036), Tajik (270,552), Pashtun (129,807), Baluch (46,622), Uzbek (20,438), Turkmen (3,848), other (27,976) (IOM, 2004).

## IV. Labour Migration

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In some cases, household heads take their families back to Afghanistan to resettle, then return to Iran to work (as undocumented labour migrants) – their remittances support their household's reintegration in Afghanistan. However, the majority of Afghan labour migrants interviewed during this study were single or married men (between 16 and 45 years old) whose families had never lived in Iran, and they included daily labourers, small traders, sharecroppers, tenants and small landlords. As this indicates, labour migration may be seen as a coping strategy that provides the cash to pay for the daily needs of families in their place of return, as well as an accumulation strategy among non-refugee households to build capital for investment in land, housing or businesses.

### **The role of support networks in facilitating labour migration**

A man's family's access to networks of support (including horizontal networks such as male siblings and uncles) will influence his decision to migrate for employment. The majority of labour migrants have male relatives living close to the household of their parents (and possibly wife and children) in Afghanistan, allowing for male protection of wives or mothers left behind.

The destination of labour migrants in Iran is influenced by the presence of relatives already there (usually brothers, maternal and paternal uncles and their sons), who assist newcomers in finding accommodation and work. Unlike households which stay together as units, labour migrants usually live in their place of work (such as a building site or bakery) or in a household shared by several other labour migrants.

### **Remittances**

Labour migrants experience variable periods of unemployment in Iran, depending on their

occupation and place of residence. Unemployment among labour migrants is considerably lower in Mashhad than in Tehran and Zahedan, whereas the rate of unemployment for household heads is lowest in Tehran. Some labour migrants find irregular work by gathering in known areas such as crossroads and waiting for casual day labour. Periods of unemployment force migrants to draw on their savings for daily living costs.

Despite these frequent periods of unemployment, labour migrants claim to remit substantial amounts of money (usually via the *hawala* system and acquaintances travelling home), with annual averages of: Mashhad, 1.2 million Tooman (\$US1,300); Zahedan, 970,000 Tooman (\$US1,008); and Tehran, 690,000 Tooman (\$US775). These figures reflect the relative employment opportunities and cost of living in each city. Unemployment is significantly higher in Zahedan (followed by Mashhad, then Tehran), and monthly household costs per capita are highest in Tehran at 31,296 Tooman (\$US34), followed by Zahedan at 28,019 Tooman (\$US30) then Mashhad at 23,000 Tooman (\$US25).

Labour migrants in Mashhad and Zahedan travel more frequently to Afghanistan due to their proximity to the border. The frequency of their subsequent return to Iran suggests that neither unemployment, risk of deportation nor the experience of separation from family dissuades them from migrating for work again. It also points to the fact that the economic opportunities in the migrants' places of origin are significantly less than in Mashhad and Zahedan, and that the contribution remittances make to livelihoods in Afghanistan is substantial and greatly needed by households there.

## V. Household Perceptions about Return to Afghanistan

A clear majority of the Afghan households interviewed in Tehran, Mashhad and Zahedan do not intend to return to Afghanistan in the medium term. Patterns of intended return differ according to province of residence: while households in Tehran and Zahedan generally intend to return as intact households, those in Mashhad are more likely to leave some members behind in Iran, or send one member to Afghanistan to prepare for the rest. It is possible that the system of informal property ownership in Mashhad and “protection” offered by being close to the Shrine of Imam Reza encourages Shia Afghans to retain a base in Mashhad.

Some of the reintegration strategies practised by Afghans in Iran include:

- a household may remain in Iran in the medium term in order to continue saving money to purchase land or housing in Afghanistan prior to return;
- a household member may travel to Afghanistan to arrange accommodation and investigate work prospects in preparation for the household’s return;
- a returnee household struggling to cope in Afghanistan may return to Iran to undertake further capital accumulation;
- a returnee household struggling to cope may send a member back to Iran to work for the purpose of remitting money for the financial needs of the household in Afghanistan;
- a member of a returnee household may migrate to another province in Afghanistan to find work and remit money; and
- a returnee household may relocate to another province in Afghanistan in an effort to improve its economic situation.

### **Sustainable return requires capital or assets**

A widespread belief exists among Afghans that successful and sustainable return to Afghanistan requires capital or assets such as land or housing, or social assets such as education and vocational skills. Many Afghans interviewed during this study, particularly those in Mashhad and Zahedan, had already

purchased land in Afghanistan or were saving money to do so before returning to Afghanistan.

At least one third of Afghans in the study sample previously owned housing or land in Afghanistan, however between a half and two thirds had lost access to this property – it was either abandoned, appropriated, sold or destroyed. Many of those who had retained access to their property, but had arranged for relatives or acquaintances to look after it (*amanat*), were notably unwilling to return – presumably because of concerns about reclaiming property subject to *amanat* from their relatives.

### **Return destinations**

Afghan households in the cities of Tehran and Mashhad show a clear preference to return to Kabul (even if Kabul is not their place of origin), followed by other major cities such as Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. These cities offer comparatively better economic opportunities for returnees, and are perceived to be more secure for Shias because of the size of the Shia populations relative to the Sunni populations.

Unlike in Tehran and Mashhad, there is markedly little rural–urban migration intention among Afghan households in Zahedan. They express a clear preference to return to their place of origin, possibly reflecting the maintenance of ties with home because of Zahedan’s proximity to the border.

### **Future migration intentions**

Most labour migrants currently living in Iran would prefer to work in their own region in Afghanistan, if sufficient work opportunities existed there. Afghan labour migrants in Mashhad expressed the least interest in going to Iran again to work following return to Afghanistan, despite experiencing comparatively lower levels of unemployment there and sending higher remittances than labour migrants in Tehran and Mashhad. This may be explained by the fact that social factors (such as discrimination) dominated Mashhad respondents’ (both household and labour migrant) discussion about the negative aspects of their migration experience.

The economic imperative of migration is reflected in the intention of some labour migrants to move to Kabul or Herat on return to Afghanistan to increase their work opportunities, as well as their interest in working in the UAE and Pakistan. Generally, Afghan labour migrants would prefer not to return to Iran (nor move to another country) to

seek work if possible, while in contrast, Afghan households were more interested in third-country resettlement. Around ten percent of this study's household respondents aspired to migrate to another country, and six percent had approached UNHCR for resettlement assistance.<sup>10</sup>

## VI. Ways Forward

Research findings indicate that most Afghans living in Iran would prefer to remain there in the medium term, often in order to continue accumulating capital for purchasing land, a house or a shop in Afghanistan prior to return. They are also waiting for evidence of economic and infrastructure development and political stability in Afghanistan. Working in opposition to this general sentiment, the government of Iran has in past years made policy and legal changes that are designed to accelerate the repatriation of Afghans. Substantial numbers of Afghans have returned from Iran – 808,858 between April 2002 and July 2005, but many Afghans remain in Iran – around one million registered Afghans and approximately half that number of undocumented labour migrants in November 2004.

The key issues for policymakers involved in formulating durable solutions to this issue include:

- Creation of the conditions for sustainable reintegration of those who choose to return to Afghanistan;
- Developing a regulatory framework and administrative arrangements for legal temporary labour migration from Afghanistan;
- Examining how long-staying Afghans who choose to remain in Iran might be permitted to do so under more predictable and secure legal circumstances; and
- Providing continued protection and assistance to those who are in economically vulnerable situations (such as widows and injured workers).

In light of the findings from this research into the lives of Afghans in Iran, the following recommendations are made that will work towards sustaining protection of refugees, providing a more secure and predictable legal status for those who seek to remain in the

medium term, and improving the prospects of sustainable reintegration of Afghans returning from Iran to Afghanistan:

- The governments of Iran and Afghanistan, together with the UNHCR, should support the continued operation of the Tripartite Agreement and its accompanying arrangements to ensure the safe and voluntary return of documented Afghans from Iran.
- In order to increase sustainability for returnee households, efforts by the government of Afghanistan (with donor assistance) to improve service provision, particularly in health and education, and access to livelihood strategies for men and women, must be sustained and augmented – and communicated effectively to non-resident Afghans.
- Permission should be granted for household heads to make brief reconnaissance visits to Afghanistan to arrange housing for potential returnee families. This practice would help to inform decision-making about return, and increase prospects of sustainable reintegration.
- The governments of Afghanistan and Iran should establish a bilateral framework that provides a clear legal identity (such as a temporary work visa) for those members of returnee households who need to return to Iran to sustain their households' livelihood in Afghanistan.
- The government of Afghanistan and assistance agencies should work towards better flows of information about the situation in Afghanistan to refugees living in Iran, to encourage the return of more Shia Afghans who particularly lack information about the state of security and existing

<sup>10</sup> Afghan asylum seekers to industrialised countries fell 80 percent from 54,000 in 2002 to 9,000 in 2004 (UNHCR Afghan Refugee Statistics, February 2005, <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/afghan?page=chrono>).

- legislation that prohibits religious prejudice and discrimination in Afghanistan.
- The government of Afghanistan (at central and provincial levels) should take practical steps to address perceived concerns about female security and mobility in order to convince women that returning to their homeland will be a positive experience.
  - The government of Iran has reservations about whether Afghans in Iran should continue to be treated as refugees. Given this, further policy analysis should be undertaken to assist the governments of Iran and Afghanistan to determine how a more differentiated approach to population movements might be developed.
  - The capacity and willingness of Iranian civil society and NGOs to support Afghan refugees should be investigated, and technical and financial support should be offered so that humanitarian assistance can be provided – particularly to widows and their children, and families affected by work injury and disability.
  - Continued support should be provided to assist in the reintegration and employment of skilled and educated Afghans and their families. This should focus on the identification of Afghan graduates and skilled workers living in Iran, matching these with labour needs in Afghanistan and ultimately facilitating their reintegration and employment in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research organisation that conducts and facilitates action-oriented research and learning that informs and influences policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and by creating opportunities for analysis, thought and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives.

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