

Case Study Series

## **RETURN TO AFGHANISTAN?**

**A Study of Afghans Living in  
Mashhad, Islamic Republic of Iran**

**Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Tehran**

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## Foreword

Iran is one of the most concentrated areas of Afghan migrants and refugees. Its early refugee policy towards Afghans has been described as “open door”, and refugee status was granted to incoming Afghans on a *prima facie* basis. It has been estimated that Iranian state expenditure subsidising education, health services, transport, fuel and basic goods for approximately two million Afghans in Iran peaked at US\$10 million per day.<sup>1</sup> (UNHCR estimated its expenditure in Iran to be US\$352 million up until 2001.<sup>2</sup>) It was as a result of domestic economic and social concerns in the 1990s that refugee policy towards Afghans shifted to emphasise repatriation.

In 2002, the government of Iran signed a Tripartite Agreement with the government of Afghanistan and UNHCR facilitating the voluntary return of Afghans to Afghanistan. In 2003 this Agreement was revised and extended for two years. Between 2002 and 2004, over 750,000 Afghans returned from Iran with the voluntary repatriation operation. In late 2004, it was estimated that a little over one million documented Afghans<sup>3</sup> remained in Iran. Additionally, as many as 500,000 transitory labour migrants are said to move backward and forwards between Afghanistan and Iran, employed mainly in the agricultural and construction sectors.

Despite the long history of migration and refugee movements between Iran and Afghanistan, little comprehensive research has been undertaken to examine the social, cultural and economic situation of Afghan migrants before and after migration to Iran. Conducted in the cities of Tehran, Mashhad and Zahedan, the three primary destinations for Afghan migrants in Iran, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of Afghan communities and households, and to explore livelihoods, regional and transnational networks and perceptions about returning to Afghanistan for Afghan family groups/households and transitory labour migrants residing in Iran. This report presents the findings of the Mashhad case study which was conducted between March and May, and during the month of August, 2005.

This study was conducted by the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Tehran, and is a component of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's Transnational Networks research project. We owe many thanks to those who have made contributions to the implementation of the project. This report is the result of the fruitful collaboration and teamwork of all contributing authors. Diana Glazebrook's input was fundamental throughout the study, particularly in writing this report. We would like to acknowledge Alessandro Monsutti and Meimanat Hosseini Chavoshi for their thoughtful comments and suggestions during the design of the questionnaire for this study. The Faculty of Social Sciences as well as the office of Vice Chancellor for Research Affairs of the University of Tehran provided institutional support. Our final thanks and appreciation go to our interviewers (Mrs Atefeh Jafari and Mr Mohammad Javad Mohahegh) whose efforts were invaluable in collecting the data for this project.

Mohammad Jalal Abbasi Shavazi, Tehran, September 2005

<sup>1</sup> B. Rajaei, 2000, “The politics of refugee policy in post-revolutionary Iran”, *The Middle East Journal*, (54)1, p. 59

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, “Return to Afghanistan”, <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/afghan>

<sup>3</sup> This figure is based on a report by the UNHCR using data from the 2003 BAFIA registration project. Recent Iranian government legislation, such as the (2003) eleven “Regulations on accelerating repatriation of Afghan nationals” under Article 138 of the Constitution, differentiates Afghan nationals in terms of those who are documented and those who are not. A “documented” Afghan national carries a valid passport, a valid visa and a valid residence permit, and has been registered by BAFIA's most recent campaign.

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## Glossary

<i>amanat</i>	the object (e.g. land, house or livestock) of an arrangement where a relative or acquaintance looks after a person's property until they return to inhabit or use that property again
<i>Ashura</i>	the tenth day of Moharram commemorates the day of martyrdom of Imam Hossein
<i>bisavad</i>	non-literate
<i>gero</i>	collateral
<i>hawala</i>	money transfer
<i>hosseinieh</i>	Shiite place of worship
<i>jerib</i>	unit of land measurement, approximately one fifth of a hectare
<i>khane dar bar-a bar-e kar</i>	accommodation provided as part of wages, often farm workers
<i>khoms</i>	an Islamic tax equal to one fifth of one's disposable annual income to be distributed by religious leaders or Imams to Muslim people in need
<i>mahr</i>	a financial provision negotiated as part of the nuptial contract; sometimes the <i>mahr</i> is paid upon marriage, but often it is deferred until after the termination of a marriage
<i>mehmanshahr</i>	literally "guest city" – unregulated refugee settlement usually located on the edge of cities across Iran (there are estimated to be 80 such settlements and seven regulated "camps" across Iran)
<i>mohajerin</i>	forced religious migrants (usually refers to those Afghans who came to Iran during the Soviet occupation 1979–89)
<i>Moharram</i>	one-month period of commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hossein in which Ashura occurs
<i>namoos</i>	the honour of daughters and wives
<i>nazr</i>	usually cooked food given to neighbours, relatives, and the poor
<i>nawrooz</i>	New Year based on the Solar Hijra Calendar, beginning on the vernal equinox
<i>panahandegan</i>	refugees, usually refers to those Afghans who came to Iran after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (after 1989)
<i>rahn</i>	bond for rented house: landlord invests the bond and keeps the interest, returning the principal intact to the renter at the end of the rental contract; the higher the <i>rahn</i> , the lower the rent, and vice versa
<i>sanad</i>	officially documented and registered ownership of land
<i>Seyed</i>	the descendants of the Prophet Mohammad
<i>shakhsi</i>	private, indicating "ownership" – can indicate two types of ownership in the context of housing:

- *Gholnamei* (unofficial): deed of title negotiation between the buyer and seller without official government registration but allows for legal recognition
- *Sanad* (official): official deed of ownership transaction registered in the Governmental Property Registration Office

<i>tashnab</i>	enclosed area inside a house, without running water, where personal bathing is done using a bucket of heated water
<i>Tooman</i>	Iranian currency; US\$1 = approx. 887.5 <i>Tooman</i> or 8,875 <i>Rial</i> (March 2005)
<i>zakat</i>	Islamic tax: wealth proportionate with one's income earned from agriculture and animal husbandry, or proportionate with one's wealth such as gold or silver, paid in kind (e.g. in sheep, wheat or gold) to Imams or religious leaders for distribution among Muslims in need

## 1. Summary

Since the installation of the internationally supported interim authority in Afghanistan in late 2001, Tripartite Repatriation Agreements between Afghanistan, Iran and the UNHCR have facilitated the voluntary repatriation of around 770,000 Afghans from Iran. The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has legislated to further accelerate repatriation by raising the cost of living for Afghans in Iran. At the time of this research in 2005, approximately one million documented Afghans remained in Iran, with over 95% living outside government settlements known as *mehmanshahr*. Additionally, up to 500,000 undocumented labour migrants from Afghanistan were working in the agricultural and construction sectors in Iran.

This multi-sited study was conducted in Iran in the cities of Tehran, Mashhad and Zahedan, among both Afghan household groups and single labour migrants. The study moves beyond the quantitative data on repatriation to explore the perceptions and concerns of Afghans in Iran about the prospect of returning to Afghanistan or remaining in Iran in the medium term. This report focuses specifically on Afghan household groups (usually nuclear families, often including the household head's parents) and single labour migrants living in Mashhad.

The intentions and strategies of Afghan respondents living in Mashhad can be summarised as follows:

- over two thirds of respondents did not intend to return to Afghanistan in the medium term;
- the vast majority of household respondents are still able to find employment and opportunities for upward mobility over time in Mashhad, demonstrated by the shift from labouring to more skilled occupations;
- household respondents borrowed money from, and loaned money to, family and Afghan acquaintances mainly for illness and accidents, funeral costs and housing bond – constituting a safety net in Iran;
- household respondents were relatively settled: overall they had lived an average of 14 years in their current neighbourhood, and almost half owned their house informally (*gholnamei*);
- household respondents rarely submitted regular remittances to relatives in Afghanistan claiming they had no disposable income to do so, contrasting with labour migrants who submitted frequent and substantial amounts of money to parents and/or siblings and/or wives in Afghanistan;
- over half of household respondents had family members living abroad, and the vast majority claimed they had never received financial assistance from their relatives abroad;
- access to work and welfare facilities, particularly health and education, and perception of a strong economy and labour market in Iran, motivated Afghan households in Mashhad to remain in Iran in the medium term, and concerns about the lack of these facilities discouraged return;
- return to Afghanistan was considered to be more viable for those with capital and/or assets, or with education or literacy, or skills;
- respondents aspired to save sufficient capital prior to returning to Afghanistan in order to purchase property there;

- there was a correlation between duration of residence and return intention: respondents resident for 20 years or less in Iran were more willing to return to Afghanistan than those resident for 20 years or more;
- there was also a correlation between duration of residence in Iran and (positive) economic situation: tendency among respondents resident in Iran for over 20 years to assess their economic situation as improved, and tendency among respondents resident in Iran for less than 20 years to assess their economic situation as deteriorated;
- there was no strict pattern of correlation between intention to return and (improved or worsened) economic situation;
- there was a very strong correlation between those who claim their economic situation has not changed and (non) intention to return;
- female-headed households were considerably more impoverished than other households, and women were more likely than men to want to remain in Iran;
- a perception of physical insecurity, particularly targeting women and girl children, discouraged return;
- while Shias were over-represented in the sample (97.3% of respondents), almost half claimed that residential proximity to the Tomb of Imam Reza affected their desire to remain in Mashhad, with women more affected than men;
- a clear majority of respondents intending to return to Afghanistan planned to do so as intact households;
- respondents could not rely on relatives in Afghanistan to support or sustain their reintegration in the event of return;
- as prospective return destinations Herat, Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif are cities perceived by respondents to have better infrastructure, and to be more secure for Shias due to the size of the Shia population relative to the Sunni population;
- single labour migrants experience comparatively low unemployment and remit substantially higher amounts of remittance by *hawala* and acquaintances to parents and brothers in Afghanistan; and
- in spite of high employment and sustained substantial remittances, single labour migrants in Mashhad prefer not to return to Iran.

## 2. Rationale for the research

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–89) caused massive migration of some 2.6 million Afghans into Iran. A period of Afghan repatriation from Iran following the withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989 was suspended by the onset of war in Afghanistan in 1992 that endured for the next decade. The period 1992–2001 is characterised by substantial migration (both forced migration and labour migration) of Afghans from Afghanistan to Iran, as well as substantial repatriation (both voluntary and involuntary) of Afghans from Iran back to Afghanistan.

From the 1990s, as a result of domestic economic and social concerns, Iranian refugee policy shifted to emphasise prevention and repatriation.<sup>4</sup> Iran's first repatriation programme for Afghans was formalised in late 1992 with the establishment of a Tripartite Commission (comprising Afghanistan, Iran and UNHCR). During 1993, about 600,000 Afghans returned to Afghanistan – over 300,000 of them under the repatriation programme.<sup>5</sup> In 1998–99, the Iranian authorities engaged in a parallel deportation campaign of up to 190,000 undocumented Afghans.<sup>6</sup>

In late 2001, following the installation of an internationally supported interim authority in Kabul, the government of Iran signed a revised Tripartite Agreement with the government of Afghanistan and UNHCR to facilitate the voluntary return of Afghans by March 2005. While return to Afghanistan was voluntary, domestic legislation aimed to accelerate repatriation from Iran. In 2003, under Article 138 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran,<sup>7</sup> various “regulations on accelerating repatriation of Afghan nationals” were introduced. The Iranian government implemented further measures intended to “induce a more substantial level of repatriation of Afghans in 2004” by raising the cost of living for Afghans in Iran.<sup>8</sup> These measures included the introduction of school fees for Afghan children at all levels, and the re-registration of all Afghans who had been registered under the 2001 BAFIA exercise (including payment of a US\$6–8 fee).

This was the backdrop against which voluntary repatriation of some 770,643 Afghans occurred in the period 1 March 2002 to 31 October 2004.<sup>9</sup> It is also the backdrop against which a little over one million documented Afghans (1,009,354 individuals) remain in Iran including 190,765 households and 113,201 single Afghans,<sup>10</sup> and as many as 500,000 undocumented single Afghan labour migrants, some of whom move backwards and forwards between Afghanistan and Iran.<sup>11</sup> The scale and speed of the return programme (particularly the period March–September 2002 when 1.7 million Afghans returned from Iran and Pakistan) provoked discussion about the sustainable

<sup>4</sup> Rajaei, p. 62

<sup>5</sup> D. Turton and P. Marsden, 2002, *Taking Refugees for a Ride? The Politics of Refugee Return to Afghanistan*, Kabul: AREU, p. 12

<sup>6</sup> US Committee for Refugees in Turton and Marsden, p. 15

<sup>7</sup> According to Article 138 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in conformity with two prior decrees No. H23538T/58858 dated 22.12.1379 (12 March 2001) and No. H26697T/13521 dated 08.04.1381 (28 June 2002)

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR, *Global Report 2003: Islamic Republic of Iran*, <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/openssl.pdf?tbl=MEDIA&id=40c6d7500&page=home>, accessed 2 May 2005

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR Kabul, *Operational information monthly summary report March 2002–October 2004*, in E. Stigter, 2005a, *Transnational Networks and Migration from Herat to Iran*, Kabul: AREU, p. 19

<sup>10</sup> Afghan population and family status in Iran as of 1 November 2004, Amayesh and Repatriation databases (note: there are some missing data values in the source).

<sup>11</sup> US Committee for Refugees, *World Refugee Survey 2004 Country Report*, <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?subm=&ssm=&cid=118>, accessed 29 May 2005

reintegration of Afghan returnees.<sup>12</sup> A report commissioned by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit during the period of assisted return movement in 2002 drew attention to the lack of sustainability of large-scale and rapid assisted return. The Turton and Marsden report (*Taking Refugees for a Ride? The Politics of Refugee Return to Afghanistan*, 2002) focused on returnees' internal movement, their continued multi-directional movement across boundaries, and their participation in regional and transnational social networks. The final recommendation of the report made explicit a connection between sustainable reintegration and transnational social networks, proposing "undertaking in-depth, qualitative research to improve our knowledge of refugee decision-making and the regional and transnational networks that sustain the incomes of Afghan households and families."

This recommendation laid the ground for the development of AREU's long-term Transnational Networks project, which also coincided with UNHCR's reappraisal of repatriation elaborated in its paper *Afghanistan: Challenges to Return* (March 2004). The paper acknowledges the need for a new framework for approaching repatriation that is not formulaic, and instead develops context-specific reintegration strategies that take into account the mix of Afghan refugees, asylum-seekers and different categories of economic migrants in Iran and Pakistan:

*Repatriation is subject to a diverse array of influences including the original reasons for flight, the differing experiences of exile and displacement, family capital and assets, the motivations and strategy for repatriation, the risks and challenges inherent in return and reintegration in different locations, and the policy and institutional actions that shape the overall return process.*<sup>13</sup>

This case study of Afghans living in Mashhad draws on a limited respondent group of 60 households to explore:

- how respondents perceive their livelihood and other prospects in the event of returning to Afghanistan or remaining in Iran;
- participation in and function of regional and transnational networks;
- processes of decision-making; and
- respondents' current intentions in relation to returning or remaining in the medium term.

The study was preceded by related research undertaken by AREU in the Afghan provinces of Faryab and Herat, and in the city of Kabul, in 2004, and it was undertaken concurrently with related research in Pakistan, and in Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan. Each of these studies aims to enhance understanding and appreciation of transnational networks as a key livelihood strategy, "to support bilateral negotiations, as well as to advise the government of Afghanistan on how to provide minimum standards of security and income of Afghan migrants in the longer term."<sup>14</sup>

While there is now extensive literature on transnational networks as they relate to migration, until several years ago, little research had been undertaken into regional and transnational social networks between Afghans in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Several recent field-based studies conducted in Afghanistan offer accounts

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<sup>12</sup> Turton and Marsden

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR, 2004, *Afghanistan: Challenges to Return*, Geneva, p. 6

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, 2004, *Obstacles to Return* in Stigter, 2005a, p. 2

of regional and international mobility and social networks – providing a context for this study. Alessandro Monsutti’s research into remittances among Hazaras from Afghanistan<sup>15</sup> found that even before the massive return in 2002, the majority of Afghans had returned to Afghanistan at least once, and most households had one or two members abroad. Monsutti claims that many Hazaras:

- move constantly between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran;
- are engaged in multiple registers of solidarity within and outside their own lineage;
- practise a diverse basis of cooperation; and
- remit a large amount of money to Afghanistan.

Elca Stigter’s two case studies conducted for AREU in 2004 on the transnational networks and migration of Afghans from Herat to Iran, and from Faryab to Iran, further elaborate on the practice of Afghan migration both inside Afghanistan, and across the international border. Stigter makes the important point that return to a country of origin does not necessarily combat insecurity and vulnerability, and that return may “prompt onward passage, leading to a pattern of multi-directional cross border movements.”<sup>16</sup> Stigter concluded that channels of pre-established transnational networks exist between Afghanistan and Iran, and that migration to Iran constitutes a strategy for Afghan men which is both social and economic. Stigter proposes that migration functions as a coping strategy, with remittances covering subsistence costs and debt repayment, as well as contributing to a further accumulation of assets (e.g. *mahr*, house, land).

One final note on the use of terminology in this report: Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont emphasise *mohajer/mohajerin* as an Arab word that translates as “refugee(s)” in Islamic countries, and is based on the root *hejra* which makes direct reference to Mohammad’s flight from Mecca to Medina. Those classified as *mohajerin* have gone into exile “especially for religious reasons, when the regime in power does not allow the free practice of Islam.”<sup>17</sup> In 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan coincided with the Islamic Revolution in neighbouring Iran. The Islamic principle enshrined in the Quran<sup>18</sup> of hosting refugees and displaced people was given particular respect in light of the revolution in Iran. The Islamic principle of *hijrat* asserts that practising Muslims fleeing their own country on the grounds that they are unable to properly practice their faith deserve the noble status of *mohajer*. Rather than the simple English translation of *mohajer* as migrant or refugee, the term *mohajer* refers specifically to an “involuntary religious migrant”. *Mohajerin* were issued with identification cards known as “blue cards”, and granted indefinite permission to stay in Iran legally. Until 1995 they had access to subsidised health care and food, and free primary and secondary education.<sup>19</sup> After the withdrawal of

<sup>15</sup> A. Monsutti, 2004, “Cooperation, remittances and kinship among the Hazaras”, *Iranian Studies*, (37)2, p. 219–40

<sup>16</sup> E. Stigter, 2005b, *Transnational Networks and Migration from Faryab to Iran*, Kabul: AREU, p. 1

<sup>17</sup> P. Centlivres and M. Centlivres-Demont, 1988, “The Afghan refugee in Pakistan: an ambiguous identity”, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1(2):145

<sup>18</sup> “The homeland of Islam (dar-al-Islam) is one. It is a homeland for every Muslim, whose movement within [its domain] cannot be restricted... Every Muslim country must receive any Muslims who emigrate thereto, or who enter it, as a brother welcomes his brother: ‘Those who entered the city and the faith before them love those who flee unto them for refuge, and find it in their breasts no need for that which had been given them, but prefer the fugitives above themselves through poverty become their lot...’”, Quran 59:9

<sup>19</sup> Rajae, p. 57

the Soviets in 1989 and the subsequent civil war between various mujahedin factions, Afghans seeking refuge in Iran after 1993 were categorised not as *mohajerin* or religious migrants, but as *panahandegan*, translated as “refugees”. After 1993, the Iranian government started issuing temporary registration cards to undocumented or newly arrived Afghans. Whereas “*mohajer*” was considered to be an honourable term, “*panahandegan*”, or refugee, was considered to have a pejorative nuance, even connoting impoverishment.<sup>20</sup>

There is a third and significant category of Afghans in Iran and that is the labour migrant who may cross repeatedly between Afghanistan and Iran, leaving his family behind in Afghanistan. These labour migrants are known in Farsi as *kargar-e fasli* (seasonal workers) or *kargar-e Afghani* (Afghan workers), and it has been estimated that more than 500,000 single Afghan labour migrants are in Iran, employed mainly in the agricultural and construction sectors.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.1 Main research questions

The Transnational Networks research in Iran comprises studies in twelve neighbourhoods in three cities: Tehran<sup>22</sup>, Mashhad and Zahedan. The study collects data on the previous livelihood strategies of Afghans before leaving Afghanistan, the current status of their assets in Afghanistan, and the relations they have sustained with Afghanistan. It also looks at Afghans’ current livelihood strategies including their participation in regional and transnational social networks. The research offers insight into Afghan perceptions and plans in relation to their future, and it touches on the projected livelihood strategies of Afghans intending to remain indefinitely in Iran, and the projected livelihood and reintegration strategies of Afghans intending to return to Afghanistan.

The research questions focusing on transnational networks, livelihoods, reintegration and cross-border movement are as follows.

With *Afghan households* that have been based in Iran longer than eight years (both households in a city and households in settlements):

- What are the reasons for households remaining in Iran?
- What livelihood strategies do these households have?
- What links, if any, do they have to Afghanistan, and how have these varied over time (e.g. remittances, visits, work)?
- How do they see their long-term future in relation to Afghanistan?

With *transitory labour migrants* from Afghanistan living in Iran:

- What is the nature of the life of migrants (both in terms of work and lifestyle), and how is this similar to, or different from, their experiences of life in Afghanistan?

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<sup>20</sup> Complicating this, prior to the 1979 revolution, a small number of Afghan were issued “white cards” stipulating their status as *panahandegan* (or refugees) entitling them to tax exemption, the right to work, and the right to obtain travel documents (Rajaei, p. 57–8).

<sup>21</sup> US Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey 2004 Country Report

<sup>22</sup> J. Abbasi, D. Glazebrook, G. Jamshidiha, H. Mahmoudian and R. Sadeghi, 2005, *Return to Afghanistan? A Study of Afghans Living in Tehran*, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

- What are the positive and negative aspects of being migrants (opportunities and constraints)?
- What are the reasons for becoming migrants?
- What are their future intentions in terms of return, mobility etc?

## 2.2 Methodology

This research project was conducted in a particular domestic (Iranian) political milieu. At the time of the research, Iran was a party to a Tripartite Repatriation Agreement with Afghanistan and UNHCR to actively facilitate the repatriation of Afghans living in Iran. Additionally, beginning in April 2005, a media campaign was conducted on national television to encourage Afghans to return to Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> While this research did not solicit data on the impact of this particular environment on refugee decision-making, the point has been made by earlier researchers that the combination of facilitated repatriation and perceived pressure from the host society has influenced Afghan decision-making to return.<sup>24</sup>

The principal research tool used was an extensive structured questionnaire comprising an introductory sequence of closed-ended questions eliciting demographic data such as region of origin, education, occupation and household structure, followed by several sequences of open-ended questions on the subject of migration history, livelihood strategies, social networks and future intentions. The mixed closed-ended/open-ended format allowed analysis of correlations or relationships between respondents' intention to return to Afghanistan and various factors.

Comprising 80 questions, the principal questionnaire was organised in terms of linear time:

- life in Afghanistan before leaving;
- initial arrival in Iran;
- livelihood strategy in Iran and participation in social networks; and
- decision-making in relation to returning or remaining; and livelihood strategy in the event of return.

As well as asking about respondents' perceptions or intentions (which risks rhetorical answers not grounded in actual practice), questions were formulated that focused on practices and actions that had actually been undertaken. While the framing of questions in this way goes some way towards distinguishing an action from an intention, it does not go far as participant observation by the researcher which allows observation of respondents' practices and actions, as opposed to recording respondents' discourse about their practices and action. For example, those respondents who expressed interest in third-country resettlement were asked:

- What information do you have about that country?
- What are your sources of information about that country?
- For what reason does that country interest you?

<sup>23</sup> "Regulations on accelerating repatriation of Afghan nationals" (2003) Article 5 states that the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organisation (IRIB) will promote and encourage Afghan nationals to return to Afghanistan.

<sup>24</sup> Turton and Marsden, p.33

- What efforts have you already made towards applying for third-country settlement to that country?

A second example relates to the form and destination of remittances: those respondents who said that they had relatives in Afghanistan were asked:

- By what means do you have contact?
- What form of assistance have you provided each other?
- Have you sent money, and if so, to whom?

A final example relates to financial difficulty: those respondents who claimed that they had faced urgent needs were asked:

- What was the urgent need for which you needed money?
- How did you resolve that urgent need?
- From whom did you borrow money?

The questionnaire was trialled in the interviewers' neighbourhoods in Mashhad, and revised in response to feedback from the interviewers and respondents. Each questionnaire took approximately two hours to complete, and interviewers carried out a total of 60 interviews in the four locations identified in Mashhad: Golshahr (25 interviews), Sakhteman (13 interviews), Altemoor (16 interviews) and Hosseinieh Heratiha (6 interviews). The sample was selected based on the relative Afghan population size in each of the four locations. Features that were selected for included: widows as household heads, ethnicity, age, and phases of arrival to Iran (i.e. communist-led coup and subsequent Soviet occupation 1979–89; conflict between the Najibullah government and mujahedin 1989–92; interfactional fighting, rise and overthrow of Taliban movement 1994–2001.<sup>25</sup>

A second open-ended questionnaire that specifically targeted the migration experience of single Afghan labour migrants in Iran was designed. It was influenced by the data of Stigter's studies in Herat and Faryab, and it utilised Alessandro Monsutti's migration time–place matrix.<sup>26</sup> This second questionnaire comprised 40 questions including an introductory sequence of closed-ended questions eliciting demographic data, followed by several sequences of mixed closed- and open-ended questions on: livelihood resources and strategies prior to migration; function of the labour migrant's social network in Iran; remittances and savings; and future migration strategies. The labour migrant questionnaire comprised 40 questions including an introductory sequence of closed questions eliciting demographic data, followed by several sequences of mixed closed and open-ended questions on the subject of livelihood resources and strategies prior to migration, function of the labour migrant's social network in Iran, remittances and savings, and future migration strategies. The questionnaire was revised following analysis of the Tehran labour migrant data. Several questions were added to extend data on background to migration, particularly, the character of horizontal social networks and assets base. Features that were selected for in the sample included place of origin in Afghanistan and occupation in Mashhad. Initially, the interviewers in Mashhad were unable to identify either documented or undocumented single labour migrants in Mashhad, apparently reflecting UNHCR's figures that Khorasan Province is one of the least

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<sup>25</sup> UNHCR, 2004, *Afghanistan: Challenges to Return*, p. 7

<sup>26</sup> A. Monsutti, 2004, "Guerres et migrations," *Editions de l'Institut d'ethnologie*, Paris: Neuchatel de la Maison des sciences de l'homme

populous destinations of documented single Afghans (only 3,495)<sup>27</sup> However, after learning that BAFIA estimated that there were as many as 50,000 undocumented single labour migrants resident in Khorasan Province, a further study was undertaken. Conducted during the month of August, fifteen interviews with labour migrants were completed.

In Mashhad, the two Afghan interviewers (male and female) were both ethnic Hazara Shia. One had a Bachelor of Sociology with previous training and experience in conducting interviews, and the other was studying sociology at university. The research team spent two days in Mashhad briefing the interviewers, discussing the trialled questionnaire results and visiting the field sites. Given Afghan apprehension that the Iranian government had recently promoted repatriation and carried out limited deportations, the subject and timing of the research was highly sensitive. Trialling the questionnaires and training the interviewers was critical, as the project's success depended on the capacity of the interviewers to carry out interviews with sensitivity and tact and to demonstrate trustworthiness in relation to respondents, allowing them to speak relatively openly about their own experiences and situation. Interviewers used a snowball technique rather than random sampling, asking willing respondents to refer them to other Afghans. Interviewers also worked through their own networks to identify respondents, and in the case of Mashhad this has probably resulted in a higher proportion of educated Afghans interviewed, reflecting the social networks of the two interviewers. Interviewers were directed to explain to respondents that the transnational networks study was an international project carried out by research teams in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, and managed by a Kabul-based research institution (AREU), and that in Iran the project was being implemented by a team of researchers from the University of Tehran. Interviewers were also directed to advise respondents that every effort would be taken to protect the identity of respondents – for example, identifying details such as name, street address in Iran, workplace in Iran and village of origin in Afghanistan would not be recorded, and questionnaires would be coded for identification. Data was collected between March and May, and again in August 2005.

Aside from the questionnaires, interviewers undertook social mapping of neighbourhoods to identify utilities and services, schools, training centres, mosques, clinics, and community associations and organisations. Additionally, research team members made field visits to each of the four neighbourhoods in Mashhad, holding informal discussions with community figures, and making relevant observations. These field visits often resulted in spontaneous group discussions which were invaluable opportunities to gauge Afghan concerns at the local level.

## 2.3 Report structure

This report details the findings of the research. Part 2 sets the context for the report by summarising the history of Afghans in Iran, followed by a selection of respondents' reasons for leaving Afghanistan, and concludes with a description of Iranian government policy towards Afghans from 1979 to the present. Part 3 focuses on Afghan households in Mashhad. This section provides data on current livelihood strategies, participation in regional and transnational social networks, and respondents' perceptions of their current situation in Iran compared to their previous situation in Afghanistan. It then considers decision-making processes in relation to

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<sup>27</sup> UNHCR Iran 2005 Afghan population and family status in Iran as of 1/11/04, Amayesh and Repatriation databases.

returning to Afghanistan, including the impact of Mashhad as the location of the Shrine of Imam Reza on the decision-making of Shia Afghans. Finally it examines respondents' strategies in the event of return to Afghanistan and aspirations for third-country resettlement. Part 4 focuses on the experiences of transitory single Afghan labour migrants in Mashhad who have left their families behind in Afghanistan and live with co-workers, friends or family members in Iran. This section considers the subjects' family histories of migration between Afghanistan and Iran, the impact of migration on their families in Afghanistan, and future migration intentions. Part 5 concludes with a discussion of the research results and patterns identified in relation to the main research questions.

### 3. Afghans in Iran

#### 3.1 History of Afghans in Iran

Transitory migration of Afghans to Iran motivated by economic differences has occurred since the nineteenth century. Afghan Shias have been making pilgrimages to Iran<sup>28</sup> for several hundred years. The first documented movement of Afghans to Iran was in the 1850s when up to 5,000 Hazara households migrated to Iran and settled at Jam and Bakharz.<sup>29</sup> It was recorded that some 15,000 families (approximately 168,000 people) settled in Torbat-e Jam in the east of Mashhad during the centralist rule of Amir Abdul Rahman (1880–1903), constituting up to 90% of the local population.<sup>30</sup> After the seizure of power by Reza Khan after the last Qajar king in about 1937, Hazaras from Afghanistan were officially categorised as a tribal group called Khawari and represented at ceremonies and Iranian national celebrations.<sup>31</sup>

The second major movement of Afghans to Iran occurred as a result of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979–1989. Relative seclusion, stability and peace had been sustained until 1973. Disorder, insecurity and ongoing disputes between left-wing parties led to two coups in 1978 and 1979 in which President Daoud was killed by Taraki and Amin, then Taraki was killed by Amin who was killed by Soviet troops. A *jihad* was proclaimed against the Soviets and many Sunni and Shia clergy encouraged migration. Only about 3% of the Afghan population in Iran resided in camps, and most Afghans established themselves in Afghan settlements known as *mehmanshahr* (of which there are approximately 80) located on the periphery of Iranian cities.<sup>32</sup> During the 1980s, Afghans were said to fill a significant gap in the workforce during the war against Iraq.<sup>33</sup> Repatriation figures peaked following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, with 1.3 million Afghans returning from Iran between 1992 and 1995.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> S.A. Mousavi, 1997, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study*, New York: St Martin's Press, p. 148

<sup>29</sup> Mousavi, p. 149

<sup>30</sup> Shah Alami in Mousavi, p. 150

<sup>31</sup> "Khawari" literally means "people of the east". Also referred to as "Barbari", these people migrated from Afghanistan mainly to Khorasan in the previous century, and many integrated and were naturalised as Iranians. A larger number migrated onward to Iraq and many of the Khawari now residing in Mashhad were expelled from Iraq in the 1970s. The citizenship of the Khawari in Mashhad is now disputed, and many have been issued amayesh documents with specific mention of Iraqi nationality (Alessandro Monsutti, personal communication).

<sup>32</sup> US Committee for Refugees, 2003 and 2004, *World Refugee Survey: Iran Country Reports*

<sup>33</sup> UNHCR, *Afghanistan: Challenges to Return*, p. 9

<sup>34</sup> UNHCR Pakistan, based on estimates obtained from the Government of Iran, <http://www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm>

The process of voluntary repatriation came to an end with the outbreak of violence: from 1989 when the mujahedin were at war with the central government, and after the fall of Kabul in 1992 when civil war broke out. Civil war resulted in a third wave of movement to Iran and Pakistan, this time particularly the urban, educated middle class. Reflecting the non-religious motivation for their flight, those Afghans who fled to Iran at that time were classified as *panahandegan* or refugees. The fourth major movement of Afghans to Iran occurred in response to the repressive rule of Taliban militants, and fighting between Taliban and opposition groups between 1994 and 2001. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, a Tripartite Repatriation Agreement was signed by Afghanistan, Iran and the UNHCR. From 1 March 2002 to 31 October 2004, 770,643 Afghans returned from Iran with the voluntary repatriation operation.<sup>35</sup> Around 65% of Afghan returnees from Iran were men of working age.<sup>36</sup> The following characteristics of Afghan returnees from Iran have been noted by the UNHCR:

- the majority of returnees during 2002 had left Afghanistan within the last five years;
- a much higher than expected number (42%) returned to urban destinations;
- approximately 40% (predominantly single, undocumented men) repatriated outside the official UNHCR assisted voluntary return process; and
- compared with the percentage of Hazaras from Afghanistan (predominantly Shia) in Iran, far fewer Hazara than other ethnic groups such as Tajik and Pashtun have returned to Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup>

The ethnicity of documented Afghans in Iran is predominantly Hazara, followed by Tajik: Hazara (377,036), Tajik (270,552), Pashtun (129,807), Baluch (46,622), Uzbek (20,438), Turkmen (3,848) and other (27,976).<sup>38</sup> While Hazaras comprise 43% of the documented Afghan population in Iran, their returns comprise only 25.6% of the total UNHCR-assisted return figures. Between April 2002 and August 2005 some 209,534 Hazara have made assisted returned to Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup>

Year of arrival	Numbers of Afghans
1980	200,000
1981	500,000
1982	800,000
1983	1,200,000
1984	1,500,000
1985	1,800,000
1986	2,000,000
1987	2,221,000
1988	2,700,000
1989	2,900,000
1990	2,940,000
1991	3,000,000
1992	2,900,000
1993	2,700,000
1994	1,850,000
1995	1,623,000
1996	1,420,000
1997	1,400,000
1998	1,400,000
1999	1,400,000
2000	1,326,000
2001	1,483,000

Table 1. Arrival from Afghanistan to Iran 1980-2001 (until 1 January 2001)

UNHCR Pakistan, [ww.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm](http://ww.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm)

Note that UNHCR Pakistan qualifies that its figures for the Islamic Republic of Iran are based on (Iranian) government estimates only.

<sup>35</sup> UNHCR Kabul, *Operational information monthly summary report*, March 02–October 04

<sup>36</sup> UNHCR, *Afghanistan: Challenges to Return*, p. 9

<sup>37</sup> UNHCR, *Afghanistan: Challenges to Return*, p. 11

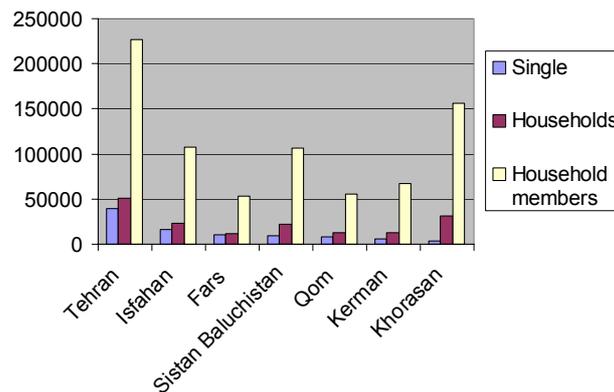
<sup>38</sup> Amayesh and Repatriation databases

<sup>39</sup> UNHCR Iran, personal communication

Repatriation from Iran	Assisted	Spontaneous	Total
1988–89	–	–	–
1990	–	–	–
1991	–	–	–
1992	7,000	287,000	294,000
1993	337,000	269,000	606,000
1994	121,000	106,000	227,000
1995	92,000	103,000	195,000
1996	8,000	6,000	14,000
1997	2,000	–	2,000
1998	14,000	–	14,000
1999	9,000	152,000	161,000
2000	184,000	31,000	216,000
Total <sup>40</sup>	775,000	954,000	1,730,000

Table 2. Repatriation of Afghans from Iran to Afghanistan  
UNHCR Pakistan, [www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm](http://www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm)

most populous destination of single Afghans – with only 3,495 single migrants residing there. The majority of Afghan family households live in the provinces of Tehran (50,959 households or 227,056 household members), followed by Khorasan (31,805 households or 155,893 members), Isfahan (22,915 households or 107,490 members), Sistan Baluchistan (22,355 households or 106,908 members), Kerman (13,035 households or 66,807 members), Qom (12,334 households or 55,931 members) and Fars (11,315 households or 52,888 members). Additionally, at the end of 2003 UNHCR documented the “population of concern” living in several refugee camps (mainly Afghans and some Iraqi) as follows: Kerman (12,730), Fars (5,800), Khorasan (5,440), Sistan Baluchistan (5,300), Markazi (4,700), Khuzestan (3,450), West Azerbaijan (3,340), and Semnan (2,900).<sup>42</sup> The ethnicity of documented Afghans in Iran is predominantly Hazara, followed by Tajik: Hazara (377,036), Tajik (270,552), Pashtun (129,807), Baluch (46,622), Uzbek (20,438), Turkmen (3,848) and other (27,976).<sup>43</sup>



<sup>40</sup> Some totals may not add up due to rounding.

<sup>41</sup> Amayesh and Repatriation databases

<sup>42</sup> UNHCR, 2003, *Statistical Yearbook Islamic Republic of Iran*, <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/statistics/opendoc.pdf?tbl=STATISTICS&id=41d2c17a0&page=statistics>, accessed 2 May 2005

<sup>43</sup> Amayesh and Repatriation databases

### 3.2 Leaving Afghanistan

Respondents in Mashhad were asked to describe their main reasons for leaving Afghanistan. About 80% mentioned the situation of war, and the effects of war such as compulsory national service, insecurity, threat to *namoos*, unemployment and inflation. About 12% mentioned poverty and 6.7% mentioned that they came to Iran for the purposes of pilgrimage, but then stayed. Most of the respondents (76.7%) interviewed in this study left Afghanistan immediately prior to the Soviet occupation

Year of arrival	Number of respondents
1348/1969	1
1353/1974	1
1354/1975	2
1355/1976	2
1356/1977	1
1357/1978	3
1358/1979	10
1359/1980	5
1360/1981	5
1361/1982	10
1362/1983	4
1363/1974	2
1364/1985	2
1365/1986	4
1366/1987	1
1368/1989	1
1369/1990	1
1372/1993	1
1375/1996	4

Table 3. Year of arrival in Iran

and during the occupation, i.e. 1979–89. However, 10% came to Iran in the decade prior to the Soviet occupation (1966–76), 5.1% came during the civil war after 1989, and 6.7% came in 1996 at the time of the Taliban movement's rise to power.<sup>44</sup> Reasons for migration to Iran depended on the time period and place of residence of the respondent in Afghanistan. Prior to 1979, Afghans left their homeland as a result of impoverishment and debt brought on by drought and adverse government policy. Subsequently they fled the effects of instability and warfare: political coups and 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.

Many respondents from rural areas paid for their journey from Afghanistan to Iran with the proceeds from the sale of livestock.<sup>45</sup> Around 71% of respondents came to Iran directly, while 28.3% passed through other countries, primarily Pakistan. Two respondents entered Iran from Iraq and Syria where they had undertaken pilgrimage to Shia religious sites. Another entered from Dubai. Half of those respondents who passed through other countries stayed in those countries for less than one week, 12.6% stayed 1–3 months, 12.6% stayed six months, and 18.8% stayed two years.

Several respondents travelled to Iran prior to the Soviet occupation for the purposes of pilgrimage, but then chose to stay, presumably because the political situation in their homeland had deteriorated in their absence. For example, a Hazara farmer from Bamyan left Afghanistan with his wife to make a pilgrimage to Karbala, Iraq, in 1969. They remained in Iraq for ten years until 1979, and then spent five years in Syria before arriving in Iran in 1984. Another respondent mentioned a pilgrimage visit his family had made to Mashhad prior to returning again as *mohajerin*:

<sup>44</sup> Interviews in this research project were restricted to Afghan households that had been based in Iran longer than eight years, i.e. before 1996.

<sup>45</sup> About 62% (37 respondents) had owned livestock in Afghanistan and of these, 75.7% or 28 respondents had sold their livestock, most of them claiming that they used the proceeds of this sale to fund their journey to Iran.

*We first came to Iran with passports to make pilgrimage. Then Daoud was killed and our passports expired. We returned to Iran in 1978.*

The act of pilgrimage itself may have been motivated by hardship and the desire to change one's circumstances. For example:

*There were many factors [for leaving Afghanistan]. First, we had no land. Second, there was war and conflict. My father was a religious man and he wanted to make pilgrimage. We went to Iran to go to [Karbala] Iraq, and then when we came back through Iran we decided to stay.*

A small number of respondents claimed that they had left Afghanistan prior to the Soviet occupation due to poverty caused by inflation and unemployment. Some respondents who had experienced hardship during the Soviet occupation were enticed to go to Iran by the description of other family members already living in Iran. For example, a Hazara respondent who had lived in Herat Province at the time of leaving Afghanistan in 1982 said:

*At the time of the Soviet bombardment of our region there was no security, and my brother had come to Iran previously and described to us the good situation in Iran especially in terms of the living conditions and facilities.*

Respondents who left Afghanistan at the time of the Soviet occupation mentioned several reasons associated with the state of war that followed the occupation:

- protection of the honour of daughters (*namoos*) against violation by soldiers;
- protection of Islam from debasement or prohibition; and
- avoidance of conscription.

One respondent who left Afghanistan in 1983 aged 13 to avoid conscription requiring him to fight fellow Afghans said: "We did not want to become involved in the civil war and be forced to kill our brothers." Forced conscription was mentioned by a Hazara widow originally from Mazar-i-Sharif: "Because of war the communist government took [conscripted] men and boys and nobody could find whether they were alive or dead." Some respondents left Afghanistan in order to avoid conscription which they believed was a death sentence. For example, a Hazara man from Kabul arrived in Iran in 1990 aged 16 "to escape from national service – I knew I would not come back alive if I did national service." Another respondent from Mazar-i-Sharif, who had one young son at the time of leaving Afghanistan, claimed that soldiers were moving from house to house extorting money, and where there was no money to give, sons were sometimes taken.

Many respondents claimed that they (or their parents) had left during the Soviet occupation because the state of war had meant that they could not educate their children. For example: "During the war [1978], for the sake of the children's education, we left Afghanistan." This respondent, a Hazara widow aged 53 who had only elementary education herself, and whose deceased husband had worked as a librarian in Afghanistan, had educated her seven children, aged 18–37, in Iran. Two had completed university degrees, and three had completed high school.

Some families with members who were religious clergy left Afghanistan following persecution. For example, "[We left Afghanistan] because of the Soviet occupation and lack of security, plus we were a [Shia] clergy family and the communists arrested us...we came to Iran in 1980." A Seyed Shia respondent who came to Iran in

1980 aged 35 mentioned Iran as being synonymous with “Islam” – saying that he “came to Islam for protection [from Communists]”. Others fled persecution due to involvement in (anti-government) political affairs. One Hazara woman from Kabul explained that she arrived in Iran aged 17 in 1985 “...because of war and insecurity: my father and brother were involved in political affairs and everywhere we went we were arrested – our safety was at risk.”

Many fled during the Soviet occupation because of the dangerous environment of daily bombardment – “as relentless as waves”. For example: “My husband was killed during the Soviet bombardment of Bamyan, and my daughter who was living in Iran insisted that I go there in 1982.” The urgency of people’s flight is suggested by some respondents who were forced to abandon their livestock. One such respondent was a 23-year-old Pashtun Shia man whose family fled in 1986: “At the time we could not even bring our money or our clothes hanging in the yard.”

Some respondents explained that they had returned to Afghanistan from Iran after the Soviet withdrawal, only to leave for the second time during the Taliban regime. A Seyed Shia man from the rural area of Ghor explained:

*Because of the Soviet invasion, war and insecurity [we left]. Then when we returned to Afghanistan, the Taliban were in power, and because of the problems they made for people we came back to Iran again.*

### 3.3 History of Iranian government policy on Afghans

In 1976, Iran ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol with reservations regarding Articles 17 (wage earning employment), 23 (public relief), 24 (labour legislation and social security), and 26 (freedom of movement). With regard to Article 17, recognised refugees with residence permits must apply for work permits in Iran, which, in most cases, restrict them to manual labour. In practice, while the authorities have granted few work permits to refugees, it should be said that they have generally tolerated the presence of Afghans working in areas where labour shortages have existed. Both the UN Refugee Convention and its Protocol have force of law in Iran: Article 155 of the Iranian Constitution states that the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran may grant asylum to those who request political asylum, except traitors and criminals under Iranian law. In 1963, prior to ratifying the Refugee Convention, the government of Iran had adopted an ordinance relating to refugees that provided a legal and administrative framework to grant asylum to refugees, which remains in force. Article 122 of the Labor Law of Iran provides that the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs may issue, extend, or renew the work permits of immigrants from foreign countries, particularly Islamic countries, as well as those of refugees, provided they have a valid immigration or refugee card and are subject to the written agreements of the Ministries of the Interior and Foreign Affairs.<sup>46</sup>

The primary responsibility for foreign nationals in Iran lies with the Ministry of the Interior, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Labor.<sup>47</sup> Refugee matters are handled by the Ministry’s Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs (BAFIA), established in the early 1980s.

<sup>46</sup> US Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey 2004 Country Report

<sup>47</sup> Rajaei, p. 47

Based on Iranian government figures, UNHCR Pakistan estimated that from 1980–89, during the period of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, 2.9 million Afghans arrived in Iran.<sup>48</sup> According to some commentators, it was the combination of the size of the influx, combined with the Iranian government’s lack of preparation and the post-Islamic revolutionary desire of Iranians to aid Muslim refugees fleeing communist-occupied Afghanistan, which allowed Afghans to settle primarily in eastern Iran’s rural and urban areas.<sup>49</sup> Some 3% were accommodated in camps, while the remainder settled in urban areas and settlements on the periphery of cities. Iran’s early refugee policy towards Afghans was “open door”, and refugee status was granted to incoming Afghans on a *prima facie* basis.<sup>50</sup> From 1979–92, most Afghans entering Iran were issued with “blue cards” which indicated their status as involuntary migrants or *mohajerin*. Blue card holders were granted indefinite permission to stay in Iran legally. Until 1995, blue card holders had access to subsidised health care and food, and free primary and secondary education, but were barred from owning their own businesses or working as street vendors, and their employment was limited to low-wage, manual labour.<sup>51</sup>

As a result of domestic economic and social concerns in the 1990s, refugee policy shifted to emphasise prevention of illegal entry and repatriation of Afghan refugees.<sup>52</sup> Since the 1990s, Iran has:

- made repeated efforts (often in collaboration with UNHCR) to document and register Afghans in Iran in preparation for repatriation;
- implemented several deportation campaigns;
- incrementally reduced services to Afghans (particularly education and medical); and
- legislated employment restrictions (most notably Article 48 in 2000).

However, these policies did not have a significant impact on the number of Afghans in Iran, which in 2001 remained at 2.1 million.

Iran’s first repatriation programme for Afghans was formalised in late 1992 with the creation of a Tripartite Commission comprising Afghanistan, Iran and UNHCR. In 1993, the Iranian government issued over 500,000 temporary registration cards to undocumented and newly arrived Afghans. During 1993, about 600,000 Afghans returned to Afghanistan – over 300,000 of them under the repatriation programme.<sup>53</sup> The government extended the issuing of cards several times, but eventually declared them invalid in 1996. In 1995 the government issued *Laissez-Passer* (LP) documents for one-way travel out of Iran either for repatriation or resettlement. During the period of the mid 1990s, as a result of economic downturn and domestic political pressure, Iran began to withdraw refugees’ health and education subsidies. (In 1994, according to statistics released by the Iranian government, expenditure on two million Afghans was said to be as high as US\$10 million per day for subsidised education, health services, transport, fuel and basic goods.) As the UNHCR had limited its assistance to refugees in settlements since 1985, 95% of Afghans living

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<sup>48</sup> UNHCR Pakistan, Afghan Refugee Statistics, [www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm](http://www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm)

<sup>49</sup> Rajae, p.50

<sup>50</sup> UNHCR in Turton and Marsden, p. 15

<sup>51</sup> Rajae, p. 56–57

<sup>52</sup> Rajae, p. 62

<sup>53</sup> Turton and Marsden, p. 12

throughout Iran in rural and urban areas were largely ineligible for any kind of assistance.<sup>54</sup>

In 1995, the government announced that all Afghan refugees must leave Iran, but later in the year it sealed its border to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, effectively ending repatriation efforts. In 1998, the Iranian government and UNHCR resumed their joint repatriation programme. The Iranian authorities engaged in a parallel campaign of deporting up to 190,000 undocumented Afghans in 1998–99. In 1999, UNHCR and the Iranian authorities tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a new repatriation agreement. UNHCR sought to avoid a programme of “voluntary” repatriation accompanied by a parallel programme of forced repatriation. UNHCR’s goal was to institute a refugee-screening programme jointly with the government that would assess individual claims and provide protection to those recognised as refugees, and avoid deportations and confinement of Afghans within camps. The new agreement was not signed but the government appeared to back down on its previous position that refugee should be confined to camps – allowing self-sufficient refugees to remain in designated areas. UNHCR’s concern about the proper registration of Afghan refugees was eventually satisfied with the BAFIA registration of all foreigners in 2001.

In April 2000, the Parliament passed a law under Article 48 of the third five-year development plan 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 responsibility of determining the presence or absence of a threat to life. The legislation also established the Foreign Nationals Executive Co-ordination Council (FNECC) to be chaired by the Ministry of the Interior, to deal with international relations and the “arrival, settlement, deportation, expulsion, training, employment, health, and medical treatment” of foreigners. Iranian authorities conduct refugee status determination on an individual basis through the FNECC, but do not make this information public.<sup>55</sup> On 22 June 2001, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs made employers of foreign illegal workers subject to heavy fines and imprisonment.<sup>56</sup> Many small businesses that employed Afghans were shut down, and the government revoked the work permits of some Afghans. Afghans with residence cards were permitted to work in sixteen categories of mainly manual work.

In 2000, BAFIA conducted a major exercise in registration of all foreigners. BAFIA issued certificates to documented foreigners that superseded all previously issued documents, which became null and void. Prior to the 2001 registration, Afghans had received a range of statuses, most without the rights and benefits normally accorded to refugees under the UN Refugee Convention. Most were denied the right to move freely within the country and faced other restrictions in employment, education, documentation and foreign travel. UNHCR agreed to participate with the Iranian government in a joint repatriation programme in 2000. Under this program, Afghans in Iran, regardless of their status or time of arrival, were invited to come forward either to benefit from material assistance to repatriate voluntarily, or to present their claims for the need for protection from return. Observers noted problems with the government’s screening criteria, which tended to deter or exclude uneducated applicants from agricultural backgrounds whose claims of persecution were based on religion (being Shia) or ethnicity (as Hazaras). Under the joint program, those Afghan

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<sup>54</sup> Rajaei, p. 59

<sup>55</sup> US Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey 2004 Country Report

<sup>56</sup> Turton and Marsden, p. 31

recognised as requiring protection were granted three-month temporary residence permits (renewable four times), and were required to reside in the province where the permits were issued, until the situation was conducive for their return. Separate from the refugee-screening procedure, BAFIA and UNHCR established a voluntary repatriation programme.

In late 2001, the US military campaign in Afghanistan and subsequent fall of the Taliban saw Iran resolve to repatriate Afghans and prevent the entry of other Afghans by closing the border with Afghanistan. Iranian officials established two camps on the Afghan side of the border in the southwestern province of Nimroz. In January 2002, after installation of the internationally supported interim authority in Kabul, UNHCR shifted its programme in Iran to facilitate Afghan repatriation. The Tripartite Repatriation Agreement signed in April 2002 planned for the return of 400,000 refugees from Iran during the first year of operation, starting on 6 April 2002. It was estimated that the same number would return in 2003 and 2004.<sup>57</sup>

In 2003, the government of Iran signed a revised Tripartite Agreement with the government of Afghanistan and UNHCR extending the voluntary return of Afghans by a further two years. From 1 March 2002 to 31 October 2004, 770,643 Afghans returned from Iran with the voluntary repatriation operation.<sup>58</sup>

In 2003, under Article 138 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, eleven articles were approved by Member Ministers of the Executive Co-ordination Council for Foreign Nationals. These eleven articles were titled “Regulations on accelerating repatriation of Afghan 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 for those who entered the country holding 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 for those who have entered the country with a valid passport and visa and who have been issued with a residence permit, was prohibited except with the permission of the provincial BAFIA offices.

### 3.4 Profiles of Afghan neighbourhoods in Mashhad

In November 2004, it was estimated that a little over one million documented Afghans were living in Iran, including 113,201 single Afghans.<sup>59</sup> Khorasan Province (including the city of Mashhad) is the second most populous destination of documented Afghan families (159,388 households), and one of the least populous

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<sup>57</sup> UNHCR in Turton and Marsden, p. 19

<sup>58</sup> UNHCR Kabul in Stigter, 2005a, p. 19

<sup>59</sup> Amayesh and Repatriation databases, Afghan population and family status in Iran as of 1/11/04.

destinations for documented Afghan singles (3495).<sup>60</sup> Respondents in this study had been resident in these neighbourhoods in Mashhad for prolonged periods, and the mean average length of residence was 14.5 years. Most respondents (71.7%) had relatives or acquaintances living in their current neighbourhood prior to their moving there. Of those relatives living there, 25% were the respondent's father's brother, and father's brother's sons, 22.7% were Afghan acquaintances, 13.6% were distant relatives, and 11.4% were the respondent's own brother.

### Golshahr

Located to the northeast of Mashhad in the Tabadgan region, Golshahr lies on the margins of the Mashhad residential area which consists of six regions. Golshahr is a major residential area for Afghans, to the extent that local Iranians call the suburb "Kabul shahr", or Kabul city. According to informal data, 50–65% of the Golshahr population (35,000–40,000) is Afghan, mainly Shia Hazaras. Many have constructed or purchased their own houses; this is accepted at the local level but does not carry the same legal validity as the officially documented and registered ownership known as *sanad*. Facilities in Golshahr include municipal water, gas, electricity and other welfare services such as a 200-bed hospital, five health centre branches as well as private medical clinics. There are several state-run schools: pre-school, primary school, lower secondary school, upper secondary school and technical training facilities for trade professions, as well as a Quranic school sponsored by the Imam Reza Foundation, and two independent Afghan schools (primary and secondary). Other facilities include approximately twelve small libraries, and eight mosques and *hosseiniehs*. The work of most Afghan men in Golshahr centres around the construction industry (as builders, labourers, plasterers, stonemasons and bricklayers) as well as some being shopkeepers, welders and agriculturalists. There are also small workshops producing *tasbih* prayer beads, *mohr* clay prayer tablets and prayer rugs. Women, children and young people are engaged in the weaving of carpets and *kelims*, spinning wool, shelling pistachios, agricultural work and some seasonal work such as cleaning saffron. Political parties or groups tend to be based on ethnic allegiance. Residents resolve disputes by seeking advice from elders, and occasionally request government intervention.

### Sakhteman (also known as Shahid Rajai)

Sakhteman is an old neighbourhood located in the east of Mashhad on the margins of the city, and at the head of the road to Sarakhs. It is part of Region Five of Mashhad. About 25% of the population (40,000–45,000) are Afghans, both Shia and Sunni. Sakhteman has the following facilities: two health centres, one night and day pharmacy, 4–5 health centre branches, state-run primary and secondary schools, and one independent Afghan school. Afghan Shias have one independent mosque for their own use, three *hosseinehs*, and two centres for educational and cultural activities. Afghan Sunnis share two mosques and one theological school with Iranian Sunnis. The occupational structure of Sakhteman is similar to Golshahr except that there are fewer shopkeepers in Sakhteman.

<sup>60</sup> 1989 data from the Coordination Council of Afghan Refugees' Affairs in Mashhad (prior to the repatriation of many Afghan refugees coinciding with the Soviet withdrawal) estimated that there were 296,500 living in the east and northeastern part of the city. Most Afghans in Mashhad originated from Herat (141,000) followed by Hazarajat (76,000), Kabul (34,000) and Mazar-i-Sharif (23,000). Populi Yazdi and Mohammad Hossein, 1993, "The political effects of Afghan refugees' presence in Khorasan", in Populi Yazdi and Mohammad Hossein, *Afghanistan, War and Politics* [Farsi], Tehran: C.N.R.S. [French-Iranian Studies Association in Tehran], p 163–94.

### **Altaymoor (also known as Sheikh Hassan)**

Located to the northeast of Mashhad, Altaymoor has a population of about 15,000 with 33% Afghans. Altaymoor has city facilities, but it is generally less developed compared with other parts of Mashhad. Welfare facilities include governmental schools (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary) and two health centres. There are several cultural associations for Afghans in Altaymoor. The occupational structure of Altaymoor resembles that of Golshahr and Sakhteman except that many Afghan men resident in Altaymoor work in brick manufacturing.

### **Hosseinieh-e Heratiha**

Six interviews were undertaken at Hosseinieh-e Heratiha, a religious meeting place mainly attended by Afghan Shias from Herat (hence the name “Heratiha”). Afghans using this facility tend to reside in dispersed and more affluent locations in the centre and northwest of the city of Mashhad. Hosseinieh members participate in religious activities which are social in nature, such as annual religious ceremonies, funerals, weddings and hosting guests. Those Afghans who form the Hosseinieh-e Heratiha membership tend to be bazaar merchants, traders or officers of the Afghan government based in Mashhad, and have a significantly stronger economic position than those Afghans living in Golshahr, Sakhteman or Altaymoor.

## **3.5 Profiles of Afghan household respondents in Mashhad**

- **Ethnicity:**
  - Hazara (83.3% or 50 respondents)
  - Seyed (10% or 6 respondents)
  - Tajik (3.3% or 2 respondents)
  - Pashtun (3.3% or 2 respondents)
- **Religion:** Shia (96.7% or 58 respondents), Sunni (3.3% or 2 respondents)
- **Age, sex, marital status of respondents:**
  - Mean age: 41.3 years (63.3% 30-49 years)
  - Male: 83.3% or 50 respondents
  - Female 16.7% or 10 respondents
  - 75% currently had a spouse
  - 20% were widowed (10 women, 2 men)
- **Province of origin in Afghanistan:**
  - Bamyan: 22%
  - Kabul: 22%
  - Mazar-i-Sharif: 16.9%
  - Uruzgan: 10.2%
  - Ghor: 8.5%
  - Daikundi: 6.8%
  - Herat/Ghazni: 3.4% each
  - Jawzjan/Parwan: 1.7 % each
- **Area of origin:** 60% rural, 40% urban
- **Situation of work in Afghanistan before leaving:**
  - working: 63.3%
  - student: 1.7%
  - unemployed: 21.7%
  - home duties: 13.3%
- **Marital status before leaving Afghanistan:** 51.7% married, 48.3% single

- Type of work in Afghanistan before leaving:
  - agriculture and/or animal husbandry: 64.8%
  - labourer: 10.8%
  - carpentry: 5.4%
  - shopkeeper/tailor/fabric seller/bazaar seller/baker/panel beater/shepherd: 3.7% each
- Assets in Afghanistan:
  - 41.7% (25 respondents) claimed they had owned land in Afghanistan, of those 11 claimed they retained access to that land (currently leased or subject to *amanat*)
  - 30% (18 respondents) said that they owned their own house
  - 33.3% (20 respondents) said they had lived in their father's house and did not specify whether the house was rented or owned; of these 13 said they retained access to that house
  - 8 respondents said that they had retained access to that house
- City of first residence in Iran:
  - Mashhad: 51.7% (with an additional 10% going to Tayabad and Kashmar in Khorasan Province)
  - Zahedan: 20%
  - Tehran: 10%
 26.7% stayed no more than one month in the first city of arrival
- Household size: mean average 5.65 members; range 2–11 members
- Number of children: mean average 3.95 (not necessarily currently living in respondents' household); range 0–10 children

## 4. Afghan households in Mashhad

The data in this section is drawn mainly from an open-ended questionnaire (80 questions) targeting Afghan households resident in Iran for more than eight years. Interviews with 60 Afghan households were undertaken in four locations in Mashhad.

### 4.1 Livelihood strategies

#### Housing

60% of respondents had lived in rural areas prior to leaving Afghanistan. 30% or 18 respondents claimed that they owned their own house and 33% had lived in their father's house (which may or may not have been owned by their father). About 23% or 14 respondents had rented their house, 8.3% had received accommodation as in-kind income usually from landowners (*khane dar bar-a bar-e kar*). 5% had lived in government housing. In terms of the current situation of respondents' housing in Afghanistan<sup>61</sup>: 17 respondents (41.5%) had abandoned their houses when they left Afghanistan, while eight (19.5%) said their house had been destroyed, and another eight (19.5%) said that it was the subject of *amanat* (being looked after by others). Five respondents (8.3%) said they were currently leasing their house, and three respondents (5%) said they had sold their house.

Respondents characterised their housing in Afghanistan as follows:

- electricity: 10%

<sup>61</sup> 41 respondents out of a possible 60 offered information about their assets status.

- running water: 6.7%
- bathroom: 16.7%
- *tashnab*: 46.7%

Several households had neither bathroom nor *tashnab*, and family members bathed at the river's edge close to their house in the dark of night. Some roofs were made from timber, and some houses incorporated a stable area for sheep beneath a single roof. Additionally, several used an *ojaq* or oven in the centre of the main room. Almost 35% had a two-roomed house, and 19.2% had either a one-roomed or a three-roomed house. None of the Mashhad respondents had a telephone installed in their previous house in Afghanistan. Most respondents (85%) claimed that they relied on "only wood" for fuel, with 5% relying on either wood and electricity, wood and animal waste, or coal.<sup>62</sup>

In Mashhad, 24 of the respondents (40%) currently "owned" their houses.<sup>63</sup> In Iran, home ownership can take both official and non-official forms. Legally, foreigners are not permitted to own property in Iran. However, a form of tenure has evolved in Mashhad in which Afghans may purchase property from Iranian or other owners, and this transaction, while not recognised as *sanad* (registered officially in the Governmental Property Registration Office known as Mahzar) is recognised as *gholnamei* (literally meaning "letter of promise") and is valid at the local level. This practice did not occur in the other two study areas of Tehran or Zahedan. Afghan-owned houses in Mashhad are classified as *gholnamei*, as distinct from the official registration of property which is designated *sanad*.

In addition to *gholnamei* status, 32 respondents or 53.3% rented housing in Mashhad, and of these, 43.3% paid both monthly rental and *rahn* and 10% paid *rahn* only. The mean average amount of *rahn* was 1.27 million *Tooman*, (US\$1,415) with the lowest being 100,000 *Tooman* (US\$114) and the highest being 4 million *Tooman* (US\$4,450).<sup>64</sup> The mean average monthly rental was 25,000 *Tooman* (US\$27) with the lowest being 5,000 *Tooman* (US\$5.50) and the highest being 50,000 *Tooman* (US\$55) Apart from those who owned and rented housing in Mashhad, 3.3% lived in the house of an acquaintance, 1.7% received in-kind housing in lieu of wages, and 1.7% lived in government housing.

Afghan houses in Mashhad had the following facilities:

- municipal electricity: 98.3%
- municipal water: 96.7%
- municipal gas: 95%
- gas cylinder: 3.3%
- kerosene: 1.7%
- telephone: 61.7%

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<sup>62</sup> This is questionable as wood is rare in Afghanistan, and in Hazarajat the main fuel is *calma* which is made from animal dung and straw (A. Monsutti, personal communication).

<sup>63</sup> In 1989 prior to a substantial return movement of Afghans in Khorasan Province back to Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, it was estimated that approximately 64% of Afghans in Mashhad both Shia and Sunni, owned their houses (Populi Yazdi and Mohammad Hossein, "The political effects of Afghan refugees' presence in Khorasan".)

<sup>64</sup> Iranian currency \$US1 = approx. 887.5 *Tooman* or 8,875 *Rial* (March 2005)

Around 52% of respondents lived in a two-bedroom house, and 22% lived in a one-bedroom house. The relative comfort of a house depended on the amount of *rahn* and rent that the tenant could afford.

Most respondent households in Mashhad consisted of two generations, i.e. parents and children. However a significant number of households included a third generation or the household head's siblings: nine households (15%) had either one or two parents of the household head living in the same household; four households (6.7%) included grandchildren as members of the household; two households (3.3%) included the spouse's parents; and three households (5%) included the household head's siblings – either brother or sisters. Extended family members in the household who contributed income included daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, son-in-law, sister and father.

### Work and education

Most respondents were literate with only 6 respondents (10%) describing themselves as *bisavad* or non-literate. 32 respondents (53.3%) had primary school education, 11 (18.3%) had lower secondary education, 6 (10%) had a high school diploma, 4 respondents (6.7%) had university education, and 1 respondent (1.7%) had theological school training. Several respondents from the neighbourhoods of Golshahr and Sakhteman in Mashhad had become literate through local adult literacy programmes.

The children of Afghan households born in Iran had a significantly higher literacy and education level compared to the children of those same households born in Afghanistan. The first child of Afghan parents born in Afghanistan had 15% illiteracy compared to no illiteracy among first children born in Iran; 10% of those first children born in Afghanistan had either lower or upper secondary schooling compared to 33.3% among those born in Iran. 25% of first children born in Afghanistan had a high school diploma and none had university education, whereas 22.2% of first children born in Iran had a high school diploma and 7.4% had university education. Time is significant in this analysis – since those children born in Iran are generally younger than their counterparts who were born in Afghanistan, and they have had access to far more extensive facilities in Iran.

The following section provides data on occupation categories in three periods: prior to leaving Afghanistan, upon first arrival to Iran, and at the time of interview. Of those respondents who had worked in Afghanistan, the following occupations were listed:

- agriculture and/or animal husbandry: 64.8%
- labouring: 10.8%
- carpentry: 5.4%
- shopkeeper/tailor/fabric seller/bazaar seller/baker/panel beater/shepherd: 2.7% each

While agriculture and animal husbandry were the most predominant occupations in Afghanistan, among respondents in Mashhad these were minor occupations in the locations where interviews were conducted.

On their initial arrival to Iran, respondents had worked in:

- labouring: 38.6%
- building and tailoring: 10.5% each

- agriculture: 8.8%
- embroidery/welding/brickmaking: 5.3% each
- “cultural work” (publishing, writing, art, cultural organisation employee): 3.5%
- poultry farm, shoemaker, animal husbandry, first aid, trading, moulding, grocer: 1.8% each

Whereas respondents listed their occupations current at the time of interview as:

- bricklayer: 19.6%
- hawker: 17.4%
- tailor: 13%
- labourer: 10.9%
- grocery shopkeeper: 8.7%
- carpentry/agriculture/bazaar stall holder/religious school student: 4.3% each
- pistachio sheller/stonemason/teacher or school principal/fabric seller/shopkeeper/translator: 2.2% each

In summary, over time there was a shift away from simple labouring, and significant shifts towards hawking, more skilled building occupations such as bricklaying, and a minor shift towards tailoring.

Respondents described their current work situation in Mashhad as:

- working: 85%
- unemployed: 8.3%
- home duties: 6.7%

Most respondents (55.1%) were independent workers, with 34.7% working for employers, and 10.2% employers of others. Respondents had spent substantial periods of time in their workplaces: the mean average duration of the first job was 10.6 years, second job 6.45 years, third job 7.95 years, and fourth job 7 years. Most women spouses, including educated women, were listed by their husbands as doing home duties. Those few women who worked were either daughters or widows working as tailors or machine embroiderers. Some older women spun wool in small workshops or shelled pistachios.

Some respondents worked at more than one occupation concurrently. For example, a 29-year-old Hazara man who had been educated to high school level in Iran had worked in the fields of publishing, marketing, labouring and embroidery. At the time of interview, this respondent was engaged in “cultural work”, and he supported this work by leading tour groups to the Shrine of Imam Hossein in Karbala, Iraq, as well as running his own small grocery shop and working occasionally as a builder. Another respondent, a Hazara man with a Bachelor of Arts, worked in marketing and had previously supported his university study through labouring work, manufacturing *mohr* clay tablets<sup>65</sup> and agricultural work.

The majority of respondents had worked in several occupations since being in Iran, including: photography, welding, shoe repairing, industrial painting, marketing, baking, metal foundry work, brickmaking, ironsmithing, carpet weaving, electronics,

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<sup>65</sup> Small tablet used by Shia Muslims in the act of prayer, made of clay from a pilgrimage site such as Karbala or Mecca.

mechanics, animal husbandry, repairing of home appliances, gardening, screen-printing, plastering, driving, nursing, graphic design and screenwriting.

### Income and expenditure

The various occupations mentioned by respondents earned the following average daily wage in Mashhad:

- skilled construction worker (builder/bricklayer/stonemason): 8,000–10,000 *Tooman* (US\$9–11)
- labourer: 4,000–5,000 *Tooman* (US\$4.50–5.60)
- tailor: 4,000 *Tooman* (US\$4.50)
- agriculture: 2,000–2,500 *Tooman* (US\$2.20–2.80)
- carpet weaver: 2000 *Tooman* (US\$2.80)
- pistachio sheller: 250 *Tooman* (US\$0.28)

It should be noted that construction industry work is seasonal and work may be scarce during the three-month winter period December–February.

Respondents were asked to specify their monthly expenses (including rent and bills for utilities like water, gas, electricity and phone). Households expended on average 124,000 *Tooman* (US\$138) per month, with the lowest being 20,000 (US\$22) and the highest being 300,000 (US\$334). Most respondents (58.3%) spent 50,000–100,000 *Tooman* (US\$55–110). Monthly expenses per capita were variable with 22 most respondents spending 10,000–20,000 (US\$11–22) per capita, and 27 respondents spending over 20,000 *Tooman*. The mean monthly expenses per capita were 23,500 *Tooman* (US\$26).

Around 3.4% or 2 respondents disclosed that they had received other sources of income, with one mentioning *khoms*.

Respondents were asked to list urgent needs that they or their relatives had experienced since living in Iran. Around 93.3% of respondents stated that they had faced urgent needs including:

- sickness: 46.2%
- marriage costs: 19.2%<sup>66</sup>
- housing bond or *rahn*: 11.5%
- buying a house: 9.6%
- accident: 5.8%
- purchase of work equipment, e.g. sewing machine: 3.8%<sup>67</sup>

Newly arrived Afghans struggled to accumulate sufficient capital to either pay for *rahn* or buy a house in the face of periods of unemployment and indebtedness. One

<sup>66</sup> The cost of marriage is substantial for an Afghan man in Afghanistan and Iran. In Iran, the costs include: wedding ceremony and reception including wedding clothes; *rahn* for separate rented house for bride and groom; household items such as carpets, refrigerator, gas stove, and television; gold for the bride; and cash money to the parents of the bride. One respondent in Mashhad mentioned that he had borrowed 5 million *Tooman* for the cost of his marriage two months prior to the interview.

<sup>67</sup> If a tailor's sewing machine breaks down irreparably, this may be considered an urgent need. Housing as an urgent need may indicate threat of eviction for unpaid rent, or homelessness in the absence of *rahn*.

respondent described this struggle using the Persian phrase “We suffered terribly but endured this suffering.”<sup>68</sup>

Respondents mentioned that they had resolved various urgent needs by borrowing money from immediate family or relatives (50%), and borrowing money from non-relatives, i.e. friends or acquaintances (18.8%). The other respondents had sold either their jewellery, gold, carpet or furniture, or used their own savings. One example is provided by a 43-year-old Hazara stonemason:

*In 1998, I had an accident [unspecified whether car accident or work accident] that caused spinal damage and I was unable to work for four years. I sold my carpets and borrowed money from family members. Now I have returned to work and have purchased other carpets and repaid this debt.*

Another respondent, a 35-year-old Hazara labourer, explained that when he fell ill and required expensive medication, he had been forced to borrow money from family members, and to sell household furniture.

Debts were often incurred on first arrival. For example: “When we came to Iran, we did not know anybody and we spent all the money we had. Then when we had no more money, we borrowed money from a distant acquaintance.” Debts were usually incurred for *rahn* and purchasing a house, for marriage and funeral ceremonies, and for costs associated with illnesses or accidents. Some respondents took on additional work in order to pay for specific debts. For example: “For the marriage of my two sons, we borrowed money from relatives and acquaintances and my husband [Seyed theological school graduate] paid off that debt by performing religious ceremonies in the mosque.” Another respondent, a 23-year-old man, had married two months prior to interview and explained that he had borrowed 5 million *Tooman* for the cost of his marriage. Another respondent mentioned debt due to fraud: “One Afghan with an Iranian took my money promising me interest, and then defrauded me. Because of this I had a huge debt and still I am in debt from that incident. After that I had a car accident in my brother-in-law’s car and again I became indebted and had to borrow money.” One respondent who had sold his assets to raise money for medical surgery, and had also borrowed money, explained that debt affected his decision to return to Afghanistan: he could not return until he had settled this debt.

Some respondent households were less likely to experience urgent financial needs by virtue of their particular demographic features. For example, one household of eight had six sons aged 23–39 (and one daughter) living in the household, and all of these sons, as well as the father aged 52, were employed as labourers. In another household of six, the father worked as a seller of automotive spare parts, one daughter worked as a teacher, a son worked as a building labourer, and a son and daughter were tailors. Families with extremely low expenditure were often those with dependent children and a single wage-earner, who had negligible networks (horizontal or vertical) to draw on for assistance. Often these household economies had become further weakened by accident or illness that had required medical treatment or hospitalisation and caused unemployment. One respondent mentioned that *Médécins sans Frontières* had paid for his medical treatment. 22.9% of respondents stated that they had received assistance from UNHCR.<sup>69</sup> Some families relied on *zakat* or Islamic charity for their survival.

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<sup>68</sup> “*Sakhtim va sookhtim*”

<sup>69</sup> UNHCR Iran’s 2003 Report stated that UNHCR’s main objectives with regard to Afghans were to facilitate voluntary repatriation of Afghanistan refugees (in the context of the Assisted Joint Program agreed by UNCHR and the governments of Iran and Afghanistan) and deliver programs to vulnerable

Seven households were headed by widows and two households were headed by widowers. Widow-headed households were considerably poorer than other households, with their mean monthly expenditure of 81,000 *Toomans* approximately 35% less than the mean average of 124,000 *Toomans* for other households. Widows expended 35.8% more for *rahn* than other households (1.6 million *Toomans* compared with 1.2 million *Toomans* for other households), while they expended 21% less rent than other households (20,000 *Toomans* monthly compared with 25,000 *Toomans* for other households).

In summary, indebtedness was expected and anticipated among respondents, and respondents tended to borrow from their relatives before acquaintances. Selling assets to raise money occurred occasionally among the respondents in this study. The event of initial arrival to Iran had usually incurred debts for *rahn*, while unexpected events such as illness, accident, and death could also incur debts for the cost of medication or burial. Planned events such as wedding ceremonies also incurred debts. The economic position of widows was particularly precarious as their income was generally low in relation to expenses, meaning they were less able to cope with contingencies, and more likely to require financial assistance.

## 4.2 Afghan perceptions of livelihoods in Iran and Afghanistan

Respondents were asked to comment on their current economic situation compared to their previous situation in Afghanistan. 42.7% or 25 respondents said their situation had improved in Iran, 33.3% or 20 respondents claimed that their situation had worsened in Iran, and 25% or 15 respondents said their situation had remained the same.

A correlation can be established between positive assessment of economic situation and duration of residence. Of those 52 household heads in Mashhad (86.7% of respondents) who had lived in Iran for 20 years or more, 24 respondents claimed their situation had improved, 15 respondents claimed their situation had deteriorated, and 13 respondents claimed their situation had not changed. In short, the vast majority (88%) of those who had been resident for 20 years or more claimed their situation had improved.

Whereas, of those household heads (eight or 13.3%) who had been resident in Iran for 20 years or less, 1 respondent claimed their situation to have improved, 5 respondents claimed it had deteriorated and 2 respondents claimed their situation had not changed. In other words, among those respondents who had been resident for less than 20 years, those claiming their situation had deteriorated were five times that of those who claimed it had improved (five compared with one respondent). It is probably that some of these respondents arrived to Iran as single men, and their assessment should be considered in the context of their current economic responsibilities as household head.

### Situation in Iran comparatively better

42.7% or 25 respondents said their situation had improved in Iran. The following reasons were offered for this improvement:

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target groups including women and girls, mainly in *mehmanshahr* but including some other locations, e.g. literacy classes, reproductive health training, food assistance, and support to refugee school children. UNHCR Iran, *Global Report 2003*, <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opedoc.pdf?tbl=MEDIA&id=40c6d7500&page=home>, accessed 2 May 2005

- welfare facilities and higher standard of living in Iran: 37.5%
- better work situation in Iran: 33.3%
- better education facilities: 20.8%
- absence of war: 8.3%

A few claimed that their situation had improved radically based on the professional training and education that they had been able to access in Iran. For example, one Hazara man had left Afghanistan aged 9 years and had subsequently trained as a professional metal foundry worker in Iran: “My situation in Iran is better than in Afghanistan. Here I have been able to find good work and have trained as a professional foundry worker.” A Seyed respondent, originally from a landless farming family from rural Behsud, who owned his own house in Golshahr and had worked in a range of occupations in Iran including foundry worker, broker and car wash detailer, described his financial situation as radically improved on account of more work opportunities. Some respondents made the point that in Iran, a person could find work throughout the year, not just on a seasonal basis as they had previously experienced in Afghanistan.

Several respondents assessed their situation in terms of their children’s position: “Our situation in Iran has improved because our children have become educated, have advanced.” This respondent, a Hazara man originally from a landless farming family in rural Bamyan, had educated all of his five children in Iran: the eldest three finished nine years of schooling and two worked as tailors with him. Another respondent, a 43-year-old Hazara man from a landless farm labouring family, had himself become literate through an adult literacy program in Mashhad. The respondent’s children (aged 13–21) were born in Iran, and they were all currently studying in levels between grade 6 and high school diploma. This man explained:

*Illiteracy caused great suffering for me, I don’t want my children to suffer as I did...in Afghanistan, children just play in the dirt which means that I have to remain in Iran to secure my children’s education. Once they are educated they can find good work. I am grateful to Iranians that during these many years they hosted us, but I plead with them to let our children continue their education. If Iranians can allow Afghans to become educated, and return to their country as educated people, then that is better. Literate and educated people are useful.*

Using objective indicators such as education level and income-earning capacity, it might be expected that some families would represent their situation in terms of obvious comparative improvement, yet they elected to represent this improvement in minimalist terms. The reason for this may be that education and relative comfort become ameliorated or outweighed by the social impact of being a migrant: living in a society perceived as hostile towards migrants, living with the threat of deportation, and being restricted to low-status manual occupations. One such example is the case of a 32-year-old Hazara man whose non-literate parents had been landless farm labourers in rural Ghor, and who himself had been educated to university degree level in Iran. At the time of interview he was the principal of an Afghan school, however it should be said that he had experienced five years of unemployment prior to this position. This man said: “Our situation has improved a little in Iran. We were poor in Afghanistan, we were farmers. But [in Iran] I could continue my education and I could use welfare facilities.”

## Situation in Iran comparatively worse

33.3% or 20 respondents claimed that their situation had worsened in Iran. While “economic situation” was the term used in this study, many respondents chose to assess their comparative situation in broader terms. It should be noted that many respondents assessed that their situation in Iran had worsened, and then qualified this assessment based on incidental factors such as car accident, ill health, death of a spouse, or natural increase in family size and therefore dependents. The reasons given for assessment as comparatively worse were:

- property owners in Afghanistan and tenants in Iran: 24.1%
- husband died in Iran: 3.4%
- not comfortable living in Iran: 3.4%
- employers in Afghanistan and workers in Iran: 1.7%
- unemployed in Iran due to sickness/injury: 1.7%

It should be qualified that many respondents who mentioned that their situation had become worse related this to events such as death of family members, illness or increase in family size – things that were often incidental to them living in Iran. However it can be argued that work injury is not necessarily incidental, as the restriction of Afghans to manual and often heavy labour occupations such as building construction, brickmaking and industrial work, without insurance against injury and often without adequate protective or safety equipment, does leave Afghans in Iran vulnerable to work injury.

Respondents who were tenants in Mashhad, and had previously owned a house or a small amount of land, or livestock, tended to describe their situation in Mashhad in terms of deterioration. A widow whose husband had been killed by Soviet bombardment had previously owned a three-room house and 15 *jeribs* of land in Bamyan. In Mashhad, she rented a house with her daughter, son-in-law and grandchild, and had laboured in wool-cleaning workshops and agriculture since arriving in Mashhad. Her household had been required to deposit 1.5 million *Tooman* for *rahn*, and they expended only 30,000 *Tooman* monthly. She said that her situation had deteriorated in Iran:

*We had a house and land in Afghanistan, and even though I have tried to gather sufficient money to buy a house here [Sakhteman], I have not been able to afford to buy a house.*

A Hazara man working as a builder’s labourer, and sole income earner for a household of five, explained:

*Our situation is worse in Iran because in Afghanistan we had land and livestock, but we don’t have anything here – we are labourers and all that we earn during the day we spend at night. I don’t have any savings.*

A third example is provided by a widow who had raised her nine children in Iran, educating two to high school diploma, one to grade 11, and the remaining to higher secondary school. The family of eight lived on 80,000 *Tooman* monthly and was dependent on the wages of two sons: one who worked as a packaging factory worker, and the other as a tailor:

*It has become worse...since my husband died, we have had no income from him [previously carpet weaving and brickmaking]. We had land in Afghanistan [2*

*jeribs] and a house, and we could earn money from the land. Here I can't adequately assist my married children with their needs.*

A fourth respondent made the point that his weakened economic position affected his capacity to be social, and in effect, his social position:

*Our situation deteriorated here because we had property in [Jawzjan] Afghanistan and we were able to help others and give them food. Whereas here in Iran we have nothing to give.*

Many respondents mentioned difficulties that were a result of their migrant status in Iran – confining them to low-status occupations and subjecting them to the risk of deportation. For example, a Tajik Shia widow of four children (aged 12–15) currently owned a house in Mashhad, and with her grocer husband in Kabul had owned substantial property (six-bedroom house, shop, 3 *jeribs*, 2 cars) explained:

*In Afghanistan, we had everything. My husband was alive [and] we had land, house, car. But here we don't even have security to go downtown [without risk of arrest and deportation]. How can we get good jobs if we can't even go the city centre?*

An elderly widower, who had worked without wages for his farmer father in Afghanistan,<sup>70</sup> had worked in Mashhad in the silk and construction industries and currently worked on a poultry farm. The monthly income for the household comprising seven sons aged 4–23 was 200,000 *Tooman* monthly, and it relied on the wages of two sons working as builders, and two other sons who divided their time between labouring and home duties. This man had educated three of his sons to high school diploma level, and another two had finished grade 9. His comment about his situation referred to the narrow field of work that he and his sons were restricted to, and to the risk of deportation:

*I have gone backwards...because my hands are tied and I can't work comfortably [i.e. without anxiety about arrest]...in Afghanistan people can now work comfortably, there is nobody to harass or deport them. They continue working...there is nobody to arrest the Afghan worker – they are not forced to conceal themselves inside a barrel<sup>71</sup>...we will return to Afghanistan, God willing, in spring 2005. We are tired. We are going to return to Afghanistan. I will make the final decision and we will all return.*

Another respondent, a 50-year-old Pashtun Shia assessed his situation in terms of similar anxieties about arrest and deportation:

*Our situation has got worse in mental and spiritual terms. Although we don't have a bad economic situation, we don't have a peaceful existence [and] I am always thinking and worrying about what might happen...my son was once arrested and detained for three days.*

One respondent explained that his situation had been good in Mashhad, where he had lived for 14 years until his family's arrest and forced relocation to Torbat-e Jam

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<sup>70</sup> 25% of respondents had worked without wages in a family enterprise in Afghanistan, mainly farming, prior to coming to Iran.

<sup>71</sup> Refers to the practice of undocumented Afghan labourers concealing themselves when a construction site is raided by immigration officials.

camp in Khorasan Province.<sup>72</sup> When arrested in Mashhad and taken to Torbat-e Jam, the respondent claimed he was forced to sell his house for 300,000 *Tooman* in spite of its alleged value of 10 million *Tooman*. The respondent's wife and children remain at Torbat-e Jam, and the respondent lived and worked in Mashhad. He explained:

*Our situation has deteriorated because we were forced to come to Torbat-e Jam, and we cannot have a stable life. I am away from my family. I have two households to support: in the mehmanshahr at Torbat-e Jam, and in my other house in Mashhad. [For Afghans in Iran] there is no permanent work, and only restricted occupations, and the government does not permit us to travel. We cannot have a permanent and stable life here.*

Some respondents reflected that in Afghanistan the labour market was also closed to them, and projected that they would not be able to get work with the government unless they paid a bribe. One respondent, a 29-year-old Hazara man from Uruzgan explained that he would resettle in Kabul if he returned:

*I am interested in trade – buying and selling, because you cannot earn money from other jobs like being a government employee unless you can pay a bribe (reshwat) to be employed.*

### Situation in Iran comparable

Fifteen respondents (25%) claimed that their situation had remained the same. The following reasons were given:

- bad situation for labourers in both places: 15.5%
- high inflation and little gain in Iran: 6.9%
- better economic situation in Afghanistan, but better access to welfare in Iran: 3.4%

One respondent, a 29-year-old Hazara man who had gained a Bachelor of Arts in Iran and had worked as a building labourer and a farm labourer since being in Iran, explained:

*In terms of comfort, it is better in Iran. There in Afghanistan we lived in a village [without any facilities]. But in monetary terms, still we are not much better off. We can just survive, and the time passes [without prospects for change].*

Several respondents interpreted the question in its narrowest sense, and did not consider educational opportunities in Iran in judging their current situation. For example, a non-literate 45-year-old widow who had educated all of her children in Iran, four to the level of high school diploma, and one currently studying medicine at university, described her situation:

*Not much difference [between Afghanistan and Iran], everything was cheap, but here things are expensive, and the children's father has died and life is very difficult...when you become homeless you encounter many difficulties everyday. When my husband died, I did not know what to do.*

<sup>72</sup> This practice of forced relocation is in line with BAFIA's aim to gradually re-group vulnerable residents of settlements (Alessandro Monsutti, July 2005, personal communication).

This woman's comment suggests that the cost of living in Afghanistan 30 years ago has remained a static benchmark for her. The respondent acknowledged the progress in her children's education, but showed concern that one of them with a high school diploma worked as a street hawker, and that her son studying medicine did not have proper clothes or shoes to wear to university. This widow earned money shelling pistachios, and the family's only other income was from her son who worked as a hawker.

### 4.3 Afghan social networks

#### Relations with Iranians

Iranians featured in most respondents' social networks. Around 72% of respondents claimed that they visited Iranians, with 30% visiting on annual occasions such as Persian New Year or *Eid*, and 30% visiting on a monthly basis. About 53% of respondents said that they had received some form of assistance from Iranians including:

- financial assistance: 29%
- helping with household-hosted religious wedding and funeral ceremonies: 22.6%
- borrowing furniture and cooking ware: 16.1%
- assistance with work matters: 9.7%
- installation of telephone and/or electricity: 9.7%
- gifts: 6.5%

Several respondents mentioned that they looked after their Iranian neighbours' house when they went away for pilgrimage or other reasons. Of those 56.7% of Afghan respondents who said they had provided help to Iranians, the form of assistance included:

- borrowing money: 35.3%
- borrowing home appliances: 35.3%
- helping with ceremonies: 14.7%
- work matters: 5.9%
- transporting to hospital, joining Iranian fighters against Iraq in war, free work: 2.9% each

Help with ceremonies was common, particularly for religious ceremonies where large numbers of guests required hosts to borrow mattresses and quilts, crockery and cooking dishes, gas cylinders, and the use of stoves. Sometimes neighbours had loaned their sitting rooms to each other to hold such ceremonies. Many participated in each other's religious ceremonies during *Moharram*, and gave each other cooked food as *nazr*. Some respondents who did not have a telephone connected in their house used their neighbour's. One respondent, a Hazara man who had lived in Golshahr for 21 years and provided free tailoring services to his Iranian neighbours, explained: "When we purchased [vacant] land our Iranian neighbours helped us to connect the electricity, gas and telephone." According to informants in Mashhad, this form of assistance reflects the limitations of *gholnamei* property ownership: non-citizens such as Afghans cannot connect the utilities necessary for a new house built on land purchased via *gholnamei*.

## Relations with Afghan relatives and acquaintances in Iran

Respondents were asked whether they had Afghan family or acquaintances (e.g. from their village of origin in Afghanistan) living in Iran, and whether they had received assistance from them, or had provided assistance to them. About 98% of respondents had Afghan relatives or acquaintances living in Iran. 37 respondents mentioned visiting, 42 respondents mentioned telephone contact, and three had no contact with their relatives. Around 60% or 36 respondents said they had loaned money to their Afghan relatives or acquaintances in Iran, but many qualified that they had not been in a financially strong enough position to offer much assistance. One man explained: “No, because everyone is just hanging on by the hair of their own head (*tar-e moo-ye khodash*) and there is no extra to help others.” Another said: “We cannot help them because we are only subsisting (*dar gozar ast*) ourselves.” A counter-response was also expressed: “We share with each other in life and death. If one had no family or relatives, then one would perish. Yes, we loan money to one another.”

Of those relatives or acquaintances to whom respondents had loaned money, 91.7% had loaned money to members of their family or acquaintances:

- brothers: 30.6%
- family member: 30.6%
- son of father’s brother: 16.7%
- Afghan acquaintances: 8.3%
- wife’s brother: 5.6%
- mother’s brother: 5.6%
- son of mother’s sister

Purposes for loaning money included:

- marriage: 38.7%
- illness/hospitalisation: 22.6%
- daily living expenses: 19.4%
- funeral and *rahn*: 6.5% each
- sickness and *rahn*: 3.2%
- unspecified: 3.2%

Some had provided money to pay the cost of smuggler for a newly arrived relative from Afghanistan: “Yes we helped them when they came to Iran...we paid their smuggling expenses...when they came to Iran they stayed in our house, and we collected some money to help them build their house.” Other reasons mentioned included: capital for business, and travel costs for pilgrimage to Karbala, Iraq. About 8.3% of respondents had loaned money to Afghan acquaintances or friends.

Widows were asked whether they had received assistance from their deceased husband’s family. Out of ten widows in Mashhad, six said they had contact, two said they had no contact due to distance, and two claimed they had no contact with their deceased husband’s family. Nine out of ten widows received no financial assistance from their husband’s family, with just one respondent receiving financial assistance for the purpose of her husband’s funeral expenses. Some expected assistance: “Yes we have contact. We expected them to send money for my husband’s land [currently occupied by his brother] when he died, but they did not do that.” Some widows had

maintained contact with their husband's family by virtue of the fact that her husband had been her cousin, making the widow's husband's father her own uncle. This connection could also occur in the second generation with the marriage of cousins – that is, the widow's daughter had married her husband's brother's son.

### **Relations with Afghan family and relatives remaining in Afghanistan**

Most respondents (98.3%) had family or relatives remaining in Afghanistan. Of those who had relatives remaining in Afghanistan, 15.3% claimed they had no contact, and the remainder mentioned a variety of sources of contact:

- phone contact: 30 respondents
- news about their relatives via acquaintances travelling from Afghanistan to Iran: 28 respondents
- letters: 26 respondents
- cassettes: 2

Afghans in Mashhad received relatives from Afghanistan as temporary guests, and Afghans themselves sometimes travelled back to Afghanistan for short visits. Shia Hazara relatives commonly came to Mashhad from Afghanistan to make pilgrimage to Imam Reza.

Only one third, or 19 respondents, said they had ever sent money to relatives in Afghanistan. Respondents sent money to relatives in Afghanistan including:

- close family: 38.9%
- father's brother and son of father's brother: 33.3%
- sister/parents: 11.1% each
- brother: 5.6%

Of those respondents who sent money to Afghanistan, 68.4% had used trusted acquaintances visiting Afghanistan, and 31.6% had used *hawala*. One respondent mentioned that he had tried to compensate relatives for looking after his land in Afghanistan by sending a small amount of money to relatives directly. Financial assistance was often directed at the respondent's brother's son, or the respondent's father's brother and his sons. For example, "I sent money to my father's brother because his situation is not good: he has no land and no son, and is working as a shepherd." Another respondent, a Hazara man, had sent money (via acquaintances) for *khoms* to his father's brother who was a clergyman. Sometimes respondents in Iran sent money to Afghanistan at the time of death or marriage, for example one man sent money to his father's brother's family upon the death of his father's brother. A 43-year-old Hazara man who was deported with his entire household including his parents in 1994, and had subsequently returned to Iran, remitted money regularly (via acquaintances) to his parents in Afghanistan. Results from the Mashhad, Tehran and Zahedan case studies reveal that those single Afghans working in Iran with their families remain in Afghanistan remit substantial and regular amounts of money to Afghanistan to support their parents/siblings, and/or their own wife and children. This is in sharp contrast with the consumption practices of Afghan households in Iran which tend to expend most of their income on the daily expenses of the household, and infrequently – if at all – remit money back to other relatives or household members in Afghanistan.

Only one case was disclosed in which an Afghan in Mashhad had requested and received financial assistance from his relatives in Afghanistan. This particular respondent was arrested in Mashhad and deported to Torbat-e Jam camp, and was forced to sell his house in Golshahr for 15% of its value:

*I needed money so a member of my family in Afghanistan gave me money and I handed over my house in Kabul as collateral (gero) for the loan. Then when I repaid my relative he gave back my house.*

Another motivation for contact with relatives in Afghanistan and overseas was for the purpose of 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 overseas. 41.7% of respondents (or their relatives) in Iran had brought women from Afghanistan to marry in Iran. Those respondents who had extensive family networks in Iran tended to identify women from within that circle, for example: “In Iran there are a lot of girls from our family and we can marry here,” and “My cousin was here [in Iran] and after my maternal uncle died, I was expected to marry his daughter.” In contrast, where a household head’s siblings (and their daughters) had remained in Afghanistan, the pool of potential brides from within the family located in Iran was smaller, for example: “We couldn’t find a suitable bride among our own extended family in Iran”. One dissenting voice, a 29-year-old Hazara man, claimed the travel costs back to Afghanistan were prohibitive, and that “nowadays couples want to know each other and see each other and talk with each other [prior to arranging marriage].” Respondents claimed that Afghan men in Iran preferred Afghan women living in Afghanistan as brides because they were more likely to subscribe to traditional values about gender relations and family life, and those from rural areas were considered able to tolerate hardship and difficult circumstances, and did not have high expectations of marriage. A 48-year-old Hazara widower described the virtues of Hazara women as wives:

*Yes, everybody is conforming with his culture: pigeon with pigeon [like with like]. Village girls can tolerate difficulty but the city girl is pampered and she cannot cope with difficulty. Principally, the Hazara girl does not leave her husband.*

It was also claimed that the bride price requested by the families of Afghan brides in Afghanistan was considerably less than that requested by Afghan families in Iran.

23.7% or 14 households said they or their relatives had arranged for an Afghan woman living in Iran to marry an Afghan man living abroad. Afghan women in Iran had travelled to the following countries for the purpose of marriage with an Afghan man: UK, Canada, US, Europe (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Germany), as well as UAE (Dubai), Pakistan, Syria and Iraq. A few respondents mentioned that they or their relatives had identified Afghan women living in Pakistan as brides for Afghan men in Iran. Afghan men overseas were said to prefer Afghan women living in Iran as brides, as they were considered to be more “modern” and adaptable to the western lifestyle.

This data supports the hypothesis that transnational movement of Afghan women establishes and consolidates transnational relations between the respective families of the groom and bride in Afghanistan and Iran, and other countries.

## Relations with Afghan relatives living overseas

31 respondents (51.7%) had relatives or acquaintances living abroad including: US, Canada, Australia, UK, UAE (Dubai), Pakistan, Iraq<sup>73</sup>, Kuwait, Syria and Europe (Germany, Norway, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Netherlands, Greece and France). 12 respondents (40%) had relatives in more than one country abroad. Those countries listed as having the most family members were: Germany (8 respondents), Australia (5 respondents), Canada (4 respondents) and the remaining countries one respondent each. The relationship between the respondent and the relative overseas included: cousin (33.3%), sibling (14.8%), spouse's family (14.8%) and acquaintance (14.8%).

Of those respondents with relatives living overseas, 45.2% (14 respondents) said they had no contact with them. The remainder had multiple forms of contact:

- phone contact: 48.4%
- email or internet chatting contact: 6.5%
- hosting relatives' visit when they came to Iran: 6.4%

Of those who had relatives overseas, 84.4% claimed they received no form of assistance from their relatives, 12.5% (4 respondents) said they had received financial assistance from their relatives overseas, and 3.1% had received non-financial assistance. One Hazara man explained that his brother in Pakistan had sent his family in Iran the equivalent of 300,000 *Tooman* as a contribution towards the cost of the respondent's brother's marriage.

## 4.4 Decision-making about the future

### Informed decision-making

Respondents were asked whether they had relatives who had returned to Afghanistan, whether they had contact with them, and the nature of their relatives' current situation in Afghanistan. Most respondents (73.3%) had relatives who had returned to Afghanistan, and of these, most (76.7%) had maintained contact with them through telephone, letter, news from acquaintances or other relatives travelling between Iran and Afghanistan, and by cassette.

Respondents were also asked about their source of news about Afghanistan. Around 38 respondents mentioned that they received news about Afghanistan only from their Afghan friends and acquaintances in Iran. The remainder mentioned multiple sources including:

- Iranian radio and television, and BBC radio: 20 respondents
- Voice of America, Kabul radio and Azadi radio: 2 respondents
- internet: 1 respondent

While respondents drew on several news sources, they tended to trust news brought almost daily by relatives and acquaintances who had just returned to Iran from Afghanistan, or news passed on from relatives who had returned to Afghanistan. One respondent said he gathered news from acquaintances who he met incidentally on the street: "We are constantly asking each other 'what is the news [about Afghanistan]?" Several respondents mentioned that they received news from

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<sup>73</sup> An Afghan man who had previously lived in Iraq and Syria before settling in Iran had identified women in Afghanistan as *aroos* for other Afghans living in Iraq and Syria.

relatives who had repatriated to Afghanistan and returned again to Iran. Information relayed by television was claimed by several respondents to be untrustworthy: it either tells only negative news and downplays positive news, or the reverse. In essence, the media was perceived as not providing a balanced account of change in Afghanistan. For example: “There is no important news on the television [i.e. only news about terrorist attacks but nothing about everyday life]”, “Radio and television only gives us news about war”, and “I do not trust radio and television – it lies.”

Afghan respondents in Mashhad, by virtue of their proximity to places such as Herat, travelled back and forth to Afghanistan more frequently than Afghans in Tehran. Some mentioned that they had travelled back annually since they had been in Iran. One respondent suggested that “Ideally if one had money, one could visit and observe the conditions with one’s own eyes.” However such preparatory visits are complicated, since the individual who returns (usually the male head of household) risks losing the right to return to collect the family in Iran unless BAFIA issues a waiver to the requirement of surrendering the *amayesh* card for an exit LP. Otherwise, the person making the reconnaissance must re-enter Iran illegally to collect his family. This policy of surrendering *amayesh* cards and issuing exit LPs poses an obstacle to such preparatory visits and to larger return movements of families. About 51.7% or 31 respondents said that either they or their father or brother (or family member) had returned to Afghanistan since living in Iran, and of these, 37.8% (11 respondents) had returned between 2001 and 2004. About 72% or 21 respondents had visited just once, with six respondents visiting twice, and or one respondent visiting three times or more.

### Dissatisfied returnees

An equal number of respondents claimed their returnee relatives were satisfied and dissatisfied. According to respondents, about 44% of returnees were dissatisfied with their situation in Afghanistan because of:

- unemployment and lack of work opportunities
- lack of basic facilities like electricity and running water
- shortage of fuel in cold weather
- lack of health facilities

Many said their relatives regretted having made the decision to return to Afghanistan. Some respondents emphasised that their relatives had no running water in their houses, and had to stand in queues for long periods of time to collect water in plastic containers. It should be clarified that while 96.7% of Afghan respondents in Mashhad had running water in their houses, the case was different in Zahedan where 15% of Afghan respondents did not have running water.

Some respondents’ decision-making to return to Afghanistan was affected by their own return experience. One respondent, a 36-year-old Hazara man, had travelled to Afghanistan in 2004 to prepare for his return (and that of his wife, parents and siblings). He had purchased land in Herat and planned to settle there, but he made discouraging observations during a side trip to Kabul:

*When I went to Afghanistan, I went to Kabul. There was a high percentage of unemployed people, and most Afghans were working as hawkers and had a poor economic situation. I noticed many Afghans gathered outside the Iranian Embassy in Kabul – they were queuing for visas. Each visa cost US\$370. I asked*

*them: “Why are you doing this, and why do you want to pay such an amount of money for this visa?” They answered: “There is no work and no security [amniyat].” If they could provide housing or a piece of land, that would be good. On the other hand they could restrict the activities of land speculators and by diminishing their power this would solve other problems.*

Other respondents’ decision-making to return to Afghanistan was affected by the return experience of others. One man explained:

*My wife and I prefer to remain in Iran to continue our education [husband had a Bachelor of Arts, spouse had a high school diploma] and at the moment we have no financial capacity to return, we have no money to buy a house or land, or to establish a business. There are so many migrants who have returned and their life and work situation is in complete disarray. We don’t even have a place to be to stay.*

Another respondent implied that there is a difference between being personally able to tolerate a situation, and recommending others do the same:

*He [my cousin who has returned] says that the situation is not bad but the reality is different because he also advises us to remain here as long as we can because the situation of work and housing is not good.*

Some respondents said their relatives had experienced difficulty adjusting to the environment of Afghanistan, both in terms of limited infrastructure (water, electricity, gas, roads, transport), and in terms of being accustomed to urban Iranian culture. This study’s interviewers in Tehran mentioned the pejorative term “Irani gak” used by some Afghans who had remained in Afghanistan to describe Afghans who had returned to Afghanistan from Iran. The term indicates that returnees have absorbed Iranian gestures, manners and idioms that differentiate them from Afghans who have remained in Afghanistan. A Mashhad respondent who had lived in Iran for 26 years since the age of six and had been raised and educated to university degree level in Iran, explained:

*Here is the problem: Afghanistan is our country but we don’t have anyone to help us and [if we return] we will have a feeling of being strangers in spite of it being our country.*

### **Satisfied returnees**

About 43% of respondents claimed that their returnee relatives in Afghanistan were satisfied and had reported their situation to be good. Additionally, about 13% of respondents made global statements about the situation of returnees: “the situation of those who returned with capital was good” and “the situation of those with professional skills was good”. Those who owned houses or land in Afghanistan, or who had found accommodation and employment, were said to be in a good situation. Finding work depended on the returnees’ occupation. For example, a bricklayer and builder in Mashhad explained:

*Acquaintances say the situation in Afghanistan is good. They are builders and they say that in Kabul work for skilled builders is abundant...yes we [wife and three children aged 8–11] want to return in spring 2005, we want to buy land in Kabul.*

## 4.5 Prerequisites for return to Afghanistan

*We are not waiting for a miracle. But we just want to have a reasonable living condition in Afghanistan...if the situation [social, housing, work, security] improves, we will return.*

*(32-year-old Hazara man originally from rural Ghor, raised and educated to university level in Iran)*

Respondents were asked the question: “What changes would have to take place in Afghanistan in order for you to make decision to return in the long term?” Respondents mentioned multiple factors. Security was mentioned by 32 respondents, and health facilities by 26 respondents. One respondent, a 29-year-old Hazara shopkeeper educated to high school diploma level in Iran who had come from a rural village explained:

*We need the social, welfare, economic and security situation to be comparable to neighbouring countries. For example, having a good income, security and health facilities – none of these exist currently in Afghanistan. People like me in Afghanistan have no position, absolutely nothing there.*

The breakdown of responses was:

- improved security plus welfare facilities including health and education: 39%
- security: 11.9%
- provision of land or housing: 13.6%
- improved economy: 10.2%
- establishment of an Islamic Government: 5.1%

Two respondents mentioned that “it was the responsibility of Afghans to return and participate in reconstruction”. One Hazara man who had left Afghanistan in 1980 aged 13, had returned during the 1990s, but had then gone back to Iran in 1998. He claimed that change was the responsibility of Afghans themselves, and that until they returned they could not expect change. These attitudes imply understanding of returnees themselves as *catalysts* for fundamental change – by creating needs that must be fulfilled, and by fulfilling those needs themselves.

Most respondents, however, expected fundamental changes to take place in areas such as the system of government, infrastructure and welfare facilities prior to their return. Virtually every respondent who expressed a desire to return to Afghanistan qualified their statement by saying that they would not return until reconstruction had occurred, including basic infrastructure like fuel for heating and cooking (electricity, gas) and housing. One respondent made the point that he did not want to leave Mashhad where he “owned” his own house, to return to Afghanistan and live on the street. Another respondent described the state of Afghanistan as “upside down” – as though nothing was the way it ought to be. When things were no longer “upside down”, he claimed that he would return. One respondent used the word “disarray” to characterise what returnees faced: “There are so very many migrants that have returned and their life and work situation is in complete disarray. We [they] don’t even have a place to live.”

Several respondents mentioned that the government of Afghanistan should act to enable access to land for returnees. A 45-year-old Hazara man who lived in his own house in Mashhad proposed that land and housing was the key to motivating

repatriation: “If the government gives land and housing, all *mohajerin* would return to Afghanistan.” The idiom “foothold” (*ja-ye pa*) was commonly used to describe housing and land, for example:

*If the economic situation in Afghanistan improves then I have no motivation to remain in Iran. But if the situation does not improve, we will remain. I have no money to buy a house or land in Afghanistan...we have made a decision to return, only we have no money, we have no place there. At least we need a “foothold” in Afghanistan: a house or shelter, work, facilities like water and electricity. If we had a house we would return. We are waiting to see what will happen. If what I want provided is provided, then we will return.*

Another respondent, a carpenter, wanted to return to Kabul where he had been raised. While he was not explicit, it can be assumed that he refers to land for the purpose of building a house, not for agricultural purposes:

*[Changes that I want include] security, work, basic infrastructure of running water and electricity...[and] we don't have a house there. If the government provides us with a loan to buy land we will return.*

Several respondents expressed that they wanted an Islamic government to be established in Afghanistan. Given the existence of an Islamic Government in Afghanistan at the time of the interview, it is possible that the respondent was making a comment about degree rather than kind, referring to a government whose actions and practices – not merely constitutional principles – ought to be Islamic.<sup>74</sup> These respondents did not refer to “Islamic Government” narrowly in terms of Sharia law, but rather, a government which takes responsibility for its people by providing social and economic facilities that enable the population to live without fear and hunger and in a state of relative peace. A Hazara widow who had educated five of her seven children to the level of high school diploma in Iran said:

*We asked God to prepare the ground for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. I am satisfied with the government of Iran because my children have been educated and in this Islamic country, the conditions for my children's progress have been provided.*

Another Hazara woman proposed:

*An Islamic government in Afghanistan is the only hope. I hope that our state is Islamic, and that our government and law be Islamic in practice. The state ought to support its people [in order for them to stay within their country] because migration is oppressive.*

A 50-year-old Pashtun Shia man stated:

*May God help Afghanistan. We want any changes that are necessary for humane rule. We want the officials of Afghanistan to be humane and to cooperate with each other and to employ their rationality and be self reliant and use their own initiative.*

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<sup>74</sup> The new Constitution ratified on 4 January 2004 renamed Afghanistan as the “Islamic Republic of Afghanistan” and proclaimed that the “religion of the state of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the sacred religion of Islam” (*International Religious Freedom Report*, 2004, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35513.htm>, accessed 6 September 2005).

Related to the aspiration for an Islamic government was respondents' expressed preference for raising their children in an Islamic moral environment. In an informal group discussion, several women expressed concern that the religious culture of Kabul would become "damaged" by western cultural (secular) influence, and they preferred to raise their children in a religious (i.e. Islamic moral) environment.

The imperative of security and the need to carry out the confiscation of weapons concerned many respondents. A Seyed tailor originally from a rural village suggested:

*I don't know what I should do. I don't know what the government of Afghanistan can do for us. Do we have to live in Afghanistan "under cover" [covertly] like we have done in the past?*

Another Seyed man from the same village advised:

*It is better for the Islamic Republic of Iran not to rush the repatriation of Afghans. Afghanistan is full of dynamite, and it needs only a single match to be struck and once again it will explode into war. Each house is still armed and householders have many weapons. The Afghanistan government says they have collected arms but I think it has not been done.*

One respondent, referring to the need to eliminate ethnic and religious persecution, specifically mentioned the imperative of security for Shias. This Seyed man, who worked as a fabric seller in Mashhad, owned his own house, and had an income in the upper bracket for Mashhad, proposed:

*There should be no harassment for Shias, no risk to the honour of wife and daughters, work availability, and the government should provide basic facilities because the people now have many expectations and are not prepared to live as they did before.*

This man was originally from Ghazni (where in fact there is a Seyed population), but said he preferred to return to Kabul on the grounds that there was a Seyed population there. While discriminatory attitudes towards Shia cannot be changed by legislation alone, it should be clarified that Shia populations are represented in the current government's national parliament and cabinet, and that religious tolerance is enshrined in the Constitution.<sup>75</sup> However, the comment above and those below in relation to Shia intolerance suggest that some Afghans are either not aware of these political and legal changes, or do not yet trust in them.

A Pashtun Shia respondent (a double minority status, since Shias are a minority and Pashtuns are almost entirely Sunnis) emphasised the importance of security for Shias. According to this respondent there are 300–400 Afghan Pashtun Shia households in Iran who belonged to a sect called "Khalili-ha" (from the Arabic word *khalil*, meaning brother). Khalili-ha in Iran are located in Mashhad (Sakhteman and Alteimoor) and Semnon in Kerman Province. According to the respondent, Khalili-ha

<sup>75</sup> The 35-member Constitutional Commission formed in April 2003 included four Shias as well as broad ethnic representation. The new Constitution states that "followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law." The Constitution allows Shia law to be applied to cases dealing with personal matters involving Shias. Additionally, Shia schools are permitted unrestricted operation (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004*, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2004/35513.htm> accessed September 6, 2005).

were landless in Afghanistan and were unanimous in their aspiration to remain permanently in Iran. This respondent explained:

*If our [Shia] religion was formally accepted in Afghanistan, if religious prejudice and discrimination diminished, if government officials no longer made decisions [that discriminated] in terms of Sunni and Shia, then nothing could compare to our country and we would return.*

This man explained if he was forced to return to Afghanistan he would go to the city of Mazar-i-Sharif (rather than his place of origin in the neighbouring Jawzjan Province) as: “Mazar is near to our region and their norms and values are similar to ours and also we have the same religion.”

Income-earning opportunities were considered critical as returnees did not have sufficient savings to support themselves. One respondent specified that work opportunities for Afghan returnees in Afghanistan should not be restricted to casual manual labour “like *falake*” – referring to the situation in Iran where many Afghans wait for day labouring jobs in designated areas in the city. Another respondent, the recipient of a Bachelor of Arts degree emphasised the importance of government-sector work opportunities for educated returnees:

*Access to government jobs should be improved so that those like me can get government work in an office. Of course this is just an ideal, if I had a house in Afghanistan plus any job or work to do, I would return.*

#### 4.6 Current decision-making about returning or remaining<sup>76</sup>

Respondents were asked about their current decision-making processes in relation to returning to Afghanistan, and which member of their household would be responsible for making that final decision.

- 27 respondents (45%) said that they intended to remain in Iran in the medium term
- 17 respondents (28.3%) said they intended to return to Afghanistan in the medium term
- 14 respondents (23.3%) said they had not made a decision
- 2 respondents (3.3%) said they preferred to go to another country

There are some patterns to be mentioned in relation to decision-making, specifically the effect of duration of residency (Afghan households resident in Iran for 20 years or more comprise 52 people or 86.7% of the respondent group). The degree of willingness to return to Afghanistan varies according to duration of residency:

- 37.5% of those resident for 20 years or less wanted to return to Afghanistan

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<sup>76</sup> Jamishidiha and Ali Babaie’s study (“Determinants of Afghan migrants in Iran: Case study Golshahr Mashhad”, [Iranian] *Journal of Social Sciences*, 20(1–2) 2002: p. 71–90) presented preliminary findings on the differential attitudes of mainly Shia Hazara Afghans towards return. Analysis of responses showed several variables. Afghan willingness to return to Afghanistan under current conditions was determined by: their place of domicile in Afghanistan (rural dwellers were less willing to return than urban dwellers based on hardship and security issues in rural areas); their gender (women were less willing to return than men); their level of education (those with lower educational level were less willing to return than those with higher education); and their economic security (those whose financial situation had improved in Iran were less willing to return than those whose situation had worsened or not changed). The authors concluded that the situation of war, drought, homelessness and displacement in Afghanistan generated more suffering for women and less educated Afghans than for others, and that while these problems persisted in Afghanistan they would be unwilling to return.

- 25% of those resident for 21–24 years wanted to return to Afghanistan
- 30% of those resident for 25–28 years wanted to return to Afghanistan
- 20% of those resident for 29 years and over wanted to return to Afghanistan

Those resident for 20 years or less were almost twice as willing to return as those resident the longest (29+ years), however when the category of 20+ years is disaggregated, the picture is more complex. Those resident for 25–28 years were only 7.5% less willing to return than the category of 20 years or less. However, if the figures for 21+ years are aggregated, a clear correlation can be made between duration of residency and intention to return: 26.9% of those respondents resident in Iran for more than 20 years expressed intention to return to Afghanistan compared to 37.5% of those resident for 20 years or less.

A correlation has already been established between duration of residence and assessment of economic situation. In short, the vast majority of those who had been resident for 20 years or more claimed their situation had improved, whereas most of those respondents resident for less than 20 years claimed their situation had worsened. A cross-tabulation was undertaken to examine correlations between duration of residency, intention to return, and change in economic situation.

***20 years and less, i.e. arrived in Iran after 1986 (8 respondents)***

3 intended to return to Afghanistan and 5 did not. 60% of those who assessed their situation to have worsened wanted to return, compared with 0% of those who assessed their situation as improved or not changed.

***21–24 years, i.e. arrived in Iran 1981–85 (12 respondents)***

3 intended to return to Afghanistan and 9 did not. 25% of those who assessed their situation to have worsened wanted to return, 40% of those who assessed their situation to have improved wanted to return, and 0% of those who assessed their situation as not changed wanted to return.

***25–28 years, i.e. arrived in Iran 1976–80 (30 respondents)***

9 intended to return to Afghanistan and 21 did not. 44.4% of those who assessed their situation to have worsened wanted to return, compared with 25% of those who assessed their situation as not changed, and 23.1% of those who assessed their situation to have improved.

***Over 29 years i.e., arrived in Iran in 1975 or earlier (10 respondents)***

2 intended to return to Afghanistan and 8 did not. 50% of those who assessed their situation to have worsened wanted to return, compared with 16.7% of those who assessed their situation to have improved and 0% of those who assessed their situation as not changed.

This cross-tabulation demonstrates two clear correlations between intention to return and economic situation. First, for the group of 20 years and less, a clear correlation exists between intention to return and worse economic situation. Secondly for the group of 21–24 years, a correlation exists between improved economic situation and intention to return. What can be concluded is that while there is a clear preference against returning to Afghanistan at least in the medium term across all duration of residency categories, there is no strict pattern of correlation between intention to return and (improved or worsened) economic situation. There is, however, a very strong correlation between those who claim their economic situation has not changed, and intention to return (0% in all

categories wanted to return except the category 25–28 years where 25% of those who assessed their situation as not changed intended to return).

The categories “intending to return”, “intending to remain” and “uncertain” may be ambiguous, and people’s intentions were conditional on other factors. Some respondents said they would seek to remain definitely, but then qualified this by saying that they may eventually return to Afghanistan in the future. Other respondents said they intended to return eventually to Afghanistan, but whether this was a desire or an actual intention was difficult to ascertain, and the timing of this return was often unspecified. What can be said of respondents’ intentions in relation to the future is that the majority of respondents did not intend to return to Afghanistan in the short term, and planned to remain in Iran in the medium term if they were permitted to do this. These conditional responses highlight the reactionary nature of decision-making: the decision to repatriate is made in reaction to external pressures such as a local deportation campaign, or in reaction to changed circumstances such as a sustained period of unemployment in Iran, or the death of a parent in Afghanistan. While a combination of several external pressures may exist, it may be a particular incident that tips a decision over the edge.

Of those who had not made a decision, several used the word *mo’alagh*, meaning “suspended”, to describe their decision-making as a dilemma: that is, all options carried risks. Others described the decision as a dilemma or *saredorahi* meaning they were undecided about which path to take: this way or that way? Although 45% of respondents said they intended to remain in Iran, this did not mean that their life in Iran was not without hardship and struggle. The interviewers in Mashhad observed that several respondents seemed fatigued and depressed by their situation. Many respondents *anticipated* Afghanistan to be a difficult place in which to live based on their own experience in the past and that of their returnee relatives in the present. Many respondents also represented their lives as Afghans in Iran in terms of their *lived experience* of Iran as a difficult place. While Afghanistan was perceived as difficult in terms of human/physical and material security, Iran was perceived as difficult in social terms due to their categorisation as refugees and migrants which fundamentally affected their economic opportunities and others’ treatment of them.

Respondents were asked which member of the household would be responsible for making a final decision about returning to Afghanistan. It should be qualified that the research did not involve field-based participant observation that would have allowed observation of the practices of decision-making. Instead, it relied on the verbal responses of household heads. It can be expected that these responses will reflect publicly expressed norms and attitudes (how respondents think decision-making ought to happen) as well as representing practices conducted among family members (how respondents actually make decisions in practice). 60% of respondents said that they as household head made the final decision. One respondent, a 45-year-old man whose children were aged 7 and 10, drew on an old-fashioned norm to express (discursively) that as his decision would be final:

*If they do not force us we will not return. Other members of the family have the same view. The final decision will be mine to make. We still have feudal customs – master and servant (arbab rayat) – and for this reason I will make the final decision [over my wife].*

However, 25% said that it was a decision based on consultation with other family members. In terms of family decision-making, 21.7% of household heads claimed that

the family was unanimous in their decision to return to Afghanistan, while 6.7% said that their wife and children wanted to remain in Iran while they themselves wanted to return.

About 18.3% or 11 respondents said that they would not return as an intact family. The following variations were mentioned:

- household head would return to Afghanistan and the rest of the family would remain in Iran: 54.6% or 6 respondents
- household head would remain in Iran and other family members would return to Afghanistan: 18.2% or 2 respondents
- daughters would remain in Iran and the rest of the family would return to Afghanistan: 18.2% or 2 respondents
- sons would return to Afghanistan and the rest of the family would remain in Iran: 9.1% or 1 respondent)

### Remaining in Iran

45% of respondents said that they intended to remain in Iran in the medium term. However, many of these same respondents qualified their response by saying that their life in Iran as migrants was characterised by hardship. In other words, for many respondents who expressed a definite intention to remain in Iran in the medium term, Iran was merely the more comfortable of two places that were both difficult living environments. Household heads were asked why they and their family wanted to remain in Iran. Of the 42 respondents who responded, the following factors were mentioned:

- “comfortable life in Iran and access to welfare facilities”: 21.4%
- “children’s education”: 16.7%
- “accustomed to living in Iran”: 11.9%
- “security in Iran”: 11.9%
- “job opportunities in Iran”: 4.8%
- “because of Imam Reza’s Shrine”: 4.8%

Additionally, several respondents mentioned the situation in Afghanistan to explain why they sought to remain in Iran, for example, “lack of housing and work in Afghanistan” (14.3%), and “absence of assets in Afghanistan” (4.8%).

Several respondents who expressed a preference for remaining in Iran simultaneously offered examples of discrimination that they had faced in Iran. One respondent articulately described his dilemma of decision-making: on the one hand, his life was comparatively comfortable in Iran and there was no shortage of work. On the other hand he had become weary of the struggle of living as a migrant. Yet he anticipated that he would also be treated as a migrant if he returned to Afghanistan as he had been away for 24 years. Aspects of this respondent’s struggle as a migrant were recounted as accusation of theft, discrimination and anxiety about deportation. The “homelessness” that he mentioned was not literal for he owned his own house in Golshahr. Rather, his homelessness was about the effect of other people’s treatment of him as someone who is foreign:

*I have made no definite decision – 50/50 return or remain. In Iran I can work and earn money for my life, and there is no work in Afghanistan. But migration is*

*bad because people humiliate you. If we return to Afghanistan, we will be considered migrants again. We will be like homeless in Afghanistan, like we are homeless here. Life in Iran has also been difficult. I know of two bakers who will only serve Afghans last after Iranian customers have been served. Getting bread from the bakery was a problem for me. I remember one night that I had to buy bread the following morning. I woke [early and out of anxiety did not notice the time] and went to the bakery and it was shut. I went to another bakery and a policeman stopped me and asked me what I was doing. I said: "I am looking for bread." He said: "Do you know what the time is? It is 1 am." I was afraid the policeman would accuse me of robbery or theft but he just said: "Go back to bed and sleep!"*

Some respondents also mentioned that the death of their parents in Iran had diminished their attachment to Afghanistan. For example:

*I don't have any attachment to Afghanistan because all of my relatives have died here in Iran and all of my children were born here and we have become accustomed to life here.*

Some respondents mentioned that it was the period of time spent in Mashhad that had attached them to that place, and influenced their desire to remain in Iran. One respondent who had lived in Golshahr for 29 years since the age of 3 explained:

*When we came to Golshahr it was a village. It is now a city. If you see the gravestones in the cemetery, all of them are Afghan. All of our memories and belongings are here in this city. What we have from Afghanistan is poverty. The Afghanistan government did not treat us well. In spite of having some problems here, our children have been raised here and know this place.*

One 60-year-old widow explained:

*I want to stay in Iran. Here in Sakhteman, people know us and we have been here for 21 years, no place is better than here: we are neighbours with Imam Reza. We are familiar with this neighbourhood.*

Some respondents implied that the fact of their children's birth, raising and education in Iran had complicated their children's identity and attachments. One such respondent had raised and educated eight children (aged 3–23) in Iran, two to university degree level, two to high school diploma, and two with teaching qualifications. He said:

*Our children were born here. They are the children of Iran, they belong here. At the moment we are living with this anxiety [of not knowing whether we will be forced to return to Afghanistan]. We want to stay here so that our children can continue their education. I am trying to get a five-year residency to stay here.*

Many respondents said that the decision to remain in Iran was not their own to make – that whether they returned or remained had already been determined by a greater power, mentioned as God or Imam Reza. For example, a 49-year-old Hazara widow whose eldest son had a university degree and worked as a teacher, and whose two daughters had acquired high school diploma, explained that as educated Afghans:

*We have a responsibility to my people in Afghanistan to return, because of this I may return to Afghanistan...[But] the final decision depends on our sar nevesht*

*[the writing on our forehead, or fate]. Here we are near to Imam Reza, we have our own house, and my children were born here.*

Many others said that it was the Iranian government that would determine their future. One such respondent explained that the identification documents of her family members that permitted residency in Mashhad had been confiscated by government officials. Without these documents, the family would be considered “illegal” and vulnerable to arrest and deportation at any time. Another respondent explained to the interviewer that his status as a migrant, without documentation which rendered him “legal”, meant that his decision-making was dynamic: reactive to external pressures and changed circumstances. He said:

*Migrants have not come legally to Iran and they will not return legally from here. I do not have any definite decision to return but my opinion may change tomorrow – it depends on the situation.*

It should be said that this respondent’s current situation allows such a view to be held: he is single (lives with his mother only) and does not own his house in Mashhad.

More male- than female-household heads wanted to return to Afghanistan (28% compared to 20%). Women expressed several reasons for their resistance: fear of physical and social vulnerability, preference for independence and household autonomy, opposition to the low social position of women in Afghan society, and reluctance to bear a significantly increased workload (e.g. wood collection for fuel, water collection, bread-making). Some women sought to maintain their independence in Mashhad where they could work and support themselves. For example, a 33-year-old widow and her 17-year-old daughter who worked together as tailors, and lived together in their own house, explained:

*We are two women on our own and we want to be independent. For now we will remain in this house, God willing. There we have no place and our field of work does not exist. I have spent most of my life in Iran [since the age of 7] and I have no pressing motivation to return. There is no other country we want to go to. If they evict us from this alley, we will go to another alley.*

23% of families with single daughters aged 10 years and above wanted to return to Afghanistan compared with 45% of families without such daughters. In some households, respondents claimed that their daughters would remain in Iran and the rest of the family would return. For example, one widow explained:

*All of us [household of six] want to return to Afghanistan except two of my daughters [aged 18 and 20] because they are going to religious school in Iran, and they may board in that school’s dormitory.*

Another widow who owned her own house in Golshahr (and whose husband’s house and land in Afghanistan was in the hands of his brother) was adamant about remaining in Iran for the sake of the education of her daughters aged 14, 17 and 19:

*I am a widow, if I return to Afghanistan what can I do there? In my opinion here is heaven, there is hell. If Imam Reza accepts we will stay here. My daughters must finish their education. We stay here mainly for our daughter’s education. People say that daughters are at risk in Afghanistan. We have a house here and my children are continuing their education...our daily survival [in Afghanistan]*

*is in the hands of God. The honour of daughters is very important for us, and there is no security there.*

One respondent claimed that his wife was so adamant about not returning to Afghanistan that he would return alone, leaving her in Mashhad: "I'm interested in going to Afghanistan. But my wife refuses – she says the situation is not good and there is no fuel. If my wife does not return with me I will go alone." Whether this man's children (aged 5, 8 and 12, born in Iran) would remain with their mother in Mashhad was not explicit. It is perhaps the proximity of Mashhad to Herat, where he plans to return and where he has purchased land, that would allow him to take this (perhaps rhetorical) stand. Other male household heads acknowledged their wife's opposition but claimed that it did not affect the final decision that they would make for the family. For example, a builder planned to return to Kabul where he had news of work for professional builders:

*Yes we want to return in spring 2005...my wife [aged 25, Afghan-born in Iran] is not satisfied with the decision because in Afghanistan women have a heavy workload: they must make bread, collect wood, and fetch water by hand, and she is upset.*

Several households interviewed had returned to Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, only to return again to Iran during the Taliban regime. Some of the respondents claimed that their wife and children were reluctant to return to Afghanistan based on their memories of that time.

### **Remaining in Mashhad proximate to the Shrine of Imam Reza**

Shia Afghans are over-represented in this study (96.7% of respondents), reflecting both the actual demography of a large Shia Afghan population in Mashhad (mainly Hazara and Seyed, but including some Tajik and Pashtun Shias) and, to a lesser extent, the social networks of the two Hazara Shia interviewers. The majority of Afghans living in the city of Mashhad, the capital of Khorasan Province and close to the Afghan border, are Shia Afghans, and this can be explained in part by religious practice. Mashhad is the location of the Shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Shia Imam, and it is second only in religious importance to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, and Karbala and Najaf in Iraq. There is a historical tradition of Afghan Shias making pilgrimage to the Tomb of Imam Reza en route to the Tomb of Imam Hossein in Karbala.<sup>77</sup>

This section draws attention to the way in which ready access to the Tomb of Imam Reza for the purpose of pilgrimage and burial, and the subjective meaning of living proximate to this Tomb, might impact on Afghan Shia decision-making about repatriation. The majority (76.7%) or 46 respondents mentioned that they made frequent pilgrimage to the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad.<sup>78</sup> When asked whether respon-

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<sup>77</sup> "For generations, thousands of Hazara men and women have made long pilgrimages, on foot, on horseback and on camels, to the tombs of Shia Imams in Iran and Iraq. In fact such pilgrimages are held in nearly as much respect by the Hazaras as the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon their return, pilgrims are given various titles: *zawar* for those returning from Mashhad, *Karbala'i* and *Najafi* for those returning from Karbala and Najaf; even pilgrims to lesser shrines such as those in Qom (Iran) and Kazimain (Iraq) are titled correspondingly, all suggesting the significance attached by Hazaras to Shia shrines. Despite their constant movement between various countries in the past, however, Hazara pilgrims and travellers had always returned to Afghanistan." (Mousavi, 1997, p.148)

<sup>78</sup> Additionally, 95% of respondents in Mashhad had made pilgrimage to Hazrat-e Massoumi in Qom and the Jamkaran mosque at Jamkaran, with most making multiple visits; 93.3% had made pilgrimage to Shah Abdollah Azim in Tehran with most making multiple visits; 13.3% had made pilgrimage to Shah-e Cheragh in Shiraz; 18.3% had made pilgrimage to the Shrine of Ayatollah (Imam) Khomeini at Beheshte

dents' ready access to the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad affected their decision to remain in Iran, 51.7% or 31 respondents stated that it did have some impact, and the remainder stated that it had no impact. For those who claimed that it had some impact, it was not necessarily a determining factor, and in most cases was more likely to be one factor in many. Several respondents among the 31 mentioned above were explicit that proximity to the Tomb of Imam Reza was the most critical factor in their desire to remain in Iran.

Like those respondents who said that over time they had become attached to Golshahr and Sakhteman, many respondents were adamant about their intention to remain in Mashhad as the place of the Shrine or Tomb of Imam Reza. A devout widow, whose husband had died on pilgrimage to Imam Hossein's tomb in Karbala and had been buried there, explained:

*If Imam Reza accepts us as a neighbour we will stay...when we first came to Iran, Imam Reza was the reason that we came. When I make pilgrimage I have a special feeling. I asked Imam Reza to allow me to be buried here [in Mashhad]. If I see Afghanistan in a dream, I cry. Then I implore Imam Reza: "Why did you bring us to this place and now want us to return to that place that I see in my dream [i.e., Afghanistan]"...When we came to Iran, we said to ourselves, we will never return to Afghanistan. Our visit to Afghanistan will take place in the afterlife. We have no expectations of Afghanistan. If Imam Reza accepts us, we will be buried here next to Imam Reza.*

Other research has demonstrated that pilgrimage is more likely to be undertaken by women than men: women may do so on behalf of other family members, and women may have more to gain by doing pilgrimage than men<sup>79</sup>

Other respondents viewed their residence in Mashhad in terms of their own salvation in relation to an afterworld:

*Yes [we want to remain in Iran] because Mashhad is a piece of heaven. We will be buried near to Imam Reza...and if we are buried here, all our sins will be forgiven by God.*

In a spontaneous group discussion with research team members and interviewers in Golshahr, a story, like a parable, was told of a woman who recently returned to Afghanistan. The woman had sobbed with regret daily at the bad conditions she had returned to, and her distance from Imam Reza. It was said that she had prayed every day to Imam Reza to open the path for her to return to Mashhad as the burial place of Imam Reza. Eventually she did return. The story implies several things: the prospect of regret in the event of return to Afghanistan, the possibility of return to Iran, and faith in Imam Reza as benefactor.

A Tajik Shia man claimed that prayer directed at Imam Reza could be undertaken from anywhere. He used a proverb to explain this: "If your Heart is with me, you are next to me even if you are in Yemen [far away]. But if you are next to me and your Heart is not with me, you are in Yemen." The point being that the mindful dedication of prayer to Imam Reza, not the location of that prayer-maker, was the critical

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Zahra outside Tehran city. 25 respondents (41.7%) had made pilgrimage to the Shrine of Imam Hossein at Karbala, Iraq; 4 respondents had made pilgrimage to *Khane-ye Khoda* (the House of God) at Mecca in Saudi Arabia; and 2 respondents to the Shrine of Bibi Zainab in Syria.

<sup>79</sup> A. Betteridge, 1993, "Women and Shrines in Shiraz", in D.L. Bowen and E.A. Early (eds.), *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

factor. One respondent mentioned that being in Mashhad did motivate him to stay but he rationalised that one can pray to Imam Reza from anywhere:

*Because of our proximity to Imam Reza, we remain in Iran. [But] you can “make pilgrimage” equally from a distance. I am weary of Iran. In Golshahr, we have suffered a lot because at any time the police come to check our documents or arrest us. If the situation improved in Afghanistan, I would return tonight...I have 20 jeribs of land there...if security was improved and I had the economic capacity to return, I would return.*

Although all of the respondent’s children (aged 12–20) were born and educated in Iran, they all wanted to return to Afghanistan.

Of those 48.3% of respondents who said that pilgrimage did not impact on their decision-making, reasons offered included: “pilgrimage has no effect if the Iranian government does not allow us to stay” (22.4%), and “pilgrimage won’t provide work [i.e. food] for us” (8.6%). A pragmatic position was exemplified by a 28-year-old Hazara man who arrived in Iran aged 9, and had lived in Tehran for 21 years before coming to Mashhad in 2001. He was a university graduate, as was his wife, and he worked in Mashhad as an iron seller. He explained that pilgrimage to sites like Imam Reza had no effect on his decision-making to remain in Iran: “No, because none of these pilgrim sites can be a substitute for employment, water and bread for me. When I lose my job, what will pilgrimage do for me?” Another respondent, a 32-year-old Hazara man with a university degree, advised the interviewer: “If other respondents say pilgrimage motivates their desire to remain in Iran, it is not true, it is a pretext or excuse. They want to remain in Iran [for other reasons] but just say it is on account of Imam Reza.” Finally, one man explained that for the period of time that he had lived in Iran (19 years, since the age of 16), he had appreciated being able to live proximate to the Shrines of Imam Reza in Mashhad and Shah Abdollah Azim at Shahr-e Rey in Tehran city: “The government of Iran does not allow us to remain but it has been good to be next to them [Shrines].”

#### 4.7 Returning to Afghanistan

Around 28.3% of respondents said they intended to return to Afghanistan in the medium term. Several respondents explained that they had returned previously to Afghanistan with the intention of settling but had been forced to return again to Iran because of insecurity. Members of an elderly Hazara hawker’s family had returned to Afghanistan in 1995 and 2000 with the aim of returning permanently, but both times insecurity had compelled the family to return again to Iran. The hawker, who owned no assets in either Iran or Afghanistan, explained:

*I came to Iran in 1979 as a result of Soviet attacks and insecurity. Under pressure from the Iranian government we returned to Afghanistan in 1995, but pressure from the Taliban did not permit us to stay in Afghanistan, and we made our way back to Iran. Other relatives also followed us back to Iran in 1995. My brother and my son returned again to Afghanistan in 2000, but they also came back to Iran because of the Taliban. The situation in Afghanistan now is not bad. I have no money to return to Afghanistan or to rent a house. If there was housing or work why wouldn’t we return? Afghanistan is our home and our land. Only my youngest son was born in Iran but he also wants to return to Afghanistan.*

Another respondent, a 29-year-old Seyed man working as a carpenter, explained:

*We want to return to Afghanistan this year. We have become weary of this place. Everyday they order us to do something different and we have become weary and we will return to Afghanistan. Even though Afghanistan is destroyed, at least we can rest soundly there, without anyone calling “Afghani”, “Afghani”, “Afghani”!*

Among those household heads who claimed that they would return to Afghanistan in the medium term, several variations were mentioned. One respondent, a 36-year-old Hazara man originally from a rural area in Wardak Province, said that his wife’s father had returned to Afghanistan in order to buy some land and build a house in preparation for the return of the respondent and his wife and their six children aged 1–16. Another respondent planned to return to Kabul alone in the first instance:

*I will return but my family [wife and two children aged 3 and 7] will stay here. Because the situation in Afghanistan is not clear for me and I am not in a good economic position to take them with me. Also, they are not familiar with Afghanistan.*

Whether the family returned intact or not could also depend on whether they were able to choose the timing of their return. One respondent explained that his family would leave together if they were deported, but if this did not occur, then he would return to a city like Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif or Kabul and leave his wife and infant daughter in Iran until he had found somewhere to live:

*I will go to Afghanistan to find a place to live in and then my family will come to Afghanistan. But if we are forced to leave we will return together.*

### Strategy for return to Afghanistan

The following table represents the data gathered on previous ownership and current access to assets (house, land, livestock and shop) in Afghanistan. While almost half of the household respondents (25) had owned land in Afghanistan, only eleven respondents had retained access to that land (currently leased or the subject of *amanat*). Eighteen respondents said that they had owned their own house in Afghanistan, and 20 indicated that they had lived with their parents but did not specify whether their parents’ house was owned or rented. In the case of house ownership, three respondents had sold their house and thirteen respondents had retained access to their house.

	<i>House</i>	<i>Land</i>	<i>Livestock</i>	<i>Shop</i>
Sold	3	1	28	4
Lost access: (abandoned, <sup>80</sup> destroyed, stolen)	25	14	8	2
Retained access	13	11	1	1
No. of respondents	41	26	37	7

**Table 4. Assets in Afghanistan**

<sup>80</sup> The category “abandoned” or *raha shodan* is unclear. One of the interviewers who worked for this project in both Mashhad and Zahedan advised that a person may still have access to abandoned land if others have not subsequently occupied or appropriated that land. This being the case, the statistics for retaining access to land would be higher.

House ownership impacted on respondents' intention to return to Afghanistan. Among those who had housing in Afghanistan previously, the following percentages wanted to return to Afghanistan:

- 40% of those who were currently leasing their house to others
- 25% of those whose house was currently in the hands of relatives
- 32% of those whose house was sold or destroyed or abandoned

Respondents were asked which province they wanted to return to in Afghanistan, and the reason for their decision. Respondents nominated the following cities: Kabul (53.4%), Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat (each 20.7%), followed by the provinces of Bamyan (3.4%) and Uruzgan (1.7%). The most obvious pattern to emerge was that regardless of their place of origin, respondents tended to prefer to resettle in a major city such as Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif or Herat. In relation to Kabul, most respondents (92.3%) originally from Kabul intended to return to Kabul, 75% of respondents from Bamyan wanted to return to Kabul, 60% of respondents from Ghor wanted to return to Kabul, and 50% of respondents from Ghazni wanted to return to Kabul. In relation to Mazar-i-Sharif, 70% of respondents originally from there wanted to return to that city, with 20% wanting to return to Kabul and 10% wanting to return to Herat. Additionally, 100% (in each case only 1 respondent) from Parwan and Jawzjan wanted to return to Mazar-i-Sharif. In relation to Herat, one of the two respondents originally from Herat wanted to return to Herat and the other wanted to return to Kabul. Additionally, 50% of respondents from Uruzgan, Ghazni and Wardak wanted to return to Herat. Provinces to which no respondents wished to return included Parwan, Wardak, Ghazni, Ghor, Miran and Jawzjan.

<i>Origin</i>	<i>Destinations of 58 respondents</i>					
	Balkh	Kabul	Herat	Uruzgan	Bamyan	Total
<i>Balkh</i>	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (100%)
<i>Kabul</i>	0 (0%)	12 (92.3%)	1 (7.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	13 (100%)
<i>Jawzjan</i>	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
<i>Herat</i>	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)
<i>Bamyan</i>	0 (0%)	9 (75%)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	2 (16.7%)	12 (100%)
<i>Uruzgan</i>	0 (0%)	2 (33.3%)	3 (50%)	1 (16.7%)	0 (0%)	6 (100%)
<i>[Unknown]</i>	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)
<i>Ghor</i>	1 (20%)	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (100%)
<i>Ghazni</i>	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)
<i>Wardak</i>	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)
<i>Parwan</i>	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>12 (20.7%)</b>	<b>31 (53.4%)</b>	<b>12 (20.7%)</b>	<b>1 (1.7%)</b>	<b>2 (3.4%)</b>	<b>58 (100%)</b>

Table 5. Destination intentions of Mashhad respondents

Several respondents referred nostalgically to Kabul as Kabul-jan, meaning “dear Kabul”, an expression of fondness often reserved for parents or children. Respon-

dents perceived Kabul to be more secure, with better infrastructure and health and education facilities. For example, a 45-year-old Hazara man and graduate of adult literacy classes in Golshahr, explained: “Kabul is the capital and there are more facilities including a university and I want my children to go to university.” Kabul was also considered to have better employment prospects, particularly for those in the construction industry:

*Kabul is the capital and my sister is there, as well as two of my father’s cousins, facilities are better than elsewhere, and we might be able to find work... acquaintances have told me that abundant work exists in Kabul for skilled builders.*

One respondent, originally a landless farm labourer from Bamyan, had purchased land in Kabul to prepare for his arrival. This respondent had a reliable income in Mashhad with five members of the household of six engaged in paid work (the household head sold spare parts in a wrecker’s yard, a son and daughter worked as tailors, another son worked as a labourer, and a daughter worked as a teacher).

Several respondents from Mashhad had purchased land in Herat in order to resettle there. For Hazara Shias, the majority of Afghans in Mashhad, Herat was close to Iran, it had a substantial Shia population, and it was considered to have reasonable infrastructure. One man who had originated from a rural village in Wardak Province said: “We will return to a city, for example, to Herat, because security there is better and Herat is cleaner than other cities. I bought land in Herat and my acquaintances are there and they can advise me.” Another respondent, a 48-year-old Hazara widower had also purchased land in Herat: “We bought land in Herat because it was cheaper, but of course Kabul is better but the land is expensive.” Two respondents said that they wanted to resettle in Mazar-i-Sharif because it was a religious city, and hosted a predominantly Shia population. Another respondent said he would resettle in Mazar-i-Sharif because he believed that development (facilities and security) and progress was happening more rapidly there than in other urban centres.

Respondents from rural areas had different opinions about resettling in a major city. Elderly respondents tended to prefer to return to their place of origin in Afghanistan. For example, a 72-year-old Hazara man originally from a village in Bamyan preferred to return to Bamyan “as other cities are crowded and there is no space”. A 60-year-old widow said she would return to her village in Uruzgan “because our relatives are there and we don’t have any other place; my brother is the key person in our family now, and he will assist us.” Respondents originally from rural areas whose children had been raised in urban Iran tended to prefer to resettle in a major city. For example

*The final decision [regarding location] will depend on the situation in Afghanistan in terms of schooling, electricity and roads because my children do not know anything about Afghanistan and if we don’t have these facilities they will be upset.*

Another respondent claimed he would only return with his family to an urban area. In 1995, the respondent had returned to his village in Bamyan with his four children aged 12–27 (who had been raised and educated in Tehran). He explained:

*If you remember, the year that I returned to my birthplace in 1995, the place was difficult to bear. For this reason, my children said: “Why did you bring us to this place?”*

Respondents were asked what sort of work they or their family members anticipated doing when they returned to Afghanistan. About 26.6% of respondents were not certain (8.3% said it depended on the situation and the type of work available and 18.3% said they did not know). Work categories mentioned by respondents included:

- tailor: 8.3%
- teaching: 6.7%
- labouring: 6.7%
- agriculture/shopkeeping/building/cultural affairs: 5.0% each
- trade/construction labourer: 3.3% each

In relation to the prospects of their children:

- 18.3% of respondents said they did not know
- 36.4% said they wanted their children to continue their education (a significant proportion)
- 10.9% mentioned tailoring
- 5.5% mentioned government officer
- 5.5% mentioned labourer
- 3.6% mentioned teaching

It might be assumed that those 36.4% who wanted their children to continue their education held aspirations for their children to be engaged in non-manual work in Afghanistan such as teaching or civil service.

Respondents were asked if they returned to Afghanistan, who could accommodate them initially, and who could offer financial assistance if they experienced difficulty. Nearly all respondents had some relatives remaining in Afghanistan, but 66.7% or 40 respondents said that that no relative would be in a position to accommodate them initially, and 76.7% said that no relative could provide financial assistance. Relatives mentioned as being able to provide accommodation included: respondents' brother, father, mother's uncle or wife's family. Relatives mentioned as being able to provide financial assistance included: brother, father, father's brother, and father's brother's son. Most respondents expressed that they could not ask relatives for assistance as they perceived their relatives' economic position to be as weak as their own. For example, “I have nobody there that can help me because everyone is experiencing equal difficulty” and “No, there is no-one, because everyone thinks of himself first.” One respondent, a 29-year-old Hazara man, had experienced first-hand the capacity or willingness of his relatives to help him when he returned twice to Kabul in 2004 to prepare the ground for his family's return. He explained:

*Last time I went to Afghanistan, my assumption about whom I could rely on, changed. I realised the situation was different [than I had anticipated]. There were some relatives who could take me into their house, and some who could not.*

Respondents anticipated that they would need to rely on their own personal resources. For example, a Hazara man explained:

*We will pitch a tent...I don't think our family [father's and mother's siblings and cousins] could accommodate us [wife and two children aged 5 and 8) for more than a few nights.*

Another said: "We don't have any expectations of our family and relatives – we rely on ourselves and our God."

One respondent's sole relatives in Afghanistan were his mother's sister and brother who had been deported from Iran three years before. This respondent had no contact with these relatives since their deportation, and explained:

*Afghanistan is our country but we don't have anyone there to help us...I don't think anyone can help us. There is no non-government organisation to help Afghan returnees from Iran in Afghanistan. Afghan migrants don't know who is responsible for this work of assisting with accommodation or providing urgent financial assistance.*

### Third-country resettlement

Only 11 respondents (18.3%) disclosed that they aspired to resettle in another country. Those countries listed included:

- Canada: 2 respondents
- Europe: 4 respondents
- Australia, Japan, Sweden, Denmark, US and Malaysia: 1 respondent each

Respondents mentioned the following reasons for their choice:

- welfare: 5 respondents
- education: 2 respondents
- relatives living there: 2 respondents
- strong economy: 1 respondent

Respondents were asked what they knew about that country. Answers included:

- "abundant welfare facilities": 7 respondents
- "political democracy": 2 respondents
- "large migrant population": 1 respondent

About 44% of those respondents aspiring to migrate had learned about that country from other people. 33.3% had learned from their own family members living in these places usually by phone, email and internet chatting. Other respondents mentioned books and magazines as information sources. 64% of those who wanted to resettle in other countries had some relatives there, compared to 27% who did not have any relative abroad. For example:

*My brother-in-law is in Canada. I want to go to Canada because it has a good economic situation, and is an urbane and cultured society. I have applied to UNHCR to go to Canada.*

#### **UNHCR process for resettlement**

*An initial request is made by an applicant setting out the reasons they believe they should be resettled. No special format for this type of letter is prescribed. This letter is then reviewed and if the reasons given in a letter fit the resettlement criteria agreed with the host countries, an in-depth interview is conducted to determine the specific reasons for the request, and assess credibility and eligibility for resettlement.*

One widow expressed her preference to go to Sweden on account of the fact that her deceased husband's brother lived there. She considered Swedish migration law to be generous based on her own reading and discussion with relatives, but had not undertaken any steps to formally apply. Another respondent whose sister's children lived in Denmark had submitted an application to Denmark:

*Denmark is open to immigration. It has a good immigration policy and we have many family members there.*

In terms of action made towards resettlement, of those interested in third country resettlement, four respondents (40%) had taken no action to apply for asylum in one of these countries, three respondents (30%) had applied to the UNHCR, and three respondents (30%) had sent a letter to the Embassy of that country in Iran.

Most respondents expressed that they preferred to remain in Iran, and if they were forced to return to Afghanistan they would do so. Some qualified that they preferred to live in a Muslim country, or a country with perceived similarities in terms of language and customs. Several were resolute about not wanting to live in a non-Muslim country. For example, a 35-year-old Hazara man said:

*Because we are all religious people and respect religious matters, other countries do not respect these matters so none of our family wants to go to these countries.*

This man also said that he would not send an Afghan bride to *kafar* (i.e. non-Muslim, non-believer) countries. Countering this view was the perception that the human rights of Afghan migrants and refugees were respected in Europe or the US. For example:

*In the US and Europe, refugees and migrants have their own radio stations, and have their own political representatives and community associations. We would like to go to Europe or the US.*

This respondent had relatives in Norway, Canada and the US, but had not applied formally for refugee status.

## 5. Transitory Afghan labour migrants in Mashhad

Part 4 focuses on single Afghan labour migrants in Mashhad who leave their parents and/or wives and children behind in Afghanistan. These respondents tend to live in their place of work, or share rooms with friends, co-workers or family (mainly brothers, cousins and uncles). Data is drawn from an open-ended questionnaire (40 questions) that specifically targeted the migration experience of single labour migrants. Interviews with fifteen single labour migrants were undertaken in Mashhad. Respondents were not asked to disclose sensitive information about their status, however it is assumed that this group was unregistered and therefore representative of the large group of undocumented Afghans in Iran.

### 5.1 Profile of labour migrant respondents

- Average age: 30 years
- Province of origin:
  - Herat: 26.7%
  - Uruzgan: 20%

- Kabul and Bamyan: 13.3% each
- Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar, Nimroz and Ghor: 6.7% each
- Rural or urban area: urban (53.3%), rural (46.7%)
- Ethnicity:
  - Hazara: 40%
  - Tajik: 26.7%
  - Seyed and Tajik Shia (Farsi-speaking): 13.3% each
  - Pashtun: 6.7%
- Religion: Shia (73.3%), Sunni (26.7%)
- Year of arrived in Iran:
  - 2003: 1 or 6.7%
  - 2002: 6.7%
  - 2001: 6.7%
  - 2000: 6.7%
  - 1996: 6.7%
  - 1995: 6.7%
  - 1990: 6.7%
  - 1986: 2 or 13.3%
  - 1985: 6.7%
  - 1984: 6.7%
  - 1983: 6.7%
  - 1982: 6.7%
  - 1981: 6.7%
  - 1980: 6.7%
- Marital status: married (53.3%), not married (46.7%)
- Mean number of children: 3.86
- Education:
  - 20% (3 respondents) were non-literate
  - 60% (9 respondents) had elementary school education
  - 20% (3 respondents) had completed some early years of secondary school

## 5.2 Context of labour migration

Respondents were asked about their decision to migrate in relation to their family's integration within horizontal support networks. The assumption underlying this line of questioning comes from Stigter and Monsutti's proposition that access to resources (such as finances, goods and credit) from horizontal support networks is available only when families have sufficient means to be able to reciprocate, or when vertical redistribution networks (on the basis of ethnicity or other commonalities) provide sufficient protection. It is when this situation exists that men are able to migrate as the remaining members of their families are taken care of.<sup>81</sup>

All respondents had at least one brother, with most having several. 12 respondents (78.6%) had brothers living with or near the household of his parents in Afghanistan:

- 2 respondents had 1 brother
- 3 respondents had 2 brothers
- 2 respondents had 3 brothers

<sup>81</sup> E. Stigter and A. Monsutti, 2005, *Transnational Networks: Recognising a Regional Reality*, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, p.5

- 2 respondents had 5 brothers
- 1 respondent had 6 brothers
- 1 respondent had 7 brothers

Additionally, 14 respondents said that they had at least one maternal or paternal uncle living with or near the household of the respondent's family in Afghanistan:

- 2 respondents had 2 uncles living with or near the household
- 5 respondents had 3 uncles living with or near the household
- 2 respondents had 4 uncles living with or near the household
- 3 respondents had 5 uncles living with or near the household
- 1 respondent had 6 uncles living with or near the household
- 1 respondent had no uncles living with or near their household

When asked about the impact of the respondent's migration on the family, 66.7% or 10 respondents mentioned their family in Afghanistan had experienced difficulty, and 33.3% or 5 respondents claimed no difficulty had been experienced. Respondents mentioned multiple difficulties including:

- financial difficulties (mentioned by 6 respondents)
- absence of household head (mentioned by 6 respondents)
- yearning for that person, illness and lack of food and facilities (each mentioned by one respondent)

The size of the respondents' household in Afghanistan ranged from 4–20 people, with the mean size being 8.1 members. Most households comprised extended families. Eight respondents were married, and seven had children (average 3.8). Additionally, 10 respondents shared a household in Afghanistan with their parents and 1–9 siblings, and 2 other respondents claimed that 1–7 other relatives shared a household with them.

Respondents' families in Afghanistan were neither landless nor tenants, possibly on account of the remittances sent which allowed investment by some. Nearly all owned their own housing, and almost half owned 2–10 *jeribs* of land. 12 respondents (85.7%) said their families in Afghanistan owned their own house, while single respondents (14.2%) rented or received in-kind housing in Afghanistan. 7 respondents (63.6%) claimed that they or their parents currently owned land in Afghanistan, with single respondents owning 2, 3, 4, 5 and 10 *jeribs* respectively (two did not mention the number of *jeribs*). Of these 7 respondents, six owned the land outright and one was a share farmer.

Labour migrant respondents had worked in the following occupations in Afghanistan prior to coming to Iran:

- agriculture and animal husbandry: 6 respondents or 42.9%
- labourer: 3 or 21.4%
- grocer: 2 or 14.3%
- stonemason, soldier, photographer: single respondents: 20.1%

All but one respondent (93.3%) claimed that they were previously employed in Afghanistan prior to coming to Iran, while one respondent declined to answer this

question. This figure is similar to Tehran, while both differ from Zahedan where respondents claimed 26.7% unemployment prior to arrival.

More than half of the respondents (9 or 60%) disclosed that they had experienced debt in Afghanistan. Respondents mentioned multiple sources of debt including:

- illness: 5 respondents
- death, i.e. associated funeral and burial costs: 3 respondents
- marriage: 3 respondents
- buying a house: 2 respondents
- daily living costs: 2 respondents
- rent: 1 respondent

Six respondents disclosed that they had loaned money from others, with five loaning from family (including maternal uncle and paternal uncle), two also loaning from neighbours and co-workers, and one respondent borrowing from acquaintances only.

Respondents mentioned multiple reasons for migrating to Iran including:

- finding work: 8 respondents
- pilgrimage: 6 respondents
- visiting family: 4 respondents
- war: 3 respondents

Noteworthy here is the way respondents mention both social, religious and economic reasons for migration. Furthermore, four respondents mentioned social and/or religious reasons only, indicating that their migration as incidental rather than strategic. In other words, they came to Iran (presumably Mashhad) primarily for the purpose of making pilgrimage to Imam Reza and for visiting relatives, and incidentally decided to stay and find work.

### 5.3 Pre-established transnational networks

Six respondents (40%) had family members who had migrated to other provinces within Afghanistan for the purpose of work. They had migrated to Kabul (4), and Kandahar and Herat (1 each), where they worked in the following occupations: government (2), hawking (1), medicine seller (1), carpenter (1), trade (1).

Eleven respondents (78.6%) had relatives in Iran (all of these also had relatives in Mashhad), and 8 respondents had several relatives in Iran:

- 6 mentioned paternal uncle
- 5 mentioned maternal uncle
- 4 mentioned their own brother
- 2 mentioned their own father
- 1 mentioned grandfather
- 1 mentioned maternal aunt's son

Respondents mentioned multiple reasons for choosing Khorasan Province as a place to find work:

- 6 mentioned the existence of family members
- 7 mentioned acquaintances

- 3 mentioned Imam Reza
- 2 mentioned work opportunities
- 2 mentioned proximity to Afghanistan

Respondents were asked a sequence of questions that elicited information about the extent to which they utilised their own social networks to facilitate their migration. Parents, paternal and maternal uncles, and brothers headed the list of those providing assistance. In relation to those people involved in the respondent's decision to migrate to Iran, 3 respondents (20%) claimed that no family members provided assistance. The remaining 12 respondents (80%) received assistance from family members, with some mentioning more than one person. Two mentioned parents with an additional 5 mentioning their father specifically, and one mentioning mother specifically. Single respondents mentioned wife, father's brother and acquaintances.

Respondents were asked which member of their household had assisted with their journey to Iran. Ten respondents (66.7%) disclosed that they had received help from family members to make the journey to Iran. Of these, 5 mentioned father, one mentioned mother, one mentioned maternal uncle, one mentioned paternal uncle and one mentioned local acquaintances.

Around 60% (9 respondents) had used smugglers to enter Iran, although this could be higher as only one respondent claimed that he had migrated legally using a passport, with single respondents mentioning a route through Pakistan, and assistance from acquaintances and family members to enter Iran. In contrast with the Tehran and Zahedan labour migrant respondents, who encountered substantial difficulty in entering Iran, only one respondent (6.7%) disclosed that he had encountered difficulty in entering Iran, due to sickness.

Respondents were asked with whom they lived once they arrived in Mashhad. Eight respondents (53.4%) lived with family members and the remaining 7 lived with acquaintances, presumably fellow Afghans. In terms of the place of residence, 9 respondents (60%) lived in their workplace, 5 (33.3%) lived in a common household with acquaintances, and one (6.7%) lived in his brother's home. Two respondents claimed that they found their housing without the assistance of relatives or acquaintances. Family members helped 5 respondents to find their current place of living, while 10 respondents mentioned acquaintances.

## 5.4 Remittances and savings

Respondents listed the following occupations as their first job:

- labourer: 7 or 46.7%
- mason: 4 or 26.7%
- tailor: 2 or 13.3%
- plasterer: 1 or 6.7%
- machine embroiderer: 1 or 6.7%

At the time of interview, respondents were working in the following occupations:

- mason: 4 or 26.7%
- tailor: 3 or 20%
- embroiderer: 2 or 13.3%

- labourer: 2 or 13.3%
- watchman, carpenter, well digger and unemployed: 1 or 6.7% each

The data indicates a slight shift from more manual to more skilled occupations, evident in the decline in labouring (down from 7 respondents to 2), and the slight increase in tailors and embroiderers (up 1 each). The duration of first and second jobs (average 87 months or about seven years) indicates several possibilities: good work record sustaining employer interest; tolerable conditions and income; or fear of not finding other work.

While unemployment was an ordinary experience among most labour migrants in Mashhad, it was significantly less than that experienced by labour migrants in Tehran (93.3% experienced unemployment, with an average of 4 months annually) and Zahedan (100% experienced unemployment). Among Mashhad respondents, 9 or 60% claimed that they had experienced unemployment for periods ranging from 1–4 months per year.

Respondents claimed that they earned 4,000–15,000 *Tooman* (US\$4.50–16) daily, with simple labouring earning the least, and skilled builders, including concreters, earning the most. Daily rates varied:

- concreter: 9,000–10,000 *Tooman* (US\$10–\$11)
- digger: 8,000 *Tooman* (US\$9)
- skilled builder: 7,000–15,000 *Tooman* (US\$7.80–\$15)
- carpenter: 7,000–8,000 *Tooman* (US\$7.80–\$9)
- plasterer: 7,000–8,000 *Tooman* (US\$7.80–\$9)
- night watchman: 6,000–7,000 *Tooman* (US\$6.50–\$7.80)
- tailor: 6,000–8,000 *Tooman* (US\$6.50–\$9)
- machine embroiderer: 5,000–8,000 *Tooman* (US\$5.60–\$9)
- labourer: 4,000–6,000 *Tooman* (US\$4.50–\$6.50)

The average daily wage was 7,000 *Tooman* (US\$7.80). Respondents claimed that they spent 5,500–35,000 *Tooman* (US\$6–\$38) weekly with the average weekly expenditure 18,000 *Tooman* (US\$19.90). Deducting expenditure from income, and triangulating this with figures for remittances, weekly savings capacity can be calculated at 11,000–53,000 *Tooman* (US\$12.20–\$58). The average weekly savings capacity was approximately 30,000 *Tooman* (US\$32) (monthly savings capacity 120,000 *Tooman*).

Virtually all respondents (14 or 93.3%) sent regular remittances to their families in Afghanistan. Three respondents sent remittances via *hawala* only, 5 used both *hawala* and acquaintances, 4 used only acquaintances, and one took money himself or only with “trusted people”. Four respondents or 28.6% mentioned they had experienced difficulty remitting money. Three claimed the money had not arrived, and one said the money was delayed and received late. Of those 14 respondents who sent remittances, all sent to members of their family. Specific family members mentioned included:

- parents: 5 respondents
- father: 5 respondents
- mother: 1 respondent
- brothers: 5 respondents

Wives do not figure as direct recipients of remittances from their husbands; rather this assistance flows indirectly to wives as household members via the man's parents and/or brothers.

Of those 14 respondents (93.3%) who claimed to send regular remittances:

- 35.7% (5 respondents) mentioned every six months
- 21.4% (3 respondents) mentioned every 4–5 months
- single respondents mentioned: every 2 months, 2–3 months, 3–4 months, 5 months, annually, 2–3 years

Amounts of between 150,000 and 1.5 million *Tooman* (US\$160–1,600) were remitted each time. Calculated as annual amounts, these amounts range from 250,000 to 4 million *Tooman* (US\$280–4,500) with the mean average 1.2 million *Tooman* (US\$1,300). All respondents mentioned that remittances were used by their family in Afghanistan for the costs of daily living. Eight respondents mentioned only daily living costs, while six respondents mentioned in addition to daily costs, buying land (3 respondents), buying sheep (2 respondents) and savings (1 respondent).

Table 7 shows labour migrant respondents' occupation, employment status in Iran, and place of origin in Afghanistan, against return intention and future migration plan.

<i>Age and Marital status</i>	<i>First arrival to Iran</i>	<i>Current occupation</i>	<i>Unemployed period</i>	<i>Place of current residence in Afghanistan</i>	<i>Return to Iran?</i>	<i>Place of future migration in Afghanistan</i>
30, M	1985	labourer	3–4 months	rural Herat	no	UAE
45, M	1983	carpenter	many times	urban Kabul	no	Kabul
35, M	1986	stonemason	yes, unspecified	Kabul	no	Kabul
23, S	2002	plasterer	1–2 months	rural Bamyan	no	Kabul
30, M	1981	construction site watchman	1 month	rural Bamyan	yes	UAE or Kabul
25, S	1996	tailor	none	urban Herat	undecided	Herat
28, M	2001	tailor/machine embroiderer	minor	urban Herat	yes	–
30, S	1990	animal husbandry	yes	rural Uruzgan	yes	UAE, Dubai
32, S	1994	digger	not much	Uruzgan	no	–
20, S	2003	farming	not much	Ghor	yes	Herat, Kabul or UAE
35, M	1980	construction worker	sometimes	urban Herat	undecided	Herat, UAE
27, S	1995	tailor/machine embroiderer	no	Mazar-i-Sharif	no	Mazar-i-Sharif, UAE
28, M	2000	machine embroiderer	no	Kandahar	no	Kandahar, Europe
32, S	1986	machine embroiderer	no	Kabul	yes	Kabul
33, M	1984	concreter	not much	urban Nimroz	no	Nimroz

Table 6. Labour migrant respondent profile

## 5.5 Future migration intentions

Three respondents (21.4%) claimed that their economic situation had improved since they had migrated to Iran, and 7 respondents (50%) said their situation had

worsened, while 4 (28.6%) had experienced no change. This contrasts significantly with labour migrants in Zahedan, of whom 86.7% reported their situation had improved. Respondents were asked to list negative aspects of their migration experience. Multiple factors were mentioned including:

- distance from family: 11
- victim of theft: 1
- victim of prejudice: 3
- bad treatment by officials: 1
- humiliated by others: 1

What stands out in this breakdown is the extent to which labour migrants experience social factors as contributing to their negative experience. Multiple positive aspects of migration were mentioned including:

- work opportunities: 8 respondents
- pilgrimage opportunity: 4 respondents
- health facilities: 3 respondents
- opportunity to live in a different place: 2 respondents
- exposure to Iranian culture: 1 respondent
- no positive aspects: 1 respondent

The extent of transitory or backward-and-forward movement of labour migrants is probably assisted by the proximity of Mashhad to the international border:

- 14 respondents (93.3%) had returned to Afghanistan since coming to Iran
- 4 respondents had returned once
- 2 had return twice
- 4 had returned three times
- 2 had returned seven times
- single respondents had returned four and five times respectively

The clear majority of respondents (11 or 73.3%) already had a return plan in place:

- 5 said they would return to Afghanistan in 3–4 months
- 4 said they would return in 2006
- one said in the next 2 years, another said in 2005

The remaining respondents were uncertain of their return date: one said his return date was in the hands of God, another said he was waiting for security and construction to be established, and two said they were undecided.

Only two respondents or 13.3% stated that they definitely planned to return again to Iran after going back to Afghanistan. Of the other 13 respondents, 2 said they were undecided, 3 said it depended on work availability in Afghanistan, and 8 stated that they would not return again to Iran.

Most respondents claimed they would return to the place where their household was currently located in Afghanistan. Reasons given for returning to these places included:

- location of land and/or house: 6 respondents or 42.8%

- birthplace: 4 respondents or 28.6%
- place of family: 2 respondents 13.3%
- capital city, work opportunities: one respondent each (7.1%)

There was also a slight movement towards Kabul and Herat when respondents were asked to consider possible migration for work reasons: three respondents mentioned Kabul, three mentioned Herat, and one mentioned either Kabul or Herat. Nimroz was also mentioned by one respondent.

Seven respondents or 53.8% claimed that they were interested in seeking work abroad (6 or 46.2% said they were not interested). There was a very strong movement towards the UAE with six mentioning either the UAE or Dubai (only one respondent mentioned Europe). Reasons given for interest in these countries included:

- less prejudice in Muslim countries
- existence of Islamic laws
- work opportunities
- high income

There were some patterns in the characteristics of labour migrants interested in migrating to the UAE: none were from Kabul or had families currently living in Kabul, 5 of the 6 were construction workers, 4 of the 6 were Shia, and there were equal numbers of married and unmarried migrants. Regions of current residence in Afghanistan of those interested in going to UAE were: Mazar-i-Sharif (1), Herat (2), Ghor (1), Uruzgan (1) and Bamyan (1). Further study into the character of the networks of labour migrants in Mashhad extending to the UAE would expand upon Stigter's insights into the regional rather than bilateral character of networks in places of onward migration such as the Gulf, as well as providing data on the social and economic character of these networks.

Respondents' assessment of their situation as deteriorated or not changed (78.6%) is probably reflected in the figure of only two respondents definitely intending to return to Iran. Respondents' assessment sits uncomfortably with another fact: that Mashhad labour migrants remit the most sizeable amounts (almost twice that of labour migrants in Tehran) and sustain the highest level of employment compared to Zahedan and Tehran. The combination of high employment and sizeable remittances, and disinterest in returning to Iran to work, might suggest it is non-economic factors such as social factors (e.g. prejudice) discourage return to Iran. Certainly, the economic imperative of migration remains constant and is reflected in the figure of 46.2% of Mashhad respondents interested in working in the UAE, and intention to relocate to Kabul or Herat in order to increase work opportunities.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Afghan households in Mashhad

#### **Socioeconomic situation of Afghans in Mashhad**

The Afghans interviewed in Mashhad as part of this study were still able to find employment (only 8.3% of respondents were unemployed at the time of interview) and enter into tenancy arrangements with landlords, in spite of legislation restricting employment and tenancy to those who enter Iran with valid passport and hold a valid visa and valid residency permit.

Respondents participated actively in regional social networks that functioned as safety nets. Most had family members and/or acquaintances in their neighbourhood of residence, and most borrowed money from, and loaned money to, family and/or acquaintances in times of need (illness, accident, funeral costs, housing bond, marriage costs, smuggling fees for relatives). Loans usually took place between family members, principally between brothers, paternal cousins, wife's brother, mother's brother and maternal cousin. Iranians, usually neighbours or employers, also figured in Afghan livelihood strategies in Mashhad.

An unexpected result of the study was the extent of transnational networks among Afghan respondents in Iran with the West (mainly Europe, Canada and Australia) versus the amount of remittances from these relatives to Afghan respondents in Iran. Just over half of the respondents had family members living overseas, and half of these had direct communication with their relatives. Yet the vast majority of respondents claimed that they had never received financial assistance from their relatives living overseas (but had received gifts and souvenirs and visits). Also unanticipated was the common practice of identifying Afghan women living in Iran to become brides for Afghan men living abroad. It can be hypothesised that through such a marriage arrangement, a link is established that will potentially become an ongoing part of the livelihood strategy of the Afghan bride's family in Iran. Alongside the practice of Afghan women traveling abroad to marry, several respondents themselves aspired to migrate to another country, mainly Europe followed by Canada.

Data from this case study does not substantiate the hypothesis that in the event of return to Afghanistan, and for the reason of livelihood strategy, Afghan families would leave some members behind in Iran to remit money to help finance the family's reintegration. The clear majority of Mashhad respondents intended to return to Afghanistan as intact family units. However, with only discourse to rely on and without observing the actual practice of return, it is not possible to be conclusive about this. Reasons given for some members remaining in Iran while others returned were about preparing living arrangements in Afghanistan prior to the entire family arriving, rather than continuing to work in Iran to finance reintegration in Afghanistan.

#### **Reasons for remaining in Iran**

What can be said of respondents' intentions in relation to the future is that the majority of respondents did not intend to return to Afghanistan in the medium term, and planned to remain in Iran in the medium term if they were permitted to do so.

Access to housing, work and welfare facilities, particularly health and education, in Iran motivated Afghan households in Mashhad to remain in Iran in the medium term. In Mashhad, some opportunity for upward mobility in employment sectors over time

existed, demonstrated in the shift of respondents' employment from labouring to more skilled occupations. Some non-formally educated respondents expressed concern that work opportunities in Afghanistan would be restricted to seasonal manual labour. Educated respondents expressed concern that, like in Iran, they would not be able to secure work in the government sector for which they were qualified.

Respondents were familiar with their neighbourhood in Mashhad: almost half owned their house through the informal arrangement of *gholnamei*, and had lived for an average of 14 years in their neighbourhood of current residence. Households with non-literate children were significantly more willing to return to Afghanistan than households with educated children. However there was no obvious correlation between desire to remain in Iran and upper secondary and tertiary education. In many instances, the fact that refugees' children had been born, educated and socialised in Iran meant that Afghans families and individuals shared a history in Iran, albeit one or two generations deep, that increased their attachment to Iran and discouraged their return to Afghanistan.

The vast majority of Mashhad respondents made frequent pilgrimage to the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad. Roughly half of the respondents claimed that ready access as pilgrims to the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad affected their desire to remain in Mashhad. The other half of respondents were more pragmatic in their assessment of pilgrimage not affecting their decision-making about returning to Afghanistan. Several respondents expressed fear about continued religious prejudice and discrimination against Shias in Afghanistan, a situation largely avoided in Iran. The data from this study in Mashhad suggests that the perception of security afforded by living in close proximity to the Tomb of Imam Reza is particularly valued by women, who in general have less power over their everyday lives than men.

The percentage of Hazara returns to Afghanistan compared with other ethnicities is low. While Hazaras comprise 43% of the documented Afghan population in Iran, their returns comprise only 25.6% of the total UNHCR-assisted return figures to Afghanistan. The data from this study would suggest that this is partly due to perception of prejudice against Shias in Afghanistan and experience of religious freedom in Iran.

Female-headed households in Mashhad are considerably more impoverished than other households, and it is rare for a widow to receive financial assistance from her deceased husband's family. Women in this study were more likely than men to want to remain in Iran, which is perceived to be less patriarchal than Afghanistan and offers more opportunities for independence, autonomous nuclear households and a lighter household workload (due to existence of electricity, running water and cheap bread). Women also expressed concerns about personal security and the risk of violation of their honour, and that of their daughters. Households with single daughters of marriageable age tended to prefer to remain in Iran.

### **Reasons for returning to Afghanistan**

Respondents had sustained links with Afghanistan. However, most claimed that their own household's economic situation in Mashhad was too weak to be supporting other relatives in Afghanistan. Only one third of respondents had sent money to relatives in Afghanistan once, and only one respondent specified that he regularly remitted money to relatives in Afghanistan. In just one case, a respondent had borrowed money from his relatives in Kabul, using his house in Kabul as collateral (*gero*) for

that loan. This data was not dissimilar to the data from Afghan households in Tehran and Zahedan. All three sets of household data on remittances contrast markedly with the data on single labour migrants for Mashhad as well as Tehran and Zahedan, where labour migrants remit substantial and regular amounts of money to their family (parents/siblings and/or wife/children) in Afghanistan. Additionally, most respondents in Mashhad were part of transnational networks spanning mainly Iran and Afghanistan, and in some cases extending to Pakistan and beyond the region to Europe. In these networks, cash, gifts and women as brides are the main “objects” of circulation. In spite of these links with relatives in Afghanistan sustained by direct communication and occasional remittances, gifts and intermarriage, these links could not be relied on for assistance in the event of return or in the process of reintegration. The clear majority of respondents assessed their relatives’ situation to be even weaker than their own and unable to provide accommodation or financial assistance on their initial arrival in Afghanistan.

In spite of the clear majority of respondents who wanted to remain in Iran, many of these same respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with their perceived social and economic marginalisation in Iran. Such respondents highlighted their social status in Iran: categorisation as migrants or foreigners confined them to heavy, often dangerous, and mainly low-status work, and exposed them to risks of arrest and deportation or relocation. Some respondents claimed that their social status in Iran encouraged their return to Afghanistan, however while many interviewees claimed that others’ treatment of them diminished their personal dignity, for most, the advantage of relative material comfort in Iran appeared to be a stronger motivating factor to remain in Iran.

Return was considered to be easier and more likely to be successful for those with capital and/or assets (so they could provide for themselves in reasonable comfort), or with education or literacy, or vocational skills.

### **Afghan perceptions of long-term future in relation to Afghanistan**

Data from this study has demonstrated two important correlations. The first relationship is between duration of residency in Iran and willingness to return to Afghanistan. Those resident for 20 years or less were most willing to return to Afghanistan, and those resident the longest were least willing to return. Specifically, 26.9% of those respondents resident in Iran for more than 20 years expressed intention to return to Afghanistan compared to 37.5% of those resident for 20 years or less. However, when this figure of 26.9% is disaggregated by isolating individual categories of duration, a less definite correlation is evident. Specifically, among those resident in Iran for 25–28 years, 30% intended to return to Afghanistan. This figure is much closer to the return intentions of those respondents who have resided in Iran for 20 years and less (37.5%), and significantly further from those who have resided in Iran for 29 years and more (20%).

The second correlation refers to a relationship between duration of residence in Iran and (positive) economic situation. Most respondents resident in Iran for over 20 years assessed their economic situation as improved, and were also less willing to return. In contrast, most of those respondents resident for less than 20 years (only 8 respondents) assessed their economic situation to have deteriorated, and were also less willing to return to Afghanistan. What can be concluded is that while there is a clear preference against returning to Afghanistan at least in the medium term across all residence categories, there is no strict relationship between intention to return

and (improved or worsened) economic situation. There is, however, a very strong correlation between those who claim their economic situation has not changed and intention to return (0% in all categories, except those resident for 25–28 years, where 25% of those who assessed their situation as not changed, intended to return).

Respondents perceived peace and security as critical prerequisites for development in Afghanistan, and for their own return. They mentioned the need to sustain and extend weapons amnesty, and to work towards security for Shia Hazara as a religious and ethnic minority. (Respondent comments in relation to this indicate a lack of information among Afghan Hazaras in Mashhad about existing legal frameworks and legislation in Afghanistan which minimise religious prejudice and discrimination.) Also mentioned was the need for a stronger economy/labour market, and improved welfare facilities including health and education.

Several respondents mentioned that the government of Afghanistan should provide returnees access to land through government-sponsored loans or some form of land distribution system. Prior home ownership appears to have some bearing on people's intention to return to Afghanistan, as does current access to that property – although respondents who had arranged their house to be looked after by relatives or acquaintances were significantly less willing to return than those who had leased their house to non-relatives. Several respondents aspired to save sufficient capital prior to returning to Afghanistan in order to purchase property, and half a dozen respondents had already purchased land in both Herat and Kabul as preparation for return.

The city of Kabul, followed by Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat, were clearly the preferred place of resettlement due to presence of family members, work opportunities, better infrastructure and welfare facilities, and larger Shia populations. Substantial intended movement towards Herat – a sort of border city to Iran's Mashhad – was recorded. Unlike household respondents who tended to be living in Mashhad as intact family groups, and were less likely to be tied to a particular return destination, single labour migrants preferred to return to the place of their family's residence (usually parents and siblings and/or wife). Some mentioned that they would make onward movement to Kabul for reasons of work availability.

## 6.2 Transitory Afghan labour migrants in Mashhad

### Reasons for becoming migrants

This study substantiates the hypothesis that the availability of horizontal networks determines whether migration to Iran is feasible in terms of being able to spread risks within the household or between households. All except three labour migrant respondents had brothers living in the household of their parents in Afghanistan, with all except one respondent additionally having at least one, and up to six, paternal or maternal uncles living in close proximity to their parents' household.

Respondents described migration as a coping strategy that allowed their family to receive remittances to pay for daily needs, and to accumulate capital for investment in land and housing. Respondents' families in Afghanistan were neither landless nor tenants, possibly on account of remittances sent which allowed investment by some. Nearly all owned their own housing, and almost half owned land. Clearing debts was not mentioned as a reason for initial migration, although 60% had experienced debt in Afghanistan mainly because of illness, funeral, marriage and daily living costs.

## Experiences of Afghan migrants in Mashhad

The clear majority of respondents had relatives in Iran at the time of migrating, mainly maternal and paternal uncles, fathers and brothers. This fact supports the notion of pre-established transnational networks facilitating the migration of subsequent family members. While having a family practice of labour migration may not in itself be a reason for migration, it is probable that some Afghan men decide to migrate on the basis that their migration will be facilitated by family members and relatives in Iran. The decision to migrate was a family affair, with most migrants' parents, uncles and local acquaintances involved in the decision to migrate. Additionally, most migrants' journey to Iran, and initial settling-in period (finding accommodation and work), were facilitated by family members and acquaintances.

An unexpected finding was the comparatively lower level of unemployment among Afghan labour migrants in Mashhad compared with Zahedan and Tehran. Additionally, the annual remittances by Mashhad labour migrants were twice the amount of labour migrants in Tehran, and substantially more than Zahedan. This was in spite of the fact that weekly expenditure in Tehran and Mashhad was almost identical, but wages in Tehran were 30% higher. Among Mashhad respondents, remittances were usually transmitted via *hawala* or acquaintances, and usually to parents and brothers. Respondents' subsequent return to Iran (all except one had returned at least once, with some as many as seven times) suggests that unemployment does not dissuade them from further periods of migration. In spite of government regulations making the employment of Afghan nationals without work permits illegal,<sup>82</sup> labour migrants are still being employed, and many gain employment through recommendations or introductions by relatives or friends.

## Future intentions in terms of return/mobility

Like Afghan labour migrants in Zahedan, those in Mashhad also preferred not to return again to Iran for work once re-settled in Afghanistan, and several others said their return was dependent on the availability of work in Afghanistan. The clear majority of respondents planned to return to Afghanistan in the immediate to short term. Respondents mentioned Kabul and Herat as onward domestic migration destinations, and the UAE, in the event of not returning to Iran.

Mashhad responses in relation to future intentions are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, almost 80% assessed their situation in Iran to have deteriorated or not changed (compared with their situation in Afghanistan). On the other hand, Mashhad labour migrants remit the most sizeable amounts and sustain the highest level of employment compared to Zahedan and Tehran. The combination of high employment and sizeable remittances, and disinterest in future return to Iran to work, might suggest that non-economic factors discourage return to Iran. Social factors dominated respondents' cataloguing of the negative aspects of migration. However the economic imperative of migration remains constant and is reflected in respondents' interest in working in the UAE, and intention to relocate to Kabul or Herat in order to increase their work opportunities.

<sup>82</sup> Article 3 of "Regulations on accelerating repatriation of Afghan nationals" concerns the prevention of unauthorised employment of Afghan nationals by taking legal action against Iranian employers who employed Afghan nationals without work permits.

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