Afghan Refugees: Conversations Along the Migration Trail

In the first part of our op-ed series “Afghans on the Migration Trail,” which coincides with the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, migration specialist Nassim Majidi discusses her research, illustrating the diverse tapestry of Afghans seeking asylum.

Written by Nassim Majidi Published on Oct. 6, 2016 Read time Approx. 3 minutes

Afghan men walk in the fields at the northern Greek border with Macedonia. AP/Petros Giannakouris

European and Afghan leaders are meeting in Brussels this week for a conference to raise funds to help promote the stability and development of the country.

A major issue underlying the summit is the new exodus of Afghans fleeing their country – the first of this scale since the Taliban was overthrown by international forces in 2001. Last year, Afghans were the second-largest national group fleeing to Europe after Syrians. Europe now plans to return thousands of Afghans who are not granted asylum back to the country.
Yet despite the image presented by the Afghan government of a country on the path to stability, the reality looks very different for Afghans.

How and why do some decide to flee a country, and what goes on in their minds while leaving?

Our Kabul-based research team conducted a self-funded study seeking to answer these questions. We collected the stories of 35 Afghan migrants in transit – in their destination country and ultimately upon their return to Afghanistan – to explore the conditions prompting their decisions to leave.

The Afghans interviewed during our multiyear study live with fear every day, but also with ambitions, hopes and aspirations that contributed to their decision to migrate. They described worsening social strife at home and increasing conflict, as well as the desire to fulfill their professional and economic ambitions. During our conversations with Afghans, we found that the fear of persecution is present across ethnicities and social and economic classes, and in both urban and rural areas in Afghanistan.

They might not be under an immediate and “well-founded” threat of persecution – the criteria for refugee status as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention. They might not have been displaced by direct conflict. But the high probability of danger pushes them to leave before there is an immediate threat to their lives. Most Afghans whom we interviewed made a subjective assessment of the threat to their lives based on their prior experiences and the general situation in their communities.

Their assessments often fail to be recognized by asylum authorities abroad as being worthy of refugee status. Yet the term “persecution” is ever evolving, and as refugee law experts explain, people can claim asylum based on threats to other members of the community rather than just specific threats to themselves.

“Every day we see suicide attacks in Kabul, the capital, not to talk about the violence in the provinces,” Kabir, a 27-year-old who worked for a commercial bank in Afghanistan before fleeing to Sweden, told our research team. “If I am ready to compromise all of this, it is because I know it will soon be bad,” he explained of his decision to give up a decent standard of living in his country because of the daily violence.
Two girls look through the window of an abandoned school used by volunteers to host Syrian and Afghan refugees in Athens, on July 1, 2016. (AFP/ARIS MESSINIS)

“All rural people came to urban areas because there is no security at all and no institutions – even humanitarian institutions cannot work there,” Waheeddullah, a 28-year-old who fled from Afghanistan to Germany, told us. “But in urban areas, you cannot find a job in Kabul, while in the rural areas, Taliban will threaten you or you might be killed.”

Many Afghans we interviewed said they were advised not to tell anyone they planned to leave to avoid the rumors that would surround them and their families. Many invested their assets, sold personal property such as cars or jewelry or borrowed money to finance their journeys.

The uncertainty does not end once they leave the country, as migration policies and interpretations of what constitutes a “well-founded fear of persecution” differ from country to country and shift over time. Generations of Afghans have spent their lifetimes adjusting their plans to changing governments, regimes and conflicts, and the cycle does not stop with their migration.
Some, like Waheedullah in Germany, find the circumstances are vastly different from what they had hoped. “Of course it is not like what we imagined,” he said. “Still, I hope the government will provide us [with] better conditions, once we are accepted.”

Others change their destination en route in reaction to shifting conditions in Europe. “At first, our destination country was Germany, but we changed our minds when we reached Austria because plenty of migrants wanted to seek asylum in Germany,” says 27-year-old Kabir Rahimi. “That is why we selected Sweden.”

Over the coming weeks, we will publish a series of stories about why Afghans are fleeing their homeland, based on the testimonies of a diverse profile of Afghans collected along the migration trail during our research.

*The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Refugees Deeply.*

**About the Author**

**Nassim Majidi**

Nassim Majidi, PhD, is the founder and codirector of Samuel Hall, a research think-tank based in Afghanistan, Kenya and Somalia, and an affiliate researcher at Sciences Po’s CERI.