



ICMPD

**Migration Outlook Silk Routes 2022
South and West Asia**

Five migration issues to look out for in 2022



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1. The evolution of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan will impact migration and forced displacement within, and from the region.

A myriad of social, political, environmental and economic factors have placed the country on the verge of humanitarian catastrophe and on the brink of economic collapse. This will have a visible impact on cross-border migration pressures in 2022. Vulnerable groups (such as ethnic and religious minorities, women and girls, and others) are particularly affected by both the political and socio-economic crisis, and will continue to face insecurity and uncertainty about their future. A more structured and broader dialogue with Afghanistan's neighbours will be essential for 2022 (and with Afghanistan's new authorities if certain qualifications are agreed to) to take stock of the needs of Afghanistan's neighbours (from a standpoint of migration and mobility) and ensure that the international community acknowledges the impact that the humanitarian crisis is having on displacement. This could be done through inter-regional conferences to address the impact of Afghan displacement on host communities (bringing together EU Member States and Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan in the region) or exchanges through the Budapest Process platform on the potential role for diaspora engagement in the re-development of Afghanistan's future). Absent sufficient protection and legal means for resettlement, irregular cross-border mobility is likely to continue as Afghans seek protection. While in the first instance this will impact neighbouring countries (Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan), recent data demonstrates the impact this will have on regions further afield, such as Europe, along traditional routes via Turkey and the Western Balkans. Similar attention may need to be paid further eastward as Burmese citizens flee Myanmar's military rule and growing displacement concerns emerge at the borders of India and Bangladesh. Annual climate change and environmental disasters in the region is also expected to only further exacerbate displacement from the region.

2. The “instrumentalisation of migration” will be a key political and policy issue in Europe in the coming year, with implications for countries of origin and transit.

The instrumentalisation of migration vis-à-vis Europe and European countries is not a new experience, yet the political and policy implications of this crisis will continue. Europe's swift response with regard to the migration situation at the EU's eastern border highlights key priorities relevant for the region in the coming year. Firstly, the focus on border security and return operations, and the implementation of emergency measures, has seemed to be effective, with the potential implication for them to be



replicated in the future. Secondly, for countries of origin and transit, both the political and the human repercussions of such instrumentalisation have emerged as on the one hand lucrative, in terms of support for deterring irregular migration, and on the other hand dire, in terms of the human costs and potential restrictions that could be applied in response. In particular, cooperation with countries of origin and transit was highlighted as critical in terms of combatting migrant smuggling operations and modus operandi, as well as addressing the wider migration drivers.

3. COVID-19 has compounded inequalities: may further influence mobility expectations and migration specific challenges.

Revised economic IMF forecasts for the region (and the economies of key migratory corridors) in 2022 are lower than expected due to insecurity, higher oil and gas prices, the widespread of the Omicron variant and the subsequent virus-related lockdowns. The emergence of additional variants, over the course of the year, may prolong the pandemic and precipitate pullbacks of economic activity. This will in turn affect governments' purchasing power - and access - to vaccine stocks, thereby limiting their abilities to fight further mutations that may emerge over the course of the year. Vaccine equity will therefore be necessary to achieve economic resiliency and without boosters, additional pressures on health care systems within Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Iran, which are already at their limit, will continue. For those who can show proof of vaccination, outward mobility is appealing. However, recognition of types of vaccines (Sputnik, COVAXIN) has become a point of political friction (e.g. 12 EU countries have recognised the Indian made COVAXIN vaccine, whilst others have not and a decision from the EU Medicines Agency – EMA – is pending) often resulting in decisions that align with existing air bubbles/travel corridors. This juxtaposition between increased vaccine rates and the desire (or need) to travel versus the challenge of vaccine availability and recognition, will create gridlock taxing consular services, and creating the need for safeguarding the rights and interests of migrants. Effective consular services will require training of staff, use of digital solutions, and integrated border management services.

4. Labour migration channels will be a key area of bilateral and cross-regional policy development

A number of novel bilateral agreements and international frameworks have been developed in the past year, upon which labour migration channels can be established. Some are already in place, such as the Portugal/UK/Japan-India agreements. For these, ensuring mechanisms are in place for their fullest implementation will be important in the coming year. For others, such as those that could be foreseen under the EU's Talent Partnerships, further discussions will be needed in 2022. At the same time, the trend towards remote-work or home based employment – ushered in with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic – may also raise questions of the need for the migration of skilled labour (within few select vocations and occupational sectors), with implications for compensation, social security, and long-term residency.



5. Policy development related to remittances, return and reintegration will be high on the priority list for major labour migration sending countries in the region.

Given their experiences in the context of COVID-19, sending countries have already launched policies and policy measures related to reintegration and facilitating remittances from abroad. Considering the prolonged impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on labour migration and mobility, it is likely that these developments will continue, as sending governments look for ways to reengage their nationals, particularly in investment and entrepreneurship schemes. In this vein, outreach by governments to their diasporas in Europe may also be important. Diasporas in Europe may be relevant in particular given their financial and human resources, as well as their relative proximity compared to other diaspora locations. Investment and entrepreneurship schemes could thus benefit from pairing their approach to returnees with those in the diaspora.

Executive Summary

The second annual Regional Migration Outlook for the Silk Routes region highlights the main migration “hotspots”, trends and policy developments within the Silk Routes region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan) for 2021. At the same time, it aims to forecast potential areas of development and challenges, for the region and the international community, in the coming year.

For the region as a whole, the displacement of Afghans following the Taliban takeover was a critical issue at the humanitarian, policy and operational levels. Existing migration drivers, combined with additional social, political, environmental and economic factors, have driven recent displacement within the region and further afield. At the same time, the instrumentalisation of migration at the EU’s eastern border, of Iraqi nationals in particular, has had international implications. Through swift action from European, Iraqi and other stakeholders, the situation has put a halt to the irregular migration route, but the situation will have implications for Europe and the region in the coming year.

In terms of migration trends, internal and cross-border displacement are key issues for the region as a whole, with irregular migration implications for Europe along migration routes. Internal displacement continues to be a challenge for Afghanistan and Iraq. As regards to asylum trends, applications for asylum by Afghan nationals continue to be the highest among nationals from this region. Given the Taliban takeover in August 2021, this trend showed a sharp spike in the autumn of 2021, particularly with regard to applications by unaccompanied children. With regard to irregular migration trends for Europe as a receiving region, the developments along the EU’s eastern border with Belarus were the clear outlier compared to previous years. Otherwise, trends seemed to maintain generally in line with the previous year, including the increased prevalence of Bangladeshi irregular migration via the Central Mediterranean route. Labour migration trends demonstrate key areas of development in the last year. Measures put in place to facilitate remittances via formal channels seemed to be effective, while countries in the region have engaged new countries of destination and the EU to explore new labour migration channels.

Migration policy for the region has developed in line with these trends. In particular, the Afghan displacement crisis – and the general humanitarian crisis faced by the country – has been an important area of policy engagement, particularly in the last quarter of 2021. Funding needs are astronomical, while neighbouring countries also struggle to address the needs of new arrivals. In the context of migration and mobility, European and international partners have engaged with neighbouring countries to address their needs and prevent secondary displacement. At the same time, 2021 has also seen the impact of COVID-19 on a range of migration policy measures and approaches. For countries of origin, the impact of large-scale returns has led to a reorientation towards reintegration measures for their nationals. For (potential) host countries, gaps in labour market needs, especially in the health sector, have led to the development of labour migration channels for sending countries in the region.

For the region of South and West Asia, 2021 brought new and significant migration and mobility-related challenges, but also opportunities. Conflict and insecurity drove large-scale displacement

within and from the region, yet developments in labour mobility also picked up. Migration and mobility dynamics within this region are complex and overlapping, and this Regional Migration Outlook aims to provide insights into some of these dynamics, with a view to the coming year.

Introduction

While the global upheaval of 2020 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was unexpected and enduring, 2021 brought new and significant migration and mobility-related challenges for the region of South and West Asia (Silk Routes region). Countries within this region – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan – continued to face significant challenges domestically related to the continued economic and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the region’s worsening humanitarian situation has fuelled new waves of refugees and internal displacement. These have the potential to further increase regional tensions, economic spill-overs, and fiscal strains on host countries. Over the course of 2021 the fall of the previous Afghan government (and subsequent establishment of a Taliban government), internal and cross-border environmental related displacement, manifested in continued challenges in terms of reintegration of large-scale returns, and have had global repercussions on the ‘instrumentalisation of migration’ of nationals for political purposes.

While this report cannot cover all these issues in depth, it aims to provide insights into key developments in the region, as related to migration and mobility. ICMPD’s 2022 Migration Outlook for the Silk Routes (South and West Asia) region aims to offer a deeper regional perspective into how these developments have and will translate to internal and intra-regional mobility. This Regional Outlook delves deeper into the key trends, relying on ICMPD’s presence and expertise in the region, as well as desk research from public data sources, as available.¹

The report proceeds as follows. First, it provides an analysis of current and emerging trends from the region’s “hotspots” focusing on the two important trends for this region in 2021: the Afghan displacement situation and the migration crisis at the EU’s Eastern Borders route as related to the irregular migration of Iraqi nationals in particular. Then, the report will highlight broader migration patterns across the region according to available quantitative and qualitative data, connecting them to recent migration-related developments as relevant. In the next chapter, the report then highlights migration policy developments related in particular to Afghan displacement, return and reintegration, and European policy engagement with the region, particularly related to labour migration. Finally, the report concludes by looking to the future and highlighting possible migration specific trends and policy developments, as well as focus areas for policy makers in 2022.

Focus regions

Afghanistan

Prior to 2021, decades of complex and protracted conflict in Afghanistan, combined with climate change, gender inequality, lack of basic services (e.g. healthcare), food scarcity, natural disasters, underemployment, and a weak economic outlook, have been key migration drivers within and from

¹ It is important to highlight at the outset that at this stage in the year, accurate and timely data for 2021 is often unavailable or incomplete. Thus, we sometimes rely on forecasts or older more reliable datasets, as well as on qualitative information. Where only partial data is available, this is noted.

the country. Given these significant pre-existing drivers, developments since the Taliban takeover demonstrate that migration drivers have been compounded within a current context of insecurity for many Afghans.

At the political level, the disintegration of President Ghani's government and subsequent re-establishment of the Taliban government (with no international recognition) in the country has left Afghans feeling abandoned, threatened, and anxious about their future, in particular, vulnerable groups (e.g. media personnel, women and girls, academia, former government security personnel, members of the former Afghan legal system, interpreters, athletes, etc.). A UN report notes credible allegations of more than 100 former members of the Afghan government, its security forces, and those who worked with international troops, that were killed since the Taliban took over the country on August 15. Subsequent developments have contributed to the challenges faced women and girls in particular: the Taliban leadership have effectively banned girls' education, discouraged women from returning to work in a number of sectors (including the media) and disbanded the Ministry of Women's Affairs. In addition, at least some elements of the group have begun enforcing brutal law enforcement policies, including public execution. Moreover, the Taliban are contending with rival extremist groups in the country such as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP), impacting the security risks in the country and region.

In addition, Afghanistan has found itself on the brink of a starvation crisis, with some 22.8 million people projected to face acute food insecurity this winter. Furthermore, the UN estimates that nearly half of Afghanistan's population (around 18.4 million people) are currently in need of lifesaving humanitarian assistance. Afghanistan's economy has declined sharply in recent months, in large part due to the evaporation of international aid when the Taliban returned to power in August (prior to the arrival of the Taliban the Afghan economy received USD\$ 7-8 billion a year in budget support). Banks have reportedly run out of cash. Considering the challenges facing the Afghan banking sector, in 2021, and the overall decline in inward remittance flows since 2018, transfers from Afghans abroad are likely to continue to decline. Remittances from Afghans abroad have declined because of the coronavirus pandemic. Given the worsening situation, the UN's humanitarian appeal has tripled to Euro 4.4 billion/USD\$ 5 billion, which includes USD \$623 million to support refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries. An additional USD \$3.5 billion in development assistance would also be required to sustain access to basic services and preserving some gains in international interventions in the country over the past decades (keeping schools and hospitals open).

Over 676,000 people have been internally displaced due to conflict within Afghanistan (IDPs) in 2021 bringing the total internally (from conflict) from 2.9 million to 3.5 million (9% of the population). The largest numbers of displaced however, find themselves in Kabul, the central highlands, and border areas (near Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Iran) despite border closures. Additionally, IDMC data suggests that 1.1 million Afghans have experienced displacement due to natural disasters. Total estimates for internal displacement for Afghanistan reach as high as 5.3 million in 2021.

Displacement in the region

Notwithstanding the severe extent of the security and humanitarian situation within Afghanistan, the situation of host countries in the region with regard to Afghans is also important. Iran and Pakistan host significant numbers of displaced Afghans, including those in protracted displacement, while secondary movements from the countries is also an issue. By the end of August 2021, UNHCR had registered 1,435,000 registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan and 780,000 in Iran. In addition, both countries host significant undocumented Afghan populations, an estimated 600,000 to one million in Pakistan and 2.1 to 2.25 million in Iran. Post-Taliban takeover, the Norwegian Refugee Council estimate that up to 300,000 Afghans had fled to Iran, between mid-August and November 2021. In spite of limited means, 520,000 foreign students continue to be educated through the Iranian educational system and COVID-19 vaccine rates of its Afghan refugee population remain on par with those of Iranian nationals. Pakistan has also finalised a USD\$ 63 million (January 2022) Professional Training package that includes 3,000 scholarships, free training with stipends for 5,000 Afghan nationals, free training for 150 Afghan teachers, 100 nursing diploma scholarships, and the establishment of an AIOU (Allama Iqbal Open University) regional campus in Kabul to improve the education sector and skill development.

Similarly, UN records show that at least 28,000 Afghans (from Kabul, and the provinces of Nangarhar or Ghazni) have arrived in Pakistan during the course of 2021. However, the government is reportedly expecting as many as 700,000 Afghan arrivals to Pakistan, at a cost of USD 2.2 billion to host and meet their needs. Pakistan's Ministry of Interior has also reports to ICMPD that 300,000 Afghans have entered the country on valid visas with 25,000 relocating to another country and 150,000 returning to Afghanistan (see section on Return and Reintegration). Afghanistan's northern neighbours—Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—also anticipate to receive refugees, although more limited numbers.

Given the extent of forced displacement, closures of borders, and the absence of sufficient and efficient means for resettlement, migration and migrant smuggling has turned into one of the few sources of regular income available. Smugglers in Iran and Turkey see themselves as providing a service bringing refugees into 'safe-zones' using networks spanning Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and as far west as the EU. Reports from the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) indicate that smuggling services in Kabul, Balkh, Kandahar and Herat have significantly increased in price, reflecting an increase in demand for migrant smuggling services. For example, while the cost of a smuggler-facilitated journey from Zaranj, Afghanistan to Tehran, Iran was about USD 180 in January and February, it reportedly increased to USD 250-300 in July 2021. Likewise, fees for visas arranged by smugglers and intermediaries on the black market have increased, by double or triple, for neighbouring countries and those along the migration route towards Europe.

Alternatively, migrant smuggling through Central Asia and Russia have been highlighted as transit regions through which Afghans reach Europe, yet little data is available on this route. Similarly, routes to Gulf countries have recently emerged, with anecdotal evidence suggesting migrant smuggling

routes from south-eastern Afghanistan using Pakistani passports falsified or fraudulently obtained. Air routes from Pakistan, Turkey and Gulf states are also possible, for those Afghans who can afford the much higher cost.

Eastern Borders route migration crisis: irregular migration from Iraq

The migration crisis along the Eastern EU border with Belarus was an important “hotspot” for the EU as a whole and particularly for migrants from Iraq and Afghanistan. While the Regional Migration Outlook for Eastern Europe and Central Asia focuses more prominently on the situation and stakeholders engaged along this border, this Outlook will examine the relevance of developments particularly for Iraq, as the majority country of origin for irregular arrivals at this border area.

The “crisis” itself began in July 2021, with thousands of migrants arriving at the border this past summer, following increased political tensions between the EU and Belarus as of end of May. However, the data demonstrates that irregular arrivals along the Eastern Borders route increases (for Iraqi nationals in particular, but also Belarussian and Russian nationals) already in April of 2021, compared to both 2019 and 2020. This suggests that an increase of arrivals began already in spring, prior to upscaling of irregular migration-related operations during the summer period. Among detections of irregular border crossings at the Eastern border, Iraqis represent 59.64%. Afghans are the next highest nationality detected among all detections, at a significantly lower 7.82%. It is thus clear that this route became a particular one for Iraqi nationals. Iraqi Ministry of Migration officials estimate 4,000-8,000 Iraqis attempted this route in November alone.

Iraqi nationals depart in this specific case largely from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq², particularly Erbil, Shiladze and Sulaymaniyah. Approximately half of migrants at the Polish-Belarussian border are reportedly women and children. For Iraqis themselves, their migration decision reflects the continued difficult economic and political situation in Iraq, which has of course been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the high proportion of Iraqis from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a relatively stable and secure region within the country, is an unusual aspect of this trend. Yet, recent economic and political instability are key factors that emerge from media reports with Iraqi migrants from the Kurdistan region who availed themselves of this route. In particular, rampant unemployment, corruption, economic crisis (which has led to massive cuts in state salaries, in a region with high employment in the public sector) and the impact of internal and cross-border displacement (a major host region for Iraqi IDPs and refugees) are relevant migration drivers for this region. Returnees from this route counselled by the Iraq Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) consistently mention the lack of job opportunities as the crucial push factor: one returnee had already been forcibly returned from Germany previously yet attempted irregular migration again due to continued unemployment in Iraq. He said he would even try again, if he was unable to find a job soon. Finally, another important factor is that, for Iraqis, this (air) route was considered safer and less costly (at least at the start) than other smuggling operations via the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes, especially for those traveling

² According to recent media reports, around 90% of migrants who have arrived in Lithuania via this route are from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

with small children. In particular, this is related to the use of air routes and regular departure from the country, although irregular border crossing occurred or was attempted post-arrival in Belarus.

In terms of the emergence of this route in Iraq, media reports have pointed to increased airline connections, facilitated visa access³ and travel packages advertised in Iraq. For example increased Iraqi Airways connections to Minsk for USD 426 four times a week and travel packages to Belarus ranging from USD 540 to USD 4,000, ostensibly organised for tourism purposes. Flights and visas were also organised via transit countries, with multiplied flight connections between Minsk and Istanbul, Beirut, Damascus and Amman, respectively. The Belarussian airline Belavia, for example, flew between Istanbul and Minsk approximately 30 times per month in February and March 2021, but increased to 65 by July. At the same time, media reports suggest that the Belarusian Embassy in Erbil outsourced visa application processes to travel agencies in the country, and travel agencies in Belarus were given approval to facilitate visas and travel for foreigners as well, reportedly expediting the access to visas for Iraqis and other nationals.

The role of social media has also been emphasised for this route and in reports from the Iraq MRC approached by returnees. This route was advertised on Facebook and the Telegram app, highlighting the importance of social media in spreading information on irregular migration routes. Members of two private Facebook groups on migration and Belarus doubled or tripled between September and November, to around 30,000 members each. In addition, the information shared on social media became more specific and complex as of October, including how to acquire a visa and arrange travel to Belarus, how to find smugglers for crossing into Germany (and their contact details), and details on where and how to cross the border and evade police detection. As of end of November, few Facebook groups of this nature have been deactivated and information continues to circulate online. With this in mind, MRC Iraq began providing targeted guidance on the dangers of the Belarus route in September 2021, through engagement on social media, SMS and TV. Over half of the MRC social media engagement (over 27,000 followers on Facebook and over 10,000 engagement monthly) is now from the Kurdistan region due to this specific focus, and Lithuania has become a top country reached through the social media campaign. Since the campaign was launched, the MRC's outreach through counselling sessions has grown by almost 600% (from around 150 in July 2021 to over 1,000 in January 2022).

In response to the crisis, Iraqi authorities took an active role in efforts to block such routes from the country. In August, flights from Iraq to Minsk were suspended amidst reports of the crisis. In November, Iraq also revoked the license of Belarus' honorary consulate in the country to issue visas. As the situation emerged as a crisis, Iraqi MFA officials visited Belarus, as well as the border strip between Lithuania, Latvia and Belarus, including to the forests where stranded migrants were located. In their visits, they were instructed by the Foreign Minister to determine the number of Iraqis there, check on their safety, coordinate and communicate with relevant authorities in those countries and

³ Iraqi nationals access to visas and mobility is notoriously limited; the Iraqi passport is considered the second lowest ranking passport in the world.

encourage stranded Iraqis to return voluntarily. As of 18 November, Iraq has also organised evacuation return flights (stopping in both Erbil and Baghdad) for those nationals stranded on the border. For those who lost their identity documents during the journey, the Iraqi MFA has organised transit passports via their embassies along this route and in the EU, for those wishing to return. As of mid-January 2022, around 4,000 people already returned to Iraq through these efforts.

The EU's reaction to this crisis, aside from along this border and with respect to Belarus itself, has emphasised the importance of engaging with sending and transit countries to prevent irregular departures and facilitate returns. At the end of November, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced the commitment of EUR 3.5 million to support voluntary returns from Belarus, as well as tripling funding for border security for the EU countries affected (Lithuania, Latvia and Poland). The Vice President of the European Commission visited Iraq⁴ in November, with the message to Iraqi migrants to be wary of misinformation spread by migrant smugglers and that the EU would support voluntary return for those who want to return to Iraq. Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Masrour Barzani similarly emphasised the role of exploitative human trafficking and migrant smuggling networks in this crisis, although he also highlighted that migrants did not leave Iraq irregularly (as most had obtained visas to Belarus). In a call with the EC Vice President, he highlighted key areas of cooperation to address irregular migration in the longer-term: enhanced cooperation to reduce irregular migration, increased trade and investment with Europe and assistance for the high numbers of IDPs still displaced in the Kurdistan region. Indeed, there is consensus that it is important for Europe not only to address the specific migrant smuggling operations and modus operandi engaged along this route, but also to address the drivers of irregular migration from Iraq in terms of longer-term cooperation.

The Commission has also proposed policy measures in response as well. On 1 December, the Commission put forward proposals for temporary asylum and return measures to support Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, setting up a simplified and rapid asylum and return processes for those applying for asylum at this external border. Shortly afterward, the Commission proposed an additional set of measures modifying the Schengen Borders Code in response to both COVID impacts on mobility and the "instrumentalisation of migration", allowing for the temporary measures proposed in the Eastern Borders case to become a more permanent possibility for such situations. These proposals were welcomed by many Member States but also sparked concerns about a weakening of asylum seekers' rights among civil society stakeholders and asylum legal experts, in particular with regard to potential derogations of Member States to certain provisions of EU asylum law (regarding registration, border procedures, right to effective remedy, reception conditions, conditions of return, etc).

Although the number of irregular border crossings along this border route has diminished over the last few weeks of 2021, the situation will continue to reverberate into 2022. Iraqi officials estimated that

⁴ Vice President Schinas' visit took place within a longer tour of a number of transit and origin countries for this "hotspot" route, including Lebanon, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan.

there were around 4,000 Iraqis stranded in Belarus as of end of November, but they have also emphasised that the harsh weather conditions and the complex nature of the environment have made it difficult for rescue teams to know and determine precise numbers. Thus, the dire humanitarian situation of those migrants who will need assistance will be important, especially throughout the winter months, as well as the policy implications of this crisis in coming years.

Migration trends in the region

While the previous section highlighted the primary “hotspots” of migration experienced within and experienced by the region, this section will highlight the broader migration trends as they emerge across the region. In particular, this covers trends in labour migration, remittances, internal displacement, irregular migration, asylum and protection and return.

Outward Mobility

As a leading source region for human talent, the region’s supply of skilled labour is increasingly being solicited by countries within the EU and globally. The demand of health professionals has risen as Europe comes to terms with the COVID-19 pandemic (according to OECD data Germany, France, Spain, Italy all depend on foreign-born doctors and nurses).

Moving beyond healthcare, recent skill requirement forecasts from across the EU point to shortages in key sectors such as agriculture, heavy goods vehicle drivers, IT, and service occupations (hospitality professionals, restaurant workers, tourism, etc.). The Silk Routes region’s qualified physicians and nurses (such as in India and Pakistan) are well positioned to provide a globally skilled health workforce. Several OECD countries have taken measures to ease the entry of health workers and have encouraged health-worker migration: countries like Saudi Arabia, Malta, UAE, Germany, Ireland, and Belgium are actively recruiting Indian care workers. Given COVID-19 mobility restrictions, European governments are trying to create legal channels for non-EU migrants (such as the [Portuguese-India agreement on recruitment of Indian workers](#)) ensuring the required skills and qualifications are available to national economies. Additionally, in November 2021, Members of the European Parliament adopted a legislative initiative report on legal labour migration, proposing to ease legal labour migration to Europe, including an ambitious admission scheme for low- and medium-skilled third country workers, as well as a framework for recognition of their skills and qualifications.

At the same time, 2021 has exhibited that the region’s dependence on the historic and sizable Gulf corridor (Gulf Cooperation Council countries) will be on the decline (see section below on return

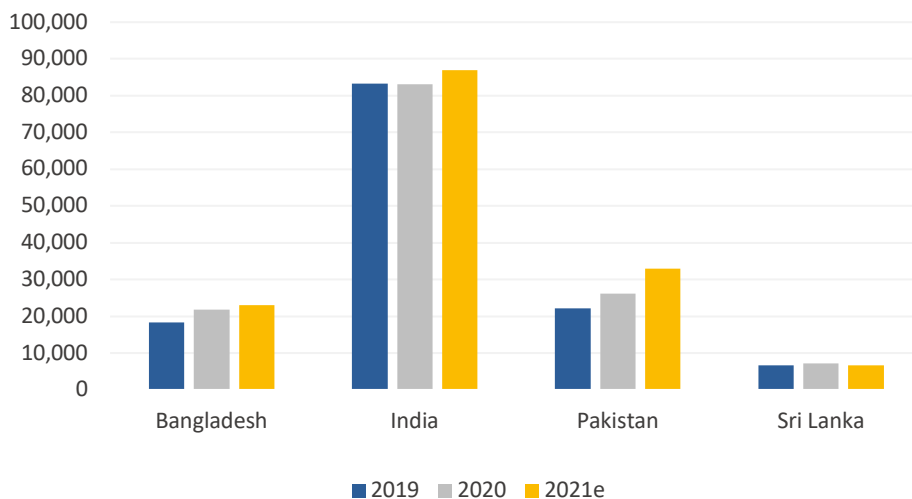
trends) due to efforts to nationalise their workforce, slower economic growth linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a transition of certain sectors within the economies to remote working. A related challenge in this area is that a sizeable proportion of low- and semi-skilled migrant workers are experiencing wage cuts, layoffs, reduction in working hours, and subsequent earning losses affecting remittance transfers from the GCC to the Silk Routes region. For example, in 2019, 625,203 Pakistanis had gone abroad on work visas, according to the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment. In

2020, this number fell to 224,705 — and came down further to 135,653 in the first eight months of 2021.

Remittances

Although final data is yet to be published, early analysis by the World Bank suggests that remittances to South Asia will likely grow around 8% to USD \$159 billion in 2021. This is in spite of the forecasted negative impact of COVID-19 on remittance levels for low and middle-income countries in 2020. Attributed to higher oil prices and a quicker economic recovery of economies from within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), remittance levels seem to have rebounded.⁵

**Migrant Remittance in-flows (US \$milions)
Based on 2021 World Bank Estimations**



Source: KNOMAD/World Bank.

In India, although remittance levels were first expected to drop, given the restrictions to travel (international and internally during the course of 2020 and 2021), they are in fact going to rise by an estimated 4.6% in 2021 equalling USD\$ 87 billion. Pakistan had another year of record remittances with growth at 26% and levels reaching USD\$ 33 billion in 2021. This rise is in part explained by the government of Pakistan’s Remittance Initiative (known as the National Remittance Loyalty Program) to support transmission through formal channels. This is all the more noteworthy given that the Pakistani rupee also dropped to a record low a current account deficit (imbalance in exports and import), market uncertainty, rising inflation and negative interest rates. The growth rate of remittances may slide in 2022 because of the delayed impact of lower outward mobility in 2021 (caused by the COVID-19 Omicron variant).

⁵ The region employs over half of South Asia’s migrants.

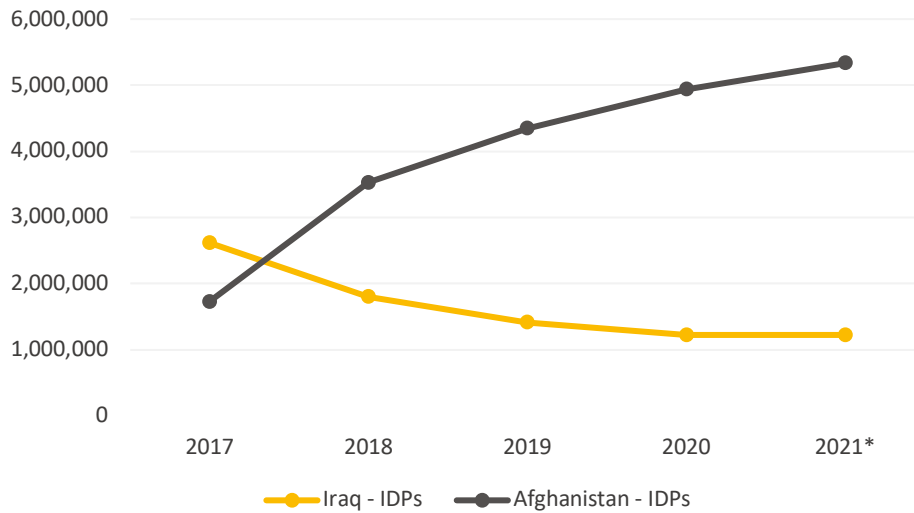
Afghanistan's fragile situation emerged as an unexpected cause of remittances in 2021 intended for Afghan refugees in Pakistan as well as for families in Afghanistan- though general expectation is that official numbers into Afghanistan will have dropped, as many preferred avoiding the barriers to formal transfer channels. In Bangladesh, given the government's tax cuts and other incentives (for more details refer to chapter 4) remittances rose in 2021 above pre-COVID-19 levels, by almost 6% to USD\$ 23 billion. However, a slowdown has been observed in the latter half of 2021, attributed to increased mobility and the re-emergence of the more traditional *hawala* system of informal transfers. This could provide an indication of post-COVID-19 slow-downs of remittance transfers should mobility increase.

Remittances remain the dominant source of foreign exchange for the region (with exception to Afghanistan), with receipts more than twice as large as Foreign Direct Investment in 2021. In spite of closures of banks, and money transfer operators, remittance costs for South Asia remained the lowest of any region in the world (at 4.6%). However, sending money to South Asia through official channels remains expensive compared with informal channels thus explaining the latter's continued popularity. Within the EU, the sending costs vary from Member State to Member State (average costs range to India from 3-8%) and access to traditional banking systems remain complicated for non-EU nationals, particularly those who may have an irregular migration status. Additional application of de-risking (Anti-Money laundering/Countering the Financing of Terrorism – AML/CFT) measures vary by Member State complicating the reliability of transfers and time needed to receive funds.

Internal displacement

As highlighted in the Silk Routes Regional Migration Outlook for 2021, mobility patterns as related to insecurity have continued to be of great significance for this region, and more specifically for Afghanistan and Iraq. While for Iraq internal displacement has a long recent history, the end of the official war against Da'esh in 2017 and the government policy focus on return of IDPs has meant a strong reduction of IDP numbers in recent years, although there remains persistent challenges in terms of reintegration of IDP returnees. On the other hand, for Afghanistan both political and environmental drivers continue to drive internal displacement numbers upwards. At the end of 2021, over 676,000 Afghans were newly internally displaced within the country, according to UNHCR.

Internal Displacement in Iraq and Afghanistan



Note: Data for 2021 is until September for Iraq and June for Afghanistan.

Source: IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix

For Afghanistan in particular, aside from the uncertainties caused by the change in government, migration drivers of internal displacement and of outward migration are significant and enduring. They include: escalation of violence in recent years, as well as various forms of gender based violence against - and exploitation of - women and children; food scarcity and malnutrition; and the increasing frequency of environmental crises such as frequent and severe floods, avalanches and winter storms. For Iraq, while the major driver of internal displacement – namely, violence related to Da’esh and the military campaign against the group – has ended, other migration drivers remain⁶, and the country has experienced challenges in closing IDP camps and integrating IDP returnees. In other countries of the region (Bangladesh, Pakistan and India) climate, induced internal displacement has been a major cause of concern. Constant flooding, cyclones, earthquakes and other natural disasters have resulted in large-scale internal displacement of population over the past few years. For example, Cyclone Amphan, the largest disaster event in the world in 2020, resulted in the evacuation of millions of people in countries such as Bangladesh and India.

Irregular migration flows

For Europe, the irregular migration flows of Silk Routes nationals represented an important proportion of the total irregular migration flows to Europe in 2021. Across all irregular migration routes to the EU, nationals from Silk Routes countries represent 21.33% of all detections of irregular crossings (38,937 detections) in 2021⁷, with nationals of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Iraq representing the highest proportions. Nationals of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq and/or Pakistan are among the top three nationalities detected across five of the seven migratory routes to the EU (Eastern Borders route,

⁶ In 2021, the drought crisis in Iraq has also been a major cause of displacement.

⁷ Until and including November 2021.

Western Balkans, Central Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean, and the Circular route from Albania to Greece). Afghan nationals in particular are among the top five countries of origin for irregular border crossings along the Eastern Mediterranean, Western Balkans and Eastern Borders routes.

Across all detections at the EU's external borders, the number of Afghan nationals detected irregularly crossing the EU's external borders increased by 36.48% in 2021.⁸ For Afghan nationals, detections along the Western Balkan route was significant: 10,284 Afghan nationals detected in 2021⁹ as compared to 5,251 in 2020, reflecting also the doubling of detections of irregular border crossings along this route as a whole in 2021. Along the Eastern Mediterranean route, the general trend was a displacement of irregular flows (and detections) from the sea to land route. This route is a traditional irregular migration route for Afghan nationals in particular but also Iraqi nationals. Thus, while detections of Afghan and Iraqi nationals along the Eastern Mediterranean sea route has decreased in 2021 compared to 2020, detections have slightly increased along the land route.

For Iraqi nationals, detections across all EU external borders doubled in 2021, fuelled primarily by increased numbers crossing the Eastern Borders route but also the Central Mediterranean route.¹⁰ Indeed, the biggest shift in trends has been at the Eastern Borders Route, in particular along the border between Poland and Belarus. Detections along this route increased from around 600 in 2019 and 2020 to close to 8,000 in 2021¹¹ (for more information, see section above and the Regional Migration Outlook for Eastern Europe and Central Asia). The detections of Iraqi nationals in particular skyrocketed along this border segment, as compared to previous years.¹² Afghans are the next highest country of origin for detections on this route, at 8.23% (612 detections). When we examine the data further, we see that detections increase significantly in July and August – both for the route as a whole and of Iraqi and Afghan nationals in particular. However, one can already observe increases in the detections of Iraqi nationals as of April, as well as of Iranian nationals (although in the latter case their numbers remain relatively stable, although elevated, for the rest of the year).

Although traditionally a less common route for Silk Routes nationals, the upward trend from 2020 of detections of Bangladeshi nationals along Central Mediterranean route continued into 2021 (12.47% of all detections in 2020 and 11.52% in 2021). Bangladeshi and Iranian nationals were among the top five countries of origin along this route in 2021. For Bangladeshis, it seems that this migration stems from onward migration by Bangladeshi migrants in Libya, due to the difficult situation there. Iranians, who previously more commonly travelled along the Eastern Mediterranean route, are more likely

⁸ Until and including November 2021.

⁹ Until and including November 2021.

¹⁰ For the Central Mediterranean route, detections of Iraqi nationals increased in 2021 (2,448 detections until November) as compared to 2020 (619 detections), but the rate of detection is rather in line with the years prior (around 3%). This is thus likely rather reflective of the significant increase in all detections along the Central Mediterranean route in 2021. For more information on this route, see the Regional Migration Outlook for the Mediterranean region.

¹¹ Until and including November 2021.

¹² From 43 detections in 2019 and 2020, to 4,665 detections 2021 (59.64% of all detections).

arriving to Italy via boats departing from Turkey or Greece, although there is little information on this trend available to date.

Asylum and protection

In terms of asylum applications by nationals of Silk Routes countries, trends also mirror irregular migration trends discussed in the previous section, with Afghan and Iraqi nationals representing an important proportion of applications, for the EU at large and for the region. Applications by Afghan nationals are regularly among the top nationalities for asylum applications lodged, and from August to November 2021 were consistently the largest group of applicants for the EU.¹³ 2021 has seen significant increases in asylum applications received from nationals of Afghanistan and Iraq in particular, both in comparison to 2020 and to pre-pandemic levels.¹⁴ Applications by Afghans reached a peak in September driven by evacuations from Kabul, after which their numbers decreased (although they remained the largest group of asylum applicants). In line with the increased detections of Iraqis at the EU's external borders (especially the Eastern Borders route), asylum applications by Iraqi nationals have increased as of June. In November 2021, asylum applications by Iraqi nationals were the highest since 2016.¹⁵ Applications from nationals of Iran and Pakistan have actually decreased as compared to 2019 pre-pandemic levels (61.98% and 17.6%, respectively).

According to Eurostat 2020 data, the vast majority of Pakistani asylum seekers are male, while for Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers, there is a relatively higher proportion of women. For Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, the proportion of children among asylum applicants is also significant, with those under the age of 14 particularly prevalent among child asylum applicants. However, Afghan, Iraqi and Iranian nationals seem more likely to apply for asylum as family units, while Pakistani children applicants are more likely to apply as unaccompanied minors, when we compare data of overall applications with those for unaccompanied minors.

Nonetheless, asylum applications from Afghan unaccompanied children have significantly increased in 2021. According to the EU Asylum Agency (EUAA), in 2021, the EU received the highest number of applications from unaccompanied children since 2015, an increase driven by applications from Afghan unaccompanied children. This group represented half of all applications received in October and November 2021, more than any other nationality by far.¹⁶ Looking at Eurostat data, which is only available up to 2020, offers more insights on this issue. In terms of countries of destination, Romania¹⁷,

¹³ According to EUAA, 13,040 applications for asylum were lodged by Afghan nationals in November 2021, including 1,520 unaccompanied children.

¹⁴ For Afghanistan, this was an increase of 60.45% from pre-pandemic levels in 2019 and 90.47% compared to 2020. For Bangladesh this was an increase of 71.04% from 2019 and 22.95% compared to 2020.

¹⁵ According to EUAA, 4,300 asylum applications were lodged by Iraqi nationals in November 2021.

¹⁶ Applications by Afghan unaccompanied children rose from under 700 in May 2021 to 1600 in October and 1500 in November, according to the EUAA.

¹⁷ Asylum applications by Afghan unaccompanied minors in Romania in 2020 represents almost two-thirds of the difference between applications in 2019 and 2020 (62.40%). The country received 805 applications, compared with 50 in 2019. In general, Romania experienced a large increase in asylum applications in 2020. It is not clear if this trend has continued into 2021.

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland and Germany received increased numbers of Afghan unaccompanied children in 2020 compared to previous years. The vast majority of Afghan unaccompanied minors registered in 2020 were over the age of 14 (91.62%) and male (96%). Given that Afghan children are more likely to travel and claim asylum with their families based on the overall asylum statistics, this implies that increasingly families have also made the decision to send their older children abroad alone, likely due to the dire situation in the country (discussed under Chapter 2).

In terms of asylum recognition rates, Afghans currently have the highest recognition rate across the EU+. While it was 57.8% in 2020, it significantly increased to the highest recognition rate on record, according to the EUAA, at 92% as of November 2021. This significant change in recognition rates could explain the trend identified by the EUAA of high numbers of repeat asylum applications of Afghan nationals in 2021 – a third of all repeated applications. For Iraqi asylum applications, the recognition rate in November 2021 was 36%, in line with previous years. Further data on recognition rates is only available until 2020. For the EU-27, Iran has the next highest recognition rate (31.41%), while the recognition rates for nationals of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are quite low.¹⁸

Return

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant many from the region (and neighbouring countries) have been forced to return home voluntarily, or involuntarily, due to their irregular status, a sudden change in their employment situation, or the lack of future prospects caused by a weakened economy. Some have resulted in re-migration whilst for others integration is vital. These returns have placed immense pressure on governments to prepare local level authorities to reintegrate their citizens into the economy. Since it began in 2020, over six million Indians have returned from abroad after the government launched the Vande Bharat evacuation mission (in 2021 alone from late January to April, around 2 million Indian citizens were repatriated). Similarly, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training estimates that 500,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers have returned home amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2021, despite Afghanistan being on the brink of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, recorded returns increased. According to the UN, over 1.17 million undocumented Afghan migrants (up to November 2021) returned from Iran, representing a 47% increase over the same period last year. According to International Organization for Migration's (IOM) reports, on average over 3,000 undocumented Afghan migrants are forcibly returned to Afghanistan on daily basis. Over the same period, 20,490 Afghans returned from Pakistan. Pakistan's Ministry of Interior, however, placed the number of Afghan returns at close to 150,000 (though the UN reports that 27,517 undocumented Afghan migrants returned in 2021). Subsequent to the Taliban takeover, UNHCR issued a non-return advisory for Afghanistan that called for a "bar on forced returns, including asylum seekers who have had their claims rejected."

¹⁸ According to Eurostat, among the EU-27, asylum recognition rates are: Bangladesh 7.54%, India 2.33% and Pakistan 10.00%.

In terms of data on returns from the EU, data for 2021 is not yet available. However, examining 2020 data highlights a 50.65% decrease in returns conducted in 2020 as compared to the previous year, likely related to COVID-19 restrictions. The number of orders to leave and effected returns were highest for nationals from Pakistan (19,145 orders to leave and 2,065 effected returns), Afghanistan (18,425 and 1,120, respectively), and Iraq (11,875 and 2,195, respectively). For Pakistani nationals, most orders to return were issued from Croatia, France and Greece. For Afghanistan, it was Croatia¹⁹, Greece, Sweden and Germany. For Iraq, it was France, Germany and Sweden.

Migration policy developments

In light of the large-scale impact displacements from Afghanistan has had thus far, the increasing relevance of migration at the EU external borders also in geopolitical terms, and the high number of COVID-19 related returns to the region, over the course of 2021, the following section will focus on recent migration policy measures and other policy developments.

Policy Responses to Afghan Displacement

Since 2001, Afghanistan's economy is often referred to as a 'rentier state': one whose economy and state spending is heavily reliant on external income with 75% of government expenditure being funded by foreign aid and about 90% of the security/defence budget. Absent the reassurances requested on respecting human rights, inclusion of women, guaranteed access to education for girls, and the formation of an inclusive government, the international community and global donors suspended all programs. As of the end of the year, the Afghanistan Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) offering counselling support to potential migrants and returnees operated on limited capacity, border management trainings and equipment transfers at checkpoints had ceased, and all work achieved on the policy development for a comprehensive migration management strategy stalled.

The immediate resettlement schemes announced by EU Member States, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (at the early stages focused) on those urgently in need (e.g. local staff associated with embassies, female journalists, former members of the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces - ANDSF, athletes, International Organisations and NGO staff, as well as members of the legal community – judges, lawyers). EU Member States continued to commit financial assistance to the anticipated humanitarian disaster. For example, Germany announced plans to contribute with 500 million Euros (USD\$ 590 million), Denmark with 32 million Euros (USD\$ 38 million), Norway with 10 million Euros (USD\$ 11.5 million), and Austria with 20 million Euros (USD\$ 23 million). By October of 2021, leaders of the G20 had agreed to restart funnelling money to the Afghan people, through international organisations (IOs) and non-government organisations (NGOs) present on the ground. However, due to the fact that the Taliban are a specially designated group under U.S. sanctions law and in other jurisdictions as well, implementing activities in the country with international financing has been complicated. NGOs and IOs feared that hurdles that humanitarian groups in

¹⁹ While Croatia has a low number of asylum applications from Afghan nationals, comparatively, their recognition rate is also the lowest among the EU-27 for 2019 and 2020, at 0%.

Afghanistan already face to deliver lifesaving assistance (in light of evacuations and female staff being restricted in their movements) were only likely to get worse because of international sanctions.

Recognising this challenge, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2615 (2021), deciding that humanitarian assistance - along with other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan – were not a violation of a provision in resolution 2255 (2015) concerning individuals and entities associated with the Taliban in constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan. Additionally, the Council decided that the processing and payment of funds, other financial assets or economic resources, and the provision of goods and services necessary to ensure the timely delivery of such assistance or to support such activities are permitted. It also strongly encouraged providers relying on the resolution to use reasonable efforts to minimize the accrual of any benefits — whether as a result of direct provision or diversion — to entities or individuals designated on the sanctions list established by resolution 1988 (2011). Neighbours, Pakistan (USD \$ 28 million) and India (sent food and medical aid) have been active, with the latter announcing a joint working group with Central Asian countries for the provision of aid to Afghanistan. The extent to which international aid will help address the humanitarian crisis will – most likely – have an impact on the displacement situation and potential outflows in 2022.

In consideration of the fact that the vast majority of Afghan refugees have traditionally been hosted by Pakistan and Iran, the two governments, together with Afghanistan and UNHCR have together worked within the context of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) since 2012. The support platform has played an important role in 2021 offering solutions to the needs of Afghans and their host communities. The EU is playing an active role as co-chair of the SSAR support platform Core Group. Through the SSAR, countries within the Silk Routes region initiated responses and actions related to Afghan displacement such as the need for better documentation. Pakistan’s National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) completed a country-wide documentation renewal and information verification exercise (known as DRIVE) from mid-April to end of December 2021 providing smart identity (Proof of Registration – PoR) cards to 740,000 Afghan refugees with plans to distribute more in early 2022. The new smart identity cards are an essential protection tool for Afghan refugees and give them faster and safer access to health and education facilities and to banking services. Similarly, in Iran, Iran formalised refugee access to banking services – including debit cards. Before the new policy was announced, banks around the country followed different practices, which meant that some refugees could access banking services but most could not. This will facilitate financial inclusion of Afghans displaced ensuring a flexible and transparent means for emergency cash distribution to refugees. As a result of this initiative, 878,604 undocumented Afghans living in Pakistan were issued Afghan Citizen Cards (in a Pakistan government initiative (implemented with IOM’s support) to regularise their status in Pakistan. This initiative was conducted in collaboration with the former government of Afghanistan. In addition, the National Command and Operation Centre – the body responsible for Pakistan’s COVID-19 response – approved the inclusion of foreigners, including Afghan refugees with Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, in its vaccination programme. Afghan refugees are

being vaccinated based on the same criteria applied for Pakistan's citizens. This service was also extended (by Pakistan's Prime Minister) to new arrivals from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in 2021.

The Framework for a Comprehensive Dialogue between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the European Union on Migration and Refugee Issues was endorsed in December 2020. The Comprehensive Iran-EU Dialogue on migration and refugees presents an opportunity to deepen cooperation at the bilateral level and to seek ways to comprehensively and constructively address, in a mutually beneficial manner and on the basis of the principles of partnership, shared responsibility and solidarity, matters relating to migration and refugees. ICMPD is supporting the implementation of the agreement framework through an EU funded project and a first technical meeting of the EU-Iran Comprehensive Dialogue on Migration and Refugee Issues is slated to take place in the first quarter of 2022.

Return and Reintegration

For Afghans, as the security situation stabilised, the UN reports that 1,170,494 undocumented Afghans returned (both voluntary and involuntary) during 2021 with 1,150,004 from Iran and 20,490 from Pakistan. Returnees received transportation allowances, financial assistance upon their return, reintegration assistance (access to shelter), through UNHCR's Priority Areas of Return and Reintegration (PARR). Efforts to strengthen essential services and facilities are supported through investment projects funded within the SSAR.

COVID-induced returns were an important migration trend, highlighted by the 2020 Silk Routes Regional Migration Outlook, and the impacts continued to reverberate into 2021 for Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Increased rates of return had myriad impacts from increased remittances, to implications related to access to reintegration support, to potential for remigration from the region. In response, countries in the region have implemented a number of policy measures that also have an important impact on the migration situation in and from the region.

For Pakistan, the National Action Plan for COVID-19 provided the primary guidance for measures to support migrants' return and reintegration, including over the course of 2021. While efforts in 2020 focused on repatriation of stranded migrants abroad, focus in 2021 shifted more towards reintegration and remigration efforts. This includes development and planned expansion of a Overseas Employment Corporation (under MoPHRD) database of returnees, including information on profiles and skills. At the same time, Pakistan has also launched a number of programmes focused on economic and social reintegration of returnees. This includes counselling on potential employment opportunities in Pakistan and abroad²⁰, investment in (re-)skilling training programmes, and development of a national entrepreneurship scheme.²¹ Additionally, Pakistan plans to provide technical and financial assistance to returning migrants through the Kamyab Jawan programme, with its loan schemes for young entrepreneurs' businesses, and the Ehsaas programme, the country's most wide-ranging social

²⁰ Including in particular the OPF-GIZ Pakistan-Germany Facilitation and Reintegration Centre.

²¹ Namely, the Kamyab Jawaan Programme, which offers seed loans for initiating small business ventures.

security scheme. In addition, public sector training institutions are gearing up to deliver technical and vocational training for returning migrants.

Pakistan's forthcoming National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis²² also emphasises the need for a reintegration mechanism for returnees, to support the management and reintegration of returning migrants. Such a reintegration mechanism is foreseen to cover three main elements of: data collection on return migrants, referral pathways for migrants needing to access special services, and cooperation with financial institutions to support potential entrepreneurship and investment of returnees. While a framework to support returnees is not yet fully elaborated, it is clear that one of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic was to push this issue to the fore in Pakistan's migration policy arena.

Bangladesh, similar to Pakistan, has seen significant impacts of return related to the COVID-19 pandemic and, in turn, has ramped up policy measures in this area. As with Pakistan, repatriation efforts dominated in 2020, quickly followed by policy measures targeted towards reintegration of returnees in 2021. In particular, the government adapted its legal and policy frameworks by addressing or adding provisions to address reintegration issues of returned migrant workers.²³ Recently, the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE) has launched the process of developing a specific policy on reintegration, with stakeholder dialogue on this issue launched in October. In addition, the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies, with the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment, have begun development of a database on returnees arriving at airports, collecting information on migrants' profiles and other relevant reintegration-related information. For 2021, the government also launched a special stimulus package for returnees, with loans available for skills development and entrepreneurship, although the scheme has reportedly been difficult to access.²⁴ Finally, with support from the World Bank, the Wage Earners Welfare Board under the MEWOE has launched RAISE (Recovery and Advancement of Informal Sector Employment), with a budget of EUR 44.5 million, focused on supporting the economic inclusion and reintegration of up to two million migrants returned due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The programme provides returnees access to cash grants, and also supports access to services such as skills training, apprenticeship programmes, counselling, referrals to relevant services by private and CSO providers, microfinancing schemes and self-employment support.

Within the Indian context, the central government launched SWADES (Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support) in 2020 which took stock of the skills and experience Indian nationals were returning home with, under the Vande Bharat Mission (2020 and 2021). A joint initiative

²² Developed with the support of ICMPD.

²³ In particular, relevant provisions were adapted within the 8th Five Years Plan, Revised Overseas EMA 2021, WEWB act 2018, proposed WEWB Rules 2021, action plan 2020-21, and Expatriate Welfare Overseas Employment Policy 2016.

²⁴ To encourage entrepreneurship, loans up to BDT 500,000 (EUR 4,855) at 4% interest rate from Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB) were made available for returnees.

of the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Civil Aviation, and the Ministry of External Affairs, the database is expected to facilitate the reintegration of migrant workers into the national labour market and promote effective employment opportunities. To achieve this, SWADES has been integrated with Skill India's ASEEM (Aatmanirbhar Skilled Employee Employer Mapping) portal, and all data has shared with relevant State Governments, on a real time basis²⁵. Additionally²⁶, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has actively engaged with destination economies such as Japan (January 2021), Germany (December 2021) launching the Triple Win project focusing on the recruitment of 1000 nurses from the state of Kerala), Portugal (September 2021) (covering the recruitment of blue-collar workers from India to Portugal), and the UK (May 2021). In this regard, the ongoing collaboration between the EU and India on the Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility (CAMM) has been recognised as having provided the MEA a better understanding of the EU Member State needs and scope for negotiation.

European Pivot to Asia

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to place increased pressure on the national health systems, destination economies are equally growing aware of their labour needs and technical skill shortages, especially as it relates to the healthcare sector. The European Commission (DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) of 2020 noted skill shortages within the health care assistants, associate professional nurses, pharmacists, and midwifery. The 2021 EU Pact on Migration and Asylum announced a focus on Talent Partnerships explicitly identifying health and medical care as areas of skills shortage, within the EU, and prioritising legal pathways in these areas. The new German government's coalition agreement contains an extensive chapter on migration calling for a more holistic concept of migration that seeks to include economic cooperation, visa facilitation, skills transfers, job platforms and cooperation on the reintegration of rejected asylum seekers²⁷.

In spite of lower density of health care professionals within countries in the region (according to WHO data) India remains the leading source for doctors and nurses - within the OECD – from the Silk Routes region. As of February 2021, India no longer is listed on the Health Workforce Support and Safeguards List (a list of forty-seven countries who face pressing health workforce challenges), Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Ireland, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Malta are actively recruiting from the region (India) - within clinical and geriatric care opportunities for the longer-term. Moreover, during the height of the COVID pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, countries within the GCC (UAE) also benefitted from emergency transfer of doctors and nurses from India.

²⁵ At the state level too (for example, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa) there has been reintegration schemes and skill mapping exercises to successfully reintegrate return migrants into the labour market.

²⁶ To offset the adverse effects of COVID-19 and boost India's economic revival (70% of the population was assumed to be infected - one of the highest in the world, a record low consumer confidence index, and several states imposing new residency requirements on job seekers).

²⁷ In late January 2022, Germany announced that it wanted to attract 400,000 qualified workers from abroad each year to tackle both a demographic imbalance and labour shortages in key sectors that risk undermining the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

Noting the growing strategic importance of the region, and the impact of events (such as Afghanistan, COVID-19, and environmental disasters) has on Europe's security, the EU and its Member States have – in 2020 and 2021 – have initiated concrete steps in redefining their engagement (as it relates to people-to-people connectivity). For example, on the basis of the German government policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region on 2 September 2020, a newly created Regional German Information Centre in Singapore commenced work with a view to using hard facts to counteract disinformation in the region. Additionally, on the basis of the strategy Germany is assisting the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance to overcome humanitarian crises in the region such as the Rohingya refugee crisis. A progress report on the implementation of the German Government policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region was released in September 2021. Inspired by the German, Dutch and French strategies, the European Commission and the High Representative also presented a Joint Communication on the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy on 16 September 2021. This also built on the Connectivity Partnership the EU and India and Roadmap 2025, covering people-to-people initiatives promoting student and faculty mobility and cultural cooperation in line with national policy priorities, and the EU-India strategic partnership-Roadmap (signed in May of 2021).

Conclusions for 2022

This report highlights the main migration “hotspots”, trends and policy developments within the Silk Routes region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan) for 2021. At the same time, it aims to indicate potential areas of development and challenges, for the region and the international community, for the coming year. Conflict, insecurity and economic instability will continue to be key drivers of migration for the region, particularly for minorities and vulnerable groups. In particular, the displacement of Afghans within the region and further afield will persist as a humanitarian and policy issue. While the irregular migration of Iraqis via the Eastern Borders route seems to have been resolved, the political repercussions will reverberate. The prolonged impact of COVID-19 on the economies, health care systems and labour migration systems of the region will also continue to contribute to migration drivers, including of irregular migration.

On the other hand, there are promising developments in the areas of labour migration, return and reintegration as well. The development of labour migration channels, especially between the region and the EU, demonstrate potential opportunities for the region, even as other channels to the GCC have restricted. Remittances have grown or maintained, defying negative forecasts at the start of the pandemic. While they have slowed in some cases, indicating a potential return to informal (*hawala*) transfers where mobility picks up again, governments have aimed to capitalise on lessons from the pandemic in terms of further incentivising formal channels. Finally, the importance of reintegration policies and measures have been prioritised, as countries in the region faced large numbers of return due to COVID-19. The lessons in these areas will clearly have positive impacts on migrants and migration from the region in years to come.

International policy frameworks and regional dialogues will continue to further discussion on these issues in the coming year. The 2021 EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, and especially legal pathways

developed under the Talent Partnerships, provide a range of potential policy measures that could be capitalised upon in engagement with this region. The upcoming International Migration Review Forum in May 2022 will review progress on the implementation of the Global Compact on Migration and clarify next steps. Given the global implications of mobility from this region, this offers an opportunity to both highlight lessons learnt for the international community, as well as identify key areas of focus for the coming years. Regional consultative processes, such as the Budapest Process, can play a key role in furthering these discussions.

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