AFGHANISTAN

Understanding the key human safety and security issues that returnees to Afghanistan are facing

ACAPS ANALYSIS HUB AFGHANISTAN

Thematic report
16 August 2024

OVERVIEW

There are currently over 10.2 million displaced Afghans – at least 3.2 million internally, four million in Iran, and three million in Pakistan – as a result of chronic conflict, environmental hazards, poverty, natural hazards, and human rights violations, among other challenges. Among these, more than 50% are women and girls (UNHCR accessed 16/07/2024; UNHCR accessed 29/07/2024; UNHCR 11/03/2024). Since September 2023, the number of returnees to Afghanistan has increased dramatically because of Pakistan's Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan; between 15 September 2023 and 30 June 2024, 647,471 Afghans returned (both voluntarily and forcibly) to the country (IOM 09/10/2023 and 09/07/2024). Initially high owing to the sudden announcement of the plan, the number of returns dropped in early 2024 before gradually increasing again starting in June (IOM 09/07/2024). Iran has also forcibly returned around 60,000 Afghans since the start of 2024 in response to national economic pressure and public discontent over the increasing flow of Afghan migrants (VOA 10/06/2024; DRC 07/05/2024; II 13/04/2024).

While conflict-related security has improved since the Interim Taliban Authority (ITA) returned to power, other safety and security challenges and their associated implications for protection and wellbeing remain and are likely to worsen with the increasing number of returnees. Applying a human security approach, this report identified nine main safety and security concerns affecting returnees currently in their respective areas of return in Afghanistan. These concerns are food insecurity, financial hardship and insufficient livelihood access, lack of access to adequate shelter and tenure insecurity, lack of access to healthcare (both physical and psychological), lack of clean water access, lack of civil and legal documentation, discrimination and physical violence, exposure to explosive ordnance (EO), and border insecurity and armed conflicts. The general population also experiences many of these difficulties, but returnees likely experience compounded impacts.

KEY FINDINGS

- All returnees highlighted a lack of access to sufficient food, adequate shelter, and livelihood opportunities as their key human safety and security concern.
- In Nimroz province, returnees noted border instability with neighbouring countries, drug and human trafficking, insufficient clean water access, limited education opportunities, and lack of access to aid and essential services as other key human safety and security concerns.
    - In rural areas of Nimroz province, returnees (and the general population) lack access to basic services because of insufficient resources and infrastructure.
    - In urban areas of Nimroz province, such as Zaranj, returnees (and the general population) struggle with petty crime, overstretched services, and higher economic pressures because of low salaries and high competition for jobs.
- In Herat province, returnees highlighted coping with disaster scenarios resulting from the cumulative effects of natural hazards as a key human safety and security concern.
- In Bamyan province, returnees highlighted the Mahram requirement, a lack of access to civil and legal documentation, limited freedom of expression, and the ban on girls' education as key human safety and security concerns.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

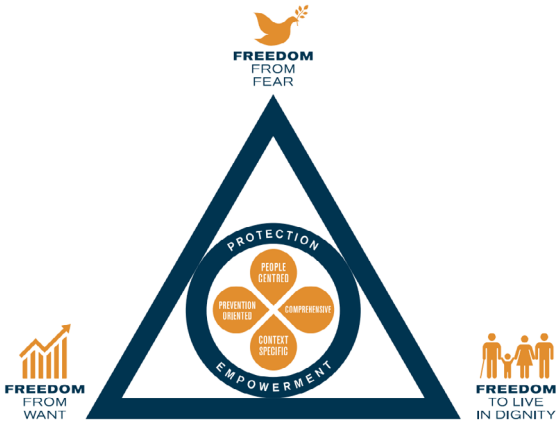
Aim

This report aims to add to the body of evidence on human safety and security issues that returnees face in Afghanistan to enable targeted protection interventions that are appropriate, relevant, and specific to returnees and that may address the risks host communities are also facing. To mitigate protection risks among the growing number of returnees, a comprehensive understanding of their human safety and security risks is necessary. Understanding the nuances and specificities in key areas of return is also crucial for the formulation of context-appropriate protection strategies for humanitarian responders to implement. Where possible, ACAPS differentiates where returnees of diverse categories, such as women and children, may experience different or compounding difficulties.

Methodology

Security can be understood as physical, psychological security or human security. This report adopts a human security approach from a humanitarian perspective based on UNGA Resolution No. 66/290. The resolution partly defines human security as *"the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair"* and declares that people *"are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential"*. It calls for human security as *"people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people and all communities"* (UNGA 25/10/2012).

Figure 1. The conceptual framework of human security



Source: UNTF (01/2016)

This report is based on a review of more than 60 publications on human safety and security relating to displaced and returnee populations in Afghanistan. It is supported by 18 key information interviews (KII) and eight focus group discussions (FGDs) with over 50 female and male returnees in Bamyan, Herat, and Nimroz, conducted in coordination with the Afghanistan Protection Cluster and its partners.

The provinces were selected based on potential human safety and security concerns and the respective volume of returnees. While Bamyan has fewer new returnees, it was selected for its geographic isolation, potentially leaving returnees without adequate protection and aggravating their vulnerability (e.g. AJ 20/02/2022). Herat and Nimroz were selected because they border Iran and Pakistan (Nimroz borders both). The high volume of returnees and the porous nature of the border have resulted in specific safety and security challenges, such as human trafficking and smuggling (US DOS 2019; EUAA accessed 16/07/2024).

Limitations

this report is based primarily on secondary data and subject to the same limitations as the data it draws from. The primary data was also only collected in three provinces, limiting the scope for a broader analysis of returnees at the national scale but providing a robust basis for understanding the human safety and security concerns among returnees in Bamyan, Herat, and Nimroz.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

HUMAN SAFETY AND SECURITY ISSUES THAT RETURNEES IN AFGHANISTAN ARE FACING

The main human safety and security issues that returnees are facing in their respective areas of return are broken down into the sections below. It is important to remember that many returnees may experience these different issues simultaneously:

- food insecurity
- financial hardship and insufficient livelihood access
- lack of access to adequate shelter and tenure insecurity
- lack of access to healthcare (both physical and psychological)
- lack of clean water access
- lack of civil and legal documentation
- discrimination and physical violence
- EO exposure
- border insecurity and armed conflict.

Food insecurity

A Save the Children survey conducted in late 2023 found that almost all (99%) of the families returning to Afghanistan from Pakistan did not have enough food for the next one to two months. Nearly three-quarters had reduced or restricted food portions for adults to ensure enough food for children (STC 18/04/2024 a). A 2024 needs assessment targeting returnees across the country corroborated this information, finding that food and cash were the two most immediate needs (OCHA 21/05/2024). Some returnees expressed that accessing food was a daily struggle and that the threat of hunger was always imminent (IOM 04/11/2021; IOM 13/03/2024). The Save the Children survey also demonstrated that the host community faced an even higher food insecurity rate at 99.2% (STC 18/04/2024 a). According to Islamic Relief, with the number of returnees continuing to grow at the end of 2023, an estimated one-third of new arrivals from Pakistan were severely food-insecure, and WFP reported that one-fourth of Afghans were generally concerned about their next meal (IR 29/11/2023; WFP accessed 31/07/2024). These findings imply not only an extremely high demand and low supply of food for both returnees and host communities but also a potential risk to the integration of returnees and social cohesion between them and the host community, as the increasing number of returnees suggests greater food needs within host communities, further stretching already limited food resources.

Financial hardship and insufficient livelihood access

Returning to Afghanistan is expensive. Some returnees from Pakistan are unable to bring valuable household items, such as furniture, back with them. This forces them to repurchase upon arrival in Afghanistan, further adding to the cost burden of returning (LSE 11/12/2023; NRC 14/12/2023; EC 22/01/2024). Returnees also struggle to find appropriate work, whether skilled or unskilled. Long-term unemployment drains people's existing resources and leads to more severe poverty (KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 b). Some returnees, including interviewees and FGD participants in Nimroz and Herat, noted that their inability to afford the basic tools they needed for their work further hindered their access to the job market (EC 22/01/2024; KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 b; KII 18/07/2024 d; KII 18/07/2024 e; FGD 18/07/2024 a; FGD 18/07/2024 b; TOLO News 06/04/2024; KII 14/07/2024 a; KII 14/07/2024 c; KII 14/07/2024 e; KII 14/07/2024 f). In Nimroz, the large scale of recent returns builds on the context of the longstanding insufficiency of employment and livelihood opportunities in the province, which has already led to displacement (TOLO News 06/04/2024). Interviewees and participants emphasised this as a source of their sense of insecurity and stress, pushing some people who have returned to leave the province again (KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 b; KII 18/07/2024 d; KII 18/07/2024 e; FGD 18/07/2024 a; FGD 18/07/2024 b). Reports on returnees' struggles in seeking employment indicate that this issue prevails across the country (NRC 14/12/2023; EC 22/01/2024; ADSP/Samuel Hall 13/05/2024).

FGD participants in Nimroz also perceived that financial support from the ITA in the form of stipends seemed contingent upon certain conditions. They observed that the ITA tended to prioritise "its own people" by requiring recipients to present a clearance certificate confirming a prior relationship with the ITA, without which a person received no stipend (FGD 18/07/2024 b). Similarly, in Bamyan, interviewees and FGD participants shared that job opportunities were restricted to members of the ITA and the Hazara community,[1] limiting opportunities for other ethnic groups (FGD 24/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 d; KII 27/07/2024 e; KII 27/07/2024 f). These suggest that many returnees in these areas may face additional financial barriers owing to the ITA's selective support, further complicating livelihood challenges for those not qualified or prioritised for such support.

FGD participants and one interviewee in Bamyan also perceived that the ITA's return to power has had a negative impact on already limited job opportunities. They noted that the increase in poverty levels and the decrease in livelihood opportunities have caused mental stress and triggered a rise in crime, such as theft and murder. Some reported that this might have led to an increase in forced and underage marriages (FGD 27/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 c). To cope, some returnees who had initially settled in urban areas have decided to migrate further to rural villages, hoping to find employment in the agricultural sector (KII 27/07/2024

1 Under the previous government, many staff in Bamyan were Hazara.

a). Echoing this, FGD participants in Herat said that they chose to return there because of the promise of better prospects in casual and daily labour. The overall deterioration of the national economy since the ITA's return to power in 2021 has affected everyone, with the unemployment rate rising from 11.93–14.39% in 2023. Herat's host population also faces increasing unemployment and poverty rates (FGD 14/07/2024 a; FGD 14/07/2024 b; Hasht-e Subh 08/04/2024; Statista accessed 20/07/2024). Consequently, both host communities and returnees are suffering from long-term unemployment. This often forces returnees, who have already experienced financial hardship and whose resources have been depleted, to resort to coping mechanisms with potentially harmful consequences, such as child labour (KII 14/07/2024 a; KII 14/07/2024 c; KII 14/07/2024 e; KP 07/01/2024).

The importance of social capital in resilience in Afghanistan and the compounding impact social exclusion can have on economic survival (and vice versa) further affect the resilience of returnee families and their ability to adapt to shocks (ACAPS 03/06/2024). Being away for a long time may have already weakened many returnees' local ties to work opportunities and coping mechanisms; lack of family support or remaining family ties in areas of return is another point of concern for many returnees. Without close relatives and family members remaining in Afghanistan, some returnees lack knowledge about their areas of return and do not have access to the same potential material or financial support as those with community ties (ADSP/Samuel Hall 13/05/2024). For example, one female returnee in an IOM study noted that the loss of her husband prior to returning significantly increased her fear of uncertainty about the future for both her and her children, triggering not only financial and livelihood but also psychological stress (IOM 13/03/2024). This case highlights how those who return alone or as the only caregiver can have poorer livelihood and reintegration prospects.

ITA work restrictions for women and the Mahram requirement aggravate the difficulties that women returnees face in accessing livelihoods (UNHCR 22/05/2024; KII 18/07/2024 d; FGD 27/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 b). Some women returnees shared that they lived in fear of burdening their families given their inability to contribute to the household income and build long-term plans (UNHCR 22/05/2024). Some resort to selling personal belongings or sending their children to work (KII 18/07/2024 c; NRC 14/12/2023). In Bamyan, people raised that the Mahram requirement, which mandates that a man must accompany a woman travelling more than 72km, was a barrier to women's ability not only to seek work outside city centres but also to travel to hospitals outside the province or in the capital (AJ 26/12/2021; FGD 27/07/2024). Those who risk travelling without a Mahram do so under great mental stress and the overarching threat of detention (KII 27/07/2024 b). These safety concerns, compounded by others that all returnees and Afghans face, lead to additional mental and emotional struggles among women returnees (KII 18/07/2024 b).

Insecurity for returnee children

The lack of education access (for economic or legislative reasons) has severe implications for children's safety and future, including limiting them to lower-income jobs and potentially resulting in boys engaging in child labour and girls being forced into marriage.

Many returnee children, particularly boys, are at high risk of child labour. Many drop out of school (involuntarily or voluntarily) to help provide for their families, usually in menial or dangerous jobs (IOM 04/11/2021; STC 18/04/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 c; KII 18/07/2024 f). In Nimroz, interviewees revealed that some returnee children (mostly boys) travel to Iran via illegal smuggling routes to work and help alleviate their families' food insecurity (KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 c; KII 18/07/2024 f).

Returnee girls are more at risk of experiencing forced and early marriage, domestic violence, chronic disease and stress disorders, lack of access to legal protection, lack of access to essential resources, and limited or restricted access to educational opportunities (UN Women 29/07/2024; OCHA 21/05/2024; Samuel Hall/UNICEF 22/09/2023; KII 18/07/2024 d). Early marriage is a common coping mechanism for returnee families facing various safety and security challenges, including a lack of job and education opportunities, physical violence, and harassment. This practice raises serious concerns regarding the rights and dignity of returnee children (UN Women 29/07/2024).

The future remains a significant concern, even though returnee children demonstrate remarkable resilience in overcoming various difficulties, especially in their education. Despite their ability to cope with immediate challenges and adapt to their circumstances, uncertainty about their long-term livelihood and educational prospects is a constant source of anxiety.

It is important to highlight that financial hardship affects the safety and security of returnees in various ways. Building on the difficulties that many have experienced in the traumatic process of returning and the loss of most of their belongings, insufficient funds can further lead to insecure housing and an increased risk of eviction or homelessness (see section 4.3 below). The issue also limits access to food, healthcare, and WASH, compromising overall health and safety. At the same time, financial stress aggravates mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Financial constraints also limit people's ability to prepare for unexpected shocks – something especially pertinent given the many natural hazards in Afghanistan, with each shock further eroding coping strategies and leaving little opportunity to replenish between them.

Lack of access to adequate shelter and tenure insecurity

Shelter is critical to safety and security because it provides essential physical and mental health protections. Adequate housing protects its residents from threats of violence and theft while preserving their privacy and dignity. Returnees, especially those without safety nets (such as the support of relatives or family or their own housing in areas of origin), struggle to find and remain in adequate shelters, putting many at risk of homelessness, additional displacement, or exploitation at the hands of rental owners or community members (NRC 14/12/2023; EC 22/01/2024). Returnees residing in informal settlements are keenly aware that their accommodation is temporary and that they face the risk of forced eviction. The isolation inherent to living in informal settlements precludes their participation in community life and raises anxiety and frustration (ADSP/Samuel Hall 13/05/2024).

The returnees in Bamyan, Herat, and Nimroz who spoke with ACAPS highlighted their concerns about the lack of personal safety accompanying their lack of access to shelter and described the various challenges they faced (FGD 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 b; KII 18/07/2024 c; KII 18/07/2024 e; KII 18/07/2024 f; FGD 27/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 a; KII 14/07/2024 a; KII 14/07/2024 b; KII 14/07/2024 d; KII 14/07/2024 e; KII 14/07/2024 f). In Nimroz, one returnee expressed owning a plot of land but being unable to build a house owing to financial difficulties upon return, leading them to instead rent a shelter and placing additional financial strain on their resources (KII 18/07/2024 c). Returnees in Khawaja Karim area, also in Nimroz, said that there were insufficient shelters to keep them safe (FGD 18/07/2024 a). Others returned to uninhabitable houses in their areas of origin that they could not afford to have repaired given the lack of income-generating opportunities (KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 b). Interviewees in Bamyan mentioned the same experience of returning to their homes destroyed, while others struggled with their family outgrowing the size of their shelter (FGD 27/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 a; KII 27/07/2024 b; KII 27/07/2024 c).

In Herat, returnees in Kahdistan area (Injil district) reported facing eviction, with rental owners frequently asking them to leave and find another place to live. They shared that this has caused mental stress; as one FGD participant mentioned, "We all need to have a place to settle, and there should be no one bothering us." (FGD 14/07/2024 a) In Ahmad Shah Baba Abdali area (Police District 13), some families returning from Pakistan said that the ITA prevented them from building shelters on their own land, which were already occupied. They have limited opportunities to seek and access justice given a fear of reprisal and the absence of legal systems - the situation is even worse for women. The situation has pushed many to live in tents, with relatives, or in abandoned homes with only surrounding walls with no roofs, making the lack of privacy a key concern (FGD 14/07/2024 c). This lack of privacy could have a greater physical and psychological impact on returnee parents and children who struggle to find safe and secure places to sleep and bathe, particularly affecting the dignity and self-esteem of women and girls and putting them at risk of gender-based violence (UNHCR 22/05/2024; KII 18/07/2024 e).

Lack of access to healthcare (both physical and psychological)

In an Islamic Relief survey conducted in 2023 with new arrivals, almost two-thirds (62%) reported health issues, such as diarrhoea and other gastrointestinal ailments (WHO 18/08/2023; IR 29/11/2023). At the same time, health services are inadequate in most parts of the country, and families lack the financial resources to seek healthcare from private providers. Besides such physical health issues, based on data collected from UNHCR's community-based protection monitoring with returnees, over 87% of respondents experienced mental stress, and returnees had a pressing need for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) upon their arrival (UNHCR 22/05/2024). This is likely because of the many stressors associated with displacement, return, and deportation, along with the multifaceted issues experienced while adapting to a new environment, sometimes intensified by additional stressors (GAPS 10/10/2023; ACAPS 07/12/2023). Some returnees who are also caregivers expressed mental and psychological issues triggered by the uncertainty about their ability to provide for their families (STC 18/04/2024 a). These mental health challenges, worsened by a lack of family support, particularly affect those who have developed stronger or deeper family ties in the country from which they have returned (UNHCR 22/05/2024).

According to interviewees and FGD participants in Bamyan, Herat, and Nimroz, the returnee community, overall, appears to suffer from increased mental health difficulties from a wide range of issues, including (but not limited to) financial hardship, insufficient and insecure shelter and housing, and a lack of educational opportunities. These have contributed to emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and trauma, affecting people's overall wellbeing and daily functioning. These challenges further impede social engagement, weaken coping mechanisms and resilience, and aggravate physical health issues (FGD 27/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 c; KII 18/07/2024 e; FGD 14/07/2024 a; FGD 14/07/2024 b; FGD 18/07/2024 a; FGD 18/07/2024 b). Despite the widespread need for more MHPSS services in Afghanistan, provision remains insufficient and plagued by a lack of understanding about mental disorders, funding, and mental health literacy (Alemi et al. 10/07/2023).

Lack of clean water access

A lack of clean water access for returnees in Nimroz has caused healthcare issues. One interviewee noted that some returnees are using water not fit for drinking and cooking because of a lack of clean alternatives. This often results in illness among families already lacking financial resources and who cannot seek treatment (KII 18/07/2024 b). There are reports that some returnees might have to resort to begging or incurring debts to meet essential needs, such as medical care for their children (LSE 11/12/2023; NRC 14/12/2023; EC 22/01/2024). Interviewees also noted that purchasing water is expensive; as 20L of water costs AFN 15 (USD 0.21), people spend AFN 500–600 (USD 6.9–8.3) to procure a 700-litre tank of water

for daily usage (KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 b; KII 18/07/2024 c; KII 18/07/2024 d). According to the Sphere Minimum Standards, an individual requires between 7.5–15L of water per day for survival (cooking, drinking, and hygiene) (WHO 07/2013). As the median returnee household size in Afghanistan is nine people, a household would consume between 67.5–135L per day to meet their basic needs, making water a costly regular and essential purchase (WB/UNHCR 06/2019). Compared to Nimroz, some other provinces are reported to have cheaper water supplies. For example, in Payok Abad, Nuristan province, water costs AFN 30 (USD 0.41) per month, meaning returnees in these areas may be under slightly less financial pressure to access water (UNICEF 04/12/2023).

In Afghanistan, climate change is exacerbating water scarcity, recurrent droughts, and the limited capacity to maintain water systems. Without adequate attention, children are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition due to dying crops and water-borne diseases from contaminated water sources and poor hygiene. In addition, climate change-induced water scarcity is also a driver of displacement, and the influx of returnees into areas with greater water scarcity can put further pressure on already insufficient resources (ACAPS 04/07/2024; UNICEF accessed 14/08/2024).

It is important to emphasise that the water crisis in Afghanistan, as in many other countries, is deeply personal for women and girls. They are often responsible for securing water essential for drinking, cooking, sanitation, and hygiene for their families. This responsibility may involve standing in long lines or walking great distances, exposing them to the risk of gender-based violence. Access to safe and clean water is also crucial for maintaining women's hygiene and dignity, especially during menstruation, and its absence can lead to significant medical and psychological distress (Water.org accessed 12/08/2024; WHO 06/07/2023).

Lack of civil and legal documentation

Obtaining civil and legal documentation is challenging for many Afghans. More than four decades of conflict have led to significant disruptions to Afghanistan's governance and administrative systems, as well as inconsistent services for the provision of civil and legal documents, such as birth certificates (UNHCR 22/05/2024). Some have found ways to navigate complex legal processes or leverage networks for assistance. Returnees, especially those resettled in unfamiliar locations and without local contacts, do not have access to the same networks and struggle to obtain civil and legal documentation, rendering them susceptible to a lack of legal protection and creating barriers to accessing essential services, such as shelter, employment, and education (IOM 2023; UNHCR 22/05/2024; STC 18/04/2024 b). While displacement and the validity of documents obtained in the countries to which they fled are presented as the main causes of the lack of civil documentation, some returnees (especially those who are not literate) also lack information and knowledge about the functions of different types of documentation, further hindering their ability to access relevant protection (UNHCR 22/05/2024; ADSP/Samuel Hall 13/05/2024). The lack of support resulting from inadequate documentation may lead to the adoption of coping mechanisms with potentially negative consequences, such as begging, child labour, and irregular migration, exposing people to further risks (IOM 04/11/2021).

Education access in Afghanistan normally requires previous school documentation and a Tazkira (Afghan national ID), but sudden and forced returns have left many returnees unable to prepare such documents (Holloway et al. 16/11/2022). As a result, returnee children are more likely to be denied entry to schools. According to Save the Children, nearly two-thirds of returnee children have not been enrolled in school, primarily because of a lack of documentation for registration (EC 22/01/2024). Returnees in Bamyan also reported that the lack of civil documentation (Tazkira, Nikah Khat or marriage certificate, etc.) has also restricted their freedom of movement (FGD 24/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 a). The cost of obtaining an electronic or paper Tazkira remains high for many returnees, who lack sources of income. This is compounded by stringent requirements, such as letters of support from areas of origin, and the absence of service centres in most districts (IOM 2023; UNHCR 11/06/2024). In some cases, the ITA has detained returning families who lack certain civil documents (FGD 24/07/2024).

Discrimination and physical violence

Returnees who are members of religious and ethnic minorities are more likely to experience discrimination, with anecdotes of discriminatory activities towards religious (including Shias, Christians, Ahmadis, and Ismailis) and ethnic minorities (Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, Tajik) in the country. The discrimination includes restrictions on religious events (imposed for security reasons), reports of ITA forces shooting Shia Muslims during an Ashura commemoration, and exclusively Sunni education in school (AI accessed 25/07/2024). Returnees and those who have migrated to areas other than their places of origin may be more vulnerable to this discrimination. Hazara Afghans in Pakistan facing forced return have expressed fear that they are being sent back to the 'slaughterhouse' and of facing renewed persecution (BBC 05/12/2023; Context 27/10/2023; TD 24/01/2024). This is likely aggravated by the fact that Hazara communities who remained in Afghanistan perceive cases where the ITA has settled land and livestock disputes in favour of the Kuchi community as ethnically charged, and there are reports that some have been forced to pay compensation for cases that occurred two decades ago (AI accessed 25/07/2024).

According to Amnesty International, there has also been physical damage to the property of Hazara communities, including homes and crops, as well as cases of deaths and beatings of Hazara community members (AI accessed 25/07/2024). An OCHA assessment found that returnees across the nation are experiencing varying extents of physical violence, harassment, threats, and discrimination, including violence in schools (OCHA 21/05/2024). Women and girls returning from Pakistan and Iran, especially those living in informal resettlement and makeshift camps, are at higher risk, leading them to adopt potentially harmful coping mechanisms, such as early marriage, which they perceive to increase their safety from such violence (UN Women 29/07/2024). Gender-based violence also puts female returnees at great risk, with some women returning pregnant or already previously surviving sexual violence (KII 18/07/2024 d; ADSP/Samuel Hall 13/05/2024). For returnees fleeing violence or persecution, forced return may coerce them to turn back to areas where such threats continue to be present.

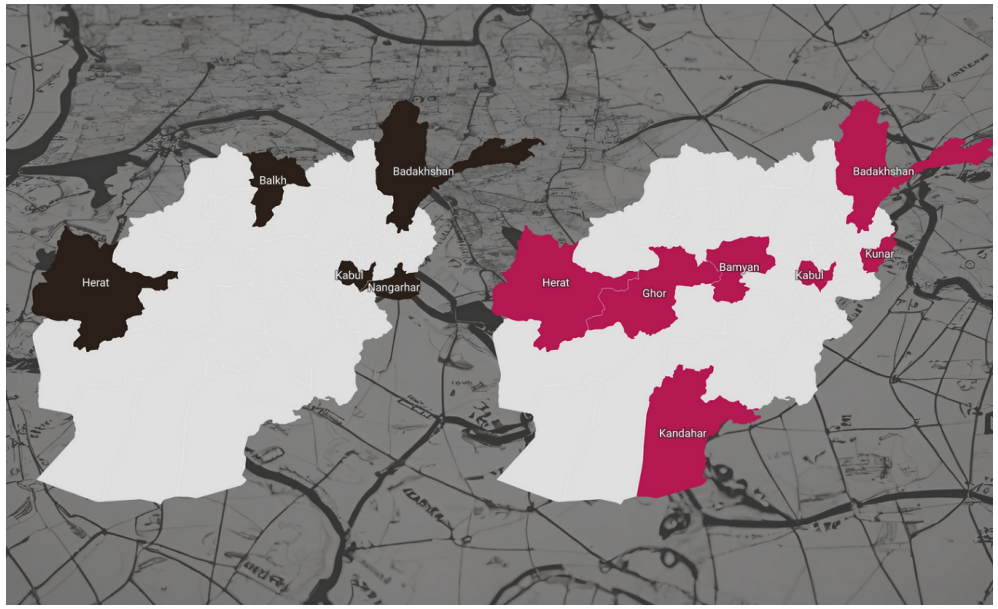
Exposure to explosive ordnance

Decades of armed conflict have resulted in Afghanistan having one of the highest contamination rates from explosive hazards in the world. Afghans face the risk of EO exposure even as they go about their routine activities, such as gathering wood for fuel (HI 10/07/2024). According to a Humanity & Inclusion assessment, boys and returnees are at higher risk of exposure to EOs, mainly because they lack the knowledge to navigate a contaminated environment (HI 10/07/2024; UNHCR 22/05/2024).

Border insecurity and armed conflict

Interviewees in Herat generally perceived the province as a safe place for returnees. Herat has attracted returnees originally from neighbouring provinces, such as Badghis, Faryab, and Ghor, as well as from more distant provinces such as Kunar (FGD 14/07/2024 a; FGD 14/07/2024 b; FGD 14/07/2024 c; FGD 14/07/2024 d; KII 14/07/2024 a; KII 14/07/2024 b; KII 14/07/2024 c; KII 14/07/2024 d; KII 14/07/2024 e; KII 14/07/2024 f). Similarly, interviewees and FGD participants in Bamyan noted that the province seemed generally safer than before (FGD 27/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 d; KII 27/07/2024 e; KII 27/07/2024 f). In contrast, interviewees in Nimroz expressed concerns about border instability with neighbouring countries, a security concern for both returnees and the host community (FGD 18/07/2024 b). For example, in 2023, there were exchanges of fire between ITA forces and Iran over water disputes, leading to increased tensions between the two countries (Reuters 27/05/2023). This tension is likely to escalate in the coming years given a predicted reduction in water resources caused by climate change (ACAPS 31/07/2024). FGD participants also mentioned that people residing near the border are especially vulnerable to human trafficking (FGD 18/07/2024 b).

Map 1. Provinces with IS-KP claimed attacks between 1 January and 8 June 2023 (left) and between 1 January – 8 June 2024 (right)



Source: Afghan Witness (19/06/2024)

While incidents of armed conflict have declined since the ITA's return to power, there have been occasional incidents of intra-group conflict between different factions of the ITA, and the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP) has expanded the territory in which they operate (see Map 1) (Hasht-e Subh 16/04/2023; ICG 12/08/2022; Afghan Witness 19/06/2024; Crisis 24 17/05/2024). Both host communities and returnees in these conflict zones face not only direct physical threats but also the risk of armed group recruitment (OCHA 21/05/2024). According to the European Union Agency for Asylum, the IS-KP has increased its recruitment in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of international forces, with 1,500–4,000 fighters recorded in rural areas of Kunar and Nangarhar provinces by May 2022. The deteriorating economy has been a key driver of the recruitment; there are reports of the group offering AFN 35,000 (USD 487) to its fighters (EUAA accessed 06/08/2024). Returnees may be more vulnerable to such recruitment given a combination of factors such as trauma, economic hardship, social isolation, and reintegration challenges, particularly for those who have been exposed to extremist ideologies, which would make them more susceptible to radicalisation. IS-KP attacks in Herat have also specifically targeted Shia Hazaras, meaning being a Shia Hazara could be a compounding risk factor for violence for returnees (AfIntl 30/04/2024; HRW 03/05/2024).

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE NEEDS, AS EXPRESSED BY RETURNEES

Lack of access to essential humanitarian aid, such as water, food, and WASH services, remains a significant challenge for returnees, affecting their ability to live with dignity and aggravating existing human safety and security issues (UNHCR 22/05/2024; Samuel Hall/ UNICEF 22/09/2023). Returnees in Bamyan, Herat, and Nimroz collectively echoed this point, expressing difficulty in accessing basic aid and services, including cash, food, water, hygiene kits, and medical care (KII 18/07/2024 b; KII 18/07/2024 d; FGD 18/07/2024 b; FGD 14/07/2024 a; FGD 14/07/2024 b; FGD 14/07/2024 c; FGD 14/07/2024 d; KII 27/07/2024 a). The isolated and remote geographical locations of Bamyan and Nimroz also further challenge physical access to some of these essential services (KII 27/07/2024 a; UNFPA 16/03/2023). For example, in Nimroz, doctors often travel for hours in difficult conditions and across uneven (and sometimes contaminated) terrain to reach a woman in labour (UNFPA 16/03/2023). Returnees in Zaranj also said that no hospitals can provide continuous support for children, women, people with disabilities, and older people in the area, causing long-term concerns among those who especially need sustainable medical attention (FGD 18/07/2024 b). A 2024 OCHA assessment has found that although the rate is low, returnees are denied access to services across the country, particularly in the eastern region. The Mahram requirement and a lack of female humanitarian staff are other common barriers preventing female returnees from accessing humanitarian services (OCHA 21/05/2024).

Returnees in Bamyan, Herat, and Nimroz collectively expressed the need for a more targeted approach to humanitarian assistance that could make aid and services more efficient, such as prioritising the provision of more livelihood and employment opportunities for at least one member who is the head of the household (FGD 27/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 a; KII 27/07/2024 b; KII 27/07/2024 c; KII 14/07/2024 a; KII 14/07/2024 b; KII 14/07/2024 c; KII 14/07/2024 d; KII 14/07/2024 e; KII 14/07/2024 f; KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 b; KII 18/07/2024 c; FGD 18/07/2024 a; FGD 18/07/2024 b). This could include small-scale cash-for-food projects that allow people, especially women-headed households, to generate a minimum amount of income (FGD 27/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 a). One returnee in Nimroz also highlighted the need for more targeted economic support for vulnerable families with children at high risk of child labour (KII 18/07/2024 a).

Returnees across the board identified the need for more shelter support and the provision of construction materials, noting that this would help address some key protection concerns (FGD 27/07/2024; KII 27/07/2024 a; KII 27/07/2024 b; KII 27/07/2024 c; KII 14/07/2024 a; KII 14/07/2024 b; KII 14/07/2024 c; KII 14/07/2024 d; KII 14/07/2024 e; KII 14/07/2024 f; KII 18/07/2024 a; KII 18/07/2024 b; KII 18/07/2024 e; KII 18/07/2024 f). Returnees in Herat also highlighted the importance of prioritising educational opportunities for girls and stressed the need for more health centres (FGD 14/07/2024 a; FGD 14/07/2024 b; FGD 14/07/2024 c; FGD 14/07/2024 d; KII 14/07/2024 b; KII 14/07/2024 f; KII 14/07/2024 a). Returnees in Bayman emphasised that the provision of vocational training and education for women and girls should be given equal priority. They indicated that working with influential people in local communities and the people's commission could be helpful, especially in addressing serious human safety and security issues (KII 27/07/2024 a; KII 27/07/2024 b).

Returnees in Bamyan, Herat, and Nimroz are concerned about their safety, access to basic services, and housing. They also face difficulties with economic opportunities, social integration, and legal documentation, as well as psychosocial challenges related to displacement and reintegration. While almost all interviewees and FGD participants expressed gratitude and underscored the importance of humanitarian assistance in enabling them to address their human safety and security concerns, a shared sentiment – apart from their call for more targeted assistance – was the inadequacy of the current level of assistance and services available to them.