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REFUGEES, FORCED MIGRATION AND SECURITY IN AFGHANISTAN: PROSPECTS FOR INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN 2017

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For the majority of Afghans the socio-economic situation has barely improved since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Meanwhile, the armed insurgency has gradually intensified and the Afghan security forces do not control more than half of the country. The lack of security and future prospects has generated “push factors” for Afghans to seek refuge abroad, while Europe’s attractiveness has led to its appeal with a “pull factor”. This “push and pull” combination has triggered a new wave of migration. From the European perspective, the focus should be to manage the root causes of migration by providing civil and military support, and engaging regional actors and transit countries such as Iran and Pakistan, to adequately control the migration flows within the region.

Asymmetric Conflict and Civil War

The situation in Afghanistan can be categorised as a domestic armed conflict with characteristics of a multifaceted civil war: an armed insurgency waged by rival militant factions against the government and its institutions, a struggle for power and influence amongst different ethnic groups, a battle against the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), and a war to influence the withdrawal of international troops. Such developments can be attributed to a sense of lack of security, give rise to organised violence and adversely affect the local population.

The National Unity Government (NUG), headed by Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, still relies on international donors and has been in turmoil since its inauguration in 2014. It has failed to provide adequate security and uphold the rule of law. Efforts for peace negotiations with the Taliban and other groups have been ongoing for years and are used to portray consensus within the NUG. On the downside, corruption, favouritism, organised crime and discrimination of minorities has weakened the trust of the population.

Since 2001, the Taliban have regained their lost power and pose the greatest threat to the government. Their asymmetric warfare is aimed at capturing provincial capitals, attacking and demoralizing the ANDSF, and forcing international troops out of the country in order to realise their vision of an Islamic Emirate. In a similar fashion to the Taliban, militia leaders benefit from the flourishing shadow economy. Opium production continues to grow annually benefiting corrupt officials, insurgents, middlemen and farmers.

Afghan Security Forces: Between Quantity and Quality

The Afghan National Army (ANA) has an official strength of 195,000 soldiers and has limited scope to be proactive. It suffers from a lack of morale, corruption, increasing levels of desertion, logistical problems and the distrust of the population. Whenever the ANA and the Afghan Special Forces launch offensives, they are mostly dependent on US close air support and suffer from a high level of casualties. Due to its limitations, the ANA has to concentrate its efforts in controlling and defending urban areas. Moreover, the

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Afghan National Police (ANP), with an official strength of 157,000, the Afghan Local Police (ALP), and other government-related forces are limited in their capacity to provide security and to uphold the rule of law.

Since 2015, the NATO non-combat Resolute Support Mission (RSM) is providing training and military assistance to the ANA on the corps level and advice to the Defence and Interior Ministries. Approximately 13,500 soldiers are engaged with the RSM. Reinforcements to assist on the brigade level and improve combat capacities are currently under debate. Within the framework of the full-spectrum Operation Freedom's Sentinel, the US continues to fight transnational terrorism (e.g. Al-Qaeda, Daesh), and provide support to Afghan Special Forces in military-strategic matters to pressure the Taliban into peace negotiations. The US also finds itself in a geopolitical rivalry with China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan who are also actively pursuing their interests in Afghanistan.

Factors triggering Migration

General remarks: In 2016, with over 2.7 million officially registered refugees, UNHCR statistics on migration indicated that Afghans constituted as the second highest refugee population in the world. With more than 11,000 asylum applications, Afghans made the second largest group seeking refuge in Austria. Afghan migration could have been triggered by different factors. It may have been directly associated to the armed conflict, or the mass repatriations from Pakistan and Iran. Deeply rooted factors are the lack of jobs, the desire for a better education and social pressure. Finally, making strategic use of social media and the sudden decrease in fees charged by the human traffickers are factors that boost mobility and encourage migration.

Lack of prospects: Since the beginning of the Afghan turmoil, the population has been gradually deprived of its ability to experience and exercise their basic human rights. This underlines the extreme vulnerable

situation of women and children. Increasing desertification, water scarcity and poor healthcare have also contributed to this push factor. Disillusionment has threatened the dream of a peaceful and prosperous future.

Hostilities: Almost one half of the districts are beleaguered or under Taliban control. An increase in terrorist attacks and combat operations have led to high civilian casualties. As a consequence, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has increased to 1.2 million in 2016. Once the hostilities are over, many attempt to return to their villages in order to not lose their plot of land. Often, the only option is fleeing to urban areas that are growing rapidly and considered relatively safe.

Economic factors: Thousands of Afghans have lost their well-paid jobs and contracts after the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2014. This is considered as a major push factor contributing to the migration. The remaining troops, private security companies and international NGOs have been downsized and cannot provide employment for the masses. Furthermore, the Hawala banking system facilitates the funding of migration.

Insecurity in rural areas: In the countryside security is not only determined by political, ideological or personal affiliations, but by the goodwill of the Taliban or the militia leaders. Disputes due to personal pride, ownership of land and rivalries revolving around women are common amongst all ethnicities. The cultivation of opium on more than 2,000 square kilometres of arable land, or e.g. the plantation of wheat, saffron and watermelons are the primary sources of income for the farmers and substantial reasons to remain settled.

Poor law enforcement and lack of legal structures: The EUPOL mission in Afghanistan which was mandated to provide support to the Interior Ministry was terminated in 2016, without having completed all of

its objectives. Such discontinuance of programmes due to the deteriorating security situation is very common amongst the international missions. The ANP with its paramilitary police is barely able to implement law-enforcement tasks leading to an increase in organised crime. Frequent skirmishes occur on matters relating to land and property ownership due to the lack of land registry records. Such deficiencies increase the frustration of the population thus leaving no option but to migrate.

Regional Migration Dimension: The Role of Pakistan and Iran

Historically, labour migration is not uncommon for Afghans. Records show such movement occurred as far back as the 18th century (e.g. to India, Indonesia or Australia). Remittances sent back home, especially from Iran and Pakistan, represent a vital economic lifeline for most Afghans. Since the start of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Iran and Pakistan are providing temporary protection to millions of Afghans. In 2017, there are approximately one million officially registered Afghan refugees in both countries and at least another million unregistered. Many earn a living as a cheap labour force, others are jobless and living in hardship.

Since 1979, Afghans in Pakistan were allowed to establish small businesses hence generating a strong pull factor. However, since 2015, hundreds of thousands have been repatriated back to Afghanistan. This has negatively affected the well-being of the returnees due to the lack of accommodation and security and also represents a strong push factor to Europe. UNHCR supports the repatriated Afghans from Pakistan with a small allowance to ease their hardship.

Since 2015, a substantial number of Afghan asylum seekers have arrived via Iran and Pakistan to Austria. Frequently, the origin (place of initial departure) of Afghans migrating to Europe cannot be identified easily. Those who are repatriated from the

EU, Iran or Pakistan only have minimal chances to reintegration without a social safety net. Some returnees feel stigmatised and often struggle to reconnect with their families. Many depart again to Iran, Turkey or Europe, whereas a minority joins the insurgency, criminal groups or fall victim into the drug scene. The current number of drug consumers in Afghanistan stands between five to six million.

Conclusions and possible Solutions

The socio-economic regression in Afghanistan can be linked to the sudden drop in international assistance to a certain extent. As a result the level of assistance provided to the repatriated Afghans and IDPs is not seen as a priority. In early 2017, the EU Commission and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) started a project to support and reintegrate the repatriated Afghans from the EU in Afghanistan. However, many Afghans believe that due to the lack of security and future prospects in Afghanistan they have no other choice but to migrate to Europe. This leads to a strong pull factor and once in a lifetime opportunity before all the routes to Europe are closed off.

The primary goal of international crisis management should be to offer viable perspectives and help improve the security situation. Providing safe zones and guaranteeing the protection of civilians can lead to the decrease in the number of individuals perceiving migration as a last resort. Due to the long history of migration in Afghanistan, human traffickers are not perceived negatively by the Afghan society, contrary to how they are perceived in Syria. It is important to increase the pressure on the traffickers and establish legal means of migration to the EU. Measures of deterrence like the closure of the Balkan route have reduced migratory flows and led to an increase in trafficking fares.

Afghans should locally counter the propaganda of human traffickers by raising awareness among their fellow-citizens via radio

and social media. In contrast, nation-wide initiatives such as “Afghanistan needs you” have proven ineffective and do not deter migrants. Furthermore, restricting access to the welfare system as modelled in Sweden has also proved to reduce the pull factor.

Moreover, the establishment of the rule of law in Afghanistan is imperative and such efforts should be increased. The mismanagement of international aid should be prioritized and an independent anti corruption organization, such as the European Court of Auditors, should be engaged. The support programmes for Afghan authorities should be reformed and a system of incentives established to strengthen the loyalty within the ANA and ANP.

Implementing the 2016 ‘Joint Way Forward’ agreement on migration and readmission procedures between Afghanistan and the EU is an immense challenge on a legal and ethical level. Iran and Pakistan should be more involved in areas of transnational migration. The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), which also includes Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, could help to tackle migration related issues on the regional level with the support of the EU.

Recommendations

- There are considerable political challenges when it comes to refugee, forced migration and security in Afghanistan that directly affects the EU and the long-term implications are not foreseeable. Creating new prospects for Afghans in Afghanistan is of strategic relevance. The key proposal is a coherent migration and integration policy coordinated across the EU with substantial Austrian contribution.
- Governmental and non-governmental actors with an emphasis on development cooperation should focus on improving the local populations’ living conditions in Afghanistan. Attention needs to be given to healthcare, schooling, vocational

training and agricultural development. Austrian flagship projects could generate incomes and reduce push factors. Herat province, which serves as a hub for migration, would be a suitable point of action. The impacts of Austrian contributions to international reconstruction funds for Afghanistan have to be reassessed.

- The Austrian Armed Forces should continue their presence in Afghanistan and further increase their support to the ANDSF, especially in the areas relating to logistics, command and control, mountain warfare and special operations forces. The support of local safety zones is also an appropriate and useful measure.
- The cooperation with Vienna-based organisations dealing with Afghanistan (e.g. the International Centre for Migration Policy Development / ICMPD or the IOM) within the framework of a Whole-of-System approach could facilitate Austria’s engagement in the region, thus making it more effective. Measures to fight corruption should be made in coordination with the International Anti-Corruption Academy (IACA) in Vienna. Lastly, the civil society, NGOs, and the Afghan community in Austria should also be engaged during policy-making and implementation efforts.

Personal Data:

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