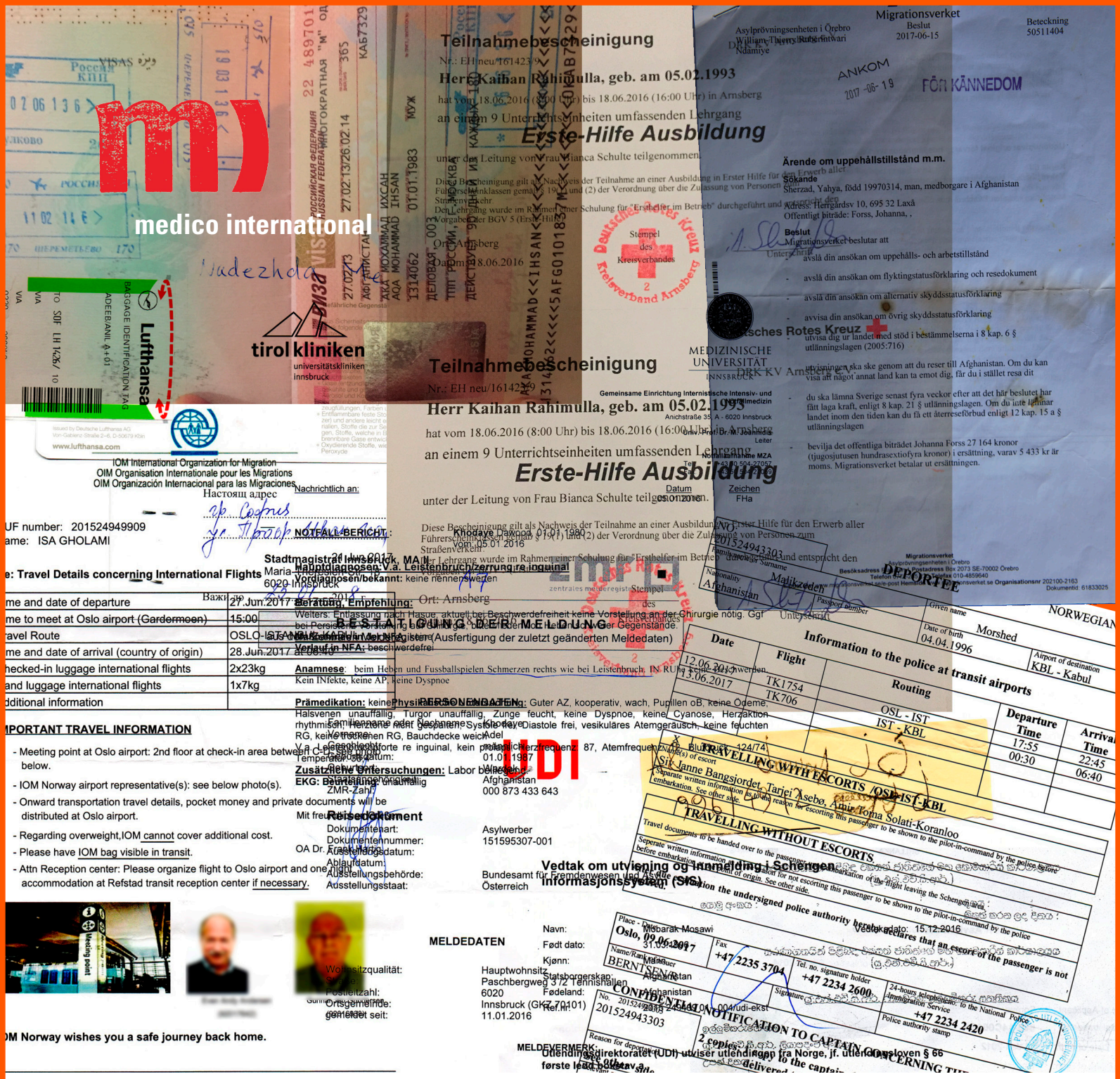

Deportation to Afghanistan:
A Challenge to State Legitimacy and Stability?

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AHRDO
Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization

Deportation to Afghanistan

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Organizational Mission

Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO) aims to improve the human rights condition of Afghan citizens, contribute to the country's democratic development, promote understanding and compliance with International Humanitarian Law in situations of armed conflict, foster inter-ethnic and inter-community peace and communication, and develop public memory and recollection of war victims as an antidote to a deep-seated culture of impunity and a profoundly ingrained ethos of war and violence in the country.

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Abbreviations

AAN	Afghanistan Analysts Network
AHRDO	Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization
CCTV	(Closed-circuit Television (also known as video surveillance
IPA	Internal Protection Alternative
ISKP	Islamic State of Khorasan Province
ECRE	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
EU	European Union
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USD	United States Dollar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The population of Afghan citizens deported back to Afghanistan from European countries constitutes a significant community, which has the potential of contributing to a further destabilisation of Afghanistan. Deportees make up of a population group extremely traumatized by their long, dangerous and expensive journeys in hopes of better and safe places to begin new chapters in the lives. A real and/or perceived sense of deep insecurity and lack of safety were cited as the major factors causing the original flight of the deportees interviewed. Escape from extreme poverty and lack of hope and prospects for improvement in their living conditions were cited as secondary factors for seeking refuge outside of Afghanistan. Almost all the deportees interviewed during this research reiterated that they had never thought of the government as an effective source of protection and security, nor did they think that the government would be able to protect them from risks and dangers in the foreseeable future.

The deportee population from Europe, coupled with large number of deportations from regional countries especially Iran and Pakistan, has the potential to transform into an important source of threat and instability in the country. These Afghan citizens, in fact, are extremely vulnerable to recruitment by criminal and insurgent groups. Extremely disgruntled at the way the National Unity Government has facilitated their deportation, as the deportees believe, the deportees could become a significant source of disturbances. They could be quickly mobilised to act against the state or could be exploited by other social and political groups and movements to challenge the authority of the government.

Many factors, so far, have accounted for lack of national mobilisation of the deportee population as an anti-state force. First, the deportee population is extremely scattered across different regions, which makes networking and communication highly difficult. Second, they struggle for their survival and the survival of their family members after an extremely difficult and financially crippling journey. Third, many expressed fear of being physically eliminated by the government directly and indirectly. The deportees interviewed believed that the attacks on public demonstrations in Kabul and elsewhere were machinations by government elements and agencies. And most importantly, the plight of the deportees has been overshadowed by the emergence of other protest movements, women's rights issues and the encroachment of Taliban into hitherto safe areas of the country. Lack of empathy and the disengagement of civil society and human rights groups with the deportee population and their issues have also contributed to their isolation and disenfranchisement.

By recognising Afghan deportees as a fast expanding population group in the face of current large-scale deportations from various countries in the Global North, this research report has explored the question of how deportees, and in particular Afghan deportees from European countries, could delegitimise and ultimately weaken and destabilise the Afghan State. This is an exploratory study in nature and scope, aimed at identifying the key sources of resentment amongst the deportee population and the potential

ways and methods they might choose to express their grievances and resentment against the Afghan State.

The report principally draws on semi-structured interviews with 50 returnees and deportees from Europe in four regional centres of the country: Balkh, Kabul, Herat and Nangarhar. Research interviews were also conducted with 20 civil society and human rights activists and Afghan government officials.

The report is divided into five sections. The first section provides an overview of the Afghan deportee population. Section two focuses on key sources of resentment and grievances of the deportee population; section three analyses the ways and mechanisms that the deportees might use to express their dissatisfaction towards the State; section four analyses the linkage between the deportee population and state legitimacy and stability. Section five concludes the report.

An Overview: Statistics, Updates and Trends in Deportation

In October 2016, Afghanistan signed a readmission agreement, Joint Way Forward, with the European Union. Within the framework of this agreement, Afghanistan committed itself to readmit those Afghan whose application for refugee and protection status were rejected in return for targeted reintegration assistance. Afghanistan also committed itself to cooperate with EU member states to reduce and prevent Afghan migration to European countries.[1] The Joint Way Forward did not explicitly condition development aid to readmission and the prevention of Afghan migration to Europe but the Afghan government promoted a national narrative according to which it was forced to sign the agreement in order to ensure the flow of development aid essential for the survival of the Afghan population.

The agreement created a split within the Afghan government, which saw the minister of repatriation and the Chief Executive against President Ashraf Ghani. Ultimately, President Ghani's close aide signed the Agreement[2] after the Minster of Repatriation's refusal to cooperate. The split with the National Unity Government largely expressed itself in the form of a tacit Non-Pasthun alignment against the Pashtuns, thus, leading to increased ethnic polarisation outside the government too. The circulation of idea of safe regional zones for deportation further fuelled the fears among the non-Pasthuns. Certain elements of the Joint Way Forward favourable to European Member States have been successfully implemented. Thousands of Afghans have been deported against a worsening conflict situation ever since the agreement was signed and the migration of Afghans towards the European Union has experienced a dramatic drop, 76% by 2017[3].[4] Other elements of the agreement, however, such as reintegration have not been as rigorously implemented. Of the 50 deportees interviewed, none had benefited from any integration programs.

According to Eurostat, 19,390 individuals were returned across the span of a three years' timeframe: 6,620 in 2017, 9,480 in 2016 and 3,290 in 2015. The Afghan Ministry of Repatriation reported 8564 returns from 2014 to mid-2019. This stands in stark contrast with Eurostat figures, revealing that the Afghan government has been unable to track to number of returns thoroughly. Research interviews with 50 deportees showed that the Afghan government has not engaged with them at all, other than having border police harassing them at the Kabul airport upon return.

As mentioned above, it appears that the Joint Way Forward has achieved a decrease in migratory movements of Afghans towards the European Union and a significant number of deportations of Afghans to an extremely volatile conflict situation. What has not been achieved, however, is the European-aided reintegration of Afghan deportees envisaged in the agreement. Provision of a small amount of cash as an incentive for voluntary return has helped the most immediate needs of those deported' but this ob-

1. Joint Way Forward on migration issues between Afghanistan and the EU, October 2016
2. Jelena Bjelica, Afghanistan Analyst Network, EU and Afghanistan Get Deal on Migrants: Disagreements, pressure and last minute politics
3. Amnesty International, Index: ASA11/9262/2018, Public Statement, p. 5, October 2018
4. ABC

viously cannot be compared to any meaningful form of reintegration assistance.

In recognition of the high risks faced by those deported to Afghanistan, Amnesty International has assessed all returns to Afghanistan as amounting to a breach of the principle of non-refoulement[1]. Similarly, in August 2018 UNHCR considered Kabul to be unsuitable as an internal protection alternative (IPA), finding that the situation in the capital city had deteriorated by then[2]. Despite the escalating violence on the ground and recommendations by refugee organizations, deportations from Europe to Afghanistan continue unabated.

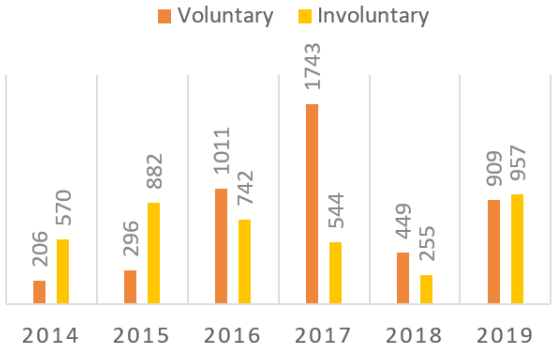

Figure 1 Total Returns, 2014 to mid-2019

Painful Tales, Infinite Suffering and Distressing Traumas

Irrespective of the reasons for their flight, the hazardous journeys experienced by the deported Afghan refugees and migrants interviewed as part of this project had a devastating impact on their personal lives and on that of their families. For many of the deportees, their lives have changed irreversibly. Even if they succeeded in reconstructing their lives financially, it will take them significantly longer to recover psychologically. For, alongside the enormous financial costs the flight has brought about, the deportees have experienced and witnessed numerous traumatic incidents along the way to their destination countries.[3]

This research presents a nuanced understanding of the plights, traumas, and excruciating suffering that the Afghan refugees have encountered in their travel to their destination countries, before delving into the questions of how they have reintegrated into their communities of origin, their relationship with the State, and the impact that their return has had in terms of overall state stability and legitimacy in Afghanistan.

To his end, this research has divided the key challenges faced by the deportees into distinct categories, in an attempt to make their multifaceted plight more understandable. We have conducted 50 structured and semi-structured interviews Afghan deportees from Europe and another 20 interviews with civil society and Afghan government officials. This research carried out over the course of 8 months from April to November 2018 , has established that amongst the risks experienced while on the move towards Europe, the most recurrent included risks of drowning; suffocation; exposure to extreme weather condition; hunger; being shot at by border patrols; being kidnapped by smuggler and criminal networks; being beaten and detained by the police; and witnessing the death of fellow-travellers or seeing dead bodies of other refugees abandoned along the routes. These key categories and patterns of challenges are illustrated as follows:

1. Amnesty International, Index: ASA11/9262/2018, Public Statement, p. 5, October 2018
2. European Council on Refugees and Exiles, No reasons for returns to Afghanistan: ECRE›s recommendation for a suspension of returns to Afghanistan due to the security there and the unfairness of asylum decision-making in Europe, Policy Note 17, p. 2, 2019.
3. AHRDO interviews with deportees in Balkh, Kabul, Herat and Nangarhar, April - December 2018.

Deadly Hazards

About 71%, (35 interviewees) reported that they almost died during their hazardous journeys to Europe. Harking back at the traumatic incidents they had faced, each one of the 35 deportees told they had lost hope for life at one point and their survival was a mere miracle.

First, drowning in the sea between Turkey and Greece was the most frequently cited risk factor for potential death. The incidents at sea were, in large part, blamed on the smugglers who had regularly overloaded unreliable dinghies several times beyond their capacities, often at gunpoint. In certain cases, the smugglers had shot dead the passengers who had refused to get on overloaded dinghies. A deportee from Helmand, described his ordeal in the Greek sea:

> We were still far from the Greek Samos Island. Our guide, the so-called smuggler, got scared as he saw the coast-guard in the far distance. As he redirected the dinghy, it deflated. 45 people began drowning. We struggled in the sea for three hours. What prevented us from dying was our swimming safety jackets…We were all struggling to stay alive. Ultimately, our screams alerted the Greek coast guards. Two guards jumped into the sea, and took us one by one to safety. They operation lasted almost a whole night[1].

Second, extreme weather condition, either extremely cold or extremely hot, along the Iran- Turkey borders, and the Turkey- Bulgaria and Serbia borders, were the second bigger hazard. A deportee from Nangarhar described is suffering as follows:

> We were left stranded one whole night inside a vast wood after the Bulgarian police captured our smuggler. That night was excruciatingly cold. The next day the police came and took us to their compound… our hands and feet had splits as a result of the cold and they were bleeding. When a Bulgarian police saw our wounds, he began weeping. He turned on the heaters and provided us with food[2].

Third, slipping off steep cliffs, high rocks and dangerous tracks, in particular between the Iran- Tukey border has been the third biggest risk factor. Another deportee from Nangarhar recounted his story:

> It took us two days and one night to walk to the Turkish border. The Iran-Turkey border, fended off by barded wire, is extremely dangerous. I saw two people dying right at the border point, one electroluted and the other one because of the heat. We were a group of 35 people. The Turkish border patrols opened fire on us at night. In the wake of the fury of shots, three people, one of whom was my friend, slipped off the high rocks. He has been missing since[3].

Suffocation inside transport trailers and buses with no ventilation was the fourth risks faced by refugees on their way to Europe. A deportee from Mazar shared his story with us:

> When I wanted to go from Greek to Italy, the smuggler put me inside a cotton trailer. I almost died because of lack of oxygen and ventilation and the air inside the trailer was boiling. I tore up the trailer's tarpaulin and called the driver for help. The scared driver took me off the trailer and

1. Interview with R. M., deportee, Helmand-Herat Provinces, April 2018
2. Interview, S. M., Nangarhar, September 2018
3. Interview with B. O. , deportee, Nangarhar, July 2018

> helped me get to a hospital[1].

Another deportee from Mazar told his heart-wrenching story:

> We were 25 people pressed inside a bus with no ventilation, travelling from Bulgaria to Hungary. We began running short of oxygen very soon. Two members of our group died inside the bus. In Hungary, they [the drivers] dropped us inside a street, and dumped the two Somalian dead bodies there as well. We escaped from the street. I do not know what then happed to those bodies[2].

Each of these different risk factors posed a deadly threat to the life of refugees in their own right. Drowning ranked as the more frequent and the more fatal deadly hazards. However, intervention by coast guards often represented a mitigating risk factor with regards to drowning. Many of the deportees believed they had survived from drowning in the sea between Turkey and Greek because of the effective and timely interventions by the Greek coast guards.

Being Shot at and Seeing Unclaimed Dead Bodies

Afghanistan-Iran and Iran-Turkey borders were reported as scenes of almost regular shooting at people who attempted border crossings. Although refugees were also being shot at during their transit through the Iranian mainland, the Iran-Turkey border remains by far the most dangerous in terms of shooting by border patrols. Shootings in these border areas often lead to the death and injury of refugees and migrants en route to Turkey. About 38% (19) of the interviewees claimed that they were shot or their team members were shot at by the Iranian- Turkish border force. A deportee from Mazar describes his ordeal:

> We were a group of 60 people walking down from the Iranian border towards the Turkish border. The Iranian border force opened fire on us. Everyone began running. Only 16 of us could make it to the Turkish side of the border. About 10 people were injured and the remaining were detained by the Iranian border force. On the Turkish side, Turkish forces detained us and took us to a refugee camp[3].

Another deportee provided adds further details:

> We were in a group of four vehicles packed with passengers. As we got close to Iranian check post at the border, the drivers sped up their cars to cross the border. At once, bullets began falling on us from all directions. Two of the four people, accommodated in the trunk of our vehicle were killed. Another car was overturned with all its passengers. We were then taken to a desolate garden where we remained hiding for another 24 hours[4].

And 40% of the interviewees (20) reported that they either saw someone getting injured or dying in the wake of the shooting or they saw dead bodies of people including women and children scattered and left abandoned along the border area between Iran and Turkey. One of the interviewees elaborated his story further:

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1. Interview, A. A., Mazar, July 2018
2. Interview, A. D., Mazar, July 2018
3. Ibid
4. Interview, H. Hamidi, deportee, 6 June 2018

> At the Iranian-Turkish border, both the Iranian and Turkish border forces opened fire on us. Fortunately, nobody was harmed. The tracks were torturous and arduous. Some of us could no longer walk and were left behind in those mountains. Close to the Turkish border, there was a high black mountain. I saw rotten and decaying bodies and skeletons of human beings there…the smell of those decaying bodies was so devastating…[1]

Most stories were extremely depressing. The deportees said that they still felt deeply shaken when recalling those scenes and that they are still haunted by those traumatic memories.

Kidnapping and Torture for Ransom

Criminal networks, alone or in collaboration with human smugglers, frequently kidnap the refugees en route to their destination. The perpetrators harass and often torture their captives by cutting off their ears and noses, extracting their finger nails and beating them. They do not free their victims unless they receive significant amounts of money in return. One of the interviewees described his story:

> While I was travelling from Afghanistan to Iran, the thieves kidnapped us in the border province of Kerman Shah of Iran. The thieves kept us for three days and three nights in an underground refuge. They freed us after we each paid about 1,500 USD as ransom[2].

About 36% (18) of the deportees, stated that either they or one of their fellow travellers were kidnapped, beaten up and tortured by criminal actors and were ultimately forced to purchase their freedom through arranging ransoms to their captors. Kidnapping for ransom, a growing industry along the major flight routes, increases the miseries and financial costs for the population escaping war and conflict situations. One of the interviewees shared his experience:

> We were a group for 10 people including my brother. The smugglers were taking us one by one from the Iranian side of the border to the Turkish side. I was the only one who made it. The Turkish smugglers kidnapped the rest of our group. They asked for 5,000 USD to free each one of their captives. After long and painstaking struggles, we provided some money to the smugglers. And finally my brother and his friend were freed[3].

Beating and Detention by Police

Unlawful crossings along international borders and transits through countries by people on the move makes them vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment by border guards and police forces. Border guards across the countries located along migratory routes often block entry points, and use force and violence to push back refugees and migrants. Under such circumstances violence becomes a modus operandi of enforcement agencies. One of the deportees from Parwan describes his experience with the Iranian police:

> We were 24 people crammed inside a lorry. The smuggler had covered the lorry with a tarpaulin.

1. Ibid
2. Interview, A, November 2018
3. Interview, Z. A, Kabul, June 2018

> We were unable to see the outside. As we reached Kerman, we discovered that we were being taken to a police compound and detained. The Iranian police behaved with us barbarically. They took off all our clothes. They not only beat up and tortured us naked but they also tortured us psychologically, and insulted us with vulgar language. They kept us in detention for one week and then deported us back to Nimruz province[1].

This research indicates that about 58% (29) of the deportees experienced abuse by law enforcement agents along their migration routes. The abuse perpetrated ranged from harassment to beating, extortion and ridiculing. Iranian law enforcement agents were the main perpetrators, followed by Bulgarian, Macedonian and Turkish border and police officers. One of the interviewees from Nangarhar described his experience in Bulgaria:

> I received my deportation letter after one month and a half after the police attacked the refugee camp once again. They searched all of our personal belongings. They were taking people to the toilets where there were no CCTV cameras in order to beat them up. UNHCR staff members were unable to discover these abuses. Nobody dared to tell or show the marks of tortures on their bodies to UNHCR. After UNHCR left the camp, the camp managers were beating up the refugees and they were even detaining them inside the toilets[2].

Part of the abuse by law enforcement agents also included arbitrary detention. The research for this project revealed that about 22% (11) of the interviewees experienced detention either by border guards or police forces during their flight across several international borders.

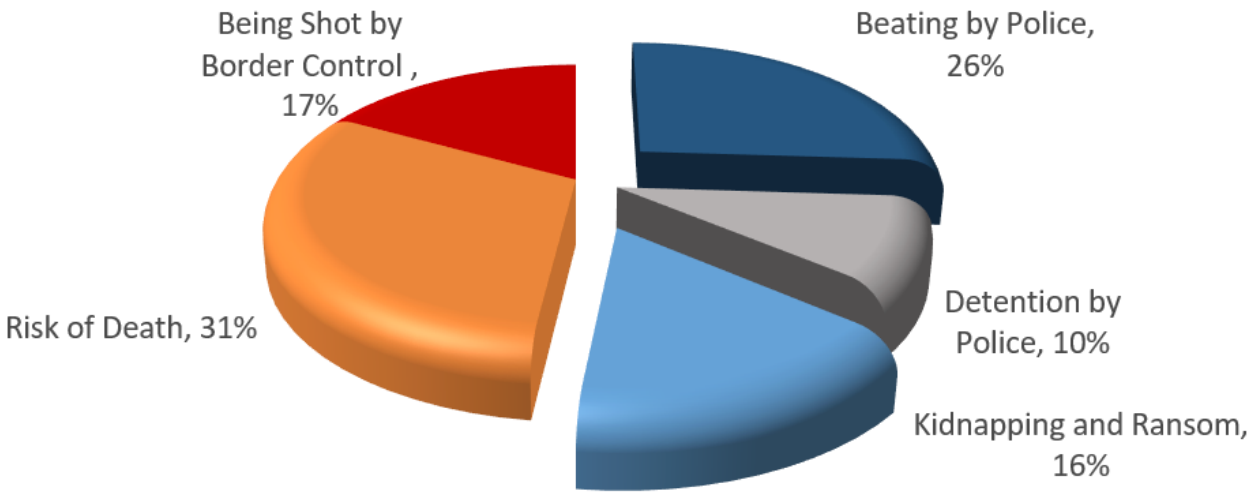

Figure 2 Challenges Faced During Flight

The above graph summarises key categories and patterns of life threatening challenges, abuse and mistreatment experienced by the refugees over the course of their flight towards their destination countries. The magnitude and breath of risks the flight has involved, compounded by abuses and violence committed by a broad array of actors, from law enforcement agencies, to smugglers and criminal enterprises, were formidable. These experiences impacted on the deportees physically, psychologically

1. Interview, H. H, Kabul-Pwarwan, June 2018
2. Interview, M. Hanif, Nangarhar, July 2018

and financially. Cumulatively, the pain, suffering and abuse suffered while on the move had devastating effects for the deportees, at various different levels.

Drivers and causes of flight in the eyes of the deportees

A major factor behind large-scale flight of Afghans has been the escalating armed conflict and deteriorating security in Afghanistan. Afghans, no matter rich or poor and urban or rural, have felt deeply unsafe and insecure in the country. Safety and security have continued to deteriorate in recent years as insurgent groups have made more advances, initiating audacious operations in urban heartlands, and striking areas that were previously known as zones of peace and stability in a country otherwise deeply engulfed in criss-crossing fighting and warfare.

Sustained political in-fighting within the government, as well as between the government and the various political factions, combined with a shrinking economy, expanding corruption and criminal enterprises have further exacerbated the pervasive feeling of insecurity and instability. The persistent threat of international withdrawal and disengagement and the fear of the country's plunging into total anarchy and possibly civil war has equally contributed into deepening a real and perceived sense of insecurity and instability in the country. Overall the main drivers of flight could be grouped as follows:

Security driver

Increasing conflict volatility, decreasing hope and an escalating fear of takeover by the Taliban or the descent of the country into civil war were referred to as the principle factors for the flight towards Europe. About 78% (39) of the deportees interviewed from the country's four selected regions (Balkh, Kabul, Herat and Nangarhar) attributed their initial departure to fear of war and insecurity. A great majority of the deportees, referring to an intensive presence of the spectre of war across the country said that they left the country because they believed they could be killed during fighting between conflict parties. Many others had more specific security concerns and reasons for their departures[1].

Economic driver

Seeking better economic and educational opportunities prompted the interviewees to flee. The armed conflict was not the only factor. Around 14%[2] of the interviewees said that they had left the country in search for better opportunities for themselves and their families. Even within this economic narrative for migration, conflict however represented a significant factor. The continuity of conflict and the constant escalation of violence had deprived them of economic and educational opportunities in the past and, they believed, would continue to do so in the foreseeable future. Although they lacked specific security concern for fleeing the country, they believed that the presence of war and violence would condemned them to misery and suffering. To escape this predicament and change the trajectory of their future, they had chosen to take up the hazardous journey towards Europe[3].

1. Interviews in Balkh, Kabul, Herat and Mazar, April - December 2018
2. Interviews in Balkh, Kabul, Herat and Mazar, April - December 2018
3. Interviews in Balkh, Kabul, Herat and Mazar, April - December 2018

Specific threat-related driver

A third group of the deportees was in a more challenging situation. This category had concerns of very specific nature and these concerns were related to specific individuals and group situations. Land disputes, family vendetta and marriage feuds, leading to violence and vengeance taking, affiliation with government, civil society, media, international agencies, threat and fear of attack by insurgent groups prompted their decision to flee. Close to 8% (4) of the deportees were open to attribute their flight to specific issues. It is worth noting that the deportees were reserved about making a connection between the motive behind their flight and the specific nature of their problem. This was either out of perceived fear or because of the sensitive nature of their issues. They felt rather more comfortable to associate the motives of their flight to the broader state of war and conflict[1].

In sum, deteriorating security was the principal factor behind the initial fight of the people interviewed who were returned back to Afghanistan in recent years, at least since 2014. These reasons for flight were also confirmed by researche conducted by Amnesty International[2], European Research Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)[3] and interdependent policy research organizations.

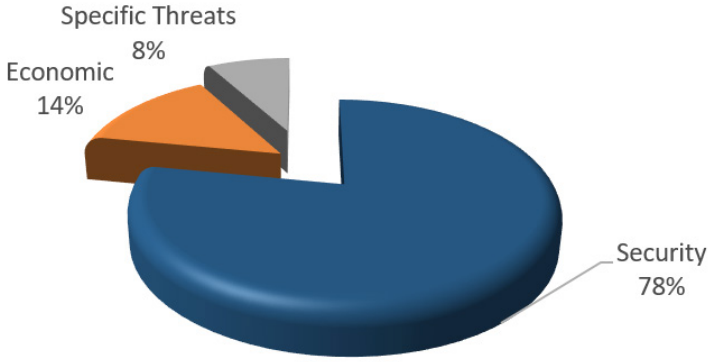

Figure 3 Drivers of Initial Flight

Post-deportation Challenges and prospects

The deportee communities face more complex challenges now than before their departure for Europe. As articulated in the previous section, generalised escalation in violence and war, increasing fear of state failure, and decreasing hope and trust were the major reason for fleeing. The flight itself was an extremely difficult process. Now, after deportation not only the deportees face a worsened situation in Afghanistan, but also new challenges such as financial debt, psychological trauma, and social and community pressure. The post-deportation challenges identified by the interviewees are broadly categorised as following:

Increasing security challenges

The security situation has further deteriorated since the moment in which the interviewees left Afghanistan. Major cities such as Kabul were considered relatively safe a few years ago, but they are also consid-

1. Interviews in Balkh, Kabul, Herat and Mazar, April - December 2018
2. Amnesty International, Index: ASA11/9262/2018, Public Statement, October 2018
3. European Council on Refugees and Exiles, No reasons for returns to Afghanistan: ECRE›s recommendation for a suspension of returns to Afghanistan due to the security there and the unfairness of asylum decision-making in Europe, Policy Note 17, 2019

ered highly unsafe at present. In 2017 Kabul suffered the highest rate of insurgent attacks. Ghazni and Nangarhar, two other areas from which people flee Afghanistan, have also grown more insecure than ever before. Nangarhar has literally turned into the heartland of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), consequentially witnessing intense fighting between the Afghan and the insurgent forces and among the various insurgent groups competing over territory in this province, otherwise known as the eastern gateway to Kabul. Ghazni, a conservative place with a significant support base for the Taliban, straddling the North-South highway, has also turned into a priority target for insurgent attacks. In 2017 the Taliban had almost taken over this strategic province, in order to cut off the South of the country from the North with the aim of strangling the embattled Kabul government. This security deterioration was tangible amongst the interviewees: more than 58% (29) of them felt unable or unsafe to return to their communities of origin. Instead, they opted to remain in Kabul. This development unfolded despite UNHCR's finding, in August 2018, that Kabul did not qualify as an Internal Protection Alternative. In October 2018, Amnesty International also claimed that all returns to Afghanistan amounted to refoulement, in violation of international law.[1]

AHRDO's research indicates that only about 30% (15) of the deportees interviewed returned to where they lived prior to their flight.

About another 10% (5) still live either in hiding or alternate between a couple of places to escape persecution and risk to their lives.

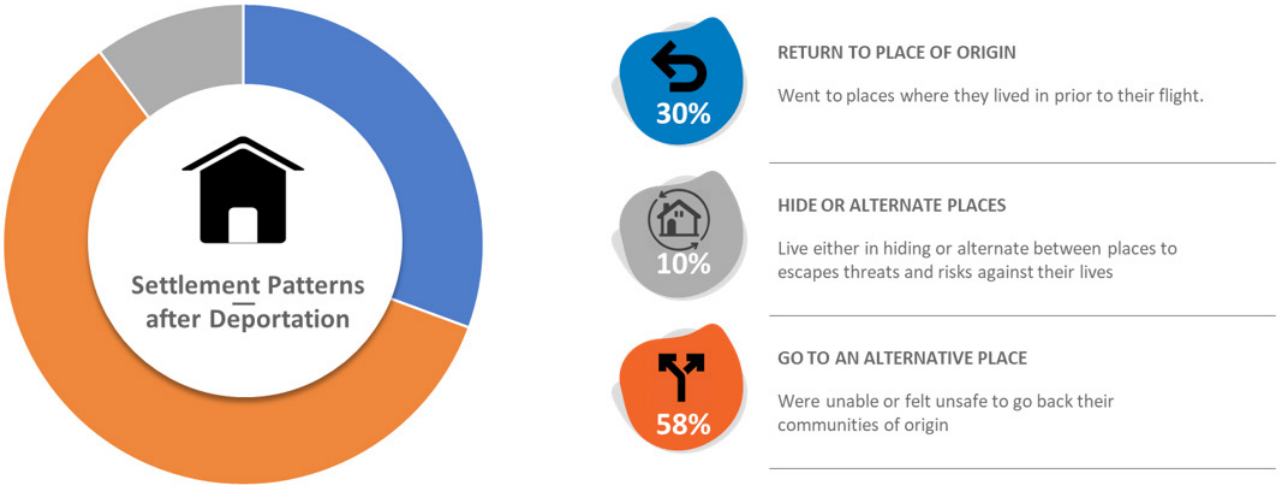

Figure 4 Settlement Patterns after Deportation

This diagram illustrates post-deportation settlement pattern among the deportees. This settlement pattern clearly reflects the (real or perceived) security threats faced by the deportees.

Travel costs, the financial and employment status of the deportees after the flight

The financial cost of being smuggled across multiple international boundaries is very high. Recovery

1. Amnesty International, Index: ASA11/9262/2018, Public Statement, October 2018

from such a scale of financial debt is extremely challenging. Such debt has the potential to negatively impact a deportee's life over the long-term. The majority of the Afghans who have attempted to reach Europe or other countries in the Global North have either sold their land and properties or have borrowed money from their families and friends.

1. The total cost of 45 Afghan deportees' flight – 5 deportees either had not kept a record of their trip finances or preferred not to reveal their travel costs - amounted to over half a million USD (USD 500,400). The average cost of the journey per person stood at 11,120 USD, 17 times more than the per capita income of 642 USD estimated in 2018.The highest amount a deportee had paid for fleeing the country was 40,000 USD and the lowest 2,000 USD. These costs will bear far reaching consequences on economic and financial status of the deportees for years to come.

2. The Afghan deportees now constitute one of the most indebted social groups in Afghanistan. About 82% (41) of the interviewees said that they had become heavily indebted because of their migration attempt and being deported back to Afghanistan. The deportees' recovery from such a significant debt and deep economic shock appears highly unlikely without state intervention.

3. In addition to being significantly indebted, as the research suggests, unemployment has also been a challenge for the deportees. About 84% (42) of the deportees interviewed remains unemployed. Only 16% (8) of them was formally employed or self-employed.

Psychological, financial, traumatic and social pressures have cumulatively caused distress for 16% (8) of deportees. At some point since their deportation, the interviewees have thought of harming themselves physically.

Afghan deportees: A challenge to state legitimacy and stability?

Afghan President Ghani upholds and promotes a nationalist discourse of state-building. Within this framework, it is expected that every Afghan citizen acts patriotically. Escaping the country for whatever reason is considered an unpatriotic act, therefore reproachable in and of itself[1]. It is against this backdrop that President Ghani articulates that he holds no sympathy for Afghans for their migration to Europe and elsewhere and are then deported back to Afghanistan.

The President is wary that constant migratory flows from Afghanistan may be seen as a sign of weakness of the Afghan government and as an indication of weakness of the political leadership of the state[2]. The President, on the other hand, seeks to portray Afghanistan as a strong state with a capable and determined leadership.

As such, President Ashraf Ghani views people fleeing as both a destabilising and a discrediting factor. Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Iran and in the Arab states, in part have been, viewed as sources of instability,and have been recruited by regional governments, criminal networks and insurgent groups alike.[3]

When it comes to Afghans seeking refuge in countries beyond the region, particularly in Europe, the government fears that such flows may be a discrediting factor, which could tarnish the image of the

1. Interviews with civil society activists, Kabul, November 2018
2. Interviews with civil society and refugee experts, Kabul and Herat, September-November, 2018
3. Interview with a conflict analyst, Kabul, September 2018.

Kabul government in the eyes of Western citizens, thereby affecting prospects for aid and development assistance.[1]

However, a narrative of patriotism and state-building, and the concept of a strong state and strong leadership are not sufficient to address the immediate needs of Afghan citizens such as security, employment and better living prospects.

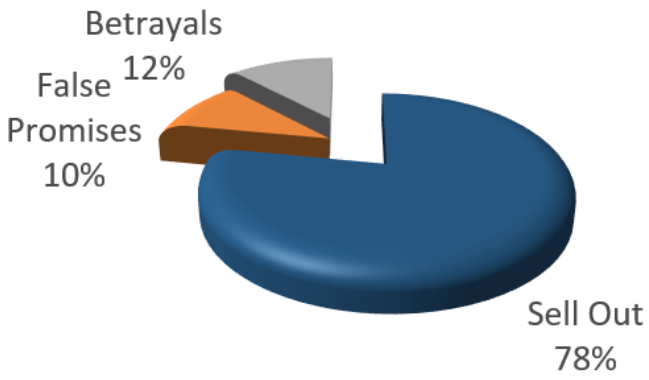

Figure 5 Deportee's View of Government's Readmission Actions

In light of what explained above, the strategic objective of the Afghan government is the reduction, containment and prevention of population flight. On the other hand, this is also very much in line with what European member states aim to achieve.

The following could be discerned as action points of the government by looking at its behaviour and positioning on refugee issues and migratory movements:

Media campaign to mischaracterise all Afghan refugees as economic migrants

Both President Ashraf Ghani and his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, have been explicit on Afghan refugees in Europe. They have characterized them as economic migrants and have referred to high admission rates as an important pull factor, prompting Afghans to leave. Large-scale rejection of refugee status application, according to this narrative which is also echoed in Europe, will neutralise this pull factor. Such presidential statements may affect policy-makers and asylum bodies making determinations on Afghan asylum seekers.

Misrepresenting the security situation

The Afghan government in general seeks to show that it is in control of its territory, that it exercises authority over its people and has the capacity and the capability to provide security and safety for its citizens. Such representation, however, is challenged by independent assessments and by the daily security and safety problems that Afghan people encounter.

Talents and opportunities

The government seeks to show that it creates opportunities for its citizens. According to the government's narrative, there are opportunities in the country and Afghan talents should return to avail themselves of these opportunities and serve their country. The harsh reality on the ground, however, profoundly contradicts such image creation. The poverty and unemployment rate are above 50% and the government is almost the sole employer, characterized by intense political, factional and ethnic infight-

1. Interview with a society activist, Mazar, August 2018

ing over civil servants' appointments.

Readmission of the Afghan deportees from Europe needs to be understood within this context. The Joint Way Forward focuses on three important but interconnected elements: deportation of failed Afghan asylum seekers; reduction, containment and ultimately prevention of Afghan flight to Europe; and a small reintegration intervention to keep critical elements quiet and retain some leverage on the practices of the original country of the refugees. These elements are largely aligned with the way in which the Afghan government strategically engages with refugee issues.

However, these elements stand in stark contrast with the way in which the Afghan deportees interviewed view the security situation in Afghanistan and the way they look at their flight to Europe. These views are explained in more details below.

Escalating violence and war

Armed violence has escalated at a fast pace during the last decade and the conflict has reached the peripheries of major urban centres hitherto considered stable and peaceful. The risk of being killed or injured as a result of frequent attacks and fighting between conflicting parties are too high to ignore. This generalised violence, highlighted by major assaults and operation by either side, has increased threat levels and fuelled a sense of insecurity and instability amongst the population.

Shrinking opportunities

Increased violence and decreasing international interests have contributed to a dramatic reduction of opportunities, raised poverty levels and unemployment rate. This refutes the government standing.

Specific threats

Individuals face a specific set of threats because of the nature of their association with certain work, groups and (mainly political) ideas. The government is unable to protect individuals facing specific concerns, challenges and problems.

Mechanism to Express Grievance

The Afghan government has done nothing to tackle the grievances of the deportees from Europe. Instead, it has contributed to them by harassing some of the deportees at the airport. The only assistance that the deportees have received, has been small amount of cash by the deporting countries. There is no uniform pattern of cash payment across the European deporting countries. Each country has its own practices. What is important is that the accumulated grievances of the deportees remain unresolved.

The central question is how these grievances and resentment could be expressed and to what extent the expression of these grievances could delegitimise and destabilise the Afghan state. After all, 98% of 50 deportees, which could be illustrative of a broader sample of the deportee population, view the Afghan state responsible for their deportation and their subsequent problem of security, indebtedness, unemployment and trauma.

All of the 50 deportees interviewed for this research were uniformly asked how they would, if at all, express their grievances versus the government. Many of them, in fact, viewed the government implicated in their deportation for signing the Joint Way Forward, mischaracterising Afghan refugees as economic migrants, misrepresenting the security situation and making misleading promises.[1]

Fearing the government for collective engagement

The majority of the interviewees stated that they would like to express their grievances, and street protests were viewed as a preferred mechanism. However, many feared government's retaliation in the form of security incidents and arrests. When expressing their fears, they referred to security incidents and attacks on previous street protests by Junbish-e Roushanayee (Enlightenment Movement) and Rastakhiz (Movement for Change). They largely perceived the attacks had been the work of the government to crash popular mobilisation and demobilise the dissenting population groups. About 42% expressed fear at engaging in any public protests.[2]

The government is indifferent to public pressure

The second biggest category of the deportees, 32%, believed that the government is indifferent to any peaceful public protest. They believed expression of grievances through the mechanism of peaceful public protests would hardly be able to change the behaviour of the government. They perceived the government as too unresponsive and unaccountable to listen to peaceful expression of popular resentment and dissent.

Supports peaceful actions against the government

Regardless of the security concerns and irrespective of the unresponsiveness of the government, the third category of the deportees were firm in their willingness to express their grievances against the government through protests. Some of the deportees within this category said they had engaged the media to make their voices heard against the consequences of the government's decision regarding Afghan deportees.

Favours taking revenge from government

The fourth group, about 12% of the interviewees, wanted to take revenge from the government. Joining armed groups and/or criminal networks were viewed as possible and preferable revenge mechanisms.

Remains loyal to the government

The fifth group, about 6% of the interviewees, stated that they remained supportive of the government regardless of the impact of the government's decision on their deportation. Ultimately, a significant majority of the 50 deportees, stated that they would leave the country again and this was in some ways their way of expressing grievance and of taking revenge against the government. The following diagram illustrates different mechanisms for expression of grievances against the Afghan government.

1. Interviews deportees, Balkh, Kabul, Herat and Nangarhar, April-December 2018.
2. Ibid

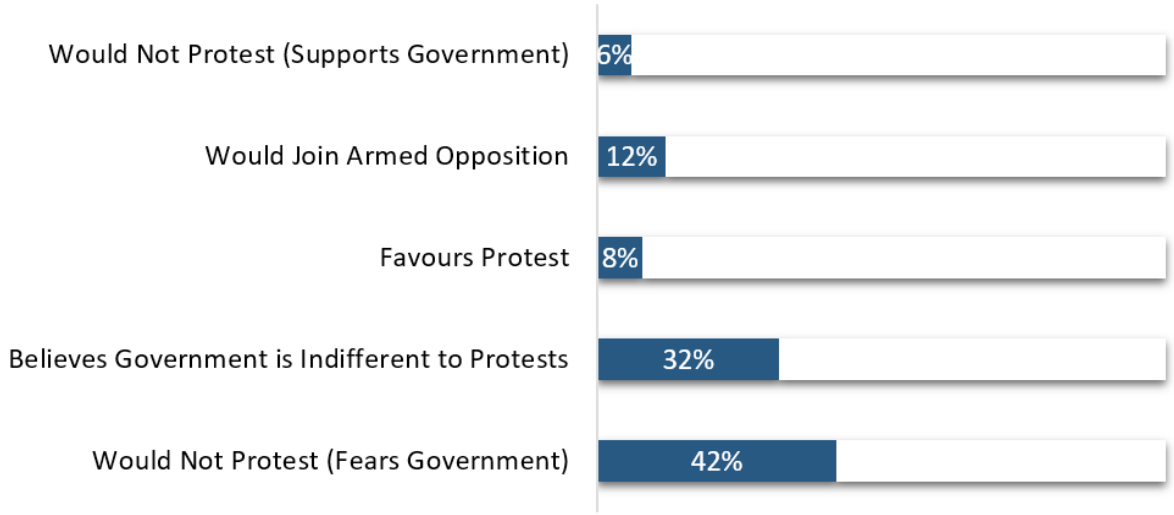

Figure 6 Means of Expressing Grievances

The deportee communities with their deep-seated grievances remain an important delegitimising factor for the Afghan state. Since they are dispersed geographically and lack discursive and organisational skills, however, they have yet to transform into a national group with significant destabilising impact on the State. Afghan civil society and youth groups who hold greater discursive and organisational capabilities have not engaged with the plight of the deportees or they are preoccupied with their own group concerns and issues. On their own, the deportees seem unable to organise themselves into a significant group for collective action on national scale with nation-wide implications.

However, they constitute an important source of recruitment for collective actions. They are susceptible to recruitment by insurgent groups, criminal networks and protest and political movements and organisation. They constitute a pool of destabilising force.

Conclusion

The deportees interviewed as part of this project believe that the Afghan movement has influenced the asylum decision-making processes in European countries by singing a an informal readmission agreement, called the Joint Way Forward, and by initiating a public information campaign mischaracterising Afghan refugees and misrepresenting the security challenges and problems in the country.

The interviewees hold deep grievances against the government. The majority prefers peaceful s means of expression of grievances against the government. A small minority also believes peaceful mechanisms of expression are not going to work. They prefer violent action to take revenge from the government.

The deportee community across Afghanistan remain dispersed, lacking both discursive capability and organizational skills. As such it may not be able to transform into an important movement.

The deportees interviewed for this project face many serious challenges including unemployment, debt, security threatsand psychological trauma, problems that cannot be tackled without the support and intervention of the Afghan government and the EU member states.

ABOUT THE REPORT

Drawing upon interviews with Afghan deportees from European countries, this study examines how they have the potential to delegitimise and ultimately weaken and destabilise the Afghan State. As an exploratory research, it attempts to identify the key sources of the deportee population's grievance and resentment against the Afghan State and the ways and methods they might chose to express this resentment.

ABOUT AHRDO

Our mission is to improve the human rights condition of Afghan citizens, contribute to the country's democratic development, promote understanding and compliance with International Humanitarian Law in situations of armed conflict, foster inter-ethnic and inter-community peace and communication, and develop public memory and recollection of war victims as an antidote to a deep-seated culture of impunity and a profoundly ingrained ethos of war and violence in the country.

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