

Migrant Smuggling Data and Research:

**A global review of the
emerging evidence base**



International Organization for Migration

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to acknowledge the Government of Turkey for its support of the “Comprehensive Global Approach to Counter Migrant Smuggling and Enhanced Migrant Protection” project under which this report is prepared, the hard work and support of all of the authors, as well as the many thousands of migrants who have participated in studies on migrant smuggling throughout the world.

This report was conceived and commissioned by Dr Frank Laczko, Head, IOM Global Migration Data Analysis Centre, who managed the report project with assistance from Marie McAuliffe (as consultant), Tara Brian and Julia de Bresser. The report was sub-edited by Melissa Borlaza and the layout done by Anna Lyn Constantino under the leadership of the head of the IOM Publications Unit, Valerie Hagger, and support from Maria Paula Subia.

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Title: Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A global review of the emerging evidence base /
edited by M.L. McAuliffe and F. Laczko
ISBN: 978-92-9068-730-6
Subjects: International migration; migrant smuggling; irregular migration.
Cover photo: © Valerie Hagger, 2013

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IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

AFGHANISTAN

Nassim Majidi and Richard Danziger

Introduction

Large-scale migration from Afghanistan has been a phenomenon since the late 1970s when the country first experienced instability, conflict and a shattered economy. Since then, the number of Afghans leaving has fluctuated in function of the degree of instability and economic hardship in the country, with Afghans continuously – and increasingly – on the move.⁴⁹ Due to the large presence of registered refugees and undocumented Afghans in the neighbouring countries of the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter referred to as Iran)⁵⁰ and Pakistan,⁵¹ an overview of smuggling from Afghanistan must also cover Iran and Pakistan, not only as transit and destination countries but also as countries of origin.

The transition of responsibility for national security from international to Afghan forces in 2014 has led to renewed insecurity (UNAMA, 2016) and a sharp economic downturn, which in turn has given rise to an “Afghan exodus”⁵² of a dimension not seen since the 2001 invasion and overthrow of the Taliban regime. Policymakers and practitioners struggle to estimate the numbers of Afghans currently leaving Afghanistan and its region through irregular means, so the focus is on the number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe. In 2015, Afghans were the second largest group of asylum seekers in Europe after Syrians.⁵³ With very limited regular pathways for migration,⁵⁴ smuggling has been the traditional

⁴⁹ Other papers relate the background and history of Afghan migration. The most recent resources include the IOM Afghanistan Migration Profile (2014b), Koser (2014), Schmeidl (2014), Majidi (2016).

⁵⁰ Islamic Republic of Iran is the country name in the UNTERM database. For editorial and spacing reasons, Iran will be used in this chapter.

⁵¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2014 estimated the number of Afghans in Pakistan to be 2.5 million, and 1.95 million in Iran.

⁵² Afghan Analysts Network’s (2015) series of analysis pieces titled “Afghan exodus” launched in November 2015 and ongoing at the time of this research (see www.afghanistan-analysts.org/an-afghan-exodus-facts-figures-trends/).

⁵³ IOM number of asylum seekers in 2015.

⁵⁴ The Government of Afghanistan is now embarking on its first National Labour Migration Strategy to be formally launched in 2016 to complement the country’s National Labour Policy.

response to the demand for migration, a demand that has dramatically increased in 2015.⁵⁵

Against this backdrop, the legal framework shows national and regional gaps. Afghanistan ratified the Palermo Protocol on Trafficking on 15 August 2014 but not the Smuggling Protocol. The Government of Afghanistan has limited capacity to fulfill its obligations under the Trafficking Protocol and is handicapped by national legislation that is not aligned with the international treaty. The Governments of Iran and Pakistan have ratified neither the Smuggling nor the Trafficking Protocols leaving a regional policy gap. While the two protocols are part of a criminal justice treaty, both also have provisions with regard to protection. Furthermore, discussions on smuggling have primarily focused on the transnational trade of goods and narcotics within the framework of transnational organized crime rather than on human smuggling. As noted in IOM's Migration Profile for Afghanistan, the long history of drug production and smuggling in the country has led to the expansion of migrant smuggling. Cross-border networks and routes are used both for the smuggling of goods and narcotics, as well as for human smuggling and trafficking operations (IOM, 2014b:22). When Afghan and regional policymakers and their international partners turn their focus to migrant smuggling, it has mainly been addressed through a law enforcement and border control lens largely overlooking questions of protection and broader migration policy.

This chapter presents the trends in smuggling of Afghans before delving into the data collected by researchers, international organizations and other actors – data that is often anecdotal and secondary. This chapter shows the limited state of research on smuggling in and out of Afghanistan. The authors argue for the need to re-conceptualize smuggling in Afghanistan as a precondition to strengthening future research.

Overview of migrant smuggling in the country

Routes

Precise route and destinations are not always preselected by the migrant. They may result from negotiations with the smuggler on cost and the smuggler's advice. Those who can afford to pay for forged documentation will leave by air, or will be able to go further on to Western countries in Europe, North America and Australia. Those who cannot afford to pay more than a few hundred dollars will be limited to being smuggled to neighbouring countries. Smugglers may also

⁵⁵ Eurostat reports 181,300 asylum applications by Afghans in 2015. In 2014, the number was 41,405. IOM reports the arrival of 208,858 Afghans in Greece in 2015.

reorient transit and destination due to border closures, strengthened controls or increased risks en route, or due to actual or perceived easing of immigration policies, such as was the case with Germany in the summer of 2015.⁵⁶

In 2013, Dimitriadi wrote that routes are determined by the points of departure, ethnicity and geography, with those departing from southern and eastern Afghanistan (typically Pashtun) travelling to Pakistan first, while those situated in other areas of Afghanistan opt for travel directly through Iran. Recent surveying of Afghans in the Balkans shows that nearly all transit Iran with 10 per cent first passing through Pakistan. Of those surveyed, 82 per cent left directly from Afghanistan (IOM DTM report, 2016b). It should be noted, however, that people were not surveyed randomly, nor were the survey results re-weighted, meaning that the results may not reflect the Afghan population currently migrating to Europe irregularly and should therefore be treated with caution.

Smuggling to and through Pakistan

Irregular Afghan migrants enter Pakistan almost exclusively by land, either on foot or by bus. The long border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is mountainous and highly porous. Many migrants do not engage the services of smugglers to cross the Afghan border as they can enter through official border crossing points without identification documents and with little difficulty. There are two main routes: the first involves travel via Jalalabad in the eastern part of the country across the Torkham border to Peshawar in North-western Pakistan. The second route leads from Kandahar across the border at Chaman and through Quetta in Baluchistan Province. Once in Pakistan, Afghan migrants follow the same principal smuggling routes and methods as Pakistani nationals: overland through Baluchistan to Iran and onward to Europe, or via air to South-East Asia with Australia as the final destination. The latter route is far more costly requiring not only airline tickets but often forged passports and/or visas.

Smuggling to and through Iran

Tehran is the major hub and staging post for the smuggling of Afghan nationals in Iran. Apart from being the capital, it lies on the main route between the south-east of the country and the north-west bordering Turkey. There, smuggled migrants organize the next step of their journey to Europe. Iran is the most important transit and destination country for irregular Afghan migrants

⁵⁶ Danziger (2015) interview with Abdul Ghafoor, Afghanistan Migrants Advice and Support Organization, September 2015.

(though it should be noted that a certain number of Afghans travel to Iran legally with visas – how many of these then opt to be smuggled to Turkey and Europe is unknown). From Tehran, Afghan migrants are smuggled across the border into Turkey in the mountainous, remote areas of Iranian Azerbaijan near the cities of Urmia and Salmas, and on towards Van and Tatvan on the other side of the border. This is often done by taxi with smuggled migrants travelling in groups of two to five and then regrouping with others near the border. The migrants who travel by foot are often guided across the border in groups of 50–100 persons, a journey that can take between 12 and 15 hours (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2015). From Eastern Turkey, the migrants travel to Istanbul where their onward smuggling to Western Europe is organized (UNODC, 2015). In the past, many Afghans would leave Turkey through the land borders with Bulgaria and Greece, but the vast majority now travel across the sea to Greece (IOM DTM report, 2016b).

Smuggling through Central Asia and the Russian Federation

Afghanistan and the former Soviet Union traditionally had close ties based on trade and cooperation and even today, many Afghans travel legally to the States of the former Soviet Union for the purposes of business or education. Since the 1990s (that is, after the Soviet occupation), irregular Afghan migrants have transited the Commonwealth of Independent States to reach the European Union, although there is little data available. Although difficult and expensive to obtain, visas for some of the Commonwealth of Independent States are available to Afghans who can therefore leave their country without resorting to smugglers (the land border between Afghanistan and its northern neighbours are generally well guarded). In 2015, 700 migrants crossed into Finland from the Russian Federation (IOM DTM report, 2016a), almost half of them were Afghans; however, it is not clear how many of them used the services of smugglers. The majority of these migrants cross into Lapland, Finland's northernmost region.

New routes to the Gulf countries

In recent years, routes to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States have expanded with an estimated number of 500,000 Afghans with irregular status in Saudi Arabia alone (Arab News, 2013). Schmeidl (2014) describes the region as being host to as many Afghans as in Europe, while acknowledging that figures may in reality be double. Estimates include 300,000 to 600,000 Afghan migrant workers (not necessarily irregular) in the United Arab Emirates.⁵⁷ Anecdotal evidence indicates that a considerable number of Afghans from provinces in

⁵⁷ Sources cited in Schmeidl (2014), p. 20.

the south-east bordering Pakistan travel to GCC States on Pakistani passports.⁵⁸ Many Afghans travel to the GCC States legally (including to Mecca for Hajj). There are two different patterns of migration to the Gulf countries: (a) migrants who intend to stay to find employment opportunities; and (b) migrants who transit to other destinations in South-East Asia or Europe. For migrants travelling irregularly, generally those who intend to remain in Saudi Arabia are smuggled from Pakistan to Iran and then by boat across to Saudi Arabia. Some Afghan and Pakistani nationals are smuggled by boat from Pakistan or Iran to Oman, with some continuing by land to the United Arab Emirates. Migrants who fly from Pakistan to Riyadh or Jeddah on fraudulent travel or identity documents typically use Saudi Arabia as a transit point en route to Western Europe. Other destinations in the Gulf, such as Abu Dhabi or Dubai also constitute transit points for migrants who then continue by air to Europe or South-East Asia and from there by sea to Australia.

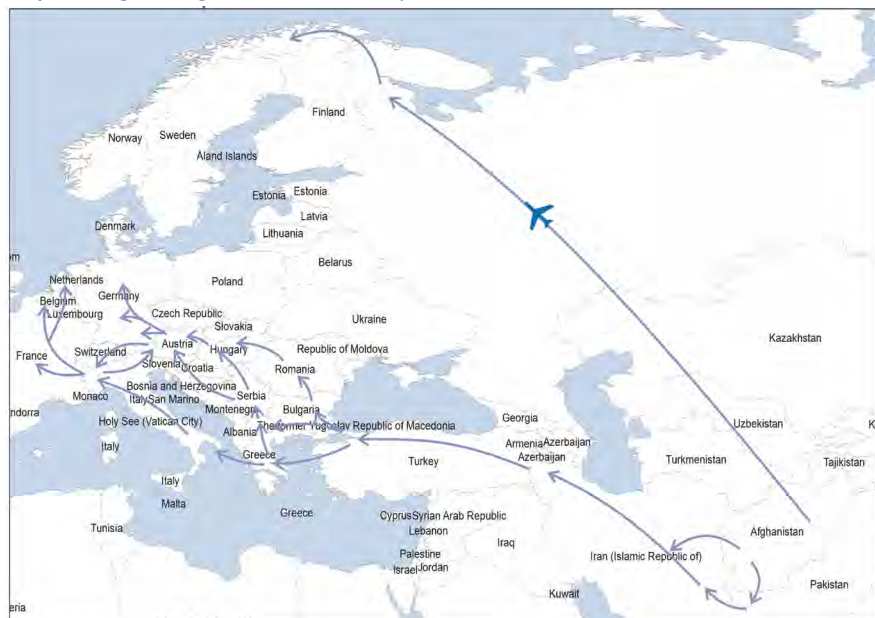
New routes to Malaysia and Indonesia through Dubai or India

In the past, Afghans heading for Australia would transit through – or originate from – Pakistan (see above). Ongoing research however shows that Afghan migrants are now also leaving directly from Afghanistan along two different routes: through Dubai or New Delhi on to Malaysia and Singapore to the final transit stop in Indonesia.⁵⁹ Both routes are taken with legal documentation and visas acquired beforehand or through the services of specialized smugglers. IOM's office in Jakarta reports that some Afghans travel from Iran via Qatar to Malaysia and then Indonesia. Travel from Malaysia can be by air to Surabaya or Jakarta or by sea to Medan.

⁵⁸ Danziger interview with Jabar Naimi, Governor of Khost Province in Khost, July 2014.

⁵⁹ Samuel Hall (2016) – ongoing research.

Map 7.1: Afghan migration flows to Europe



Source: IOM.

Categories of smugglers and smuggled migrants

For Afghan migrants, social networks, local connections and personal relations combine to select one's smuggler and create a bond of trust. Afghans will pay high prices to those smugglers who have a proven reputation for having been successful in ensuring their clients arrive safely to their destination. Afghans rely first on a local smuggler – someone from their village, neighbourhood or district who have been referred to them through a friend or a relative. The local smuggler, or facilitator, will take care of the first leg of the journey to the Iranian border. There, migrants will stay in one of a network of hotels that facilitates the work of the smugglers, provides a boost to the local economy, and allows migrants to prepare for the most difficult legs of their journey.⁶⁰ From there, and by phone, the next stage is organized. A local smuggler from any given province of Afghanistan will create a link with another smuggler on the other side of the border. A multistaged smuggling process spans borders. Many of the smugglers are prior migrants themselves. In focus groups led in Kabul in 2012 with taxi drivers calling themselves “travel agents”,⁶¹ over half of them had migrated to

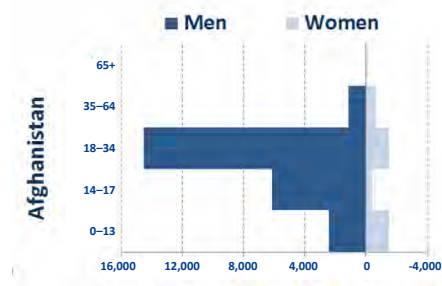
⁶⁰ Majidi 2008 research at the Afghanistan–Iranian border documenting the facilitators of irregular migration of migrant workers to Iran.

⁶¹ Majidi 2012 interviews with Afghan migrants in France and returnees in Afghanistan.

Europe and returned, and all of them had an experience of migrating at least to Iran and Pakistan.

As a result of the growing demand for migration, research by UNODC in Afghanistan and Pakistan reveals that the principal smuggling agents are usually stationed outside of Afghanistan and employ a network of facilitators around the point of origin. This has evolved into a transnational business that depends on locals for access, contacts and local knowledge. Local agents in transit and at destination are usually nationals of that country. For example, Iranians offer collateral services to smuggled migrants travelling through the country, such as accommodation, transportation from Tehran to the Turkish border or, in some cases, transportation or guidance across the border into Turkey. Turkish or Greek nationals mostly carry out the smuggling from Turkey into Greece. The same appears to be the case in the neighbouring countries of Serbia, Bulgaria, Hungary or Slovakia.⁶² According to UNODC (2015), citing Turkish and Austrian authorities, the nationality of smugglers involved in the migration of Afghans and active in these countries show a diverse set of nationalities not limited to Afghanistan. Smugglers' nationalities include Iran, Iraq, Georgia, Hungary, Myanmar, Pakistan, Romania, the Russian Federation, Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey.

Research undertaken by UNODC in Afghanistan and Pakistan suggests that the vast majority (more than 90%) of the smuggled migrants are men aged between 18 and 35 years of age.⁶³ By sending a young male abroad, the hope of the family is that there will be reunification in the country of destination later (Schmeidl, 2014). This may be changing, as IOM's DTM report of 24 March 2016⁶⁴ shows that 82 per cent of Afghans surveyed were travelling in a group, and 62 per cent of these were with family members. Thirty per cent of them in turn reported being with spouse and children.



Source: EASO, 2014.

Alarmingly, the number of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) being smuggled – already considerable in the past – has been steadily growing. As with young men, families choose one or more of their children to be smuggled abroad so that they can become established in a destination country, support

⁶² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2015.

⁶³ UNODC, 2012.

⁶⁴ See limitations of DTM methodology as described in the Overview section above.

remaining relatives with remittances and facilitate and sometimes finance later migration of other relatives. The number of Afghan UAMs in Europe in 2015 was estimated at 45,300,⁶⁵ representing just over half of all UAMs arriving in the European Union. This is in sharp contrast to the previous year when 5,800 Afghan UAMs arrived (25% of the total number but still the largest group by nationality). Sweden received 23,480 asylum applications from Afghan UAMs in 2015, compared to 3,777 Syrian claims. In 2014, Sweden reported 1,547 Afghan UAMs – the largest nationality represented.⁶⁶ Of 4,601 Afghans in Indonesia as of 30 March 2016, 204 are UAMs. Afghans represent 66 per cent of UAMs in Indonesia.⁶⁷ In contrast to the high proportion of UAMs among Afghans travelling to Europe, of the 227,601 Afghans deported from Iran in 2015, only 2,082 were identified as UAMs.⁶⁸

Organization of smuggling

Migration has a cost – whether the journey is to a nearby village, town or city or further afield, financial resources will be needed. Apart from the smugglers' profit, the smuggling fee includes the cost of transportation and food and, for those able to pay the highest sums, the obtaining of passports and visas, real or forged. Migrants will often sell their main assets or will go into debt to finance their project. The financing of smuggling becomes a collective enterprise with entire families contributing funds. While one party provides smuggling services and accepts to be paid in installments, the other party – families, relatives or even the broader community – has to complete payments within a given period. Delays in payment can lead to abuse or exploitation. Case studies of migrant smuggling turned into human trafficking, or of smuggled migrants forced to carry drugs, populate accounts of smuggling in Afghanistan.

Smugglers provide a service of smuggling packages that have evolved and adapted to restrictions at border crossings. Smugglers' services offer transnational solutions in the form of "re-entry packages": one in five of the men interviewed (Majidi, 2008) declared having been arrested on the way to their final destination in Iran with attempts to cross the border anew within days of their deportation. The repeated attempts covered by fees have been most recently confirmed by Donini, Monsutti and Scalettari (2016). Services now also include a "fee installment by border", with a price tag attached to every border successfully crossed, not requiring financial investments if border crossings fail and not requiring advance payments. These packages differ depending on

⁶⁵ Eurostat, 2016.

⁶⁶ Wilkens, 2016; Swedish Migration Board.

⁶⁷ Correspondence with IOM Jakarta.

⁶⁸ IOM Kabul Cross Border Return and Reintegration Project Annual Report 2016.

the starting location, destination and fees, at an estimated cost of USD 3,000 to smuggle Afghans through Iran and Turkey, and USD 5,500 to reach Greece (Stamouli, 2016). Figures of USD 4,000 to USD 6,000 to reach Europe are widely cited. IOM interviews with Afghans who have arrived in Balkan countries show 74 per cent of respondents paying USD 1,000 to USD 5,000 and 16 per cent paying more than USD 5,000. The cost of travel to Indonesia was reported by Al Jazeera in March 2014 as being between USD 8,000 to USD 12,500. More recent interviews with Afghan asylum seekers in Indonesia by IOM indicate costs ranging from USD 4,200 to USD 7,000. Smuggled migrants may also opt to travel by air, the most practiced route for the wealthier Afghans leaving their country, as well as for vulnerable groups, including women and the elderly. This is the most expensive service as it requires the input of specialized smugglers who can arrange for passports, visas and plane tickets. The cost ranges from USD 20,000 to USD 25,000.

The step-by-step organization of the migration journey, and the multiple chains of smugglers involved, has meant that migrants have to pay in installments along the way. There are primarily two agreed-upon methods of payment: (a) third-party guarantee; and (b) direct guarantee.⁶⁹ The method of third-party guarantee involves an upfront deposit by the migrant with a third-party guarantor who either pays entirely or in installments depending on the agreed upon milestones en route, such that a first payment will be released when the migrant reaches Tehran, a second on arrival in Ankara or Istanbul, and the last after successfully crossing into Greece. This method seems to be the most common for migrants leaving from Eastern Afghanistan. The second method requires the migrant to carry money and pay cash for the different legs of the trip. This appears to be the most common method of payment for relatively inexpensive services, such as boat trips from the Iranian coast to the Persian Gulf countries (particularly Oman). Similarly, migrants pay cash to cross the border from Afghanistan into Iran or at checkpoints in Turkey.

Researchers highlight the frequent use of the Hawala money transfer system for smuggling activities in Afghanistan where the low penetration of the banking system, low levels of literacy and the lack of official identification documentations are all obstacles to transfers through formal banking institutions.⁷⁰ This informal money transfer system protects both sides, as there is no record keeping: short-term records are destroyed when transactions are settled, and phone-based applications including Skype, Viber and WhatsApp used to organize the payments helps elude detections (Legorano and Parkinson, 2015).

⁶⁹ UNODC, 2012.

⁷⁰ Heckmann, 2014.

Services to Europe include meetings with families and relatives at departure to explain the migration process, including the lack of guarantee of success. Smugglers discuss with clients the different options, such as shorter or longer migration routes – with longer travel entailing stops in Iran, Turkey and other countries where migrants can work to pay for the following leg of their journey. They may also match migrants from one location with other Afghan migrants as travelling companions. As a result, the smuggler is not just a “travel agent”, as they often describe themselves, but often a provider of advisory services for planning and financing the migration project. Some smugglers can be fixers and caretakers; others may engage in exploitative or abusive practices conspiring with other smugglers, employers or officials along the way to gouge more money from the migrant or their family. When migrants run out of money, they have to work locally to finance the next leg of their journey. They may be forced to work in exploitative conditions as has been reported (Majidi, 2008). The case study presented in this chapter shows the vulnerability associated with smuggled migrants and the thin line between trafficking and forced labour.

Human costs

The cost of migration is not just financial: there are very real human costs too. Crossing straight into Iran from Afghanistan is increasingly dangerous. Although no baseline exists, from January to September 2015, IOM received and assisted at the Zaranj border 59 Afghans shot, injured and deported (after treatment) by Iranian border police. During the same period, 22 bodies of Afghans shot and killed by the police were received.⁷¹ Reports of shootings in border areas by Iranian police have focused on deaths of “drug smugglers” from Pakistan and Iran in 2015. Yet these shootings have also affected migrants and their smugglers attempting to cross the border for the difficult and dangerous journey from Afghanistan, through Iran, to Europe.⁷² These events remain under-reported and are indicative of a general lack of information and data on smuggling and counter-smuggling initiatives in Afghanistan and its region.

Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan are known for their arduous terrain and harsh climate. Afghans have to travel through desert and steppes as they head south-westwards towards Iran. Those opting to travel through Pakistan via Peshawar have to cross the traditionally insecure mountainous areas of the Hindu Kush, and the increasingly unsure districts of Nangarhar province. Reports from migrants by foot through Iran are rife with the risks they faced: lack of water

⁷¹ Statistics compiled by IOM Zaranj Office.

⁷² IOM reports on returnees from Iran (2014).

and food, days and nights spent walking in the desert, and the migrants (often minors) risking their lives and dying on the journey. Although no data exists on the number of Afghans dying while crossing Iran into Turkey, IOM counts 55 Afghans as having drowned at sea in 2014 while crossing from Turkey to Greece. In 2015, this number increased to 78 and as of 15 May 2016, 51 Afghans have drowned at sea, indicating an alarming trend.

The presence of Afghanistan's UAMs has raised the profile of smuggling in protection terms. Indeed, smuggled Afghans in general are represented by an important number of minors, a significant proportion of whom, according to European Partner States data, were unaccompanied.⁷³ UNODC reports from Greece, Indonesia and Scandinavian countries in 2015 show that UAMs, mainly teenage boys, are found among groups of smuggled migrants (UNODC, 2015:21).

It is difficult to do justice to the human costs incurred by smuggled Afghans and their families in this brief overview, but it is important to underline that the risks of the journey itself are compounded by the increasingly difficult conditions experienced by the migrants on arrival at the destination country. Under these circumstances, if the number of smuggled Afghans is sharply increasing, one can but consider the corresponding increase in despair over insecurity and the absence of prospects at home.

Review of data on migrant smuggling

“There are serious data problems [...] not only because of inadequate legal and policy tools but, also due to terminological confusions...”

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), 2013:38

As referred to in the introduction, a key obstacle to research is the confusion over both the terms and concepts of trafficking, smuggling, kidnapping and abduction. This is the case in the treatment of smuggling by the Government of Afghanistan. As reported in November 2015, “the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR) has called on the Ministry of Interior Affairs (Moi) to crack down on human traffickers in a bid to stop Afghans from fleeing the country. According to the Ministry, the number of human traffickers has significantly increased in recent months as thousands of Afghans continue to seek refuge in Europe. [...] ‘Many individuals and groups were arrested last week for deceiving people and trafficking them illegally to foreign countries,’ Moi spokesman Sediq

⁷³ European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex), 2010.

Sedighi said.” This discourse illustrates the lack of clarity in the Government’s stance on smuggling in Afghanistan:

- The terminology focuses on trafficking and not smuggling, thereby confusing the two.
- The accent is put on the criminal nature of smuggling rather than as a service – albeit illegal.
- The “crime” is not situated within a migration context: there is no reference to a policy on migration.

The lack of clarity in the terms used is a key challenge: smuggling and trafficking are used interchangeably, betraying a legal blur on the differences between the two. The 2008 Afghan Law on Countering Abduction and Human Trafficking/Smuggling gives a definition of trafficking in line with the international one. However, the ambiguity of the Dari term used for human trafficking undermines the law’s effectiveness by perpetuating confusion around trafficking concepts. The Dari word, *ghachag-e insan*, is used interchangeably to refer to both human trafficking and smuggling. Additionally, the word *ghachag* is used commonly to refer to all types of illegal transport, be it of drugs, arms or persons. National legislation is obliged to be more precise if it is to be enforceable. A 2013 study (Samuel Hall, 2013) emphasized the use of the term *tejarat-e insan* – meaning human trade – to refer specifically to trafficking and therefore set it apart from smuggling.

The authorities’ focus on law enforcement to the total exclusion of protection, along with the confusion between trafficking and smuggling, has severely limited the effectiveness of their response to both phenomena. This situation makes it both more challenging to identify the victims of trafficking, as well as formulate policies that would offer support or protection to smuggled migrants, or offer alternative choices to would-be migrants. It also undercuts the will to prosecute “real” traffickers when they are confused with smugglers who often enjoy popular support. The second obstacle to the collection of data on migrant smuggling is the nature of borders. While the western border with Iran is well demarcated, the eastern Durand line dividing Pakistan and Afghanistan, while recognized internationally, is not accepted by all Afghans. The fluidity and porous nature of this border makes data collection (and research) on smuggling all the more challenging.

A third challenge arises from the overall refugee context within which movements of Afghans to Iran and Pakistan take place. For the period stretching from the late 1970s to 2002 – with some interruptions – there was a general

acceptance that conditions inside Afghanistan were such that it warranted considering all Afghans fleeing their country for Iran and Pakistan as refugees. The concept of smuggling was largely only applied to secondary movements: whether Afghans used the services of “smugglers” to cross into neighbouring countries was not considered relevant. The lack of information management systems at a national or regional level means that any initiative to provide up-to-date estimates is lost. Only UNODC has a systematic approach to data collection, which is used to populate the agency’s regional reports at the Asia level.

In Afghanistan, the main collectors of data related to smuggling are as follows:

- UNODC, with its overview of migrant smuggling in Asia.⁷⁴
- IOM’s activities on counting undocumented Afghan returnees at the borders since 2011 and collecting data on vulnerabilities. To date, no data has been collected on smuggling, although with the new interest in the phenomenon, there have been attempts to use some of these data as proxy indicators.
- IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), which has, since 8 October 2015, been collecting data on Afghans (and other nationals) arriving in the Balkans. The DTM gathers information inter alia on routes, cost of journey, motives and intentions. The major constraint is that these surveys are perforce very short as the respondents are still on the move. Other limitations include the ad hoc selection of respondents and the fact that they need to be confident enough to be interviewed in a public space, leading to a bias towards young single males who speak English (survey forms are translated, but the verbal interview is in English). In short, the sample is not statistically representative, and the results should be treated with caution.
- Think tanks and research institutes – the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the Liaison Office and Samuel Hall – have taken the lead on migration research in the country, collecting qualitative data on smuggling covering all provinces of Afghanistan, including border regions, mainly through case studies, focus group discussions and feedback from community elders. AREU’s research from 2006 documents cross-border and regional migration and population movement dynamics inclusive of smuggling trends. The focus of a study on *Afghans*

⁷⁴ UNODC, 2015.

*in Quetta*⁷⁵ was specifically on transnational trade and cross-border goods smuggling, looking at the livelihoods dynamics of Afghans in Pakistan who use the border as a resource to generate income. The focus is on the smuggling of goods – flour, blankets and cooking oil – rather than people.

- Communications and consulting companies based in Afghanistan such as Wise Afghanistan has published a scoping study in 2010 on counter-smuggling for the Government of Australia. The study specifically focused on the Hazara population with an overview of trends in four selected provinces to assess the situational awareness and communications channels that maintain the people-smuggling network from Afghanistan to Australia.
- Media reporting on smuggling – with detailed information on the organization, geography and risks of smuggling provided by journalists, with recent examples of publications including the 2012 New York Times article by Luke Mogelson, on “The Scariest Little Corner of the World”, describing the dangers of the route – for both smugglers and migrants, and the coverage of Afghan migration to Europe by the Wall Street Journal.

Other information available publicly is based on secondary data and published by organizations based outside of Afghanistan. These include the following:

- (a) ICMPD’s 2013 Afghanistan Migration Country Report based on an initiative that is part of the Budapest Process. The report estimates illegal trade/smuggling to represent between 6.5 to 8 per cent of the official GDP based on secondary data but without specifying the methodology. Such estimates remain unverified by other sources (ICMPD, 2013:8). The ICMPD report’s treatment of smuggling focuses on secondary research collected on the following:
 - The cost of smuggling;
 - Payment agreements;
 - Smuggler–migrant relations; and
 - Minors’ migration.
- (b) Non-governmental organizations in Pakistan that have published information on Afghan migrants focusing on migrant smuggling and

⁷⁵ AREU, 2005.

irregular migration to Pakistan. The latest study dates back to 2009 with the work of Basic Education for Awareness Reforms and Empowerment (BEFARe) in Peshawar and ActionAid.⁷⁶

However, much of the research either remains a one-off attempt at collecting data, soon outdated by new trends in migration, or anecdotal, with evidence collected being a side project or part of a larger research project with a different focus. Only UNODC has focused specifically on collecting and analysing data on smuggling, with a focus on narcotics first and migrant smuggling second. Recommendations in IOM's 2014 Afghanistan Migration Profile call for the need for field research, with a particular focus on migrant smuggling to fill the data gap.

Review of migrant smuggling research

Methods used for data collection on smuggling are as follows:

- Qualitative data – individual interviews, focus group discussions, individual or provincial case studies based on semi-structured interviews;
- Secondary data – widely used by commentators and analysts; and
- Quantitative data – rarely available and broadly lacking other than by UNODC.

In 2015, the new indicator of choice used as a proxy to estimate the scope of irregular migration out of Afghanistan became the number of new passports issued. With only one passport office in Kabul, crowds there grew over the year 2015 as widely reported in the media. In October, 6,000–7,000 new passport applications were being made daily, up from 5,000 in August and 1,000 in early 2014 (IOM). However, this was misleading as an indicator since many people were applying for new machine-readable passports before the International Civil Aviation Organization deadline for State compliance. Furthermore, irregular migration does not equate to smuggling, although the two are closely linked due to the very low rates of visa obtention by Afghans. In order to travel abroad, they must do so irregularly, and often rely on the services of a smuggler. Other proxy indicators worth exploring further could be the following:

- Number of deportations from Iran;
- Number of Afghans detained near the Turkish border by Iranian authorities; and

⁷⁶ Azam, 2009.

- Number of departures from Afghanistan to be complemented by knowledge of migration intentions.

Online resources providing information based on secondary data available on illicit trade in Afghanistan (www.havocscope.com/) give estimates of the migrant smuggling industry ranging up to USD 1 billion, and the prices paid to smugglers between USD 700 to get to Iran and USD 25,000 to London, but without further information on data sources.

Three main concerns persist with regards to research on migrant smuggling out of Afghanistan:

- **Absence of data and systematic data collection** – IOM Afghanistan has a presence at the two major border crossings with Iran (and also the principal official border crossing with Pakistan). The organization works with officials from the MoRR on counting returnees, but there are major challenges to conducting more in-depth surveys of migrants. These challenges include the following: (a) large number of returnees (over 250,000 yearly) and their wish to proceed to their final destination as rapidly as possible; (b) the need to be careful not to raise expectations that the questions will lead to assistance; and (c) resource constraints. IOM is however working on a more systematic approach, including following up on returnees through a new information management system being developed for MoRR. All the above only capture data on returning Afghans (for the most part forcibly returned.) IOM's planned Migration Information Centres, once opened, will be useful in capturing data on intentions.
- **Little focus or advocacy on protection of migrants** which, apart from the direct impact this has on vulnerable or abused migrants, also reduces the State's self-recognition as duty bearer of human rights. This in turn means that smugglers are comforted in their roles as useful and much appreciated service providers (which the good ones are) and not perceived enough as criminals whose clients can end up as victims of violence, abuse or exploitation.
- **Non-existent regional initiatives to address smuggling:** Despite the regional nature of smuggling, in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, the discourse has focused on refugee management and refugee returns, primarily through United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees operations, with only timid

attempts to discuss the reality of smuggling that nurture a fluid, continuous and dynamic movement of populations from Afghanistan outwards.

Academic efforts have helped to fill this gap in knowledge and data on smuggling. Scholars have undertaken smuggling research through three main disciplinary approaches under the social science disciplines.

First, an economic analysis of the investments and costs of smuggling. Academics such as Khalid Koser (Koser, 2008; Koser and Marsden, 2013) have argued for the need to take an economic analysis approach to understanding the dynamics of smuggling out of Afghanistan, with a cost-benefit analysis of the investment made by families in Afghanistan who sent a family member to the United Kingdom. This study (Koser, 2008:17) looks at the question of investment and returns on investment after an initial period of two years spent in the United Kingdom. The conclusion from this study was that the initial investment and risks incurred were considered as worthwhile.

Second, a social network analysis conducted by Triandafyllidou and Maroukis (2012) based on the importance of transnational networks and the organization of smuggling networks from Afghanistan to Europe via Turkey. This included their modus operandi, costs, means of transport and duration of the journeys. This research was conducted at the level of the Asian region, with Afghanistan being just one case study.

Third, the sociopolitical implications of Afghan mobility have been studied with a close look at categories of migrants, motives for migration and routes (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis, 2012; Schmeidl, 2014) taken by Afghans, via the Iranian border or via Pakistani Balochistan, documenting the centrality of Quetta as a transit city. This approach has also documented the risks of the border crossings and the use of smugglers' services. Schmeidl (2014) discusses numbers, categories and how smugglers select and specialize in routes that respond to the priorities of Afghan families, with Europe being the most coveted destination for education, health care and long-term settlement.

While there have been several donor government-funded research projects on human trafficking in Afghanistan,⁷⁷ there has been no such funded research in the past on people smuggling. The UNODC report referred to covers people smuggling throughout Asia and is not Afghanistan-specific. The vast majority

⁷⁷ The most prominent of these have all been funded by the Government of the United States: IOM (2003, 2008, 2013), Hagar International (2014) and AREU (in progress).

of government-funded research on mobile populations has been dedicated to refugees. A new development is for the establishment of IOM DTM capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which does not specifically target smuggled migrants, although they are likely to be the principal category of migrants captured by the surveys.

CASE STUDY: The thin line between smuggling, trafficking and forced labour in Afghanistan

Research shows that smuggling can turn into trafficking and forced labor in complex regional dynamics. This case study shows how smuggling and trafficking can overlap, and is taken from the Samuel Hall (2013) study for IOM titled *Old Practice, New Chains: Modern Slavery in Afghanistan*.

One victim, a 36-year-old Afghan of Uzbek ethnicity in Northern Afghanistan, reports having been approached by a smuggler – a distant relative – when he lived in the province of Balkh. He was told that a company in Saudi Arabia would provide him with employment in a factory, at USD 520 per month, and accommodation. He travelled to Saudi Arabia by plane with a forged passport and visa. He worked as described in his discussions with the smuggler, but only to realize that he would be paid one third of the promised wage (USD 185). In addition, he would have to repay the costs of his irregular migration (about USD 400 for a forged passport and visa). The amount was deducted from his monthly wage. He was later both underpaid, working extra hours – up to 16 hours – without additional pay, and paid late, with delays in receiving his wages. He could not report it to anyone, as he could not leave the factory without permission, and his forced passport and visa were with his employer. Once he settled the loan, he was able to leave his job and return to Mazar city in Balkh.

Another victim, Muzamel, aged 15, was interviewed in Herat city in Western Afghanistan while he was working as a cleaner in Daikundi Hotel, a guesthouse where Afghans lived, mainly migrants on their way to cross the border with Iran. He himself lived in Iran with his family but had been arrested and deported back to Afghanistan. As he did not have any family in Afghanistan, he was offered to work instead of paying for a room at the nearest hotel in Herat city. At the hotel, he met a man who took him under his responsibility. He was a smuggler who promised to take him back to Iran. In order to pay the fees, the smuggler required that he continue working at the hotel until his debt had been cleared. Eventually, he spent one year working as a dishwasher in the hotel, still waiting for sufficient funds to cross the border into Iran. He had not been paid any amount since he had begun working and was only being fed and given shelter for free.

Conclusion and ways forward

The timing seems ripe in 2016 to set up a system to support the Government of Afghanistan and build the capacity of governmental authorities – from national to subnational levels – in identifying, preventing and responding to smuggling. Efforts towards improved information systems are currently being led by IOM in Afghanistan with the Government.

Renewed conflict in Afghanistan and uncertainties about its political and economic future have led Afghans to emigrate in search of protection and better living conditions. If the traditional directions of the flows of irregular migrants from Afghanistan were primarily directed towards the neighbouring countries (Pakistan and Iran), Europe has been an increasingly popular destination for migrants in recent years. However, with respect to the size of irregular migration, the reviewed literature provides little information about the scope of migrant smuggling with departure from inside Afghanistan.

The organizational aspects of smuggling of migrants are the main interest of research on smuggling. This includes the routes, the methods used and the criminal organizations behind the process. This is explained by the fact that the main actors conducting research on the subject are judiciary or law enforcement institutions. Further research is needed to understand the following: (a) profiles of the smugglers; (b) human and social costs of migrant smuggling; (c) role of corruption; and (d) fees paid to smugglers and their involvement in other criminal activities including human trafficking. Furthermore, there has been a sharp increase in women and minors migrating irregularly from Afghanistan, and there is an urgent need to explore their relationships with smugglers, and especially their vulnerability to exploitation. Indeed, there is a complete absence of studies specifically focusing on gender issues, and very little concerning the irregular migration of minors especially considering the scale of the latter.

The need for smuggling data is clear in Afghanistan: there are no comprehensive statistics and only broad estimates on smuggling from one of the highest producing countries of irregular migration in the world. As just one example, it is unknown how many of the Afghans arriving in Europe through the facilitation of smugglers began their journey in Afghanistan rather than Iran or Pakistan.

What, therefore, can be done to improve data and research on this subject in Afghanistan?

First, serious thought needs to be directed at conceptualizing smuggling – and trafficking – within the context of Afghanistan. As previously mentioned, there continues to be confusion between trafficking and smuggling both with regard to the word itself in Dari, as well as the actual concepts. The crime of trafficking in Afghanistan is often confused with simple abduction, a confusion reinforced by the existing legislation (although this is under review). There is much to be said for moving away from the use of “trafficking” when applied to a mixed migration scenario, and substituting “migrant abuse and exploitation”, which can better capture the protection needs of smuggled or other irregular migrants. Equally, there is the need to consider how and when to use “smuggling” as a descriptor of a facilitated irregular cross-border movement.

Second, major gaps need to be addressed on the protection as opposed to law enforcement side of smuggling. Anecdotal and actual evidence of exploitation, abuse and worse of adults and children have been raised in research but not systematically enough to be able to develop policies and programmes. The building of an evidence base on smuggling must be informed by protection-related issues, including those that lead to Afghans requesting the services of smugglers in the first place.

The presence of researchers on the ground shows that access is possible even in nominally insecure areas of the country. It is therefore possible to collect data on smuggling through field-based research in Afghanistan without necessarily going very far afield. Conducting research on smuggling is actually easier than is commonly acknowledged for several reasons, such as the following: (a) smuggling is a common and widespread phenomenon; (b) it is demand driven, when described by smugglers themselves; and (c) it is part of the experience of a very large number of Afghans. Rare is the Afghan who does not have a relative or acquaintance who has not used a smuggler to migrate, let alone know a smuggler themselves. As already mentioned, an important gap in the knowledge is that of the profile of smugglers. Knowing more about and humanizing the smuggler, along with improved data on protection issues, is key to developing sound policies and programmes dealing with outmigration from Afghanistan as a whole. At a time of sharply rising migration, and with Afghanistan being the second most important source country in the world for asylum seekers, the priority must be on launching a full-scale study on smuggling that takes into account the phenomenon as viewed both from the point of view of the Protocol, as well as that of the Afghans who place their futures – and sometimes their lives – in the smugglers’ hands.



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