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## Those who were sent back

Return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq



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Return and reintegration of rejected asylum  
seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq

Constanza Vera Larrucea, Henrik Malm Lindberg  
and André Asplund

Report 2021:10



Delmi Report 2021:10

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We promote the opportunities of migration by running a project co-financed by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

# Foreword

Over the course of the past few years, the issue of return and reintegration has received a great deal of attention from both policymakers and the news media. Return is a vital part of migration management and the regulated migration policy. It essentially means that migrants who do not have grounds to remain must return to their country of origin. It is moreover an essential part of the *New Pact on Asylum and Migration* that was proposed by the European Commission which also aims to establish more efficient and fair migration processes. After having received funds from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), Delmi decided to make a contribution in the field.

This report takes on the issue of return and re-integration from the perspective of the returnees. The Delmi Report 2020:1, *Those who cannot stay: How to implement return policy* took on the same issues, but from the perspective of the implementors. In this report the focus is shifted to those who have returned, their experiences from the processes of being denied asylum followed by return and reintegration. Thereby, these two reports complement one another and adds to the hitherto scarce knowledge in this field.

Studies on return and reintegration on Swedish data are few and therefore this report fills an existing gap. By a structured analysis of a wealth of data, interviews with one hundred rejected asylum seekers that have returned from Sweden to Afghanistan or Iraq, this report shows how the returnees try to manage their lives, how reintegration support is used and what factors – pre- and post-return – that both contribute to and impede a sustainable reintegration. The data is structured around a framework that characterises reintegration as a complex process taking place at multiple dimensions – economic, social and psychosocial – The following questions have guided the analysis: What pre-migratory factors affect (re)integration? Does the asylum process, or certain elements of it, affect the return and reintegration? What does life look like for those who return to Afghanistan and Iraq? Is it possible to talk about sustainable return and reintegration?

The report is authored by Constanza Vera Larrucea (PhD in Political Science), Henrik Malm Lindberg (Associate Professor in Economic History) and André Asplund (PhD International Studies). All three are research coordinators at

Delmi. Research coordinators Sara Thalberg and Daniel Silberstein and, until December 2020, Raoul Galli have held responsibility over the internal review. A steering committee at Delmi has throughout the process contributed with valuable insights: Joakim Palme chair of Delmi; Annika Sundén, member of Delmi; Mattias Wahlstedt, head of Delmi Secretariat and Åsa Holmqvist project controller. The report has also received contributions in the form of transcriptions, editing and proof reading from Delmi's research coordinators: Iris Luthman, Suzanne Planchard, Linus Liljeblad and Diana Sarbast. Valuable contributions have also been given by Johanna Hemberg and Jens Willgård, interns at Delmi.

The report and the AMIF-project has had a reference group consisting of the following members: Annika Sundén, Head of Analysis unit at the Swedish Public Employment Service; Önver Cetrez, associate professor Department of Theology; Bettina Chu, Counselling Asylum & Repatriation Danish Refugee Council; Jonathan Chaloff, Comparative migration policy expert OECD; Mikaela Eriksson, Desk Officer Ministry of Justice; Mikaela Hagan, project manager Swedish Red Cross; Mikko Hakkarainen, Policy Officer Home Affairs DG at the European Commission in Brussels; George Joseph, managing director Caritas Samuel Persson, Desk Officer Ministry of Foreign Affairs (UD); Åsa Petersson, Border Policing section National Operative Unit; Eva Qvarnström, Head of International Transportation NTE, National Unit of Transportation, Swedish Prison and Probation Service; Hugo Rickberg, Expert at The Migration Agency; Kjell-Terje Torvik, Project manager European Return and Reintegration Network; Tobias Von Treck, Programme Officer at IOM.

The report has been reviewed by external researchers at a scientific seminar. Daniela DeBono (Associate Professor International Migration and Ethnic Relations Department of Global Political Studies) at Malmö University; Marieke Van Houte (Postdoctoral researcher, Department of Public Administration and Sociology) at Erasmus University Rotterdam and Tine Davids (Associate Professor, Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies Department) at Radboud University Nijmegen.

The authors are fully responsible for the report's contents including its conclusions and policy recommendations.

Stockholm, May 2021

Joakim Palme

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# Sammanfattning

Endast en tredjedel av de som får avslag på en asylansökan, eller av andra skäl inte har rätt att vistas inom EU, lämnar regionen. Mindre än en tredjedel av de som faktiskt lämnar gör så frivilligt. Återvändande och återintegrering av de som återvänder står därför fortsatt högt på den politiska agendan. Detta avspglas bland annat i och med EU:s nya förslag om en strategi för ett gemensamt återvändandesystem med fokus på hållbar återintegration. I en tidigare Delmirapport (2020:1) undersöktes återvändandet från ett myndighetsperspektiv. Fokus låg då på implementeringen av, och målen för, den fastslagna politiken på återvändandeområdet – att fler ska återvända och helst frivilligt. Få tidigare studier om återvändande och återintegration har utgått från återvändarnas egna erfarenheter. I den här rapporten riktas därför strålkastarljuset mot återvändarna själva, det vill säga personer som har fått avslag på sin asylansökan och återvänt till hemlandet.

Rapporten har finansierats av EU:s Asyl-, migrations- och integrationsfonden (AMIF). Den bygger på semi-strukturerade djupintervjuer med 100 asylsökande som fått avslag och återvänt från Sverige till Afghanistan eller Irak. Utifrån de upplevelser och erfarenheter som migranterna delat med sig av, om tiden som migrant på väg mot Sverige, som asylsökande och senare som återvändare, utforskas olika aspekter som kan tänkas påverka deras återintegrering i hemlandet. En ganska tydlig bild ges av hur det faktiskt är att återvända och försöka återskapa sitt liv, hur återintegreringsstöden används, och huruvida man överhuvudtaget kan prata om 'hållbar återintegrering' – ett mål som alltmer förespråkas bland beslutsfattare runt om i Europa. Förhoppningen är att rapporten, genom analyser av de personliga berättelserna, kan bidra med insikter som i sin tur kan vara användbara för arbetet med att uppnå det svenska målet om ett välfungerande återvändande som bygger på hållbarhet och humanitet, och som är effektivt och rättssäkert.

Intervjuerna har analyserats utifrån ett antagande om att återintegration är en komplex process som innefattar flera dimensioner: en ekonomisk, en social och en psykosocial dimension. För att en person ska anses vara (åter)integrerad behöver personen i fråga vara integrerad i någon utsträckning inom alla dessa tre dimensioner. Med andra ord räcker det inte att ha tillgång till resurser och tjänster om man saknar sociala nätverk och

band – genom vilka man får tillgång till information och där relationer uppstår och hålls vid liv – eller om man saknar kontrollen att styra över sitt eget liv, saknar en känsla av tillhörighet och fruktar för sin personliga säkerhet. Ett annat antagande som har varit vägledande för studiens utformning har varit att migranternas erfarenheter från hela migrationscykeln – innan migrationen, på vägen mot värdlandet, under tiden som asylsökande, under återvändandeprocessen, och efter ankomsten i hemlandet – påverkar möjligheten för återvändare att återintegreras i den kontext som de återvänder till. Antagandena ovan, rörande återvändande och återintegration, har legat till grund för utformningen av intervjuerna, samt analysen av de erfarenheter som återvändarna delat med sig av.

Rapporten visar att många av informanterna levde under väldigt utsatta förhållanden innan de gav sig iväg på en lång, kostsam och ofta farlig resa mot Europa och Sverige. För de flesta afghanska återvändare tycks den drivande faktorn bakom migrationen ha varit åratals av fattigdom och utsatthet i områden som präglats av ett oroligt säkerhetsläge. Några av afghanerna hade migrerat till Iran i hopp om bättre levnadsvillkor, innan de slutligen bestämde sig för att migrera vidare till Europa. En del var födda i Iran och hade aldrig levt i Afghanistan, trots det afghanska medborgarskapet. Bland irakier var det vanligare att ha levt relativt bra och välställda liv innan migrationen. För dem var ofta den bidragande faktorn till migration en oväntad händelse, som en släktfejd eller en milisattack – vilket föranledde en hastig och påtvingad flykt från landet.

Studien visar att en rad faktorer verkar ha påverkat hur väl förberedda migranterna var på att återvända efter att de fått avslag på sin asylansökan. Den långa väntetiden under asylprocessen, bristfällig tillgång till – och kommunikation med – underleverantörer av tjänster kopplade till Migrationsverket, samt en allmänt bristfällig förståelse för asylsystemet och dess process tycks försvåra förberedelserna för återvändandet. Många tycks helt enkelt ha varit dåligt förberedda på att återvända och saknade därför en plan för hur de skulle kunna återstarta livet i hemlandet med allt vad det innebär. Många av de afghanska återvändarna berättade att de känt sig motarbetade och blivit otrevligt bemötta när de försökt ordna med resehandlingar vid den afghanska ambassaden, vilket försvårade förberedelserna.



Väl framme i hemlandet beskrev många, speciellt de som återvänt till Irak, att de återupplevt samma hot eller hotfulla situation som fick dem att lämna landet från första början, vilket hindrade den sociala och psykosociala integrationen. För majoriteten av återvändarna var den ekonomiska situationen riktigt svår. Arbetslöshet och en ständig kamp för att få ihop tillräckligt med pengar till mat, mediciner, hyra, och avbetalning av skulder var typiska inslag i många av återvändarnas liv. Den dystra ekonomiska situationen för flertalet kan sannolikt ha försämrats till följd av nedstängningarna av stora delar av samhället, som rådde vid tidpunkten för intervjuerna, till följd av Coronapandemin. För de flesta av de som återvänt till Afghanistan var situationen ungefär lika ekonomiskt ansträngd som den var när de lämnade landet, om inte värre. För de som återvänt till Irak tycks den ekonomiska situationen vara sämre än tidigare, då de hade det jämförelsevis bättre än afghanerna innan de migrerade, och ofta hade spenderat relativt sett mer pengar på att ta sig till Europa och Sverige.

Sociala nätverk spelar en avgörande roll för återvändarnas möjligheter att återintegreras, både i Afghanistan och Irak. Många av afghanerna uppgav att de saknar familj och släkt i landet. Inte heller hade de sociala nätverk eller personliga kontakter i någon större utsträckning, vilket försvårade deras ekonomiska integration i Afghanistan, och gjorde att de kände sig ensamma och sårbara. I Irak tycks jämförelsevis fler ha återvänt till en mer familjär kontext med familj, vänner och sociala nätverk, även om några levde gömda eftersom de uppfattade att det fortfarande fanns en hotbild mot dem.

Utbildning och andra färdigheter som de återvändande i viss mån lyckats skaffa sig i Sverige visade sig vara svåra att nyttja och tillämpa i de länder som de återvänt till, och kan på så vis inte sägas ha bidragit nämnvärt till återintegreringen. Många uttryckte även att de gått miste om den viktigaste tiden i deras liv under den långa väntan på ett asylbesked – en tid i livet som deras jämnåriga hade kunnat använda till att skaffa sig en utbildning, få anställning och bilda familj. När de jämförde den verklighet som de nu befann sig i, med den som de föreställde sig att de kunde ha haft i Sverige, så ger väldigt många uttryck för hopplöshet och nedstämdhet. Speciellt tydligt var detta hos de relativt stora antal återvändare som fortfarande kände sig orättvist behandlade av det svenska systemet, och som ansåg att avslaget på asylansökan var felaktigt.

Rapporten pekar på att det finns problem med alla former av återvändandestöd som finns att tillgå. De ekonomiska svårigheterna efter återvändandet lindras förvisso av återintegreringsstödet om 30,000 kronor (tillhandahålllet genom IOM för de som återvänder frivilligt), men som regel går pengarna till mat, hyra, eller avbetalning av skulder. Endast i ett fåtal fall används stödet för att starta en inkomstgenererande aktivitet som på sikt skulle kunna leda till självförsörjning. Vidare visar rapporten på att flertalet återvändare tycks ha missförstått informationen kring de återvändarstöd som finns tillgängliga. Några vittnade även om problem med att få tillgång till stöden. En del uppfattade processen som krånglig med svåruppnåeliga krav. Andra menade att de fått vänta oskäligt länge. Det stöd som kallas in-kind – vilket oftast avser hjälp med upp till 2,500 Euro för att starta någon form av inkomstgenererande aktivitet – är det stöd som får mest kritik, speciellt i relation till de långa väntetiderna. Det stöd som får minst kritik är det som kallas ankomststöd – vilket oftast avser ett "pengar-i-handen-bidrag" om ungefär 150 Euro som ges vid ankommande flygplats.

För de allra flesta informanter i studien upplevdes den nuvarande situationen som osäker, utsatt och extremt känslig för politiska och ekonomiska svängningar. Huruvida det är möjligt att beskriva återvändarnas vardag i termer av 'hållbar återintegration' beror helt på vad som läggs i definitionen av begreppet – och här finns det olika uppfattningar bland såväl forskare, praktiker och beslutsfattare. Om 'hållbar' i detta avseende betyder att den som har återvänt har möjlighet att ekonomiskt försörja sig, pekar studien på att få av återvändarna kan sägas vara hållbart återintegrerade. Om hänsyn tas även till de sociala och psykosociala dimensionerna av integrationen är det ännu färre som kan sägas vara hållbart återintegrerade. Att den psykosociala dimensionen spelar stor roll var tydligt. Den upplevda känslan av säkerhet och personlig trygghet föreföll ha större betydelse än de ekonomiska faktorerna för mångas beslut om att eventuellt försöka migrera på nytt.

# Summary

Only one-third of those who are not allowed to stay in the EU actually leave; of those who leave, less than one-third does so voluntarily. A previous Delmi Report (2020:1) examined return migration from a governmental and implementation perspective. Its aim was to gain an understanding as to why the return rate from Sweden is so low and what the predicaments the “street level” bureaucrats working with returning rejected asylum seekers are facing. Return and reintegration is high on the political agenda, as evident by the EU's newly proposed strategy towards a common EU system for returns, highlighting sustainable reintegration of those who return. While much has been written on the potential conditions, facilitating return and in particular sustainable reintegration of the returnees, the experiences and perspectives of those who have returned are rarely investigated. In this Delmi Report, financed by AMIF, such experiences take centre stage.

By way of analysing the personal stories of one hundred rejected asylum seekers who have returned from Sweden to Afghanistan or Iraq, the study explores different aspects of the migration experience and the asylum process that seem to affect post-return reintegration. The report paints a picture of what life looks like for returnees trying to rebuild their lives. It depicts how different kinds of reintegration support is utilised and discusses whether or not it is possible to describe the returnees' situations along the line of “sustainable reintegration” – a much promoted term among governments and policy makers across Europe. It is hoped that the personal stories of returnees can provide insights that in turn can contribute towards the Swedish aim of having a well-functioning return procedure grounded in sustainability and humanity.

According to previous research, different aspects and experiences of the migration cycle – during the time before migrating, the journey towards Sweden, the time as an asylum seeker, the return process, and arrival in the country of origin – affect the ways in which a returnee is able to reintegrate, economically, socially and psychosocially, after the return. This knowledge of return and reintegration from previous studies guide the design of the study, the semi-structured in-depth interviews, as well as the analysis of the experiences that the returnees shared. The analysis of the data is structured

around a framework that assumes that reintegration is a complex procedure taking place at different levels or dimensions: economically, socially, and psychosocially. a successful reintegration presupposes that individuals are integrated, or embedded, to some extent in all these dimensions. For example, it may not be enough to have access to resources and services (economic embeddedness) if one lacks social networks through which information can be delivered and relations with peers can be nurtured (social embeddedness), or if one lacks the ability to decide over one's life, lacks a sense of belonging and feels unsafe and fears being harmed (psychosocial embeddedness).

The report shows that many of the returnees in the study seem to have been living in conditions of vulnerability before embarking on a difficult, and often hazardous, journey towards Sweden. After an external shock rocked their life balance – a tribal feud or militia attack – they felt that they had no choice but to leave the country.

Afghans seem to have been driven to migrate mostly by years of living in poverty and insecurity. Some had previously moved on to Iran in order to take advantage of the economic opportunities there, before leaving for Europe. Some others declared to have been born in Iran and had never set foot in Afghanistan, even though they were Afghan nationals. Iraqis, however, to a larger extent than Afghans, described having lived relatively good lives, with access to employment and economic opportunities before migrating.

Different aspects of their time as asylum seekers in Sweden seem to have affected their preparedness to return following a rejection on their asylum application. The length of the asylum process, poor access to and communication with service providers linked to the Migration Agency, and the lack of understanding of the asylum system, appear to obstruct asylum seeker's abilities to prepare for a return. Many respondents appear to have been ill-prepared to return, lacking a plan on how to restart life after arrival in their country of origin. Difficulties in acquiring travel documents and a feeling of disrespect and lack of empathy by the personnel at the embassy, which does not facilitate the return process, were frequently mentioned by the Afghan respondents.

Upon return, many describe experiencing the very same threat or hostile situation that made them leave in the first place. This poses challenges to their ability to reintegrate – particularly in the social and psychosocial realms of

life. The economic situation for the absolute majority of those who returned is bleak. Unemployment, lack of economic opportunities, and a constant struggle to thrive, describe life for most. The bleak economic reality for many can likely in part be explained by the Corona pandemic shutdowns of much of society that were in place during the time of the interviews. For most of the Afghan returnees, the economic outlook is as bad, if not worse, than what they left when migrating out of Afghanistan. For most Iraqis, the financial situation seems to be much worse than what they left as they were relatively better off than the Afghans, but seemingly paid more for their migration

In both cases, the existence of social networks plays an important role for the returnees' abilities to reintegrate. Many Afghans seem to lack social networks, family and relatives as well as *wasta* (personal connections), and as a consequence their economic reintegration is impeded leaving many lonely and vulnerable. In Iraq, a relatively greater number of respondents returned to some sort of familiarity, family or friends, and existing social networks. Nevertheless, a number of respondents in Iraq were unable to draw on such assets since the perceived threats to their lives were such that they deemed it necessary to hide.

For most, skills and knowledge one may have acquired in Sweden are either not useful at all or at least not easily transferable to the returning context and as such do not contribute to the reintegration process. Many feel that they have lost some of their most important years while being an asylum seeker in Sweden, which has set them back in time compared to their peers, education-wise, workwise, and even familywise. Many returnees feel both hopeless and depressed when they compare the realities that they now have to settle for, with what could have been a better life in Sweden had they been able to stay – particularly so given that they also harbour an acute sense of injustice for not having been granted asylum.

The results suggest that economic return aid, in-cash or in-kind, offer relief upon return, but in only a handful of cases does it seem to have led to a successful income-generating activity. The re-establishment support (approx. EUR 3,000) is often used for subsistence. It is, by no means, wasted money, but rather spent mostly on housing, food, and paying off debts, rather than on goods or services that may lead to self-sufficiency. Many seem to have misunderstood the information given by Swedish public authorities regarding the financial support they would be able to obtain upon return. Some point to

obstacles in receiving the financial and other support after their return, such as difficult procedures with obstacles, preconditions hard to fulfil, and long delays. All forms of assistance get a share of criticism among the returnees. The *reintegration assistance* provided by the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), an in-kind support for things such as assistance with starting a business (up to EUR 2,500), receives much criticism, particularly with respect to long waiting times. The small *reception support* (USD 147, cash-in hand at the airport in Kabul) on the other hand is rarely noted as being difficult to get.

Whether or not one can talk about sustainable return and reintegration depends upon the definition of the concepts. The vulnerable situation experienced by the returnees makes it difficult to talk about sustainable integration. If sustainability here is equated to having the means to sustain one's existence economically by themselves or not, few in the study would be characterised as sustainably returned. If social and psychosocial dimension of reintegration are also included, even fewer of the respondents could be considered sustainably reintegrated. In fact, what seems even more important for the returnees in this study than economic opportunities, is the perceived security and feeling of personal safety. For many, those aspects were regarded as determining for their plans to stay or re-migrate i.e. to migrate again after return. It is clear from the study that for most of the respondents, the current situation is precarious and vulnerable to political and economic instability. This leads to a majority of our respondents to consider re-migrating [back to Europe] if they find the resources to do so.

# Index

1. Introduction .....	1
1.1 Aim of study .....	2
1.2 Contribution and originality of the study .....	3
1.3 Outline of the study .....	4
2. Previous research and analytical framework .....	7
2.1 Factors affecting return and re-integration .....	8
2.2 Return and reintegration in previous studies .....	10
2.3 Analytical framework .....	19
3. Method and sources .....	25
3.1 Studying return and reintegration .....	25
3.2 Limitations to our study .....	25
3.3 Two cases: Return to Afghanistan and to Iraq .....	27
3.4 Target group and sampling .....	28
3.5 Fieldwork: Gathering data in difficult conditions .....	30
3.6 Data analysis .....	36
4. Laws and rules governing return and reintegration .....	39
4.1 From asylum to return .....	39
4.2 The Swedish Return Policy gets on the agenda .....	43
4.3 Supporting return and reintegration .....	43
4.4 The asylum and return process from different perspectives .....	47
5. A turbulent region. Push factors and migration patterns .....	51
5.1 Ethnic groups, instability, and migration in Afghanistan .....	52
5.2 The Iraqi context .....	56
5.3 A statistical review of return from Sweden to Afghanistan and Iraq .....	62
6. Pre-migration and asylum process: Life before return .....	69
6.1 Pre-migration situation .....	69
6.2 Migration journey .....	75
6.3 Being an asylum seeker in Sweden .....	78
6.4 The return process .....	92
6.5 The return experience .....	101

6.6 Discussion .....	103
7. After the Return .....	107
7.1 (Re)integrating into Afghan society .....	107
7.2 Reintegration upon return to Iraq.....	129
7.3 A sustainable return? .....	141
7.4 Summary and short comparison of the two cases.....	151
8. Conclusion and final thoughts .....	159
8.1 A 'whole-of-migration' perspective to understand return .....	160
8.2 Returning from Sweden: Takeaways and social "remittances" .....	168
8.3 Reintegration programmes under the light of our data.....	168
8.4 Key elements of reintegration.....	170
8.5 Re-migration: A possibility or a dream? .....	171
9. Policy recommendations .....	173
References.....	179
Appendix casebook .....	199
List of previous publications.....	203



# Figures, boxes and tables

Figure 1. Return decisions to Afghanistan and Iraq 2009–2018 .....	27
Figure 2. Residence permits for Afghans 2000–2019 .....	56
Figure 3. Residence permits for Iraqis 2000–2019 .....	61
Figure 4. Return cases 2015–2020 Afghanistan .....	62
Figure 5. Return cases 2015–2020 Iraq .....	63
Figure 6. Return travels to Iraq 2016–2020 .....	64
Figure 7. Return travels to Afghanistan 2016–2020 .....	65
Figure 8 Implemented trips by the Police to Afghanistan .....	66
Figure 9 Implemented trips by the Police to Iraq .....	66
Box 1. Gender perspectives: On being a woman on the run .....	72
Box 2. Unaccompanied Minors .....	84
Box 3. Re-establishment Support, Reintegration Assistance and Reception Assistance .....	128
Box 4. The autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI) .....	130
Table 1. Interview themes and questions .....	31
Table 2. Voluntary and forced returns, by gender .....	34



# Abbreviations

AFN	Afghanistan
ALCS	Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey
AMASO	Afghanistan Migrants Advice & Support Organization
AMIF	The Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
AT-UND	Certificate for asylum seekers to have the right to work
AVR	Assisted Voluntary Return
AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EBO	Eget Boende (self-housing)
ECRE	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
EMN	European Migration Network
ERRIN	European Return and Reintegration Network
ETTC	The European Technology and Training Centre
HDI	Human Development Index
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IOM	International Organization for Migration
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

IRARA	International Returns And Reintegration Assistance
IRQ	Iraq
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JO	Justitieombudsmannen (Parliamentary Ombudsmen)
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan region of Iraq
LMA	Lagen om mottagande av asylsökande (Reception of Asylum Seekers' Act)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TIA	Tidiga Insatser för Asylsökande (Early action for asylum seekers)

# 1. Introduction

Regulated migration presupposes that individuals lacking legal rights to stay, such as rejected asylum seekers, return to their country of origin. However, only a minority end up doing so. In 2019 just above 30 percent of rejected asylum seekers required by law to leave the EU actually returned (OECD 2020:27). This has contributed to the fact that questions regarding return and national strategies to deal with irregular migrants have risen to the top of the political agenda in the European Union (European Commission 2018; 2020) as well as for Sweden (Malm Lindberg 2020).

A turn from an 'integration regime' to a 'deportation regime' (Peutz & De Genova 2010) sees return as an important tool of migration control and perceived by states as an act of sovereignty. Within this turn towards return, policies have focused on ensuring effective returns as well as sustainable integration. A "sustainable return and reintegration" is now an increasingly sought-after goal also among EU policymakers. From a policy perspective, the term "sustainable return" has commonly referred to a state in which a returned migrant does not re-migrate back to Europe, or at least the previous host country.

Although there is an abundant body of literature about return and reintegration stipulating a series of conditions for a smoother return and a successful integration, little is known about the individual experience of return and personal approaches to reintegration. This qualitative study turns to individuals who have returned to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of return and reintegration. How does the migration experience and return process affect, according to their perspectives, the post-return situation? In other words, what are the factors that makes or breaks a well-functioning, "sustainable" return of rejected asylum seekers? This study turns to the experiences of returnees from Sweden to Iraq and to Afghanistan. After a difficult migration and an unsuccessful asylum process, individuals must start over in a place where the conditions are difficult. Their experiences and reflections might highlight aspects that policy makers and practitioners rarely see and put into context or even contest logics and terminology applied to the return of unsuccessful asylum seekers. The so-called reintegration process

might not be so but a new integration process for some individuals who are not previously acquainted with the society to which they return to, therefore we choose to call this (re) integration.

## 1.1 Aim of study

This study has been co-funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (Migration Agency 2020a), with the aim to increase and enrich the knowledge in the field of *return* with a bottom up approach. This follows a Delmi initiative to investigate return policies, their implementation and consequences, and bring together decision- or policymakers, practitioners and academics who work in the field.

Delmi's first report on Return (Malm Lindberg 2020) investigated the implementation of return policies in Sweden from the perspective of officials and street-level-bureaucrats whose job is to implement migration and return policies. This study instead takes a bottom-up approach to study return and (re)integration by focusing on the experiences and perspectives of those who were not granted asylum – rejected asylum seekers returning from Sweden to Afghanistan or Iraq. In doing so, the goal is, first, to help fill knowledge gaps on return and (re)integration of rejected asylum seekers and, second, to contribute towards a well-functioning return procedure grounded in sustainability and humanity.

In order to achieve our goal, and adopting a migration cycle approach, we have the following guiding questions:

- a) What pre-migratory factors affect (re)integration?
- b) Does the asylum process, or certain elements of it, affect the return and reintegration?
- c) What does life look like for those who return to Afghanistan and Iraq?
- d) Is it possible to talk about sustainable return and reintegration?

We make use of data collected in Iraq and Afghanistan from individuals that have returned from Sweden relatively recently. Their narratives, i.e. the way in which individuals reconstruct and make sense of their reality, are analysed considering the migration cycle – pre-migration, the migration trip, the asylum process and return – and factors intervening in the return and reintegration

process, in the form of a psychological, social and economic dimensions. The primary goal of the study is not to compare these two groups but to acquire a deeper knowledge about how different stages in the migration cycle, individual characteristics and the contextual factors affect return and reintegration.

The report makes use of terminology usually found within return studies. Particularly important are the terms voluntary and forced return.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the report, the term voluntary return refers to the return of persons who have a decision of expulsion and are required by law to leave and consent to do so within a stipulated time – with or without support. Meanwhile forced return is considered as the return of someone who is required by law to leave but have not consented to do so and who are directly subject to coercion to carry out their removal. These terms, thus, refers to two distinct legal situations, commonly used by Swedish agencies but also internationally. However, what our data shows will challenge this dichotomy by showing different degrees of (in)voluntariness among the respondents.

## 1.2 Contribution and originality of the study

Despite the high relevance of return and sustainable reintegration, there is no systematic study about returnees from Sweden except for the ethnographic study of Khosravi (2009) on post-deportation. Return from other European countries, for example the Netherlands and Norway, have been more thoroughly investigated. With a perspective including not only return and reintegration but also pre-migration conditions, the journey to Sweden, and the asylum process, this study hopes to add insights, beyond previous literature in the field. We draw on the experiences of one hundred returnees, gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews with voluntary and involuntary returnees to Afghanistan and Iraq. This has provided us with a rich material which we believe can contribute to a better understanding of how to achieve a well-functioning return and reintegration, facilitating returnees' abilities to rebuild their lives and (re)integrate into society and help actors involved in return and reintegration with the knowledge acquired. By

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<sup>1</sup>There is an alternative but similar dichotomy also used in the literature: soft deportation versus hard deportation. The term *hard* basically stands for detection, detention and forced return, whereas *soft* stands for compliance by the migrant via assisted return programmes. (Van Houte et al 2021).

identifying returnees' needs and assessing possible solutions within the particular context of return, we expect to contribute to a better formulation of policy goals as well as tools to evaluate reintegration programmes.

*I wasted five years of my life in Sweden and they were cruel to me. I could have had a good life in Sweden if they had made a good decision. Now that I am here, I neither have a job nor a safe life. I am broke, emotionally ill and do not know how to get married or continue my life.*

Male, 29 years, AFG#70.

The study is unique in the sense that it approaches individuals who have been through the asylum and return process from Sweden and returned to two of the most difficult contexts to re-integrate into, Iraq and Afghanistan. Both countries are sources of large numbers of asylum seekers in Sweden where Iraqis have a fairly long history of crossing the Swedish border. Afghans have been among the largest groups during the last decade subjected to return, which has also been broadly discussed by the news media and civil society organisations.

## 1.3 Outline of the study

This Delmi-report is arranged as follows:

In Chapter Two we put this study into context, that is, the current state of research in the return and reintegration field. Key concepts when analysing the data are voluntariness, preparedness, and embeddedness.

Chapter Three describes and discusses the method (in-depth interviews performed in Iraq and Afghanistan) used to acquire the material, or data, (the returnees' experiences of asylum procedures, return and reintegration) which this study draws on.

Chapter Four deals with the design of the return system in Sweden, briefly covering the existing rules and regulations at both a political and an administrative level.

Chapter Five outlines the contexts that the respondents left and subsequently were obligated to return to. This chapter briefly describes the historical, economic, and political circumstances that lead to instability in both countries.



The next part of the report (Chapters Six and Seven) focuses on the empirical data. In a chronological set up, Chapter Six describes and analyses the period before return, (looking at for example individual characteristics, motives to migrate, the migration experience and asylum process).

In Chapter Seven, the focus is directed towards the experiences after the return to Iraq and Afghanistan. We explore the factors that affect the reintegration process. Three dimensions of re-integration are covered: The social, psychological, and economic dimensions of returning to each country. Then, a short comparison is made.

Chapter Eight explains and evaluates the primary findings in relation to the research questions as well as the analytical framework. It also intends to extrapolate some of the key findings to a discussion regarding the consequences of being a failed asylum seeker in a difficult context to return to. This chapter also problematises the sustainability of the return.

Finally, based on the empirical analysis, in the concluding Chapter Nine we present our policy recommendations.



## 2. Previous research and analytical framework

In order to understand how we landed in the theoretical and analytical framework, with voluntariness, preparedness and mixed embeddedness as key concepts, it is important to first present a short overview of the field return migration and the factors that previous research have rendered as important for a successful reintegration. Likewise, it is important to mention some themes that we have encountered in the data, but they are also an integral part of this research field: First and foremost, return migration is not always a process of going “home” and then reintegrating. Home rather has a dynamic and multi-local notion and is filled with both ambiguity and variety. Secondly, the often-used concept voluntary will be challenged in this report. Voluntary is a term used by Swedish and other agencies such as the International organization for Migration (IOM) to define a decision taken by the returnee, but from the perspective of our informants it is much more complex and must be put in a context to be comprehensible.

Our analytical framework stems from the fact that we think it is too simple to see return migration as a dichotomous process: from origin to host country and then back again. Return migration is rather part of a circular process with (sometimes) multiple origins and hosts. Moreover, to successfully re-integrate or rather become re-embedded is not a condition that is easily definable. It is rather dependent on subjective feelings of e.g. identity and belonging in a continuum.

Research on return migration can roughly be divided into two main categories: Pre-return and Post-return. Studies describing the return process are scarce. Studies from the first group tend to focus on questions relating to the decision-making processes – e.g. what makes the returnees more or less willing to return? That decision, to accept or actually pursue the return, is part of a complex process. It depends on many factors, which may change significantly over time, together with the intention and actual behaviour (Black et al. 2004; de Haas et al. 2015). The focus of the studies from the latter group tends instead to be on the sustainability of return. Literature on return,

specifically on forced return i.e. deportation, reflects a broad awareness (among scholars and policy makers) that return and reintegration is neither a simple nor a straightforward process, and that the many difficulties faced by returnees when trying to (re)integrate into society may stem from economic, political and/or social conditions upon return (Black et al. 2004:25).

This particular field of research is often named “deportation studies” and it was initiated in the early 2000s as a branch of migration research or studies. Researchers in this field generally have a critical approach. A prevailing practice for those, including us, who work with empirical methods is to conduct the research based on the migrants’ perspectives. By means of country-based studies as well as comparative research, different “deportation regimes” has been identified (Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2015). The concept has been coined due to the emphasis on return rather than on integration that has characterised Government’s and agencies’ view on and work with migration and migrants (Peutz & De Genova 2010).

Previous studies on reintegration offer different tools that serve to the purpose of our study. Within general factors associated we found specific terms describing conditions that will later affect re-integration. A triad of concepts - voluntariness, preparedness and embeddedness - are used to analyse our data. The interpretation and reading of the interviews are thus influenced by these concepts and it will be further operationalised later in this report.

## 2.1 Factors affecting return and re-integration

Previous research on return migration have pointed to a set of factors that affects the extent to which a returnee can (re)integrate post-return (see e.g. Cassarino 2014; Kuschminder 2017; Ruben et al. 2009; Scalettaris & Gubert 2018:100), such as:

- *Individual characteristics* like gender, age, level of education and religion.
- *The (whole) migration cycle*, including such factors as reasons for leaving, experiences as an asylum seeker in host country, return procedures, return conditions like security and employment opportunities.
- *Pre- and post-return assistance* delivered by for example state, private or civic organisations

*Individual characteristics.* These can also be linked back to pre-migration conditions and are also considered to influence how migrants experience their return (Ghanem 2003). A case in point, ethnicity and religious affiliation may influence both impetus for migrating and means of reintegrating upon return, in both cases by way of discrimination via a myriad of dimensions. Gender, age and socio-economic background may also affect reintegration (Kuschminder 2017).

*The whole migration cycle.* That includes pre-migration conditions (impetus for migrating), migration experience, the return process and post-return conditions that may affect (re)integration. Returnees' experiences from before and during migration, and in our case with particular focus on the time spent as an asylum seeker in Sweden, are as such informative in relation to the ability to (re)integrate post-return. There is a broad consensus within return studies that a country's political, institutional, economic and social conditions all greatly impact a returnee's ability to (re)integrate in different dimensions (cf. Black et al. 2004; van Houte & Davids 2008; Ruben et al. 2009; Paasche 2016; Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Kuschminder 2017; Strand et al 2016; IOM 2015; OECD 2020). Access to employment and basic services such as housing, education, and health; the absence of war and conflict are some of the most important aspects in this regard. In addition, it has been argued that reintegration depends on the ability of the returnee to mobilise resource and prepare adequately before returning.

One aspect that has been raised with more emphasis lately is the fact that the countries the migrants return to are not only less developed, but also institutionally weaker and plagued by corruption (see Chapter 5). A newly explored theme is the migration corruption nexus (Carling et al. 2015). The few empirical studies have pointed to signs that corruption affects the outcomes both in terms of psycho-social well-being and economic possibilities. An example is Paasche's (2016) findings of returnees to Iraqi Kurdistan who experience severe constraints in terms of lack of merit-based opportunities, and an undermined sense of individual security due to the power exercised by politicians and bureaucrats in governmental institutions that were perceived to be above the law.

Within the migration cycle approach, it is important to highlight the completeness of the cycle from an individual perspective. Return migration of failed

asylum seekers is rarely completely voluntary, although the expelling states might classify it as such. The return is therefore not always the end of their migration cycle since the returnee might start all over again. Cassarino considers that *a migration cycle is incomplete when unexpected factors and conditions prompted migrants to return when they intended to stay abroad for longer* (Cassarino 2015: 217). Therefore, taking into account the migration cycle might have important consequences for the reintegration of migrants. Such reintegration might be desired by the country expelling the migrant, but not by the expelled individual who does not see the expulsion as a return.

*Pre- and post-return assistance*, from governments and/or CSOs are set up to contribute in different ways towards the return and reintegration process. A lot of resources are directed towards these sorts of assistance, like AVRRO (implemented by IOM on behalf of the host nations) and ERRIN (implemented by ICMPD on behalf of host nations). The extent to which they deliver the designed outcomes is unclear and debated.

## 2.2 Return and reintegration in previous studies

### Asylum process, waiting for an answer in the host country

Research on asylum and the waiting period describes a situation of uncertainty and dissatisfaction for the asylum seekers in general. One important finding from Swedish data is that the constant threat of forced return is likely to put great strain on asylum-seekers during the process (Slavnic 2000). Empirical studies in the Netherlands show that the length of stay in asylum accommodations can have detrimental impacts on asylum-seekers' mental health (Bakker et al. 2014). There is likewise evidence to suggest that failed asylum seekers and other irregular migrants have a general low level of well-being as well as more prevalent diagnosis of both physical and mental illnesses (Woodward et al. 2014).

Since two outcomes are possible from an asylum process – approval or rejection – applicants tend to prepare for either a continued life in the country of destination or a return to the home country. At an individual level, having parallel goals – integration and return – is difficult to manage, even if the national authorities might have such objectives (Brekke 2001).

When Brekke (2001; 2004) studied asylum seekers in Sweden a key finding was that “return is not an option” for the migrants, and simply raising the issue tended to render strong emotional reactions. The negative reactions and outcomes of a prolonged waiting period could be explained by the low sense of coherence and comprehensibility during the process. A study on Kosovan asylum-seekers’ life at a Swedish refugee accommodation centre showed that the waiting period was stressful. Lack of employment and resources made waiting hard to manage (Rosengren 2009). Another study of asylum-seekers in Sweden, this time in EBO<sup>2</sup>, concluded that return was always perceived as a threat, never a possibility. Even while some may have felt alright during the asylum process many felt trapped in limbo waiting for a possible residence permit (Lennartsson 2007).

Esaiasson & Sohlberg (2018) concluded from a short review of the existing research that asylum-seekers generally have little confidence and trust in the system and also towards the public authorities such as the Swedish Migration Agency. From their empirical study it is clear that most asylum seekers in Sweden are dissatisfied with their situation during the asylum process (e.g. material conditions and length of process), and that many have suspicions regarding the fairness in the asylum system.

Other studies have a focus on the experience and wellbeing of the migrants before the return has been implemented, including the experience of living under threat of deportation, or being deportable (Kalir 2017; DeBono et al. 2015; DeBono 2017; Hasselberg 2016).

## Intervening factors in the embeddedness process

As it was previously mentioned, earlier studies identify a number of factors that have an impact on the state of (re)integration, for example: individual characteristics of the returnees – age, gender, class and ethnicity – as well as the characteristics of the society into which one returns, the experiences from the migration cycle as well as the information, access and use of different

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<sup>2</sup> The EBO law entered into force in 1994 to give asylum seekers the right to find their own accommodation and move anywhere in Sweden while their asylum application is being processed. Under the law asylum seekers could claim daily compensation from the state. The law was amended in 2019 whereby asylum seekers could still choose their accommodation, but if they move or remain in an area deemed vulnerable the authorities might withhold housing compensation.

kinds of return and reintegration assistance. A factor affecting the three forms of embeddedness is the context where an individual returns to. If return shall be considered as sustainable, or in other cases (especially IDP's) as a "durable solution," it is imperative to consider the conditions to where an individual returns to (Davis et al. 2018). Even more important is the vulnerability an individual might experience prior to migration which does not disappear after migration.

Another strand of empirical studies about return has to do with the implications of it for vulnerable groups such as minorities, families, and children. After deportation, vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities, uneducated youngsters and women might face more difficulty when trying to make a life in the place they are sent to (Khosravi 2018:3).

Children suffer the most with the threat of deportation, but the post-deportation period also sees children suffering from post-traumatic stress, a permanent fear about family stability, and the stigma that associates immigration with illegality (Dreby 2012). Moreover, women suffer an increased risk of physical and sexual assaults and prostitution due to financial insecurity and ineffective law enforcement (Robertson et al. 2014). Even when return is planned and consciously made this might negatively affect women's psychological well-being as Majidi (2017b) shows in her study of returnees in Somalia.

Meanwhile, minorities might find themselves in the same or in a more vulnerable situation after return. Even in contexts where states and international organizations have encouraged, promoted and funded return of minorities, these cannot succeed in reintegration if there are no appropriate conditions guaranteeing equal treatment and opportunities to remain in their country of nationality (see for example, Özerdem & Payne 2019).

In contrast, there are some examples where a failed migration project can be experienced in a less negative way. An example is Schultz study on deported Malian men whose return do not necessarily lead to social death (Schultz 2019:178). Despite hardships, the group of young men seem to make sense of their everyday life after return. The fact that Schultz centres her analysis on conceptions of masculinity and thriving even in a situation that could look as standstill, previously seen as a *motion within motion* (as quoted in Schultz - Vigh 2006:4) i.e. the active part of the migratory cycle, could presuppose that



young men find themselves in a better situation to develop a sense of agency after deportation. Although not so developed in the literature, this could help to interpret or compare with our material, which also mostly consists in the narratives of young men.

## Return and psychosocial well-being

One of the aspects that has raised interest among scholars investigating return, are the psychosocial aspects specially in the case of rejected asylum seekers. Policies encouraging or enforcing return significantly affect the psychological status of individuals who have been asylum seekers or irregular migrants (Vathi 2017:15).

Studies highlighting a weak psychosocial well-being among rejected asylum seekers before, during and after deportation are abundant. Specialised studies on mental health in the post-deportation period tell about the psychological strain among returnees not only who have been subjected to a forced return but also those who participate in assisted voluntary return programmes (see Lersner et al. 2008). In most cases the psychological problems were already present before return. The deterioration in mental health while waiting for a decision or by living in illegality (see for example, De Bono, 2017) might then have a severe impact in the post-return period, affecting the chances of reintegration. The migration experience can be seen in studies as an additional stressor post return, especially in cases of asylum seekers fleeing violent conflicts (Hunt & Gakenyi 2004; Steel et al. 1999).

Bivand Erdal and Oeppen (2017) describe three factors shaping the psychosocial wellbeing of returnees based on empirical data collected among returnees from Norway to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Poland: accumulation of resources, relationships with family members and agency. These three factors are strongly linked to the previous aspects facilitating the pre-return phase (Cassarino 2004) and access to resources and social networks for the re-embeddedness. This aspect cannot be separated from access to social networks, in terms of channels allowing access to resources and family connections. Therefore, the returnee who undertakes a trip on his or her own has very low chances to re-embeddedness. A return to a place different to the one considered as home, may foretell a low chance for re-embeddedness.

The involuntariness of return has also been seen as an important factor in the deterioration of psychological well-being. Empirical studies have shown how psychological well-being of individuals is severely affected by their lack of free will and agency (see for example, De Bono 2017).<sup>3</sup>

### Sustainable return: a reintegration into society?

Many EU Member States specify 'sustainable return' or reintegration as an explicit objective for their return programmes and policies (OECD 2020) yet no single definition of the term or how to measure it exists (Kuschminder 2017:7). To define sustainable return by measuring re-migration rates of returnees, an approach favoured from policy perspectives, can be said to occupy one end within a spectrum comprising more and less inclusive definitions of sustainable return. Here, return is considered sustainable when the returned migrant does not re-migrate. This approach has been thoroughly challenged by modern research which criticised it for being reductionist. It has for some time now been replaced with more complex definitions, recognising the multitude of contextual, individual and psychosocial factors that influence the return and subsequently the (re)integration of the returned migrant.

At the other end of the spectrum one might consider for example Koser and Kuschminder's definition of sustainable return as occurring when: "[t]he individual has reintegrated into the economic, social and cultural processes of the country of origin and feels that they are in an environment of safety and security upon return" (2015: 8). Definitions towards this end of the spectrum, however, has been criticised for being unachievable for policy makers (Kuschminder 2017: 9). Within the spectrum of more or less inclusive definitions used today by scholars, practitioners and policy makers, there seems to be consensus about the fact that sustainable return involves many different dimensions of a returnee's livelihood.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) considers sustainable return as synonymous to reintegration, or 're-entry' into the social, economic cultural structures of society (Dimitrijevic et al. 2004: 38, from Ruben et al. 2009). There has also been the assumption, also stemming from

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<sup>3</sup> This resembles to the capability approach, introduced by Amartya Sen, which is a theoretical framework that argues that human well-being should be understood in terms of people's capabilities and functionings. It also entails a recognition of human agency which in turn has influenced the development literature.

UNHCR, that when returnees are “similar to the local population” in terms of socio-economic conditions and security, return can be considered as sustainable (Fransen 2015). In the UN, and related organisations such as IOM, there is often an effort to link return and re-integration to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) or what contributes to the Human Development Index (HDI) (IOM 2017a). These also include a number of dimensions that broadly correspond with what the literature in this field has come up with.

Black et al., (2004) in an empirical study on voluntary return from the UK to Bosnia and Kosovo, suggested measuring sustainability by examining Physical, Socio-economic and Political-security aspects of the returnee’s situation post-return. A particularly innovative feature of this study was to measure the perceptions of the returnees themselves – which according to the three above identified aspects would correlate to: Desire to re-migrate (Physical); Perceived socioeconomic status (Socio-economic), and; Perception of safety, security threats (Political-security). The study took those data in consideration together with measuring the objective conditions of individual returnees and the wider conditions in the country of return (2004: 25–26).

This call to analyse what happens after the return from the perspective of migrants in order to understand (re)integration has been echoed in other prominent research on return migration for example by Khosravi, although he refrains from using the term reintegration and instead talks about a state of post-deportation (2009, 2016). Post-deportation challenges the logic of return, where an individual comes back to its “natural” environment. In this sense, re-integration is coming back to the same context that an individual left before migration. Such approach is not only static in considering migration as a once in a lifetime experience, it also assumes a sedentary nature of individuals often living in areas of instability and uncertainty – two major factors behind a decision to migrate. From this perspective, reintegration, or post-deportation, cannot be called “sustainable” if an individual encounters hostile conditions when arriving to the country of nationality, which is not always what an individual would recognise as “home.” Importantly, among the many who make use of the term post-deportation, a majority base its conclusions in empirical data (Dingeman & Rumbaut 2009; Ahumuza 2017; Lecadet 2013; Schuster & Majidi 2013; Schultz 2019 Drottbohm & Hasselberg 2015).

When measuring sustainable return from the perspectives of the returnees, defined by their self-perceptions, Strand et al. (2016: 179) found that “[f]ew of the returnees to Afghanistan and Iraqi Kurdistan would agree that they live in an environment of safety and security, even if they to a varying degree might have reintegrated into the economic, social and cultural processes.” This suggests, that to understand sustainability of returnees it may not be enough to measure socio-economic indicators, or the extent to which a returnee has adapted into the dominant society. It may be pertinent to also take into account “the subjective importance that returnees’ attribute to these conditions” (Ruben et al. 2009: 945), as that allows capturing opportunities for returnees to identity, position and interest vis-à-vis the dominant society of return. Based on the returnees own self-perceptions regarding the sustainability of their return, Strand et al. (2016: 19) proposed that only “those who aspire to reintegrate and are able to reintegrate” can be categorised as sustainable returnees.

## Return assistance

Most actors, national and international, have considered voluntary return and repatriation to be the best solution to the global refugee situation and as such, Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes were initiated (Koser & Black 1999). These programmes, nowadays referred to as Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR<sup>4</sup>), have increased in size during the last 15 years, and on average assisted some 74.000 migrants yearly between 2015 and 2019 (IOM 2020). Such programmes offer many types of assistance such as financial and other material support, but also occupational assistance and different forms of community development. It should, however, also be mentioned that some form of support (see section 4.3.) is also often offered to non-voluntary returnees.

These programmes are rarely properly evaluated, or even monitored, and the message from scholars in the field, NGOs and EU members states have been to have more and better evaluations (Paasche 2014).

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<sup>4</sup> The conceptual distinction between AVR (assistance in the practicalities of the return process) and assisted voluntary return and reintegration AVRR: (additional assistance for the purposes of reintegrating into the country) Kuschminder (2017).

One of the primary findings in the academic literature is that financial support for return and reintegration seldom is the deciding factor contributing to return (Koser 2001; Black et al. 2004; Koser & Black 1999). The Swedish Agency for Public Management's (2010) evaluation of financial support for return migration indicated that the financial contribution, referred to as re-establishment support, had no substantial effect on the return rate among rejected asylum seekers. This finding is consistent with similar investigations in Norway (Strand et al. 2016, 2008) and in the UK (Bryan et al. 2010). Leerkes et al (2017) found that financial support had a small positive effect on return, but part of that effect was indirect and explained by the interest of a certain type of migrant who returned home to a large degree. In general, it seems to be a gap between the mostly positive picture of reintegration depicted among decision-makers as well as the in the institutional discourses, and evidence on the beneficiaries' experience (Lietaert et al. 2014). Albeit with limited data to make a judgement, academics as well as civil society organisations have questioned several elements of the assistance programmes including: the voluntariness, the extent to which they provide assistance, and their ability to support post-return reintegration and also a sustainable return (Paasche 2014).

Ruben et al. (2009) identified several key factors that could influence the prospects for embeddedness, and their conclusion was that the current programmes tended to have a limited or even negative effect on the socio-economic and psychosocial embeddedness. A similar result was reported by Fransen & Bilgili (2018) where organisational support from either NGO's or international organisations were negatively related to the subjective reintegration of returnees. Flahaux (2017) looked at both regular and irregular returning migrants and their chances of a successful reintegration and concluded that these are low, even if institutional assistance after the return is provided. Migrants who were documented before their return and benefited from support programmes enjoyed similar reintegration conditions to those without support.

Programme evaluations have largely come to the same result. The Danish Refugee Council (2011) evaluated a programme facilitating sustainable return to Kosovo. It offered a comprehensive assistance package including counselling, reception assistance and other in-kind and in-cash support. It indicated that most returnees 3-4 years after the actual return were not self-

supporting, but economically dependent on relatives. Despite that, the programme had some effect and was helpful during the first hard years back in Kosovo. The evaluation identified the lack of initiative and confidence among the returnees as one of the obstacles to the reintegration process, which in turn was linked to the restrictive living conditions at the asylum centres.

A recent monitoring survey based on interviews with beneficiaries, voluntary returnees from Sweden to Afghanistan and to Iraq, was conducted by IOM (2021a) – the same organisation who handled the programme. To what extent did the returnees have a sustainable economic, social, and psychosocial reintegration in their communities?<sup>5</sup> The results indicated that the beneficiaries were generally satisfied with the support they received. The information provided was generally considered clear – albeit not from the Swedish Migration Agency – and few problems were reported with the payment of the support. Generally, the beneficiaries struggled with economic sustainability, partly due to the effects of the Corona pandemic, whereas the social and psychosocial reintegration indicators scored a bit better. Even if the results in the survey indicate that the financial support itself was not sufficient to give a sustainable reintegration, the findings on the effects are more positive than previous research and evaluations.

After reviewing previous research on assistance programmes, it can be concluded that the programmes often fail to deliver the desired results and the intended policy goals are rarely achieved. Different obstacles and explanations for the ill-functioning implementation have been noted, regarding for example organisation and dissemination of information; different actors' organisation and coordination of the return and integration process; allocation resources; and last but not least – whether or not the current reintegration package meets the real needs of the returnees.

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<sup>5</sup> According to IOM (2021a:2), reintegration can be considered sustainable when returnees have reached levels of financial self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers.

## 2.3 Analytical framework

Methodologically and analytically, this study draws on the findings of previous literature: in designing the data collection, in organising and structuring the collected data, as well as in making sense of the data and interpreting the results. Some important pointers guiding our analysis follow below.

### Pre-return: preparedness and voluntariness

Within the pre-return phase, two important analytical tools in our study are the degrees of voluntariness in the return decision as well as the preparedness for return. **Preparedness** is the term used to determine the returnee's readiness to return, not only willingness to return (Cassarino 2004: 271). It refers to a process taking place in a person's life, through time, and is shaped by changing circumstances (i.e. personal experiences, contextual factors in sending and receiving countries) in their broadest sense. Preparedness is then not only about preparing for return but also, according to Cassarino about having the ability, though not necessarily the opportunity, to gather the tangible and intangible resources needed to secure one's own return home (Cassarino 2008: 100). Among different types of migrants, the level of preparedness varies significantly, with rejected asylum seekers being the type of migrants that are least prepared and having the lowest chances of a successful integration (Ruben et al. 2009: 949). The target group for this study (rejected asylum seekers), therefore, faces greater difficulties in (re)integrating since their abilities to mobilise resources and prepare for return, one could assume, would be lower than that of other migrant returnees.

A second term that guided us in the analysis is **voluntariness**. The concept is of particular importance for our study because it includes readiness and free will to return as fundamental elements in the preparedness of the individual. Free will entails that subjective feeling that a return decision is not imposed by others or by external circumstances. Meanwhile, readiness refers to the extent to which an individual is able to mobilise tangible (i.e. financial resources) and intangible (i.e. social networks, individual skills) resources needed to ensure a stable situation after their return (Cassarino 2008: 101).

The willingness to return usually depicted as the dichotomy voluntary/forced generates a distinction highly criticised by researchers. What makes a return “voluntary” when the alternatives are few to none? Could return still be referred to as “voluntary” when the returnee fears punishment? The voluntary character of the return has been questioned by the researchers on the basis of empirical data (Blitz et al. 2005; Webber 2011; Khosravi 2006; Leerkes et al. 2017; Geremew Gemada 2019) but also from a legal perspective being return migration considered involuntary where no other legal alternatives are available (Noll 2000) or when migrants cannot receive any other form of visa to stay in the country (Dimitrijevic et al. 2004). Webber questions whether voluntary return has any free will in it, especially because this is presented as a less painful alternative to compulsory return (Webber 2011:103).

Leerkes et al. (2017) conducted a study concerning “practices of return” observing that these practices lie on a continuum from relatively voluntary to relatively forced. Between these two poles the researchers noted complex blends of voluntariness (Leerkes et al. 2017: 8). The distinction then should be made between hard and soft deportation because in any case the individual has its will limited by the power of the State (Leerkes et al. 2017). The voluntariness is then put into question by using the concept of soft deportation, mostly referred to as “assisted return.”

Empirical work has also shown that the approaches towards assisted return can differ significantly among individuals. Bendixsen and Lidén (2017) found among returnees from Norway that these agreed to assisted return due to different considerations than a will to return. Moreover, return could mean different things: for some it was a foreseeable part within their migration journey, for others return had an uncertain potentiality and for others it was just a stepping-stone in their mobility path (Bendixsen & Lidén 2017: 35). Therefore, assisted return might not result in the desired outcome by the authorities i.e. sustainability. Sometimes it can be a strategy to continue with the migration journey.

The discussion on voluntariness can be taken further considering whether the study of return as removal is undertaken from immigration studies’ perspective or from the security literature. While immigration research approaches deportation as a “move” focusing on the significance of national borders over subjectivity and mobility, security literature sees it as



“enforcement” (Coutin 2015). The different approaches show that the same action – deportation – can be understood both as part of a mobility process, but also considered as the end of that mobility in the eyes of the authorities.

The above-mentioned studies tell about degrees of voluntariness with varying amounts of free will and agency by the part of the returnee. We therefore depart from the belief that there might be degrees between a voluntary and involuntary return.

## Post return and re-integration

Return and the period referred to as “re-integration” is complex and cannot be analysed as a unidimensional phenomenon. When discussing sustainability, re-integration should be approached as a complex, multi-dimensional process where both individuals and contextual characteristics affects the outcome. Moreover, the term re-integration presupposes a series of assumptions that might not always reflect the reality of returnees. Reintegration sees return as the end of the migration cycle and as a restoration of a natural state. Moreover, reintegration assumes that an individual “returns” to his or her place of origin, when in reality individuals could be sent back to a country of nationality, which is not what they would necessarily define as home. We adhere to the approach that considers sustainable return migration from a perspective of mixed embeddedness, rather than reintegration (Davids & Van Houte, 2008).

***Embeddedness*** refers to the extent to which individuals are able to find and define their position in society, feel a sense of belonging and are participating in the society (Ruben et al 2009: 945). As a concept, it originally comes from a sociological tradition and was used by Granovetter (1985) to measure trust as part of such networks that are crucial for successful transactions. It essentially meant that individual actions were embedded in contextual factors such as social networks. The concept mixed embeddedness, often used in studies of return and re-integration, was coined by Kloosterman et al. (1999) and Kloosterman (2010) and amongst others point to the interplay between agency and structure. It brings in agency in the equation since despite that the actor's choices are to some extent determined by structure, actors also have a certain degree of agency over their choices and can thereby change the existing structure. But Kloosterman also highlighted the important interplay between the different contexts: cultural, economic, institutional and social. By

considering different dimensions of embeddedness one may better understand the complex reality of migrants and returnees, who may for example be more or less embedded in one dimension yet not at all in the others.

Although the concept embeddedness might be seen as close to that of reintegration, they differ to some extent. Embeddedness entails more of continuous processes, that could have successes and failures but are ongoing, whereas integration has more of an ultimate goal and suggests success as soon as adaptation to the dominant society is accomplished. Contrary to integration, embeddedness *sets no norm and leaves room for considering processes of integration with safeguarding an individual identity as sustainable or successful*. (van Houte & Davids 2008: 174).

The perhaps most central component that embeddedness adds is the question of identity. In exploring the process of embeddedness, the ability to construct an individual's own identity is also crucial. It gives returnees a place in society and is at the same time the connection between the self and that society (van Houte & Davids 2008: 175). The concept is closely connected to the more everyday term belonging; thus it makes sense to think about embeddedness in terms of what or which places a returnee feel he or she belongs to, identifies with and can participate in (van Houte 2019: 146). We deemed this approach of mixed embeddedness especially suitable for our study considering that it takes into account factors at the micro level, such as experiences before and during migration – in this case, the asylum process – the conditions during and after the return and the decision to return, as well as the personal strategies and capacities of the individual (Black et al. 2004; Kloosterman 2006; Cited in van Houte & Davids 2008). In our study we are able to see that conditions previous to migration might influence the situation after return, which is not prevalent in studies departing from the post return situation to evaluate reintegration.

The individual or micro factors influencing embeddedness could be more or less successful according to the existent opportunity structures of governments in the sending and receiving country and social, political and economic context of the country to which an individual returns (Kloosterman 2006). The central aspects of embeddedness can be decomposed into three different dimensions: Economic, Social and Psychosocial:

In essence, ***Economic embeddedness*** involves access to resources and services such as income, housing, land, education, health care, and transportation; a way to cope with and recover from stress and shocks, and enhance, or at least maintain assets and capabilities in the short and long run (Ruben et al. 2009: 950) – resources, opportunities and basic services that are crucial in order to build and maintain a self-sustained livelihood.

***Social embeddedness*** specifically involves different aspects of social networks, as they fill a set of purposes: they are crucial for getting information, discuss, and develop shared beliefs and values, but also for sharing intimate relations with peers. In way of maintaining one's identity, social networks also play an important part in strengthening one's psychosocial well-being (see psychosocial embeddedness below). Social capital – access to and inclusion in information flows, social safety nets and social organisation – builds on social networks and can help individuals acquired a stable position in society (Ruben et al. 2009: 950).

An important precondition for a successful ***psychosocial embeddedness*** after the return, is being able to decide over one's life. Having the ability to freely express identity, and having this identity accepted in wider society, enhances feelings of belonging and attachment to the society in which one dwells, providing the individual with a foundation for psychosocial wellbeing. Psychological well-being includes agency, autonomy and control; participation and involvement; social relationships and networks; and safety (DeBono et al. 2015). Psychosocial wellbeing also depends on safety conditions where physical safety relates to being safe from physical harm, like violent attacks, and legal safety relates to assurances which are/aren't given by the government against persecuting and/or discrimination upon return (Ruben et al. 2009: 951).

These three dimensions are interrelated and moreover they can reinforce each other – but do note that at an individual level it is perfectly possible to be well embedded in e.g. the economic dimension and not at all in others. Although mixed-embeddedness is not equivalent to reintegration, it does include several of the elements that lead to reintegration. For these above-stated reasons and with these clarifications, we use re-embeddedness as part of our analytical framework.

## Re-migration: a failure of sustainable return?

Different studies have shown that re-migration is a poor proxy for sustainable return. For example, “eventual legal migration made possible by skills acquired during the reintegration process” should not mean that the return was not sustainable (IOM 2015: 19). A number of studies highlight that a successful reintegration also could mean and lead to further migration (e.g. van Houte 2016; Koser & Kuschminder 2015). Likewise, the lack of re-migration may be the result of not having the capabilities to re-migrate regardless of the extent to which one is successfully reintegrated or not. There is a difference between having the capability to realise a re-migration as opposed to only an aspiration to re-migrate (Strand et al. 2016). Koser & Kuschminder (2015) found that while only ten percent of returnees in their study had concrete intentions to re-migrate more than 50 percent aspired to re-migrate.

The aforementioned OECD study quoted different definitions that State agencies use when working with assisted voluntary return. While countries such as Norway do not have a working definition of sustainable reintegration, others like France and Sweden specifically mention the non-occurrence of re-migration as sustainable reintegration (OECD 2020). Despite previous studies contesting the view of re-migration as a failed reintegration, some agencies still believe that establishment in the country of origin is a vital condition for a return to be sustainable.

## 3. Method and sources

### 3.1 Studying return and reintegration

This study uses an empirical approach, collecting qualitative data in the field. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with informants who have experienced return and reintegration from Sweden to Afghanistan or Iraq.

The focus is on asylum seekers whose application has been rejected and who have been obliged to return to a third country outside the EU. Respondents include both rejected asylum applicants who chose to leave on their own initiative, with or without assistance, and those who refused to return and as such were forced to return.

Delmi conducted a feasibility study in May and June 2019, gathering necessary information for constructing a study design and proposal for funding. During that process different organisations, networks and consultants were contacted and briefed on the potential aim and scope of the intended study, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Red cross, Caritas, European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), The European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC) and Samuel Hall (a social enterprise that conducts research in countries affected by issues of migration and displacement). The structure of the present study, its scope and design (including methodology), has been influenced by these consultations.

### 3.2 Limitations to our study

For practical (language and contextual skills) and security reasons (insurances and pandemic) Delmi's researchers were not able to collect the data by themselves. Therefore, the consultancy firm Samuel Hall<sup>6</sup> – by means of a public procurement procedure – undertook the fieldwork gathering the primary data for the study. Samuel Hall's local teams demonstrated good

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Hall defines itself as a social enterprise that conducts research in countries affected by issues of migration and displacement See <https://www.samuelhall.org/our-vision>.

knowledge of the context as well as previous interactions with the target group.

The first aspect that could be considered as a limitation is that the respondents in the study do not comprise a representative sample of the whole returnee population in either country, or that of returnees from Sweden. Thus, broad generalisations concerning returnees cannot be made from our study. Sampling of respondents differed between the two countries. Strand et al. (2008) mentions a fundamental point concerning returnees that serve as informants compared to returnees in general. Those who stay in Afghanistan and can be reached as informants, could be expected to be more educated, more often married and perhaps therefore more integrated in local social networks. From the statistics collected in Sweden about return migrants to Afghanistan or Iraq – discussed in Chapter five – we can see that our respondents to some extent mirror the characteristics of individuals who are sent back to these countries due to an unsuccessful asylum application.

Secondly, there are certain differences in the sampling method from Afghanistan and from Iraq in our study. In the Afghanistan case lists of informants with contact information were provided by the national IOM representatives. In Iraq IOM did not provide such lists. Instead, our contractor Samuel Hall used a combination of snowballing and previous connections to sample respondents. The sampling strategies are explained more in detail later on in this chapter.

Thirdly, the data was not collected in a completely uniform matter. Face-to-face interviews were originally the chosen method for data collection. Due to a worsening security situation in both countries and the Corona pandemic, the interview method was changed. Most interviews in Afghanistan were done face to face, a few had to be conducted via Skype. Almost all interviews in Iraq were conducted via Skype or telephone.

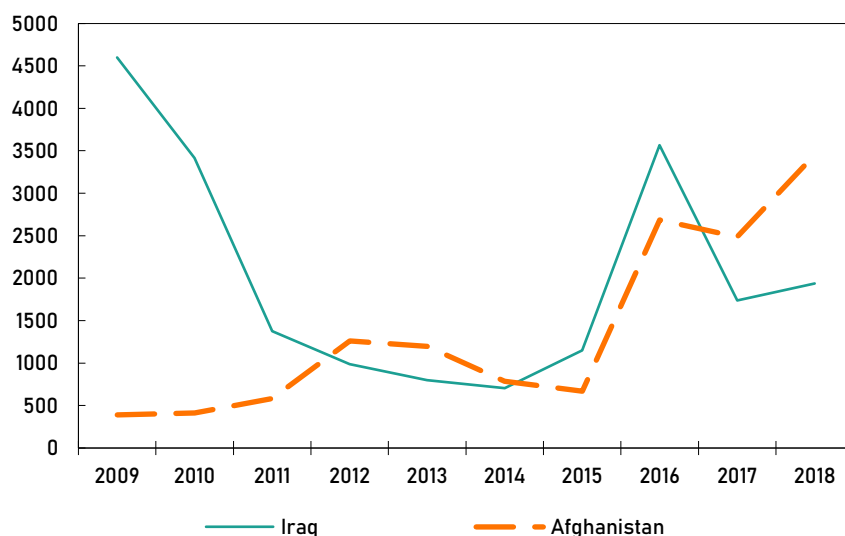
Fourthly, the analysis is based on English translations of the original language transcription of the interview (which was conducted in the native language of the respondent by Samuel Hall, in Afghanistan and Iraq). This means that nuances, accentuations, or the meaning of a certain expression sometimes may have been lost in the translation process. To minimise such risks, randomised sample translations were carried out by independently contracted verified translators, for each of the interview languages – Dari, Arabic and

Kurdish. These were then compared with the translations provided by Samuel Hall. The results were for the most part satisfactory.

### 3.3 Two cases: Return to Afghanistan and to Iraq

The focus on return to Afghanistan or Iraq is motivated by the high number of individuals returning there from Sweden. In 2009 Iraqis constituted the most frequent nationality among all the return decisions. The number of return cases to Afghanistan was at that time relatively low but has increased considerably in the past five years. Figure 1 shows the frequency in return decisions for Afghan and Iraqi nationals.<sup>7</sup> We also know from statistics and previous research (Malm Lindberg 2020) that the implementation of their return is significantly more difficult than that of return to other countries.

Figure 1. Return decisions to Afghanistan and Iraq 2009–2018



Source: Migration Agency (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

<sup>7</sup> For more information about the main nationalities among return cases see Appendix Casebook.

Iraq has long been the nationality with the largest number of rejected asylum seekers from Sweden, becoming Afghanistan the largest after 2017.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, these two cases cover two of the most significant nationalities among those who have received a return decision, which are not always implemented (Malm Lindberg 2020).

If we compare those two at a European level, the seventh largest country of citizenship of non-EU citizens returned outside EU27 was Iraq, and Afghanistan was in fifteenth place (Eurostat 2020).<sup>9</sup> However in a global perspective, the numbers of returnees from Europe are only a small share of returnees to Afghanistan. (Oxfam 2018).

### 3.4 Target group and sampling

The aim was to conduct approximately 100 interviews with returnees from Sweden to Afghanistan and Iraq. To be eligible for an interview the returnee should have been back in his/her country of origin for no more than three years. Due to the difficulties to recruit informants, particularly in Iraq, a few exceptions were made. Hence, a couple of respondents had returned in 2015 and 2016. However, the majority had been back approximately one year, in either Iraq or Afghanistan. On a few occasions Afghan citizens had returned to Iran where they had lived before migrating to Sweden. Samuel Hall identified potential informants and verified that the respondents were in fact third country returnees from Sweden who had received a negative asylum decision, i.e. been rejected, and had returned with or without financial support.<sup>10</sup>

The Corona pandemic and the deteriorating security situation in both Afghanistan and Iraq made sampling difficult, leading to the process taking longer than planned. Other hurdles in the sampling procedure included lack of actualised contact information or plain rejection to participate in the study. Both Delmi and the local teams tried to find alternatives. Early in the process,

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<sup>8</sup> For more information about the main nationalities among return cases see Appendix Casebook.

<sup>9</sup> For more information see [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/1/1f/Top\\_20\\_countries\\_of\\_citizenship\\_of\\_non-EU\\_citizens\\_returned\\_outside\\_the\\_EU-27%2C\\_2018\\_and\\_2019\\_%28number%29\\_MI20.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/1/1f/Top_20_countries_of_citizenship_of_non-EU_citizens_returned_outside_the_EU-27%2C_2018_and_2019_%28number%29_MI20.png).

<sup>10</sup> In Iraq, a minor group had voluntarily returned before a decision was made by the Migration Agency.



Delmi reached out to stakeholders in the region who could assist in gathering returnees' contact information. Delmi also assisted Samuel Hall in providing letters of intent for their outreach efforts. Purposive and snowballing techniques were used in both countries. Respondents that were deemed fitting the eligibility criteria (by Samuel Hall, Delmi and also AMIF) were contacted until the target of 100 interviews were met.

IOM's country office in Afghanistan provided Samuel Hall with lists of returnees from Sweden linked to the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR). Most of the potential participants from the lists, however, were not to be reached. To ensure enough respondents for the study Samuel Hall was helped by Abdul Ghafoor, founder and director of AMASO (Afghanistan Migrants Advice & Support Organisation), a civil society organisation dedicated to supporting returnees from Europe.

In Iraq, Samuel Hall did not benefit from IOM support or collaboration in getting lists of returnees. At this point Delmi also sought IOM's cooperation in providing the same kind of lists for Iraq that was provided in Afghanistan, without success. Samuel Hall's local team nonetheless managed to secure lists through other personal connections. Thanks to the project leader's connections to the programme staff at the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)'s European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), connections were made to civil society organisations in Iraq. The team contacted and reached out to the European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC), an organisation that implements reintegration programmes on the ground and Lutka, a local NGO working with returnees from Europe in Sulaymaniyah. Thanks to these organisations a total of 40 respondents was reached and interviewed. Again, purposive and snowballing techniques were used.

One of the main pitfalls of the sampling methods and consequent result in the interviews is the low participation of women, especially in Afghanistan where only two female returnees accepted to be interviewed. As the data collection was undertaken in settings where women are not always able to speak to

other men alone, accessing women's testimonies was particularly difficult, especially for male researchers.<sup>11</sup>

Respondents agreeing to partake in the study consented verbally as well as in writing when signing a consent form informing them that their information would be anonymised and with Samuel Hall and Delmi only.

Samuel Hall structured the research team as follows:

1. Two national researchers in Iraq, three national researchers in Afghanistan
2. One supervisor and quality control reviewer in Afghanistan and one in Iraq.
3. An overall project director, Dr. Nassim Majidi, reviewed all team outputs, conducted the pilot research to contextualise the tools and submitted two interview reports.

## 3.5 Fieldwork: Gathering data in difficult conditions

### Interview method

The study relies on in-depth interviews as they can be considered to provide a more comprehensive and detailed picture than what could be attained by means of other methods. Used correctly they allow for the interviewer to explore not only the predetermined questions, but also explore such issues and questions that occur during the interview.

Delmi's research team decided on the themes and primary questions covered in the interviews. Samuel Hall provided input on how to phrase and structure the interviews so as to make them suitable for each context. The interview guide followed the structure of a semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel Hall informs that since Iraq is by large, a police state, both field researchers felt that male respondents initially displayed a lack of trust. Engaging with them was challenging and required multiple phone calls. Samuel Hall also noticed that in Iraq, the Corona pandemic seemed to have made people more sceptical than usual to speak freely and to engage in research activities.

Casebook), with predetermined questions, but also leaving ample space for follow-up questions and individual narratives about the topic.

Table 1 shows the themes covered in the questionnaire which follow a chronological order in an attempt to catch a comprehensive picture of the respondent's migration cycle.

**Table 1. Interview themes and questions**

Migration Phase	Themes Covered
Profiling questions (control questions)	Application for asylum in Sweden Location of application for asylum Possession of LMA-kort ( <u>asylum seeker card</u> ) Description of the LMA-kort Nature of return (voluntary or forced)
Pre-migration situation	Pre-migration life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Economic</li> <li>– Social</li> <li>– Cultural / personal</li> </ul> Decision making factors regarding migration Migration journey
Experiences in Sweden	Arrival experience Experience as an asylum seeker in Sweden Interactions with institutions / organisations in Sweden
Return process	Notification of rejection Decision to return Preparation for return Return procedures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Information about aid or support structures</li> <li>– Actors involved</li> </ul>
Post-return	Arrival in country of origin Social (re)integration Economic (re)integration Psychosocial (re)integration Safety Support received Assets Plans for the future

The interview guide had a story-telling structure, which is useful to frame respondents' experiences, but it was lengthy. Interviews lasted about an hour, many lasting around 1.5 hours. A post interview checklist was filled out by the interviewer so that the interview context and possible extra information was accessible for the researchers at Delmi responsible for the analysis of the data.

A few respondents, who feared for their life, avoided to provide details related to the reasons that pushed them to leave. Surprisingly, respondents in general did not shy away from talking about psychological trauma and struggles upon return.

## Implementation of the fieldwork

With the assistance of Samuel Hall, Delmi first conducted a pilot study. Based upon the findings in the pilot, some adjustments were made. A total of 100 interviews were conducted between March and October 2020. Sixty interviews were conducted in Afghanistan (2 women, 58 men) out of a list of 194 returnees meeting the criterion of the study. Forty interviews in Iraq (9 women, 31 men), out of a list of 63 returnees. Profiling/control questions were recorded and then followed by an in-depth qualitative interview. Samuel Hall's local teams transcribed and translated the interviews to English upon which all related material (recorded interviews, transcriptions, original and translated) were delivered to Delmi for analysis.<sup>12</sup>

In Afghanistan, most interviews were conducted in Kabul. Some were also conducted with respondents in Ghazni, Herat, in Iran and in Greece. In Iraq most interviews were conducted with respondents in or around Baghdad, as well as locations within the Kurdish Region of Iraq such as Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaymaniyah.

In Afghanistan, most interviews were conducted in Dari, some in Farsi and Pashtun (see Appendix Casebook). In Iraq, some were conducted in Kurdish and the rest in Arabic. In all cases but one the interviews were conducted in the respondent's native language.

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<sup>12</sup> Two short interview reports (Samuel Hall 2020a,b) were delivered by Samuel Hall in May and in October 2020.

## A turbulent context

Undoubtedly, one of the primary difficulties in gathering data was the Corona pandemic. In Iraq, Samuel Hall's local team was able to conduct interviews despite a more or less full lockdown between March and August 2020, in some instances turning to skype interviews. In Afghanistan, the research team was able to schedule and conduct the interviews in person and outdoors after the lockdowns were lifted in April 2020.

Political instability was present in both countries at the time of the fieldwork. In Afghanistan, the political instability following US negotiations for a peace deal with the Taliban was reflected in the interviews. This instability, and lack of security, was mentioned by many of the respondents.

Iraq also witnessed political turmoil and civil unrest at this time, following the repression of civil protests. The formation of a new government posed further challenges to get access to respondents, since governmental focal points were not necessarily available.

## Characteristics of the respondents

The median age among the 60 Afghan respondents was 25 years. Most were of Hazara origin (46), some were of Pashtun and Tajik origin. The respondents come from different parts of the country. Most declared to be Muslim, while a handful had converted to Christianity during their stay in Sweden. Almost all have attended primary school. Some have attended an institution of higher education and a few have no formal education at all. Most were single. Only 13 respondents declared to have voluntarily returned from Sweden after an order of expulsion entered into force. The rest stated that they had been forced to return.

The respondents in Iraq were on average older than in Afghanistan, the median age was 36.5 years. Returnees in Iraq have, on average, a better level of education. They also returned voluntarily to a higher extent. In most cases they migrated as a family. A majority declared to be of Arab ethnicity, 17 of 40 declared being Kurdish.

Although this qualitative study does not have the ambition to be fully representative, we did want to contrast our sample characteristics with the ones of individuals who have been expelled to Iraq and Afghanistan in the past five years.

**Table 2. Voluntary and forced returns, by gender**

	Voluntary return, women	Voluntary return, men	Voluntary return, total	Forced return, women	Forced return, men	Forced return, total	Total
AFG*	176	1,535	1711	6	613	619	2,330
IRQ*	1,283	3,801	5,084	42	219	261	5,345

Notes: AFG = Afghanistan and IRQ = Iraq

Source: Migration Agency (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

According to the statistics provided by the Migration Agency, between 2016 and 2020, 182 women returned to Afghanistan following an order of expulsion in comparison with 2,148 men who returned in the same period. This makes the group of men considerably larger which our data reflects. As for volition, a majority of Afghans returned voluntarily (1,711) as compared with those who were subjected to a forceful return (619). In this sense our respondents who were forced returnees are overrepresented. It is important to consider that the Migration Agency does not take into account the totality of trips enforced by the Police which could change the proportion of forced returns as discussed in 5.3.

Our sample also tells of the young age of the returnees. In the same period presented above 256 minors returned following an unsuccessful asylum application, a much lower number than the adults (2,074) who left Sweden. Still, the largest age group of Afghan nationals returning (1,391) is of those who had 18-24 years at the time of the expulsion. Therefore, many of them could have been minors by the time of arrival considering the long period taken by their asylum process. Among our respondents in Iraq there were more women, which reflects the numbers from the Migration Agency, 1,325 women and 4,020 men.

Respondents from Iraq had more variation in terms of age, which also could represent the age distribution among the total number of individuals who received a return order. 1,152 children returned to Iraq in the time period, while 4,193 adults did it in the same period.

## Reliability of the data

To make sure the respondents belong to the target group, i.e. unsuccessful asylum seekers returning from Sweden, control questions were posed at the start of the interview (see Table 1). For example, the respondents were asked to describe a “LMA card,” which is a document provided by the Swedish Migration Agency. LMA is the abbreviation for the *Lagen om mottagande av asylsökande* (Swedish Reception of Asylum Seekers’ Act) and it is a card showing that the individual who holds it is an asylum seeker). The use given to the card is specific to the Swedish Asylum System. All the answers regarding the question were considered consistent by the three Delmi researchers involved in the analysis.

Another measure taken to ensure the reliability of the data was Samuel Hall’s internal quality checking. All collected data was first checked and quality controlled by the local project leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan, and subsequently by Samuel Hall’s team leader. This ensured that the information collected could be vetted as logical and contextually accurate. Samuel Hall’s own quality control processes revealed that valid and contextually accurate data was being collected. In Iraq, a few respondents contradicted themselves, i.e. one respondent stated that he was not married but then spoke about his wife, or remained purposefully vague on certain aspects of their protection journey, but the research team believes that such incoherencies have to do with fears related to personal protection.

As previously mentioned, in order to ensure that transcriptions and translations were correctly made, Delmi contracted an independent authorised translation to make sample controls of two randomly chosen interviews. While the interviews in Dari and Arabic were highly satisfactory, the test applied to interviews in Kurdish showed some minor irregularities concerning some missing data from the audio file vis-à-vis the transcript. Delmi requested new transcripts in these cases to the local team in Iraq.

## 3.6 Data analysis

### Approaching personal experiences of return

Our data consist of personal accounts of migration experiences. As such, these can be narrated differently than the way an outsider observer or public authorities may describe the process of return.

The way our data is approached has to do with the qualitative enquiry followed by this report. This is a study about returnees' perspectives. The data at hand represents their subjective experience of return. We consider their experiences as narratives. The term "narrative" has been associated with various different meanings and has been used in a variety of ways by different disciplines, often synonymously with 'story' (Riessman & Quinney 2011). Our respondents answered questions formulated in chronological order, which allowed them, in a way, to tell a story of a failed migration project and how to make sense of life after that. We approach these testimonies as narratives considering that the focus is on the interpretations of events related in the narratives by the particular individual telling the story (Bruner 1991). The way their experiences are treated is close to narrative analysis, approaching narratives as a way in which individuals reconstruct and make sense of their reality. Therefore, and although we do ask on particular events, dates, numbers and specific accounts, the focus is on the personal perspectives of the returnees' accounts.

The narratives that are provided by our informants can give valuable insight into how they handled and adapted in the different phases during the migration cycle. But their testimonies also showed ambiguity, inconsistencies, and contradictions which in turn gives rise to the question of authenticity and accuracy in their stories. To begin with: we have not systematically fact-checked, or had the ambition to do so, in our analysis of the data. It is moreover not the usual procedure in these kinds of studies. Some of the dates, places, and names mentioned in the data are most likely not completely accurate, sometimes confused at other times misinterpreted. Partly due to such inconsistencies and contradictions in the data, we often refrain from giving exact numbers of different characteristics and experiences. Another reason is that our data, despite its richness, sometimes lack necessary information in some instances. Therefore, we take into consideration that this data might not always reflect accurate facts.



## Systematising data in Nvivo

Nvivo, a programme designed specifically for qualitative research, was used to systematise and code the interviews in order to facilitate the analysis. The programme allows for deep analysis of large amounts of data by helping to classify, sort and arrange information. In Nvivo it is possible to identify patterns, explore potential relationships, and cross-check information by use of specific tools. The programme can examine different relations in the data and enrich the analysis with linking to internal or external sources.<sup>13</sup> It also allows a better visualisation of the data by themes or by study cases.

Before importing the data into Nvivo, the transcripts needed to be prepared. The interview transcriptions in English were read carefully. Later the data of each interview was classified into predefined aspects *family codes*. These aspects were informed by theory, previous research as well as specific aspects informed by experts. Certain aspects were later re-coded into *free codes*. These are the respondent informed new factors that might be playing an important role in return and reintegration.

## Communicating results

Quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate some of the primary findings. These have been chosen considering their representativity, their assertiveness or sometimes by way of highlighting outliers and exceptions. The respondents have been, at all times, anonymised. Although some interviews were particularly well-articulated, the research team tried to see that different respondents were quoted verbatim when illustrating the results.

The discussion includes the support of certain diagrams and Nvivo-produced figures. These were designed to make the logic behind the primary conclusions more accessible for the reader.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/about/nvivo>. retrieved 18/09/2020



## 4. Laws and rules governing return and reintegration

In order to better understand the process that our respondents went through in Sweden, this chapter describes primary features of the Swedish policies for asylum, return, and reintegration. It also looks at the responsibilities and powers of different actors and what kind of support is provided. This way it is possible to have an idea of the available structures involved with return and their potential in making the process easier for individuals.

### 4.1 From asylum to return

It is primarily the Swedish Aliens Act (*Utlänningslagen*) that regulates refusal of entry into (*avvisning*) and expulsion (*utvisning*) from Sweden. In addition, the EU's return policy contains common rules, operative cooperation between member-states countries and cooperation with third countries concerning the readmission of refused asylum seekers or irregular migrants. The 'Return Directive' (*Återvändandedirektivet* (2008/115/EC)) from 2010 sets out common rules so that persons living irregularly in any member country State would be persuaded to return (Malm Lindberg 2020:41).

An individual seeking asylum in Sweden turns in the application to the Migration Agency after arrival. Following a completed asylum investigation, the case is decided by a decision maker at the Migration Agency. Generally the decision is made in agreement with the caseworker in charge of the case, based on the available information in that specific case and it can also be based on the general Country of origin information in the Lifos database (Swedish Migration Agency 2013).<sup>14</sup> The asylum seeker has, according to the Swedish Aliens Act (SFS 2005:716), the right to be represented by a legal

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<sup>14</sup> Lifos is the Migration Agency's expert institution for legal and country of origin information. Praxis has indicated that the available country of origin information in Lifos has played a major role in how the credibility of the asylum-seekers narratives are judged in the asylum process.

advisor<sup>15</sup>, often a lawyer, until a final verdict has been delivered, The law does not, however, stipulate that the legal advisor must have a special degree or even being educated in migration & asylum law (SFS 2005:716, Chapter 18). The Migration Agency has the responsibility to make sure that a legal advisor that is appointed by the agency have enough and necessary competence for the assignment (SOU 2020:54 p. 367). The general rule or criteria to be appointed as a legal advisor is that the person have a Swedish law degree, or has documentation showing knowledge and skills in migration law, family law, general administrative law and moreover has experience in handling cases in courts (Migration Agency 2020c).

According to the Swedish Administrative Procedure Act (Förvaltningslagen) (SFS 2017:900) the Migration Agency can decide that a legal advisor that is assessed as inept to handle a particular asylum case can be dismissed, but there has been no possibility for the agency to generally dismiss legal advisors.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the Migration Agency has no right to limit the number of ordinances or cases that a legal advisor can have at the same time. It is also possible, and it occurs more or less frequent that the appointed legal advisor leaves the case to a different person, often due to lack of time (SOU 2020:54, p. 371-2).

An asylum-seeker has a legal right to have an interpreter assigned to assist in the communication between, for example, the case worker and the asylum seeker during the application interview and interviews that follow. If interpreters are needed in conversations with the legal advisor such services are also covered by that legal right. The asylum seeker, to a certain degree, can influence the choice of interpreter, primarily the sex of the individual and if there is a need for special expertise, e.g. knowledge concerning LGBTQ-related cases, the agency takes such demands into consideration. Interpreters

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<sup>15</sup> The term Public Counsel is also often used but in this Delmi-report we will stick to the term legal advisor. The part concerning legal advisors is also from an interview 2 February 2021 with Lars Svanström at the Swedish Migration Agency.

<sup>16</sup> The Migration Agency used to, up until 2016, have a Black list of legal advisors who did not fulfil the requirements set up, but this usage of lists has been criticized and was therefore abolished.

are almost always hired via interpreting services and not employed by the agency (Wadensjö et al. 2021).<sup>17</sup>

A denied application can be appealed within three weeks from notification. If the Migration Agency sees no reason to change the decision, it is forwarded to the Migration Court, which is the second instance in the case. The Migration Court can either change the decision or confirm the decision. In the case of the latter, the asylum seeker can apply for reassessment via the Migration Court of Appeal within three weeks. The Migration Court of Appeal, however, only takes on the case if it lacks previous precedents. It is the final instance and a decision there sets precedent, that is, it becomes guiding for both the Migration Agency and the Migration Court's further decisions in similar cases.

After the final decision on rejection has become legally binding the decision shall be enforced. For the decision to be enforceable, there must not be any impediments to it. An impediment can be when the foreign national's country of origin has no intention to receive the individual when returning from Sweden. Another is if the applicant has become too ill to travel, or if the political situation in the country of origin have changed so a return becomes impossible (Migration Agency, n.d.c).

When the return decision has become legally binding, a special unit within the Migration Agency has the role of, first, persuading the applicant to organise a voluntary return and, second, offer assistance in the process. The Agency has the primary responsibility for enforcement, which is considered complete when the asylum-seeker has left Sweden. A voluntary return takes place if the asylum-seeker leaves Sweden on his/her own within the stipulated time. If the applicant is found to be non-cooperative, the Police takes over the case. At this point, the expulsion order may be executed by force, including detainment. If the applicant is missing when contacted the case is also handed over to the Police (Malm Lindberg 2020:47–48, SFS 2005:716, Chapter 12.)

Information about the options as well as advice are provided to those who receive a return decision. Depending on the country of nationality of the individual, he or she may be entitled to cash support or other forms of support to make it easier to reintegrate in the country of origin. A condition for

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<sup>17</sup> Information concerning interpreters was also gathered on an interview with Rustem Yunusov at the Migration Agency, 28 January 2021.

entitlement to cash support is that the individual voluntarily returns. This opportunity is not available if the individual absconds or expresses no intention to return, in which case the case is handed over to the Police.

A legally binding return decision must be executed within four years. If it is not, for example due to impediments, it becomes statute barred, meaning that the case is written off. This does not mean that the individual subjected to the decision is granted asylum. Instead the process starts over again if the individual has remained in or is found in Sweden. If a new asylum application is submitted after the time span, a new asylum process starts (Malm Lindberg 2020:48–49).

During the asylum process, an asylum seeker has the right to work but must have a certificate (AT-UND) stating an exemption from the requirement to have a work permit. In order for this to be obtained, the asylum seeker must provide proper identity papers or some other document to prove his/her identity. This work permit is also valid after an initial refusal of the asylum application during the appeal phase. During the return process, the returnee has the right to work as long as he or she cooperates to leave the country, and until the decision regarding return has become legally binding. If the asylum seeker was gainfully employed while awaiting for a decision on the application for asylum, he or she can apply for a work permit if the application is rejected – a “change of tracks” (Malm Lindberg 2020:84–87; Migration Agency n.d.a).

Special rules apply if the rejected asylum seeker is an unaccompanied minor. A member of this group can also be rejected in the process and be compelled to leave Sweden. UNICEF (2019:2) assessed that Sweden did have a best interest assessment or determination procedure in place for unaccompanied or accompanied minors facing potential returns. However, these assessments are rarely based on the individual circumstances of the child, but rather on more general observations. Unaccompanied children are entitled to appropriate accommodation, healthcare, education, and child protection services following a return decision, even when the case is handed over to the Police due to a child’s unwillingness to cooperate.

## 4.2 The Swedish Return Policy gets on the agenda

During the early 2000s, Swedish authorities wanted to make the asylum period as one of qualification for both integration into the society and for a possible return. Therefore, the aim was to fill the period with activities that could facilitate both outcomes (SOU 2003:75). The premise for such a policy is that there is no conflict between these two. Already at that point there was a discussion on whether Sweden should organise a programme of preparatory activities for rejected asylum seekers waiting to return (Brekke 2004:56).

Around 2010 return rose on the agenda of politicians and decision-makers, and then again following the large influx of refugees in 2015, both left and right-wing governments have found it important to give the public authorities more and sharper tools to work more efficiently with return cases by establishing identities, giving better possibilities to discover irregular migrants, but also stationing several special return liaison officers at key embassies and consulates abroad (EMN Sweden 2016:5, SOU 2017:93). The ultimate purpose of these efforts has been to get people who did not have permission to stay in Sweden to return to their country of origin (Malm Lindberg 2020).

## 4.3 Supporting return and reintegration

### The reestablishment support

As many other European countries, Sweden have developed and implemented programmes aimed at facilitating return and reintegration and promoting voluntary return, using both in-kind and in cash support, since the late 1990s (Government Bill 1997/98:173, pp. 47–48). The cash support, referred to as “reestablishment support,” is distributed to persons, minors or adults, who returns to a country where there is limited scope for reestablishment because of the security situation. Applications within two months from the notification of the refusal decision or the withdrawal of the asylum application (UNICEF 2019:39; Migration Agency 2020b).

This financial grant was introduced in 2007 temporary at first and then prolonged (Government Bill 2006/07:100; SFS 2007:640).<sup>18</sup> It corresponds to SEK 30,000 for each adult individual over the age of 18 and SEK 15,000 for minors, a maximum of SEK 75,000 for each family. This cash support has since that time been delivered to returnees from, amongst others, Afghanistan and Iraq. In both of these countries, the IOM has since the start been in charge of the transfer on behalf of the Migration Agency. The conditions are stipulated in an agreement between those two parties and was recently updated. (Statskontoret 2010:4, Migration Agency 2020b).<sup>19</sup>

From its introduction in 2007 and until September 2020 around 8,000 Iraqi citizens applied for and received the reestablishment support and nearly 2,000 Afghan citizens. Over time the number of beneficiaries from each country has fluctuated widely (Annika Cullblad, Migration Agency interview, 21 September 2020).

One of the primary criteria for receiving the financial support is that the returnee shall make certain that he or she will return to the native country again. In the example of Afghan returnees, those that have a stated desire to return to Iran soon after returning to Afghanistan are not eligible for the reestablishment support. Another case where an application is rejected is when the returnee had not applied in due time after the return decision.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Already as early as in 1999 Kosovo Albanians with temporary permits who chose to return received a grant of SEK 5,000 per person or a maximum of SEK 30,000 for one family. This support seems to have been more of a trial. (Migration Agency 2003:13).

<sup>19</sup> Beneficiaries are entitled to Re-establishment support if the following conditions apply: have had their application for asylum rejected, or if they have withdrawn your application for asylum in Sweden; intend to return of their own accord to a country where there is limited scope for reestablishment because of the security situation; are likely to be received in the country you intend to return to; are staying in Sweden when they apply; apply as soon as possible after having their application for asylum rejected or withdrawing it.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Annika Cullblad, Swedish Migration Agency, 21 September 2020.



## The reintegration assistance and other types of support

The Swedish Migration Agency also offers both financial assistance and reintegration support through ERRIN.<sup>21</sup> It provides the returnees with basic support such as legal advice, medical care and a time-limited residency. Returnees to both Afghanistan and Iraq are eligible for support. It is available to those returning voluntarily and through forced returns, but with different amounts: up to a total sum of EUR 2,500 for voluntary returns and EUR 2,000 for 'involuntary' returns. ERRIN support is aimed at adults, children in families, and children without custodians who are returning to their country of origin. To receive this support a verification check is required from the responsible governmental authorities in the partner country, in this case the Migration Agency (ERRIN n.d.).<sup>22</sup> The ERRIN programme has contracted local service delivery partners to assist the returnees.

Sweden, via the Migration Agency, started to participate in ERRIN in 2016. Until December 2017 IOM was the provider of the services in Afghanistan and thereafter an organisation named International Returns and Reintegration Assistance (IRARA) (IOM 2018). In Iraq, in KRI as well as the southern and central part of the country, the service provider for the ERRIN programme is ETTC. In August 2018 the whole programme was halted due to data protection concerns when GDPR entered into force and applications were not processed for some time, before reactivating the programme again in late 2018 (Lindholm 2018; Carlsson Tenitskaja & Lindholm 2018). Return support to Afghanistan was suspended by the Swedish Migration Agency in February 2019 due to concerns that IRARA was not able to satisfactorily account for their invoicing. (UNICEF 2019:11, 65; Migration Agency n.d.b) The programme was re-started again in Afghanistan in November 2019.

Finally, there is a cash support that IOM provides under the EU-funded RADA project. It is delivered to those who arrive at escorted travels, to Afghanistan, but not to Iraq. It amounts to €147 in local currency and it has since April 2019 replaced an earlier in-kind support that lasted between December 2016 and

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<sup>21</sup> The former name of ERRIN was ERIN that stands for European Reintegration Network. The ERRIN Programme is funded by the European Commission through AMIF, as well as by the partner institutions of the eighteen countries that are members.

<sup>22</sup> The support from ERRIN could be delivered in many forms such as Airport pick-up or reception at place of arrival; In-country onward travel assistance; Temporary accommodation; Referrals for urgent medical care; Other basic essentials (ERRIN n.d.).

April 2019. This earlier support included basic medical support, in-country onward transportation, and temporary accommodations for up to two weeks.<sup>23</sup>

Data from the Migration Agency suggests that almost all who apply for ERRIN support get it. More than 90 percent of the applicants are given support and between 2018 and 2020 roughly 600 Afghans and a little more than 600 Iraqis received it (Migration Agency 2020b).

The ERRIN reception and reintegration assistance for Afghan returnees in Sweden was reported and, in a way, evaluated by IOM in 2016. Out of 465 returnees, between 2013 and 2016, 331 returnees received ERRIN support. Out of the 331 supported 241 received full support and 90 did not since IOM was unable to establish contact with them past the initial interaction. Most of those who received support started businesses, often grocery shops and out of the 251 initially started firms 170 were well functioning according to the organisation (IOM 2017b).

Another branch of the support structure towards rejected asylum seekers in Sweden is the information provided, the training and other preparatory activities taking place during the asylum process or after the final decision is made. The Migration Agency often point to the fact that correct and realistic information concerning the situation in the countries of origin is important in order to reach a well-informed decision and also promotes reintegration.

## Return and readmission agreements with Afghanistan and Iraq

Return or readmission agreements are a common feature in international relations between sending and receiving countries. They are developed in order to facilitate the removal of those who do not, or no longer, fulfil the conditions of entry to, presence in or residence in the requesting State (European Commission 2002:26). Even though research does not find that such agreements are particularly effective they commonly used instruments by governments to promote return (Janmyr 2015:5; Trauner & Kruse 2008:434)

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<sup>23</sup> Interviews with Informant A, Embassy Liaison Officer at the Swedish Police 5 June 2020 and 26 March 2021 and with Informant C, Embassy Liaison Officer at the Swedish Police 16 April 2021. E-mail correspondence, 20 April 2021 with the IOM regional headquarters in Helsinki Finland.

Sweden and Afghanistan have a memorandum of understanding (MoU) from 2016 on the readmission of people whose residence permit applications have been rejected. It covers both support to those who are in the return process and the obligations of Afghanistan to accept returnees and facilitate the process. The Swedish MoU makes no mention of voluntary repatriation of refugees. It appears to focus entirely on the return to Afghanistan of people whose asylum or other applications have been rejected, by means of either forced returns or Assisted Voluntary Returns (Regeringen 2016; Amnesty 2017).

Sweden and Iraq have a readmission agreement in the form of a MOU from 2008. It has similar formulations as the agreement with Afghanistan and deal with the return to Iraq of former asylum-seekers and others whose applications have been rejected (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008).

## 4.4 The asylum and return process from different perspectives

### Denial of application – Return in focus during the process?

The Aliens Act (SFS 2005:716) states that a decision must be in writing and contain the reasons on which it is based. This applies to decisions such as, for example, refusal-of-entry or expulsion. The Migration Agency's own aim is that the decision made, the alternatives and the process in itself shall be understood by the asylum-seeker. This includes information about the importance of passport and identification documents as well as his/her responsibility during the following process. (Migration Agency 2019a). If the case is such that there is a need to continue the dialogue, for example if the case cannot be carried out with force or if ID documents are missing, there is a possibility (but not a necessity) to have a follow-up talk. That talk has roughly the same objectives as the notification talk (Migration Agency 2019b, c).

The way agencies' decisions are formulated and the perceptions of these by individual asylum seekers cannot simply be judged considering legislation and standards of the Migration Agency. From previous studies in this field we know that the formulation of the decisions often fell short in terms of both structure and legal reasoning. The information provided was written in a way

that makes it difficult for the asylum seeker to understand why the Migration Agency made a specific assessment.

It is difficult to see what the Agency's actual reasons for the decision are and what information referred to other matters than the decision. Moreover, the way the decisions were formulated did not provide sufficient information to the asylum-seeker, who probably desired a more thorough explanation. It seemed that the reasons for a decision often only touched on the issue superficially (SOU 2013:37, pp. 24-25.) A similar phenomenon was also highlighted in an inspection report from the Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsman (JO) reached a similar conclusion – that the design of decisions in some cases made it difficult to find what was essential to the individual. They were not always adapted to the individual cases and therefore not designed based on the circumstances that were relevant to a particular asylum case (Parliamentary Ombudsmen 2016).

Data from the Delmi Report 2020:1 indicate that there are seldom any more talks aimed at explaining the situation or circumstances with the returnee after the initial notification talk has taken place. In this study, informants at the Migration Agency pointed to a lack of time and resources, combined with a general idea at the Agency that follow-up talks were rarely fruitful (Malm Lindberg 2020).

## The Declaration of satisfaction

According to the migration legislation covered in the Swedish Aliens Act there is a concept of "declaration of satisfaction" (*nöjdhetserklaring*) which means that the asylum-seeker with a rejection have an opportunity to declare that he or she will not appeal the decision. It means that the seeker loses the entitlement to appeal against a refusal-of-entry or expulsion order and withdraws all current appeals and/or applications for various permits. This is a statement that is final in the sense that a declaration of satisfaction cannot be withdrawn (SFS 2005:716).

The Migration Agency delivers the notification talk, i.e. when the asylum seeker is notified about the decision in an office of the Agency. The purpose of the notification meeting is to make sure that the asylum-seeker understands the decision and is aware of the possibilities ahead, including the declaration

of satisfaction (Migration Agency 2019a). In such cases an assigned counsel<sup>24</sup> shall, as the representative for the asylum seeker, guide him or her through the process following the decision.

According to the official investigation in 2013 the assigned counsel seldom explained the decision in a more thorough way. It was rather the possibilities for an appeal that were scrutinised. Moreover, it was not uncommon that asylum seekers used relatives or acquaintances with a knowledge in Swedish or translating services via the Internet in order to grasp the content of their decision (SOU 2013:37, p. 203). It is to our knowledge unknown, according to the findings in investigations or other studies, if these circumstances above also had an impact on the declaration of consent in the sense that the asylum-seeker can misinterpret the rules.

## Prepared to return

After a return decision has been delivered and become legally binding, all minors regardless of residency status keep their rights to attend preschool and primary and upper secondary school even if they, or their parents, are no longer asylum-seekers (SOU 2010:5; Bunar 2017:4). All other former asylum-seekers except for minors lose their right to participate in organised activities that require an LMA-card. No other organised activities, educational or vocational, directly connected with the return are normally offered to former asylum-seekers.<sup>25</sup>

## Voluntary return versus forced return and the travel back to the country again

If an asylum-seeker whose asylum-application has been refused does not leave the country during the period of voluntary return specified, he or she will face a re-entry ban to the Schengen Area for up to five years.

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<sup>24</sup> An assigned counsel is a lawyer or some other person with legal skills who one is entitled to appoint (engage) under the Swedish Legal Aid Act as a representative in certain official decisions such as the deportation. Their costs are met by the government.

<sup>25</sup> Information was given by Hugo Rickberg, Migration Agency (2021) and Kjell-Terje Torvik (2021a), ICMPD and ERRIN formerly Migration Agency.

Only those returning voluntarily or have withdrawn their asylum application are eligible for Re-establishment support. This must be applied for right after to the final decision. To receive re-establishment support one must be able to show a proof of departure (*utresebevis*). That is a certificate from the Swedish Migration Agency (or sometimes the Police) that must be provided to border control when exiting Sweden as a way to document departure from Swedish territory (National Police Board 2014: 17–19). When the returnee is registered as departed from Sweden, the process of handing out the re-establishment support starts.

### Where does the Swedish responsibility end in the Return process?

The return process is not necessarily completed when the migrant is back in the country of origin. If either the Police or the Transport Unit of the Prison and Probation Service (*Kriminalvårdens transportenhet*) is accompanying the returnee, they must make sure that readmission is completed. (National Police Board, 2014:19–20). The governmental agencies and other public authorities in the country of origin may refuse to accept the returnee, for example by claiming irregularities concerning identification or other documents.

## 5. A turbulent region. Push factors and migration patterns

The large influx of Afghan asylum seekers became a hot topic in the Swedish news media especially after the large numbers of unaccompanied minors that were sent back to Afghanistan for lacking asylum grounds. There is, however, less interest in one of the largest groups of immigrant origin in Sweden, Iraqis. Migrants from Iraq are however significantly older and has been larger in numbers than the Afghan ones.

The Afghani and Iraqi societies are both characterised by a lack of security and a very high level of state-sanctioned political violence. In the past five years both countries have scored at the worst level on the terror-scale index.<sup>26</sup> These are also two of the most corrupt nations in the world – with a tally of 20 out of 100 at the Transparency indexes.<sup>27</sup>

This chapter provides a brief description of the interwoven economic, historical, and political circumstances that have led to conflicts and turmoil triggering refugee migration to western countries. As such, it provides an important part of the puzzle to understand migratory patterns, return and reintegration circumstances.

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<sup>26</sup> Afghanistan and Iraq are both at the highest level, 5, consistently 2015–2019. Political terror is defined as violations of basic human rights to the physical integrity of the person by agents of the State within the territorial boundaries of the State and the estimations are based on data from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the U.S. State Department. The scale covers both scope, intensity and range of the terror. (The Political Terror Scale 2020). <http://www.politicalterroryscale.org/>.

<sup>27</sup> Afghanistan and Iraq had transparency scores of 19 respective 21 in 2020, at a scale of 0–100 where a 0 equals the highest level of perceived corruption in the public sector. That places them in the absolute bottom of the world ranking, and also low in a regional context. Corruption is measured on a scale with 13 indicators such as bribery, diversion of funds, nepotism, etc. (Transparency International 2020) <https://www.transparency.org/>.

## 5.1 Ethnic groups, instability, and migration in Afghanistan

The population of Afghanistan<sup>28</sup> is divided into dozens of major and minor ethnic groups. The groups vary in size, influence, and geographical location, and much of the unrest and violence in Afghanistan stems from conflicts between groups and harassment of groups. In this sense, Afghan identity has been, until very recently, less important than ethnic identity, and this is especially so in the rural parts of the country where tribal and ethnic groups take primacy over the individual (Barfield 2010:17).

The largest ethnic group in the country are Pashtuns (40 percent), followed by Tajiks (30 percent), and then Hazaras (20 percent) who mostly live in central Afghanistan, in the Hazarajat region and in most Afghan cities (Singh 2001). Hazaras have consistently travelled and migrated from Afghanistan to neighbouring countries. Almost one million live in Iran and around 650,000 are residents in Pakistan. Since the late 19th century Hazaras, (predominantly Shia Muslims) have been persecuted and considered infidels, most recently by the Taliban. (McCauley 2002:60). Furthermore, IS has also targeted the group for having the “wrong” religious affiliation and a perceived closeness and support for Iran (EASO 2019). Being at the bottom of the Afghan social hierarchy. Hazaras have had difficulties in achieving social mobility. However, their position has improved after the fall of the Taliban regime and Hazaras are now recognised in the Constitution as part of the nation of Afghanistan (Barfield 2010:26).

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and the following Mujahedin-led insurgency led to large waves of migrants fleeing to the neighbouring countries. A smaller portion also managed to escape to the West. (Colville 1998:6; Oeppen 2009:80; van Houte 2016). In 1990, more than six million Afghans lived in exile – over three million in Pakistan and almost the same number in Iran (Marsden 1999:56). By the late 1990s, roughly four million Afghans had

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<sup>28</sup> The number of inhabitants in Afghanistan is contested. It was estimated at 33 million as of 2019 by the Afghanistan Statistics and Information Authority. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/nsia-estimates-afghanistan-population-329m>; UN estimates that cover 2020 is approximately 39 million. [https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Files/1\\_Indicators%20\(Standard\)/EXCEL\\_FILES/1\\_Population/WPP2019\\_POP\\_F01\\_1\\_TOTAL\\_POPULATION\\_BOTH\\_SEXES.xlsx](https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Files/1_Indicators%20(Standard)/EXCEL_FILES/1_Population/WPP2019_POP_F01_1_TOTAL_POPULATION_BOTH_SEXES.xlsx).



returned, making it the largest return and repatriation of a single refugee group in history (UNHCR 1998; Colville 1998:6).

A new wave of refugee migration was triggered in 1996 when the Taliban came to power accompanied by severe ethnic persecution and massacres of especially Hazaras. Following the downfall of the Taliban more than five million Afghans returned, most from Pakistan and many from Iran (Monsutti 2008:60; Oeppen 2009:82 van Houte 2016:48). Motivated by prospects of normalcy and less violence, new opportunities and a desire to be part of the reconstruction of the country, many that returned during the 00s encountered a country they had not seen for decades, some never as they had been born abroad (Colville 1998:6; Monsutti 2008:60–61; Majidi 2017a:7). Propelled by a deteriorating security situation and changing political landscape, outmigration again increased sharply during the past decade, including an increase of re-migration of those who previously returned (Bizhan 2016).

Conflicts and insecurity continue to characterise life in Afghanistan. From 2015, the terror organisation IS was added to the list of security threats, previously containing the Taliban and a set of warlords (Donini et al. 2016:3; van Houte 2016:51). While the international community has launched ambitious reconstruction programmes, through development aid and loans, and large-scale return and repatriation programmes, the societal and individual needs are enormous (van Houte 2016:46–47). ALCS (2018) painted a stark picture of even worsening conditions during the 2010s. More than half the Afghan population lived below the national poverty line, indicating a sharp deterioration in welfare between 2011–2012 and 2016–2017. It was due to a combined impact of stagnating economic growth, increasing demographic pressures from a growing population, and a worsening security situation.

## Afghan migration patterns

As migration and integration policies in the neighbouring countries became harsher, an established Afghan diaspora in many western countries became proof of the possibilities to receive residence permits and draw on networks that could provide decent, or even good, living conditions (Koser 2014; van Houte 2016:56). As such, even those with more modest resources began to migrate further west, many looking towards Europe and the US. In 2015 the number of first-time asylum-seekers quadrupled in Europe, and a substantial proportion of them came to Sweden (Majidi 2017a:7). Following the sharp

increase of migrants entering Europe around 2015, many restrictive policies were adopted, and the recognition rates (of refugee status) fell sharply (van Houte et al. 2016; van Houte 2016: 51-57).

The demographical characteristics among Afghan migrants have been changing a lot during the past decades. The more recently migrating Afghans can be categorised as predominantly belonging to one of three groups that migrate for partly different reasons.

One group is the unaccompanied minors, mostly male Hazaras men. This group includes Hazaras that lived outside of Afghanistan, sometimes second-generation refugees with little connection to their home country. Regardless of conflict, young Hazaras have for example migrated frequently from the mountainous central parts of Afghanistan to the cities of Iran, as a way to broaden their social networks, but also as a kind of rite of passage to adulthood. They often fear persecution for their ethnic and religious background, both from the government and local population (Monsutti 2007).

Another group comprises Afghans from the Southern and Eastern regions, both rural and city-dwellers. They mainly flee from violence or risk of forced recruitment from all sides in the conflict and insurgency.

Yet another group of migrants from Afghanistan consists of city-dwellers mostly from Kabul, who are members of an emerging middle class, often quite well-educated. They might have lost their income due to the scaling down of development programmes or the economic downturn. Their migration is, therefore, more motivated by financial reasons, but they also might fear persecution and retaliation from segments of the Afghan society (Donini et al. 2016:31-32).

## Return migration to Afghanistan

Among the growing number of studies of returnees to Afghanistan, there is a consensus of the complexity of the process. After the fall of the Taliban rule in early 2000s, it has been suggested that the high numbers of returnees were too much to handle for the limited absorption capacity of Afghanistan (Stigter 2006: 115-7; Turton & Marsden 2002). One of the problems, highlighted by Opel (2005), was that the urban labour markets were not expanding to accommodate the increasing flow of returnees to the cities. Özerdem &

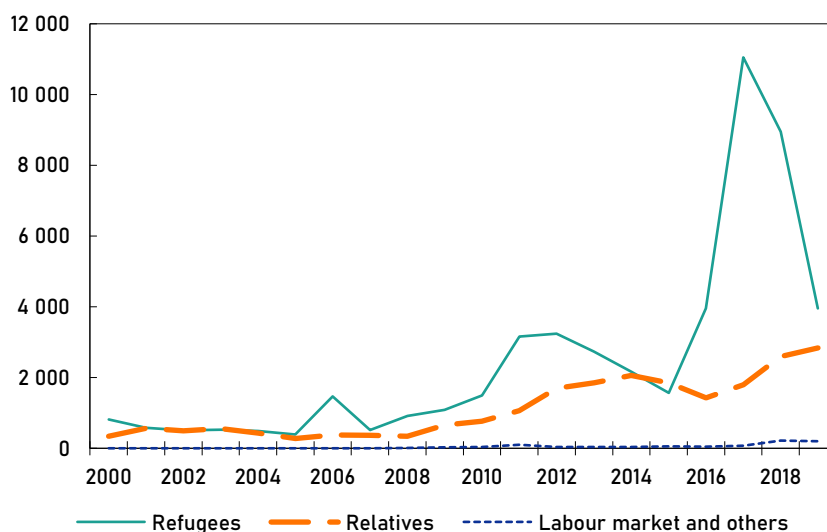
Sofizada (2006) claimed that there was an absence of a well-coordinated return and repatriation strategy by the international community that prevented sustainable solutions for these returnees.

## Afghan Migration to Sweden

The Afghan migration to Sweden was miniscule up until the 2000s, when a few arrived as quota refugees and others received permits as asylum seekers. (SCB 2000). In 2015–2016 the number of Afghans seeking asylum in Sweden skyrocketed, as it did in Germany (Parusel & Schneider 2017). In total more than 70,000 Afghans received residence permits during the period 2000–2019 (SCB 2020).

The Afghan migration is clearly tied to the search for protection and a large majority of the obtained residence permits have been acquired for such reasons. Moreover, a large part of Afghans – mainly from Hazara background – who came to Sweden and received a permit were unaccompanied minors and Sweden also stood out in a European context in that regard (Celikaksoy & Wadensjö 2018). Many Afghan migrants have previously resided in other countries, especially Iran, not least unaccompanied minors, but due to not being formally recognised and not having stable opportunities, they migrated to Sweden. Afghan migrants, first and foremost unaccompanied minors, have received quite a bit of attention from the civil society, the news media, and in the political debate (EMN Sweden 2019:22). Organisations working to safeguard their interests have acted on their behalf, and some legislation that has been enacted, such as the New Swedish Act on Upper Secondary Education, has been implemented in order to respond to their precarious situation.

**Figure 2. Residence permits for Afghans 2000-2019**



Source: SCB (2020) (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

## 5.2 The Iraqi context

Iraq has also been ravaged by war, insurgencies, ethnic, sectarian and religious conflicts, as well as a recent surge in attacks by terror groups and religious fundamentalists.

### History, ethno-religious tensions and conflicts

Modern Iraq evolved with the Socialist Arab Ba'ath party and military take-over in 1968. The Ba'athist ideology was secularly socialist and aggressively nationalist, and the ruling government was soon marked by a system of patronage. Despite an authoritarian regime and persecution of different groups, the first period was also characterised by high economic growth and soaring prosperity mainly due to the large oil revenues bolstered by the sharp oil price rises.

The existing regime turned even harsher during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship between 1979 and 2003 which was dominated by repression and persecution – of Kurds in the north and Shias, mainly in the south – war and

conflict against Iran between 1980-1988 and against US-led military forces in the first and second Gulf Wars. Following Iraqi defeat in the first Gulf War 1990-91, the repressed Kurds in the north and Shias in the south, tried to take advantage of a decimated Iraqi military and rose against the Ba'ath regime. While the uprising in the south among the Shias was crushed by the regime, the US and EU implemented a no-fly-zone to protect the Kurds. This would contribute to Kurdish autonomy, and in turn resulted in the establishment of the semi-independent Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991 and the expulsion of Saddam Hussein's troops (Black 2007).

During the 1990s, the UN levied sanctions on Iraq as a whole, and the Saddam regime did the same on Iraqi Kurdistan. Effectively hit by dual sanctions, and a military conflict between the two dominant political factions in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdish region came to suffer devastating impoverishment – a combination of financial and security pressures – driving an exponential increase of out-migration for asylum in Europe (Strand et al. 2016).

The downfall of Saddam Hussein would mark the end of the Ba'ath Party's 35-year-long rule. The dictatorship was replaced with a fragile democracy, but also a resurgence of sectarian and ethno-religious movements and militias as well as a re-emergence of tribalism and patriarchal forms of authority (La Vecchia Mikkola 2013). The years ahead would become marred by violent sectarian civil war and conflicts. The Iraqi economic conditions worsened during the 1990s due to economic mismanagement and the UN sanctions imposed on the country. At the turn of the 21st century, Iraq's economy started to grow again as several states ignored the UN's sanctions. But the economic situation is highly volatile with sharp turns between boom and bust, often caused by changes in the oil revenues. Adding to the list, with a brutal offensive in 2014 on Iraqi soil, IS managed to take control over large parts of northern and western Iraq, including major cities like Mosul and Falluja. Both Kurdish forces, Peshmerga, and Iraqi military forces fought to oust the organisation and eventually did so in 2017. These military clashes and political unrest also contributed to a sharp downturn in the Iraqi economy 2014-16 (e.g. Edgumbe 2020; Strand et al. 2016).

Politically, economically, and socially, Iraq today is considered at best 'unpredictable'. The Humanitarian Response Plan for Iraq, published by the

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in January 2020, noted that: “[p]rone to political instability, violence, corruption, armed conflict and natural disasters ... Iraq is an anomaly of an upper middle-income country deemed to be at ‘very high risk’ of a humanitarian crisis requiring international assistance” (OCHA 2020:11). The latest events in Iraq also point to the instability that has plagued the country for so long. With this brief background, it is easy to understand why in the past five decades the country has seen massive migration, internally as well as externally.

### Migratory patterns and ethnic composition in Iraq

The population of Iraq is 40 million, and more than 10 million Iraqis reside in the diaspora. There are three major ethno-religious groups: Shia, Sunni, and Kurds. Exact numbers in this composition are disputed.<sup>29</sup> Muslim Arabs constitute a large majority in Iraq, comprising 75 to 80 percent according to some estimates. Muslim Kurds, roughly five million, make up the second largest ethnic group, estimated at 15 to 20 percent of the population. The majority of Muslim Arabs in Iraq are Shia Muslims and a minority are Sunni. Estimates from 2015 suggest that the proportion is 15 million Shia and 9 million Sunni. The overwhelming majority of the Kurds are Muslim. A large majority of the Muslim Kurds are Sunni with only a small minority being Shia. Other ethnic and religious groups in Iraq seem to constitute about five percent of the population.<sup>30</sup> In religious terms, roughly two-thirds of Iraqis are Shia, one-third are Sunni, with around five percent belong to other religious affiliations. Christians constitute one percent and other religions between one and four percent (European Parliamentary Research Service 2015:3–4; CIA World Factbook on Iraq 2020).

Iraq has also a long history of migration and immigration from neighbouring countries. Today, roughly 250,000 Syrian refugees reside in Iraq following the war in Syria, as well as approximately 40,000 refugees from other countries in

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<sup>29</sup> Due to the sharp and sometimes violent ethno-religious tensions the question of ethnicity and religious affiliation is politicized, hard to measure and estimates in different sources therefore differ – sometimes a lot. The International Crisis Group (2008) points out that figures from censuses, “are all considered highly problematic, due to suspicions of regime manipulation” because Iraqi citizens were only allowed to indicate belonging to either the Arab or Kurdish ethnic groups.

<sup>30</sup> Others consist of many smaller minorities such as Turkmen, Yezidi, Shabak, Kaka’i, Bedouin, Romani, Assyrian, Circassian, Sabaeen-Manderan and Persians.

the region (UNHCR 2020). Yet another group that primarily came in the 1970s was a group of highly skilled labour migrants, fuelled by the booming oil industry (Chatelard 2009).

Due to sharp ethno-religious tensions, authoritarian and repressive rule and long periods of war, different groups have been forced to flee, been deported or migrated from Iraq. Forced migration from Iraq on a larger scale started around 1980 when the regime expelled citizens, mainly Shia Arabs and Shia Kurds, of Iranian origin in an Arabization-attempt. Other minorities started to flee Iraq for political, ideological and ethno-religious reasons, often to neighbouring countries like Jordan or Syria (Chatelard 2009:10). In the case of Kurds many fled Iraqi Kurdistan between 1975 and 1991, several also arriving in Europe – including Sweden – seeking asylum (Strand et al. 2016).

The invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the internal uprising and following repression in the southern and northern regions as well the economic embargo by the UN created a lot of displacement internally as well as externally. This led to an outflow of well-educated Iraqis that found employment as qualified migrant workers in several Arab countries and some well-educated Iraqis were also able to enter and to settle in Europe or America by means of labour or student migration visas. Others invested capital in properties and businesses and thereby obtained residence rights in neighbouring countries (Chatelard 2009, 2010). In-fighting between Kurdish groups and militias in the late 1990s also contributed to this displacement (Strand et al. 2016).

While Shiites have constituted the majority in Iraq, Sunni Arabs have been controlling key institutions and positions of the government as well as the army. As a result, both Shias and Kurds have felt alienated and faced discrimination, persecution, forced displacement and deportation. The fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003 saw the return to Iraq of around 500,000 previously displaced individuals, particularly in northern Iraq, but also in the Shia-dominated south, which in turn resulted in the displacement of about 200,000 people who had been living in the homes of the returning diaspora (Romano 2005; Van der Auweraert 2011).

Following the 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari mosque, Sectarian violence escalated and at its extremes roughly 1,000 persons a week were killed. Millions were driven into internal displacement and hundreds of thousands left

the country, most of whom to neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Syria, Iran and Lebanon (Edgecumbe 2020; Respond 2018).

In 2015, it was estimated that internally displaced Iraqis together with Syrian refugees made up more than 20 percent of the population in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), putting enormous social and economic pressure on the autonomous region (Respond 2018; Strand et al. 2016). At the height of the conflict in Iraq it was estimated that a staggering six million people were internally displaced. Today, while that figure has decreased to about 1.3 million, humanitarian needs are still immense, and protection, particularly for vulnerable groups, is a big concern (OCHA 2019; 2020; UNHCR 2020).

## Return migration to Iraq

The post-Saddam period held great hope for those who voluntarily decided to return. However, studies show that a number of structural and political issues together with the weak security situation hampered the possibilities for successful return and reintegration (Romano 2005).

In contrast with Afghanistan, there has previously been an effort to promote return to Iraq as part of the post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Different agencies as well as European countries developed special programmes for repatriation of the Kurds to the Iraqi Kurdistan (Emanuelsson 2008; King, 2008).

Most of the previous return efforts were demolished by the rise of IS. But when military actors reclaimed lost territory, internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as asylum seekers began to return. However, the security and material conditions, at least for the IDPs, have been precarious (Davis et al. 2018).

When returning to a sectarian, and often violent, post-conflict society, plagued with patronage, it is important to belong to or have connections with such sectarian political groups that control the various ministries and public offices – in other to get a foothold in society (Edgecumbe 2020; Iaria 2010).

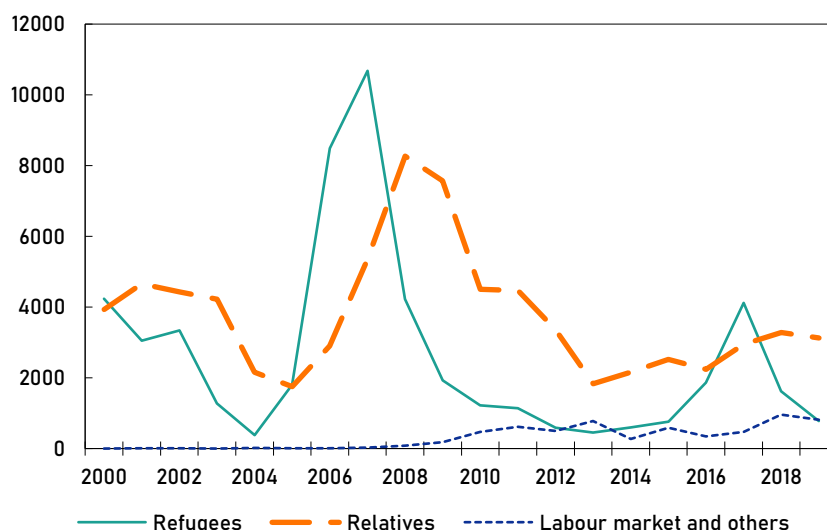


## Iraqi Migration to Sweden

Between 1980 and 1999 more than 30,000 refugees came from Iraq followed by a little over 20,000 relatives. From the turn of the millennium to 2019 more than 130,000 Iraqis received residence permits. Iraqis constitute the second largest immigrant group in Sweden (SCB 2019).

Two wars within a twenty-year period, the Kurdish struggle for independence, and ongoing ethno-religious conflicts have been the primary drivers for Iraqi migration to Sweden (Sharif 2019). The number of Iraqi refugees entering Sweden was relatively modest until the US-led invasion of the country in 2003. The peak levels were reached in 2007–2008 following the start of the US withdrawal (see Figure 2). The large influx was partly due to the relatively liberal asylum rules in Sweden at the time, and to the fact that Iraqis were treated like and granted refugee status as a group – which led to a 90 percent approval rate (Andersson et al. 2010; Sharif 2019; Bevelander 2007).

Figure 3. Residence permits for Iraqis 2000–2019

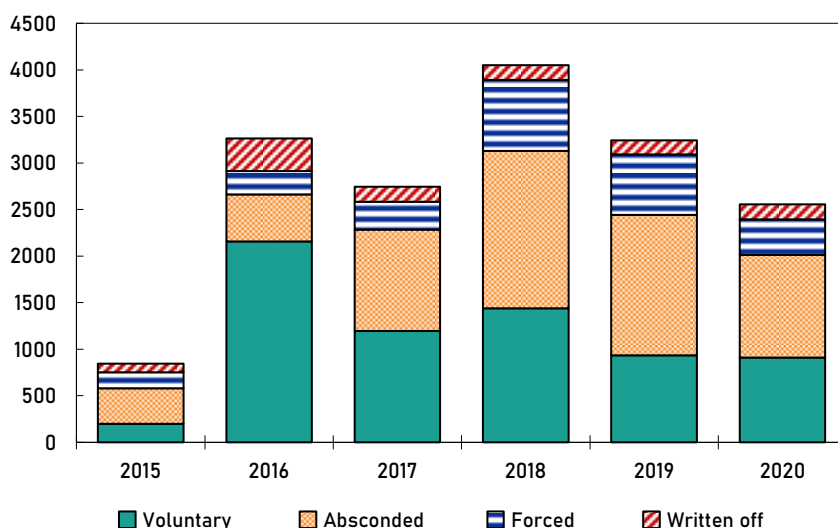


Source: SCB (2020) (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

## 5.3 A statistical review of return from Sweden to Afghanistan and Iraq

Afghan and Iraqi citizens are both overrepresented among the asylum seekers who have received a negative asylum decision in Sweden, following the sharp increase in migrants coming to Sweden 2015. As the protection rate for these nationals decreased (see e.g. Parusel & Schneider 2017), a significant number of those who sought asylum in Sweden received a rejection and later a return decision.

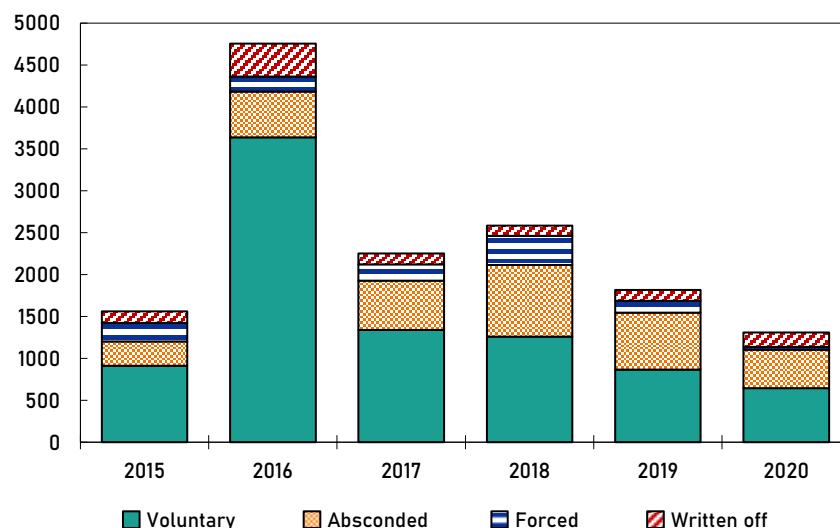
Figure 4. Return cases 2015-2020 Afghanistan



Source: Migration Agency (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

Among the return cases that include Iraqi nationals the share that return voluntarily increases after 2015. In this group, both the number and the proportion of cases handed over to the police during the same period decreased, while the number of cases of absconding increased.

Figure 5. Return cases 2015-2020 Iraq

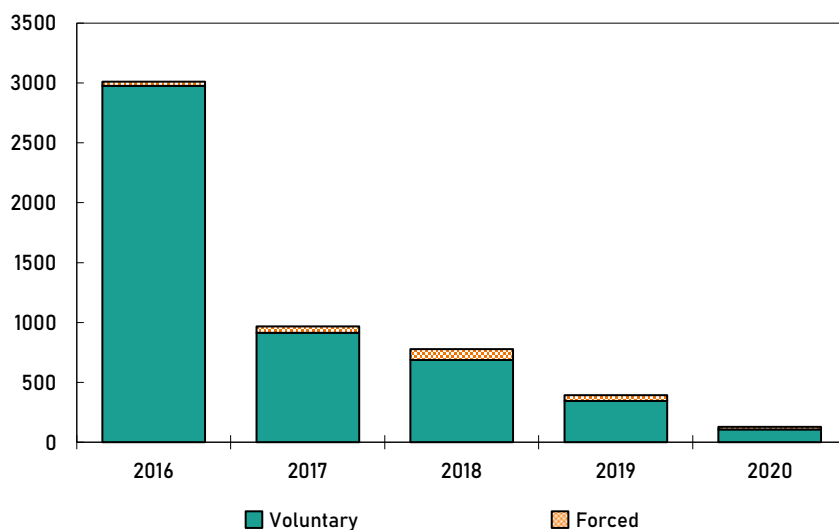


Source: Migration Agency (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

For both Afghanistan and Iraq, there is a clear increase in voluntary return in 2016, in terms of both number and proportion. For Afghan nationals, the numbers vary greatly during the six years shown in Figure 3. Between 2015 and 2016, the number of voluntary departures tripled, but it is necessary to take into account that the number of asylum seekers from the country increased significantly at that stage.

Numbers on the actual implemented trips (as opposed to return cases), show that during the last three years a larger proportion of forced returns were implemented to Afghanistan than to Iraq (see Figures 5 and 6). Forced return trips to Iraq constituted a very small share.

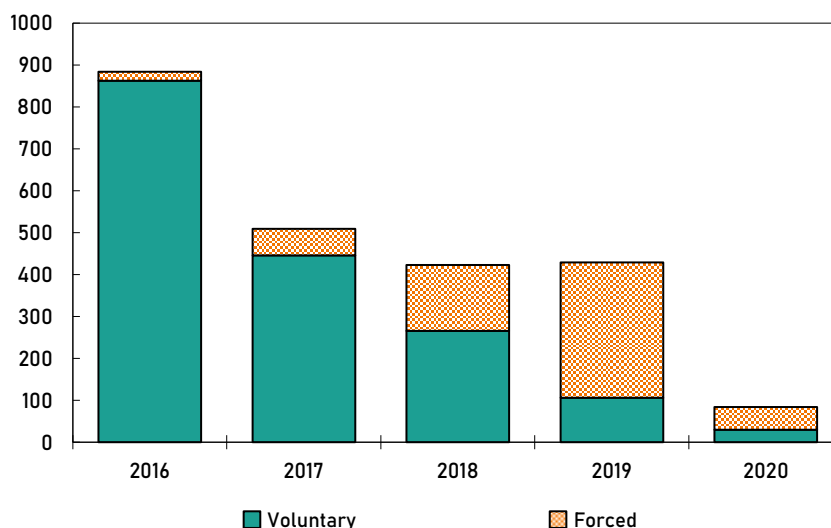
Figure 6. Return travels to Iraq 2016-2020



Source: Migration Agency (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

When only implemented trips are accounted for, the number of voluntary returns decreases significantly for Afghan citizens.

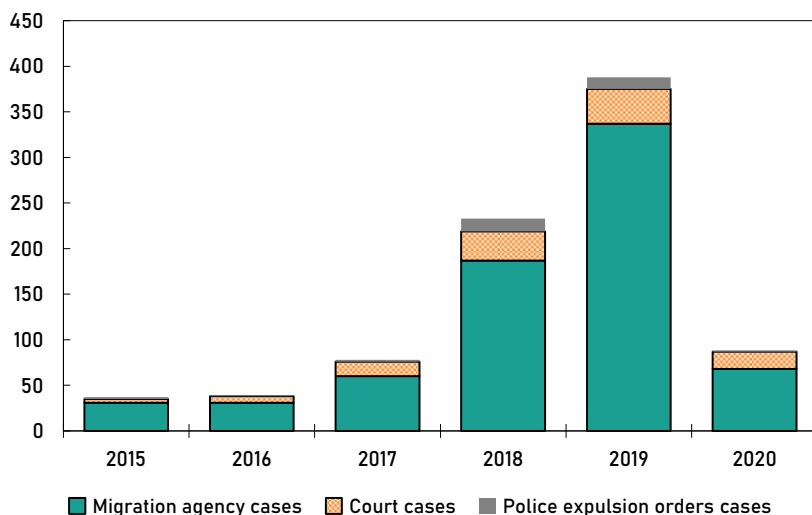
Figure 7. Return travels to Afghanistan 2016-2020



Source: Migration Agency (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

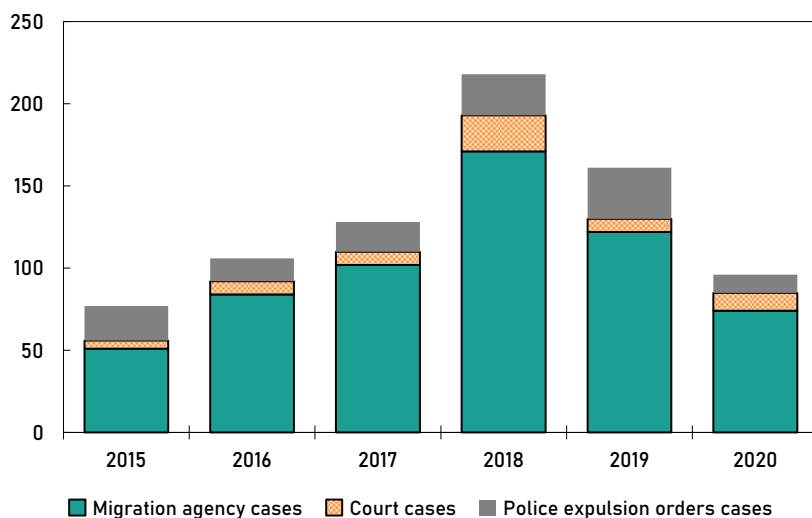
The cases that the Migration Agency registers as forced are the ones implemented by the Police. Sometimes the numbers do not coincide due to delays of reporting, or cases that due to any of a variety of different reasons are not reported. The total number of cases of implemented return decisions is, nevertheless, higher than the one accounted by the Migration Agency. Besides the cases this agency sends to the Police, there are, first, return cases initiated by the Police – due to lack of a permit to legally stay in Sweden, or cases where an individual has not been in direct contact with the Migration Agency regarding return- and, second, court cases – when individuals are to be returned to their country of nationality after have been convicted by an offence. Figures 7 and 8 account for the number of Police-implemented trips by the source emitting the return decision.

**Figure 8 Implemented trips by the Police to Afghanistan**



Source: Swedish Police (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

**Figure 9 Implemented trips by the Police to Iraq**



Source: Swedish Police (Data processing and editing by Delmi)

Although it is difficult to estimate the proportion of the return decisions issued by the Migration Agency that are actually implemented by the Police, we see clearly that among the return trips, these are a majority. These decisions can be implemented even when several months or even years have passed since these were handed over to the Police.

From the figures above, we can see that it is difficult to assess the exact number of implemented return trips classified as forced. Still, what we can observe with respect to our data is that the number of forced returnees is overrepresented in the case of Afghans, which are a majority.





## 6. Pre-migration and asylum process: Life before return

The respondents in our study left a country with political and socioeconomic instability. The previous chapter informed that while Iraqi asylum seekers have been reaching Sweden for decades due to the subsequent wars in the country, Afghans are relative newcomers, reaching Sweden predominantly in the past ten years. Their stories have some similarities but also differences. Although Iraqis are the second largest migrant group in Sweden, it is difficult to find studies among them or efforts associated to NGO's preventing their return. In contrast, the influx of Afghan asylum seekers became a hot topic in Swedish media, especially after minors were sent back to Afghanistan for not having asylum grounds. Information was disseminated by NGO's regarding their vulnerability, the lack of legal certainty of their asylum procedure, and the group's feeling of frustration.<sup>31</sup>

This chapter is based on the personal narratives about the respondents' lives before migration, and their experiences on the way towards Sweden as well as during the time as an asylum seeker in Sweden. The chapter serves both descriptive and analytical purposes. The focus is on their stories, and topics therewithin, which illuminate certain patterns.

### 6.1 Pre-migration situation

#### Personal characteristics and place of departure

*I wanted and still want to have a good and peaceful life and to live in Europe, as well as to be independent. Besides, I don't want to feel scared of the police to get me arrested and deported to the [home]country anymore. Because they arrest Afghans in Iran and send them back to the country. Further, I want to have a life and support my family... We didn't have our own home in Iran and,*

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<sup>31</sup> See for example, Save the Children report <https://press.raddabarnen.se/news/raedda-barnen-kommenterar-utvisning-av-barn-och-unga-till-afghanistan-380813>.

*therefore, we always stayed in a rented one. However, I have grown old in Iran and adapted to their culture, but they always insulted us by calling us Afghans.*

Male, 30 years, AFN#114

Our respondents are mostly Hazaras, a few have Pashtun origin and a couple declared to be Tajiks (see Appendix Casebook). Before migrating to Sweden, they were for the most part living in provinces in north-central Afghanistan<sup>32</sup> such as the Hazarajath region but also other areas in Northern Afghanistan and close to the border with Iran. Only three respondents were from or lived in Kabul before return from Sweden. Their socioeconomic situation varied from being decent to very poor.

A large part of the respondents arrived in Sweden around 2015 and were deported in the past three years following an unsuccessful asylum application. More than half declared to have been minors at the moment they entered Swedish. Despite their young age, a large part had already an occupation, which varied but in most cases was linked to farming. The respondents who found themselves in Iran before migration worked irregularly for example as mechanics and cleaners. Only a few had finished their secondary studies.

*Our condition was good, and I was working in a vehicle repair shop with my father. Then the Taliban warned us and attacked me with a knife... On the other hand, my elder brother was working with Americans and, therefore, the Taliban told us that my elder brother should leave the Americans as he should [instead] work with them. Therefore, they killed my elder brother and then told us that I should work with them. That's how, I was forced to migrate.*

Male, 23 years, AFN#67

Almost half of the Afghan respondents – all of Hazara origin – had been living in Iran before migrating to Europe. Within this group, there is a variation in the time they spent in Iran. Most had left Afghanistan in their early childhood together with their family, some were born in Iran while others had spent only a few years in Iran before leaving for Europe.<sup>33</sup> They had a distinct feeling of discrimination in Afghanistan for being Hazaras. This feeling was also present

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<sup>32</sup> For more detailed information see Appendix Casebook.

<sup>33</sup> The research team classified respondents as living in Iran if they in their interview stated that they had been living there for more than two years previous to departure.

in Iran, although without the threats of the Taliban and IS. The degree of attachment and existing social networks varied within this group. Their socioeconomic situation was good enough to cover daily needs, having difficulties but being able to fulfil their basic needs for food and shelter. Iran was not a proper home in this sense, but neither was Afghanistan. Different everyday situations tell of the discrimination and threat they were living under right before migration.

*I was born in Afghanistan but raised in Iran. The reason my family left Afghanistan was the war. We are originally from Behsood district of Maidan Wardak province. My father knew the Mujaheddin and worked with them so that combined with the fact that we were Hazaras made us leave the country to avoid troubles from the Taliban.*

Male, 22 years, AFN#18

Some Iraqi respondents migrated together with their families. The experiences are then more complex because of other factors being present during the trip, arrival, and asylum process in Sweden that has to do with children and attempts to keep their family together. The Iraqi respondents come from cities in the centre part of Iraq or from the Kurdish Region. Almost all of them had a profession of some sort before their migration. Muslim faith is characteristic of all but two of the respondents. Half of them embrace the Shi'a faith and the other half Sunni, being all those of Kurdish origin in this category.<sup>34</sup>

Iraqis, in contrast, had a better socioeconomic situation than the Afghans did, even though some had experiences of unemployment. Their socioeconomic situation was enough to cover their basic needs, with some having a better situation owning a house and a car, which they sold to finance their migration. Discrimination and harassment due to affiliation to certain groups affected their everyday lives to a large extent.

Most female respondents from Iraq migrated together with their families. Their experiences are narrated differently, especially concerning the stay in Sweden (see box 1).

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<sup>34</sup> See Appendix Casebook for more information about respondents in Iraq.

## Box 1. Gender perspectives: On being a woman on the run

Previous studies depict women as a vulnerable category among returnees. Our study partly confirms this situation. Although women in our sample make up a minority (ten respondents), there are some commonalities among them.

All but two Iraqi women in our study migrated together with their families. Most were Kurdish (five out of eight) and were married or migrated with their parents. The welfare of their families in many cases determined their perceptions of Sweden and the asylum process. In this sense, women were more aware of the services that they and their families were provided and more critical of the help they receive or lack during the asylum process. This could be explained by the role of carers that their place of origin assigns them. Still they show to have a power of decision within the family. A 27-year-old Kurdish woman declared to not have received an appropriate treatment after arrival. *The treatment we received from the government was good, and bad at some points. What they didn't consider was that I had a baby with me, or that we were hungry when we arrived, they were just trying to speed up the process.* IRQ#51. In contrast, a 32-year-old woman has good memories about her having been well taken care of by the system during her pregnancy, which she mentioned several times in her interview. *They were very nice, when we arrived the red cross and immigration office received us, and they helped me a lot as a pregnant woman.* Female IRQ#63.

Our respondents were dependant on their partners and their social contacts with peers feeling vulnerable when these were unavailable. Most had a debilitated psychological well-being which influenced the family's decision to voluntarily return. A 36-years old Iraqi woman of Arab origin told about her desperation when her husband was taken into a detention centre. This situation and her feeling of helplessness without her husband made the family opt for voluntary return.

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*We did not decide alone. The migration office pushed us to make the decision. They took my husband away from me... They took him to an isolated camp, only for men, and I stayed alone with my children. I cannot do anything without him, which pushed me to decide to return, so that I could be with my husband again.*

***What do you mean by "they pushing us"?***  
*The migration employee. Then, we decided to return, even if we will die in Iraq, but at least we will be together.* Female IRQ#16.

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After the return, their situation is weak. Sometimes they blame themselves for the decision to return. They wanted to go back to a familiar place but encountered several difficulties. *I feel very bad, I always tell myself that we were very close to building a good future for my kids, but I destroyed this chance and caused our return to Iraq from Sweden. And to be honest I don't feel that I am safe here.* Female

The Swedish experience also made them reflect about their position in Iraq as women. They seem to count few opportunities to thrive on their own due to security reasons and because of the more traditional role associated to women.

In Afghanistan, only two women were interviewed. They had very different backgrounds and voluntarily returned due to different reasons. One describes the impossibility to adapt to Swedish life considering her religious faith and traditions. The other was a highly educated woman fearing a specific threat.

*You know; however, I had some education and I can develop some skills like tailoring, but my husband is from a very conservative and tribal family he won't let me work here even if we die of hunger.* Female IRQ#53

## Push and pull factors and consequences for the after-return period

The Afghan interviewees of Hazara origin are in line with previous research on this group. Mobility is characteristic of the Hazara people due to recurring persecutions and harassment from different powers that mention their Shia faith as a motive for discrimination. Many returnees of Hazara origin lived irregularly in Iran fearing deportation at any time. This is a constant fear among them but also a way of living (Schuster & Majidi, 2013; Khosravi 2016). Living in illegality is not new for them. It is not a desirable situation either, but at least it was perceived as safer than living under Taliban rule or IS threat.

If we go back to the concept of embeddedness previously discussed and apply it to this case, we can see that before migration most individuals did not have a defined position in Afghan society. Their existence was marked in some cases by persecution, in others by illegality in Iran. For those in Afghanistan, their sense of belonging was linked to their families and the land they could have possessed or work with. For those who did have a stable home, a family and an occupation, their re-embeddedness will depend on whether a similar position can be re-constructed after migration.

The situation for those living in Iran can be considered as vulnerable, the economic and the psychosocial dimensions being especially weak. Meanwhile,

the social networks made that they were somehow embedded to their community because their family members or some close friend, were in there supporting each other socially and economically in a hostile environment. However, the living conditions were still precarious and unsafe, which became the primary push-factor for their migration to Europe.

Only a very few respondents mentioned previous mobility within Iraq, and in contrast with the Afghan respondents, Iraqi returnees did not have a previous migration experience to neighbouring countries. However, many of them were acquainted with the migration experience abroad, having extended family living in foreign countries, particularly in Sweden. In fact, the Iraqi diaspora is one of the largest diasporas in Sweden, which likely contributes to the fact that many choose Sweden as their migration destination.

*I didn't think at all about migrating. I was living a very normal life, but the security situation pushed me to think about it. In addition, there is no future in Iraq. Even though I finished my studies, I will not be able to work, and we have a very bad government, which doesn't care about its citizens. Unfortunately, after 2003, Iraq became only for people affiliated with political parties – they can live peacefully, unlike poor people.*

Male, 29 years, IRQ#18

Although many narratives described everyday difficulties in general terms, a particular threat was often described in detail. Such threat involves a particular problem with the authorities, a militia, a fear for IS or a family feud that causes the necessity to leave. It was also a common feature in many interviews that because someone in the family had ties to a militia or to the Ba'ath party, the individual interviewed was threatened, extorted, or even kidnapped. Such safety concerns pushed people to migrate. The primary push factor for Iraqis was the sense of insecurity. The lack of safety due the political instability and potential discrimination due to ethnicity or affiliations of family members was often mentioned as a reason to migrate.

Through the many narratives of instability, it is easy to see a post-war situation where stability has not yet been achieved. There is, however, a consciousness of how things should be done and how citizens should be treated. The frequent mentions of Sweden as a country that respects human

rights tells about people not only looking for a safer place but also for a dignifying life in a democracy.

*Me and my husband knew from the news and heard from people that Sweden is a stable country and that it has an outstanding reputation when it comes to the rights of women and children and those of refugees. This made us think of migrating and going to Sweden.*

Female, 27 years, KRI IRQ#51

It is important to highlight from an analytical perspective the fact that Iraqis made a more informed decision – they knew more about Sweden, which was chosen as destiny beforehand – and that they took their families with them. These two factors will later influence their return, most especially the voluntary character of the return.

## 6.2 Migration journey

### The decision to migrate

Moving abroad was not always a decision made by the individual. In some cases, the immediate or extended family decided to send the respondent abroad, in most cases due to safety reasons. The decision is, in some cases, supported by what could become an asylum ground, in other cases it was mostly poverty, constant harassment, and severe discrimination that lead young people to look for a better future. Fear for one's safety can be seen as the major push-factor for these migrants, who in their majority have been already displaced before their migration to Sweden. In the respondents' narratives, we find cases of persecution among those residing in Afghanistan at the time of migration. Such fear is sometimes based on direct threats of the Taliban or other groups, family feuds or social conflicts.

The decision to migrate to Sweden from Iraq was often propelled by a sense of not feeling safe. In general, Iraqis were socio-economically better off than the respondents from Afghanistan were. The narratives though are characterised by a more detailed account of the threat than in the previous case.

*My financial situation was good. I was working as a police officer at the Ministry of Interior. I left my work prior to the onslaught of ISIS on the Sunni Areas...Yes, there was a threat to my life. It all started when I wanted to resign as a police officer and go back to school to study. I submitted my resignation to the Ministry of the Interior; it usually takes two months to reply (accept or reject) a resignation letter. While I was waiting for the reply, ISIS started attacking and controlling areas in north and west of Iraq. Accordingly, the Ministry of Interior rejected my resignation. But I refused to re-join the police and quit my job unilaterally. Subsequently, my commander reported a list of names to the ministry of interior, including my name, of police officers who left their duties and joined ISIS. This made me leave Diyala, go to Sulaymaniyah and from there I took a flight to Turkey directly.*

Male, 40 years, IRQ#38

As in the case above, the threats associated with the unstable situation and conflicts in the area pushed people to leave. However, people were able to describe an attachment to their place of origin in Iraq, and they felt connected to it. The embeddedness people felt prior to migration will later have consequences for the period after the return.

At the same time, a powerful pull factor was the knowledge the Iraqi respondents had about Sweden. Some interviewees highlighted that they knew Sweden as a country that respects human rights. Also, in contrast to Afghans, some of them had family members in Sweden. This is not surprising considering the large number of Iraqis in Sweden. In this case, there is a previous contact with the country due to a history of chain migration to Sweden

*I remember my cousins were visiting us in Sulaymaniyah [and they] were explaining to us how safe Sweden is and how families and people in general are protected and respected, we saw a picture of the life in Sweden and since then I always wanted to see Sweden.*

Female, 23 years, KRI IRQ#56



## A traumatic journey

*There were a lot of troubles along the way. When we left Kabul to go to Iran, first we went to Nimroz and from there to Pakistan and then to Iran. We were checked in the Pakistan border and the Taliban would take people with them, so we travelled at night. They would shoot at us with any type of weapons they had at night, but it never hit our car. We were six people when we left for Iran... I was 15. They would make over 10 people get in one Sedan when we left Iran to go to Turkey. They would have people sit on the seats, in the aisle in the front and also in the trunk. It took us six days to get from Tehran to Istanbul... We could not go out in Turkey. The smuggler would tell us to stay indoors because he did not want our efforts to be wasted for coming all the way there from Afghanistan. We had one person with us who had Turkish citizenship and he would bring us food and other items. From Turkey, we went to Greece on a boat. The boat was very crowded with people with no space to stretch your legs or anything. It was very difficult, and the smugglers did not care about the crowding. They just wanted their money.*

Male, 20 years, AFG#105

For the respondents in the study, the whole migration period took from a couple of weeks to two years. In some cases, respondents had to work in either Iran or Turkey in order to fund the rest of their journey. Smugglers were used for the whole or parts of the route. A majority decided to go to Sweden while en route after having learned more about the conditions in different European countries from other asylum seekers. Most Afghans travelled via Iran, or departed from there, to Turkey. They then crossed the Mediterranean Sea in small boats for Greece. The time spent in Iran and Turkey was described as particularly difficult, especially due to fear of the local authorities and other armed groups along the way. Crossing the Mediterranean Sea was traumatic for several. Once in Europe most respondents travelled by train, rented cars or even by foot. Many had to call home, to family and friends, in order to get more money to finance the last part of the route. Others managed to get help from people along the way, who assisted them with food, water, and clothing, or with information. Some reported to have gotten help from NGO's or even State institutions to get train tickets to Sweden. A couple of respondents described having taken a different route, crossing from Turkey to Russia and Bulgaria.

*I met the smuggler in Turkey, which is very widespread – there is a smuggler for Sweden, one for Germany, etc. I was ready to go anywhere, because I was dead no matter what, so if I died in the sea, nothing would have changed, at least I would have tried... From Iraq to Turkey, I took a flight, legally, using my Iraqi passport. From Turkey to Greece, I crossed the sea, and once we reached Greece, they took us to the capital, Athens. After that, with the big boat, we went to Serbia [then to] Macedonia, and after that, I think Slovenia, and after that, Austria. The big boat was only from Athens to Serbia; afterwards it was by car or walking... In Austria, by a train ride, I went to Germany, and afterwards I took a big boat to Malmo.*

Male, 29 years, IRQ#26

Iraqi respondents followed a similar route to Sweden. A large majority had already decided to go to Sweden prior to leaving Iraq. Iraqis generally paid more than the Afghan respondents to go to Sweden – smugglers seem to adapt to the financial capacities of those who flee – and often travelled in a safer fashion to Turkey, with some even taking a flight to Istanbul. Iraqi mobility seems to be greater than Afghan mobility and individuals are able to move through more legal and safer routes. However, there are also testimonies of traumatic journeys, especially after reaching Greek Islands. From Greece to Sweden the Iraqi respondents, in most cases, travel by themselves paying for different types of transportation.

## 6.3 Being an asylum seeker in Sweden

### Arrival

*I had a very strange feeling when I arrived in Sweden. Everything was new to me and it was difficult; the people were kind and that made me feel better... When we arrived in Malmo on the train, the police took us to the refugee accommodation, and we remained there for a few hours and then they took us to a minors' camp. That is when I submitted my application for asylum... It was sort of confusing because I did not know any of it and there was no one to help me.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#81

After a journey full of risks, our interviewees were able to reach the Swedish territory. The description they make about the process of entering the asylum system is more or less similar. After they “surrender” themselves to the police, they were guided to the Migration Agency. Although most expressed having a feeling of relief, few of them fully understood what was going on. The first contact they had with the Migration Agency was confusing although the large majority declared to have been well-treated. Individuals who were minors – a majority among the Afghan respondents – had a very poor understanding about the asylum procedure. The lack of knowledge even led some of the respondents to believe that they had been granted asylum already when they were taken into the country or when they were been interviewed at the Migration Agency.

*[T]hey welcomed us happily and told us that they would evaluate our problems hundred percent, as well as, they would review our asylum application seriously. They treated us well and on the other hand, we perceived their behaviour very well because we had lived in Iran. The people of Iran had treated us in a way that they didn't even regard us as humans. When we arrived in Sweden... we were feeling that they were treating us well and regarding us as humans.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#16

An important finding in the narratives is that a large part of the respondents appreciated and reflected over the fact that they felt that they had been welcomed well after arrival and treated as proper human beings. They described the propriety, seriousness but also kindness showed by the Police and the Migration Agency. Those attitudes could be regarded as contributing positively to individuals' psychological wellbeing and made them reflect about their human value. Many of the Afghan informants made a comparison with the way public authorities treated them in Iran or Afghanistan.

*The migration office and all government authorities were very good to us. To be honest we didn't expect them to be that good with us. Despite all the big numbers of arriving refugees, the government was very good with us.*

Female, 34 years, KRI IRQ#54

Most Iraqi respondents felt that the reception in Sweden was good – some even praised the work of the Migration Agency. However, this feeling changed for some once they came to refugee accommodation centres, especially in the case of families. Iraqi respondents declared in the most part to have encountered many difficulties at accommodation centres. Some of them even returned to Iraq before an asylum decision was made by the authorities because of the perceived bad conditions they were living in.

The group of Iraqis in the study arrived more or less in the same period that the Afghans did. For the most part, they provide a relatively detailed account of an overwhelmed reception system and collapsed accommodation centres in the wake of the 2014–15 refugee influx to Sweden. A large majority described having been housed in the refugee accommodation centre in Orsa and later in Flen.

*The reception and instructions were very clear, we didn't face any problems. They were very kind with me and my children, both the Migration Agency and the police. The difficulties started after staying three months at the camp in Flen.*

Female, 44 years, KRI IRQ#57

## Life in Sweden

Most Afghan respondents thought that Sweden was as they had expected it to be.

*The culture was great, and the people were very nice. The weather was different there so that was a bit challenging (Male, 22 years, AFN#92).*

Again, the respondents highlighted the way they were treated in Sweden. Most of them expected to stay and receive asylum shortly after their arrival.

Respondents who declared being minors after arrival had more contact with Swedish society because they were able to go to school and some of them were placed with foster families, (see box 2). Even an elemental knowledge in the Swedish language resulted in better contacts with Swedes, for some respondents.

*When I was with that host family, I used to go to school together with other migrants and Swedish mates. I used to go to a Swedish language learning course with the migrants, and with Swedish mates to a painting course. After joining the camp, I had learned the language quite well as I was admitted to a class with Swedish people. I had so many friends as I had gotten acquainted with Swedish families.*

Male, 19 years, AFN#36.

For minors, more protection was offered, and they were taken care of. However, a couple of negative experiences where respondents described having been mistreated and in one case even sexually harassed. This was not a prevalent feature among our respondents but in the cases reported these had a direct influence on the psychological well-being of the then-underage asylum seekers.

Several individuals reflected on how much effort they had put in the integration process, regarding that effort as a reason to receive asylum. Therefore, they felt a great injustice for not being allowed to stay. This shows their will to overcome difficulties and trying to adapt, but at the same time a lack of knowledge in the asylum system.

Among those Afghans who were adults during the asylum process, some tried to keep themselves busy by learning the language and some worked legally and, on occasions, illegally. Their possibility to work was linked to having appropriate documentation. Those who didn't have a proper Tazkira – an Afghan national identity document – were unable to look for a provisional permit to work during the asylum process. A few respondents who did have a Tazkira or were able to get one at their embassy were able to work as mechanics, carpet cleaners, or other less qualified occupations.

*One of my friends had introduced me to a school in order to learn the language... I was not allowed to work because they asked me for my passport. When I was referred to the embassy and told them that I want a passport, they told me to provide my Tazkira to them. When I have never been to Afghanistan, how would I provide them with my Tazkira?*

Male, 30 years, AFN#114.

The illegality faced by some in Iran and the lack of contact with Afghanistan had consequences for the asylum period in Sweden, for example due to their lack of documentation.

A majority of the Afghan respondents declared to have come into contact with Swedish society. Certain factors contributed to a better adaptation. Besides the support that the respondents received considering their age, the geographic location of their housing was decisive in terms of access to other services, visits from NGO's and activities with the Swedish local community. Those located in accommodation centres in less populated places felt some isolation.

The fact that some respondents were starting to adapt made it, later on, more difficult to accept a return decision.

***Was reality aligned with your expectations, was Sweden as you had imagined?***

*It was somewhat aligned but not as I had imagined. For instance, the year I finished school in Sweden I could get my mechanic's license and should not have been deported. I had learned all the mechanics skills and the language. I spent five years of my life there only to get deported eventually.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#81

When an asylum seeker who declared being a minor is acknowledged as an adult by the Migration Agency,<sup>35</sup> their conditions change as well as the type of support and, especially, the housing they were provided. In this case social networks were crucial for our respondents. They were able to thrive thanks to the contacts they had been able to establish, and private persons sometimes offered to help them.

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<sup>35</sup> One of the problematic aspects regarding this group was the issue of age-assessment. According to Swedish Law, if the asylum seeker cannot make his/her age probable, and the Swedish Migration Agency have doubts about the applicants' age, and consider the asylum seeker as above the age of eighteen, a medical age-assessment should be offered. The National Board of Forensic Medicine is then in charge of the age assessment which is later communicated to the Migration Agency. The agency makes, however, its decision based on the assessment but also in other evidence presented in the case. they were submitted to an age-assessment by the part of the Forensic Service. For more information see <https://www.rmv.se/medical-age-assessment/>.

In contrast to the reception of Afghan minors, not all asylum seekers from Iraq find their children's needs covered – as we will discuss later in this chapter. Iraqi families seem to have gone through a tougher situation in accommodation centres. At the same time, they did not receive as much attention and encouragement as the Afghan young men did. Their major source of comfort were other families of the same ethnic origin, Iraqis or Kurds. Their extended family and acquaintances in Sweden were of little help during the asylum situation. They found the allowance paid by the Migration Agency insufficient for their daily expenses and a few respondents even received money sent from Iraq to cover their needs.

In certain cases, the local authorities might have been unprepared to cover the needs of young children with specific ethnic backgrounds. Some parents, all from the Kurdish region in Iraq, highlighted the lack of access to education for children and lack of proper healthcare, especially in the accommodation centres.

*Me and my brother wanted to attend a school, but the camp administration was not so helpful. They weren't letting us to go out of the camp and apply for schools or to find a school where there are teachers who can also speak Kurdish. None of the schools had a teacher who can speak Kurdish besides Swedish, for that reason we couldn't go to the school.*

Female, 23 years, KRI IRQ#56

For some families the conditions in the accommodation centres for refugees became one of the reasons behind opting to voluntarily return. Another reason, particular for Kurdish women was a state of poor psychological well-being, some explaining that they suffered from depression during the waiting period. They were unable to work or do other activities to distract themselves while waiting for an asylum decision. Moving to new refugee accommodation centres made them lose their social contacts. Some of them were receiving medication for psychiatric conditions. As the next section shows, their poor psychological well-being, drove them sometimes to make the decision to return before knowing whether or not they would be granted asylum.

## Box 2. Unaccompanied Minors

During the refugee-crisis of 2015, large numbers of refugees enter the Swedish border and requested asylum. 43% were minors, and half of them arrived without a parent or a tutor. The Swedish Migration Agency reports that 23 480 unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan arrived in the country during that year. Unaccompanied minors are entitled to a series of special rights in Sweden, such as being assigned a trustee – a *god man* – have an accommodation suitable for their age, and go to school, etc. The large numbers and need for housing were largely covered by the Swedish news media arousing different reactions.

Among the most discussed issues were the proceedings to determine their age – as the Migration Agency had doubts regarding their real age. These age-assessment tests were not entirely reliable according to the medical community and civil society organisations. Many of our respondents declared to have been through these tests and some stated that they have been arbitrarily assigned an age.

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*I also submitted myself to police. Police submitted me to the immigration authority of Sweden... They took our fingerprints, height and weight, and I told them that I am 15 years old, but they wrote me born in 1997 and wrote my age based on their own wish. Currently, I may be 20 years old, but I am 23 years old according to the age they have selected for me. Male AFG#65*

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The news media also reported about the delay in processing this groups' asylum applications. Many young men from Afghanistan had started to integrate by going to school and becoming part of the local community when they received a rejection. In an effort to give them an opportunity to stay and reward their integration effort, the Swedish Green Party launched an initiative that intended to grant residence permits for studies at upper secondary level. The initiative was passed at the Parliament in 2018 and it is known as the *Gymnasielagen* (Swedish Act on Upper Secondary Education). It meant that young people who had their asylum application rejected and who had turned 18 during the waiting period could apply for a residence permit for the purpose of completing their studies at the upper secondary level. It was regarded by some as an amnesty; the legislation has been criticised due to the heavy burden placed on applicants and some unclear prerequisites. Some of our respondents made attempts to stay by means of this legislation, however their efforts were unfruitful. This later became a source of frustration after return. Still, having been part of the education system in Sweden motivated people to plan to someday return to Sweden and make use of what they learned.



Young people told about the hope that if one works hard, one will get a residence permit. They feel that their efforts were not rewarded.

*I worked very hard to pass with great marks in all subjects so that in case my asylum was rejected I could get accepted through my school. Instead of studying I could have spent my time to apply for a passport and get a job which I did not, and I regret doing that. I was very upset when I got my deportation letter because it hit me unexpectedly. Male AFG#74*

*I was rejected three times; but I heard about my first result soon after my interview. It only took two to three months, which made my case weaker; if it had taken 6 to 7 months then I could utilize the new gymnasium regulation of 2018, through which I would have been accepted.*

***What kind of regulation was this?***

*It was the gymnasium regulation which contained 5 conditions of which I had met 4 conditions. My case was in conformance with 4 of the conditions and only contradicted the 5th one. That condition was that I received my first interview result very soon. I should have received the result after 15 months but unfortunately, I received it after twelve months. This was the only item in the new regulation that my case was not aligned with.*

***Which were those 4 conditions?***

*I do not remember those conditions except the one which states "The migrant should have entered Sweden before November- 2015 and the other condition was that the person should have waited for 15 months inside the camp. Male AFG#101*

## Waiting for an asylum decision: Factors affecting the level of preparedness

In both our groups, the knowledge about the Swedish asylum regulations was very limited. Even after their return, many struggle to understand the grounds to be granted asylum. The lack of knowledge in the asylum process and the early adaptation of some respondents to the Swedish society make it harder to foresee a rejection of their asylum applications. Although most respondents appealed the decision, up to three times, they did not have a full understanding of the decision and its consequences. The reasons given by the Migration Agency were not understandable for most or considered as unjust by others.

When it is time to return, the frustration and feeling of injustice deeply affect the capacity of returnees to accept the decision and plan a future outside Sweden. It was difficult for some returnees to consider starting all over again

in their country of nationality when they cannot understand the reasons why there were rejected. Many issues were mentioned regarding the asylum process that are not yet fully understood by the respondents. Such issues intervene directly in what Cassarino (2018) calls the level of "preparedness" (see Chapter 2). This preparedness refers to the individual process in an individual's life, which is shaped by changing circumstances such as personal experiences and country specific factors in the place of departure as well as in the country of origin (Cassarino, 2008). Two of the fundamental elements of preparedness are readiness and free will. Among the narratives of our respondents, there are certain factors affecting this readiness and, especially, free will. Such factors are deeply entangled with the psychological dimension mentioned by DeBono et al. (2015) in the sense that they obstruct agency, control over one's destiny and moreover, understanding of the situation. These factors could explain the reaction after a rejection and unwillingness to return. Why is a decision of return taken by the Migration Agency not fully grasped by those who suffer their consequences? The most obvious answer could be a disliking of a rejection and feelings of panic considering a return. However, the factors mentioned by the respondents are related mostly to the asylum process than to the individual reactions to a return. The three main factors identified in the material that negatively affect free will and later impede a better preparedness are: the length of the process, the deficient service provided by the Migration Agency by means of lawyers and translators, and a difficulty in understanding asylum regulations.

## The length of the process

*They treated us well, but I don't know how this Migration Agency decided about me. If they didn't want to accept us, then why would they have teased and bothered me for five years. We lived there for five years. They should have cleared our case within one year, not five, because it really hurt us.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#80

The length of the asylum process affected significantly the psychological well-being of respondents in both groups. Earlier studies have come to similar conclusions (see e.g. Esaiasson & Sohlberg, 2018). The long period gave them high hopes, especially the young Afghans, and it contributed to an integration into the Swedish context. After such a long waiting period, the rejection

arrives as the most unwelcome outcome. Most respondents hold the hope, until the last day, to stay in Sweden.

A few of the respondents from Iraq (five in total) decided to voluntarily interrupt the asylum process and go back before receiving a decision on their cases. These respondents noted the long waiting period and the strain it put on their psychological wellbeing, together with certain personal and family circumstances, as reasons to leave before receiving a decision on the asylum application.

*They let you be a candle, burning yourself during the wait, until you lose hope and decide to return.*

Male, 31 years, KRI IRQ#21

Uncertainty have a detrimental effect on asylum seekers in general, and it affects the few resources they have at hand to control their destiny. In the case of those who decided to abort their asylum process before getting a decision, for some, their psychological well-being seemed to have weighed more than the threat in the country of origin and the efforts made to reach Swedish soil and request asylum.

## Service providers at the Migration Agency: Lost in translation

Many of the complaints expressed by the respondents are directed not against the Migration Agency itself but specifically against the lawyer appointed by the agency and, on certain cases, the interpreter. Following what many described as a good reception after arrival, the communication with the Migration Agency made many respondents feel "lost in translation". The large majority of Afghan respondents reported difficulties communicating with the interpreters, and also a lack of trust in them. According to the narratives, they were presented with Farsi speaking interpreters while most of them speak Dari. Some Iraqis, of both Arab and Kurdish origin, also complained about the quality of the interpreters, being frequent to encounter an interpreter speaking a different dialect or sometimes delivering what they understood to be deviating interpretations of what they had intended to say.

*The police and the migration office were very good, but we had a problem with the translator. We couldn't understand his translation very well. The translators were speaking Kurmanji accent of Kurdish language and we couldn't understand most of the explanations. This was always causing confusions... The person who was interviewing me was not speaking a very fluent Kurdish, I couldn't understand him clearly, besides his behaviour inside the interview room was very tough and angry, I never felt comfortable to talk to him. He once said don't say hi to me because I am Swedish, and you are Iraqi.*

Male, 53 years, KRI IRQ#56

The narratives point not only to the quality of the translation. The attitude of the interpreters was also something that a few respondents highlighted in the interviews. Some argued that they were not properly heard by interpreters or that they were not allowed to say everything they needed to. An inaccurate translation of their experiences could affect the consistency of their stories in the eyes of the Migration Agency. This is something that has been noted in a previous Delmi Report on which questions the professionalism of interpreters offering services for the Swedish Migration Agency (Wadensjö et al. 2021) and sheds light over a serious consequence for the asylum process: the lack of legal certainty for individuals. This lack of functioning communication many times left the asylum seekers with a feeling of not being heard, of being disrespected and sometimes a lack of trust in the decision for or against asylum, which in their eyes could be based on an incorrect translation of their situation. The discomfort and frustration this created among the asylum seekers often stayed with them for a long time turning into anger and frustration.

Another actor associated to the asylum process who also received poor marks among the respondents, especially among young people from Afghanistan, is the assigned legal advisor. In general, respondents expected to have more contact with the legal advisor as they were of the perception that this person would be decisive for their chances to stay in Sweden. Indeed, the legal advisor was often described as absent, difficult to get hold of and not particularly receptive of the asylum seekers' questions or need for clarifications. Sometimes the result was that the asylum-seeker missed important deadlines for sending appeal documents. Many respondents seem to have felt neglected, with a desire for better communication and further

explanations regarding the rejection of their cases. This situation led some to feel that the rejection of the asylum application was illegitimate.

*The complaint paper I had signed needed to be delivered to the Migration Agency within eight days. It should have been submitted on the 11th, but my lawyer had submitted that on the 15th or 17th, which means it had already expired. The Migration Agency called me to the Agency and told me that you didn't file any complaint [appeal] against our decision, now your time is up, and you must return to Afghanistan. I told them that I had a meeting with my lawyer on "x" [date and time], and I had signed the complaint paper as well. So, as a result, my lawyer is to be blamed, as he didn't submit it on time. My lawyer cheated me.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#1

Respondents, in general, expected to have more contact with this person that seems decisive for their chances to stay in Sweden. The large majority desired to have had a better communication with the lawyer, not being dismissed by him/her, and to have received further explanations regarding the rejection of their case.

### Lack of knowledge about the asylum system

The limited knowledge of the European Asylum system in general, and the Swedish procedures in particular, also contributed to a bad reception of the decision. Moreover, this affects preparedness for return. Some respondents were convinced that because they had proven to be good immigrants they should have been allowed to stay, seemingly regardless of their asylum grounds.

*I told the immigration office staff that I'd been living in Sweden for more than four years: I started speaking the [Swedish] language, found a job, could earn money, and could make friends and socialise, "isn't this all sufficient for me to get your approval for refugee status?" I told them, "if you'd grant me refugee status today, I'd start working as of tomorrow."*

Male, 37 years, IRQ#40

Van Houte et al. (2021) finds similar beliefs among individuals who are subject to return from the Netherlands. In our study some respondents do not understand that an individual receiving a rejection is neither a criminal nor a bad

immigrant. This lack of knowledge of the asylum system was repeated in many interviews, which led us to believe that the information is not delivered in a way that can be grasped and perhaps on occasions, not all the necessary information was delivered to the applicants. The respondents, often, describe that the motives for rejection were not expressed so they could fully understand the grounds for expulsions, or be able to make sense about it and ask the proper questions.

After reading the experiences of the respondents it is possible to conclude that few of them knew the implications of requesting asylum in Sweden. Although some respondents from Iraq seemed to be more informed, they were unaware of the implications of not having asylum grounds. After the return, there is still a significant part of the interviewees who does not seem to understand the European migration system, and why they were not granted asylum in Sweden. Many mentioned that they should have gone to another European country after they were rejected in Sweden and even asked the Migration Agency to allow them to do so. There was almost no knowledge of the fact that, according to the Dublin system, it is not allowed to request asylum in more than one EU country. Even though the interviewees had contact with Swedish authorities, the lack of knowledge of the system seems to be widespread among the respondents. This affects not only the effectiveness but also the humanity of the process.

### Being notified of a rejection

*No, the migration office didn't explain anything, they just told me to return to Iraq, that's all.*

Male, 33 years, IRQ#33

The moment they found out about a rejection was experienced differently by the respondents. Most Afghans declared to have received a letter which they couldn't read because it was in Swedish. Others mention to have been informed at the Migration Agency. A few of them received a call from their

“gode man” (trustee<sup>36</sup>) or their lawyer. In all cases there was, unsurprisingly, a feeling of disappointment and discomfort, and often also desperation.

As it was discussed in the previous section, the causes leading to a rejection decision were not always directly received by the respondents but by third parties. It is difficult to know whether the reasons behind a rejection, if these were concrete enough or if these were explained to them. In fact, very few respondents were able to identify the reasons due to which they received a rejection. Due to all the difficulties with the translators, and the difficulties for some to reach their lawyers, some respondents might have never received the original information that the Migration Agency intended to deliver to them.

*I received a letter and since I could not read it, I took it to my friend to read it for me. He read it and said that it made him sad and he did not know how to inform me; he eventually told me that I had received a rejection from the Migration Agency. When I asked about the reason, he said that they have written that you should provide evidence. Then I got in touch with my lawyer, but he would not meet me or answer my calls. I had to tell the Migration Agency about this on multiple times before my lawyer would meet me... The letter mentioned when I should return to the Migration Agency and I waited until then and then I went to the Migration Agency with my host. They asked me if I knew what they wanted from me. I told them that I did not know. They said that I had received a rejection and should return to Afghanistan. They said that they would pay me 20,000 Swedish Krona if I returned to Afghanistan. I told them that I was not there for the money but rather that I was there because I had a problem and my life was at risk in Afghanistan.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#4

Some respondents (twenty in Afghanistan and one in Iraq) did not want to comply and either stayed illegally in Sweden or went to another European country (France was the most named by the respondents). This points to the fact that a substantial number deemed it as preferable to stay without permit in Sweden, rather than living legally in the country where they were citizens. This has been previously mentioned by research (Khosravi 2016), voiced out by

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<sup>36</sup> A minor, under 18 years, who comes to Sweden without a residence permit and without parents or other accompanying adult is assigned a trustee that speaks on behalf of the minor to the authorities, for example when applying for a residence permit.

civil society organisations (see Malm-Lindberg, 2020) and now corroborated by our respondents.

*Yes, I wanted to delete my fingerprints and start living illegally. I lived for months illegally after I received my third rejection, but I was arrested by police. My guardian told me that someone had informed the police about me. If I wouldn't have gotten arrested by Swedish police, I would have lived illegally. It was better to live illegally in Sweden than returning to Afghanistan.*

Male, 22 years, AFN#59

## 6.4 The return process

### Voluntary or forced return: A “choice” to be made

What happens after a return decision? As previously specified in Chapter 4, after subsequent rejections and no more possibilities to appeal a return case is opened, which includes an investigation into the applicant's own position regarding return (SOU 2009:60, p. 137). The normal procedure previously included three types of discussions: notification, follow-up and return dialogues. When the returnee does not agree to voluntarily return or when the individual in question absconds and is later found by the Police, it is the Police who implements a return. If there is reason to suspect that an individual will abscond, he or she may be placed under supervision or even detention.

*I went to school two days a week and to the workshop three days a week until the day I was arrested. When the police sent me the letter to go to their address, I went there. They asked me if I wanted to return voluntarily and I said no. They said they would have to force me to return and they did not let me leave the police station... I had received a letter to go to the police station because my case file had been referred to them. I could not live in a limbo forever. I went to the police station with a Swedish man who repaired bikes. The police did not even let me leave and see that person once I went inside. They sent me to a closed camp where I stayed for around eight months. It was like a prison.*

Male, 23 years, AFN#31



Most Afghans resisted the return decision. Among the respondents, only 15 out of 60 returned voluntarily. Some, who were later apprehended by the police were sent to detention centres. However, a few Afghans returned voluntarily after seeing no other choice or because they were considering re-migration to Sweden through legal paths with another type of visa. In contrast, the Iraqi respondents returned voluntarily to a larger extent. Out of 40, 26 returned voluntarily

*I had received a definite response that I must leave Sweden and I worked the last year of my stay because I had received a work permit. The family I was living with told me to return to Afghanistan and apply for work here from Afghanistan and migrate again to Sweden via a work permit. Therefore, I returned voluntarily.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#16

The return procedure requires that the applicants sign a declaration of acceptance (*Nöjdhetsförklaring*). It is, however, not within our knowledge how the Migration Agency proceeds when the applicant feels unwell, or whether there is a protocol to ensure that his/her decisions are well-founded. A number of the respondents reported dealing with psychological problems such as anxiety and depression. Personnel at the Afghanistan Embassy confirms that the psychological wellbeing of young men of Hazara origin was weak when they sought consular services.<sup>37</sup> Some women of Kurdish origin mentioned that depression led them to believe that going back to the Kurdish region in Iraq was better than the uncertainty and loneliness while waiting for an asylum decision.

*My psychological situation was very unstable, when my husband wanted to resist my decision to return, I once threatened to stab myself. So, initially, the decision to go back was not imposed and my husband agreed to come with me to apply for our return. After applying to return, I met a Kurdish friend and she advised me to visit a doctor to receive some treatment outside the camp. My husband received some money from Iraq, and we visited a doctor. After taking the medicines recommended by the doctor my situation improved and I no longer wanted to return to Iraq. But soon after the police and migration office*

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Informant B, Afghanistan Embassy First Secretary; via Skype, 25 March 2021.

*came and informed us that our return procedure and tickets are ready. We told them that we have changed our mind, but they insisted that the decision is irreversible, and we need to return to Iraq the next day... At the migration office I explained to the staff that I was going through a very tough situation when I made this decision and I no longer want to go back. But the migration office said the tickets are booked. we don't care that you changed your plans, if you refuse to return the police will take you and you will be imprisoned in Stockholm.*

Female, 44 years, KRI IRQ#57

A voluntary return that is not well reflected or influenced by other circumstances than the free will to return, could have repercussions for the life after the return when returnees regret their decision which might affect their embeddedness process.

*We keep dreaming of the day we were in Sweden and this is the main source of our problems, my wife tells me that we should have stayed in Sweden at all costs in order to have protected and guaranteed the future of our kids.*

Male, 26 years, KRI IRQ#48

## Help and support

When the final rejection arrives, and an order of expulsion is produced, individuals lose most or all of the previous support received from the Migration Agency or the local authorities. This is when other forms of support become important for the migrant to prepare for return. A proper counselling, and guides regarding the process, the alternatives for the future, psychological help and social support are crucial when facing an imminent return. Besides the preparation support offered by the Migration Agency in the form of guidance and preparatory talks for the voluntary returnees, the Police and the Prison and Probation Service does the same for those not returning voluntarily. There are also some kinds of informal support offered by civil society organisations like the Swedish Church, Stockholms Stadsmission, the Red Cross and Save the Children (Malm Lindberg 2020). Despite the existence of this support, few of our informants mentioned to have had contact with any of these.

Among those that did mention getting support from civil society organisations, Afghans stood out, and the support they received was from the Red Cross, and sometimes the “church”. On repeated occasions the respondents named individual persons who came to help them when they were living in illegality but, especially, when they find themselves at the detention centre.

*I had no interactions with any other institution except the Migration Agency. I received much support on a personal level from that woman, named Anna,<sup>38</sup> who was supporting about 50 – 60 people in Sweden. Ylva as well as an Afghan guy, named Hassan<sup>39</sup> were providing humanitarian support for the migrants. They were helping the migrants in terms of paying their room rent, utility bills, etc. The water was free in Sweden, but the cost of electricity was high. They paid most of those supports from their pockets.*

Male, 19 years, AFN#113

Some respondents received help from private individuals in order to fulfil their needs after the support from the Migration Agency and local authorities ceased. These private individuals would sometimes visit the detention centres, and some would also help respondents who lived illegally in Sweden. It is possible that these individuals belonged to civil society organizations, but our respondents didn't recall it. This help was in most cases to alleviate the day to day life, rather than helping with preparations for return.

Although most Iraqis found out about the return support through the Migration Agency, some had other sources of information. Social networks through co-ethnics seemed to work better for them. This is not surprising. Contrary to Afghan migration, Iraqis had been arriving to Sweden for decades. Nevertheless, the Iraqi diaspora – which could entail an important support – was rarely mentioned as a source of support during the asylum period. It was the family contacts that seemed more relevant.

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<sup>38</sup> The original name has been changed for anonymity reasons.

<sup>39</sup> The original names have been changed for anonymity reasons.

## Actors involved in the return process

During the return process, respondents mentioned having been in contact with the Migration Agency, the Police, personnel at the detention centre and the Afghan Embassy. Although the last part of the return process i.e. the transportation to Afghanistan is performed by the Prison and Probation Service, no respondent was able to identify this as separate from the Police.

*We mostly interacted with the police. They would tell us that we have been rejected by the Migration Agency and we should return. They told me about ERRIN's conditions too. They also said they would send two police with us that would accompany us all the way to Afghanistan.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#116

The Police was also a key actor in disseminating information regarding an entitlement to return support. But according to the respondents, the information received was mostly about ERRIN, i.e. the in-kind support. No respondent tells of any psychological help offered by public authorities or other organisation. Almost no one mentioned an effort by the part of the authorities to seek for a family, friends or established support network in Afghanistan.

Returning after being in a detention centre was especially difficult. A handful of respondents from Afghanistan mention that they were rushed into deportation without having been noticed about it. Besides, some respondents experienced this as being held in prison, which made them feel like they lost any remaining control they might have had over their personal situation. In a couple of cases, detainees were in fact put in a jail.

*In Sweden, the police told me that they did not have enough space at the closed camp so they would have to take me to a prison. I was there for three days. I was entirely fed up with life there. The room was very small and had nothing in it. I was like a crazy person. They take people there to mentally pressure them into deportation.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#86

The Migration Agency considers detention centres as a tool in order to make rejected asylum seekers who do not comply with removal to be "available for deportation" (Malm Lindberg 2020:42). But for our respondents, it is a hinder to

their freedom. as they are taken directly from there to the airport at its lowest. Free will is absent as there is no possibility for free movement that could lead the individual to change its situation, and no readiness is possible as from a detention centre there are few to no possibilities to mobilise resources to improve one's situation after the return. One of the primary difficulties encountered by Swedish public authorities when implementing return decisions, especially to Afghanistan, is the access to travel documents. In many cases the Migration Agency or the Swedish Police must contact the embassy of the country of origin in order to get the necessary identification documents. In some cases, it is difficult to assess the identity of the individual in question. The lack of a Tazkira becomes a problem already during the asylum process. The impossibility to confirm the asylum seeker's identity weakened his/her alleged asylum reasons. Some of the respondents claimed having been denied asylum due to not being able to corroborate their identity.

While Swedish authorities contact the embassies to get help with necessary travel documentation, the returnees also have to go there in person to acquire these. Experiences from the embassies, only mentioned by respondents from Afghanistan can be described as discouraging for the returnees. Sometimes a number of respondents thought that their last chance to receive asylum was linked to getting the proper paperwork from the embassy.

*I went to the [Afghan] embassy [in Sweden] twice and begged them not to mess with my future, but they did not help me and disregarded my documents. When I went there with the Swedish police, they issued my paperwork within minutes. The embassy did not help me at all.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#86.

Most of the interviewees reported a negative experience from the Afghan Embassy. They perceived to have been completely ignored when they went there on their own. Some even described to have been insulted and humiliated.

*I went to the Afghan embassy once to get my passport and attest my Tazkira... Those who are in the Afghan embassy were discriminating and illiterate. They hated Hazaras. When I went there and told them I was from Ghazni province, they ridiculed me.*

Male, 23 years, AFN#11

The perceived reluctance on the part of the embassy to help this group does not contribute to the will and desire to return. On the contrary, the attitude from the Afghan authorities, which was perceived as hostile by the respondents, likely contributes to an unwillingness to return. At the same time, it represents a poor point of departure for reintegration if the only contact they have with the Afghan public authorities before return is a negative one.

A theme that is frequently reported in previous research about Afghani asylum seekers is the lack of understanding of, and the related mistrust towards, asylum and return institutions as well as their representatives. It leaves Afghans to primarily rely on their own support networks, relatives and diaspora organisations for access to information on asylum and later, return (Donini et al. 2016), which is also illustrated by the experience of the respondents in this study.

According to the Embassy of Afghanistan in Sweden, this perception of hostility and discrimination does not reflect their internal protocols.<sup>40</sup> The embassy stresses that they take a special approach towards individuals considered vulnerable and intercedes for them vis-à-vis the Police and the Migration Agency. The embassy also employs personnel speaking Dari and of Hazara ethnicity to counteract a feeling of being discriminated.

The dissonance between the voices of the returnees and the embassy could be partly explained by the understaffing of the consular section. After the arrival of large numbers of Afghan citizens during 2015–2016, the embassy was under heavy pressure to provide consular services. However, the embassy only has two officers providing consular services. Even today, the embassy receives between 150–200 visits every week. The stressful situation could have led to what was perceived as an unwelcoming attitude. But the fact that several respondents who returned at different times and sought asylum in different places in Sweden, describe the same experiences, gives credibility to our respondents.

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with the Afghanistan Embassy First Secretary. Via Skype, 25 March 2021.

Iraqi respondents had, in contrast, almost no complaints against their embassy. However, there were some problems with the local authorities associated to travel arrangements, especially when Kurdish families travelled via Baghdad.<sup>41</sup>

## Preparations for return

Different challenges arise upon return. The preparations involve logistics, and life planning. But one must also mentally prepare for the return – what Cassarino refers to as “readiness” – which is not always easy when one has difficulties in understanding and accepting a rejection decision and an expulsion order.

Another type of preparation is associated to the logistic implications of a return trip. These logistic are usually solved by the Swedish institutions in charge i.e. the Migration Agency or the Police and the Transport Unit in the Prison and Probation Service, in cases of a forced return.

The third type of preparation discussed by this study has to do with the planning of a life after the return i.e. reintegration. This involves a mix of individuals’ own personal resources and plans of life and external support. Considering the difficult situation that our respondents return to, in countries with ongoing conflicts and political as well as economic instability, the prospects for reintegration are few. But what sort of information do they receive before return? As previously mentioned, the existent structures of support in the departing country, in this case Sweden, are the dialogues that the Migration Agency provides information about access to financial support. In some cases guidance and psychological support are offered by civil society organizations. Afghan and Iraqi returnees are entitled to apply for a reestablishment support (in-cash), but also a re-integration support or assistance (more in-kind). The re-integration support through ERRIN can be applied for in Sweden by all returnees whereas the reestablishment support only is given to voluntary returnees. However, few Afghans mentioned this possibility in the interviews. Especially worrisome is the fact that the access to the ERRIN support was unclear for some. For others the information they

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<sup>41</sup> We also reached out to the Iraqi Embassy to receive their reactions on a couple of issues. The Embassy responded in an e-mail, briefly and in broad terms.

perceived turned not to be what they encountered when trying to contact the organisations once in Afghanistan. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

*They gave us information there about the IOM and ERRIN projects. They told us that the assistance was for those who returned voluntarily and that we were not included in it. If the assistance was for all deportees, why was I not included in it?*

Male, 22 years, AFN#18

The timing of the information may be of relevance, especially for those who are returned by force directly from the detention centres. One can assume that delivering information about support structures in haste just prior to departure - which a few of the respondents reported had happened to them - would affect the ability to understand the scope and requirement of the support.

*The night they took me from Stockholm was a very bad night and I will never forget it. I could not even get some of my clothes from the detention centre. I even forgot the papers that said I would get assistance in Afghanistan. I did not receive assistance because I did not have that paperwork with me, and I only received assistance from the IOM.*

Male, 22 years, AFN#17

The return process for Iraqi respondents seems to have been easier than for Afghani respondents. Likely, this is a result of them returning voluntarily to a higher extent. None of them had been in a detention centre and that in many cases they returned together with their families. For most of them, the return trip was speedily organised by the Migration Agency. They also had clearer information about reintegration grants but not all of them knew how to approach the service providers after arriving in Iraq. However, some respondents claimed to not have received this information. Others argued that the information received was incorrect or did not correspond with the information provided by the local IOM-office or the service providers to the ERRIN-support.

*When I went to the deportation camp, I met by chance an Iraqi individual there. He asked me if I received got any assistance or allocation. I told him 'no,' and that no one had told me anything about that. He told me that there was an*



*allocation, of 35,000 kronor, which I could receive in Iraq. He took me to the camp reception and told them that I wanted to register to receive the allocation. They gave me an official letter, which contains all the details and telephone numbers, and the organisation I should call to receive the money.*

Male, 31 years, IRQ#27

## 6.5 The return experience

A deportation is considered as a removal for the governmental authorities, but it can be regarded as a big failure in a person's life plan. The respondents' experiences of the return trip differ to a certain extent. The experience and treatment when force is involved differ from returns where no force is included. Returning together with one's family, as many from Iraq did, is also experienced differently as when returning alone. The collective experience is depicted as less tough than when this is experienced on one's own. In general, the respondents express the frustration and sadness of having been sent back to Afghanistan, but some experiences were more traumatic than others.

While most Afghans did not return voluntary (43 out of 59 returned involuntary), few described having been returned by use of *physical* force.

*The Swedish police gave me 100 dollars and a power-bank before my return, and it was somewhat good. I could eat and get a taxi using that money when I was in Afghanistan.*

### ***What were the challenges you faced in preparing/planning your return?***

*The challenge was that they had handcuffed me. I had even held the door shut the night they were deporting me because I did not want to return. I wanted them to send me to a different country like Pakistan, but not Afghanistan; I told them I would be killed in Afghanistan. I even held on to the plane door and 5 cops had to hold me and put me on the plane seat. My hands were handcuffed.*

### ***What do you wish you had known then to better prepare you for your return?***

*Nothing. I did not want to return to Afghanistan, but I was forced to... I felt very bad. I cannot explain it. My hands were tied on the plane, but I would still push the police and held on the plane and avoid sitting; even the pilot felt bad as to why they were deporting us like that.*

Male, 22 years, AFN#17

According to the Transport Unit of the Prison and Probation Service, coercive measures are uncommon and the use of handcuffs is used in no more than ten percent of their cases.<sup>42</sup> The use of force on an escorted trip is not only costly for the state; it can also have negative effects on the well-being of the individual who returns. Among our respondents, a few were later able to recall it in detailed account, which affected their psychological well-being and, sense of agency.

After being in the Swedish asylum system for years, some had a difficulty to take in what happened in a matter of a day. The reality of a failed migration project seems to appear suddenly for some, and many respondents struggled with switching from asylum seeker-mode in Sweden to returnee-mode in Afghanistan.

*I did not know when I was going to be deported. They arrested me and then deported me; I was in my pyjamas when I arrived in Afghanistan. Everything I had was left in Sweden... When I arrived in Kabul, I was scared and stressed. The Afghan police at the airport had fought with each other on that day and they were beating each other up. I was very stressed when I saw that. I was thinking about how I could return to Iran when I arrived at the airport. I started searching for a room and a person who had been deported with me was guiding me. I did not have anyone in Afghanistan to welcome me. My family were upset and did not want me to remain in Afghanistan because it is not a good place.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#81

Even though Iraqi respondents seem to have experienced the return trip better than the Afghans, it was not always problem-free. Respondents of Kurdish origin were in certain cases left in the KRI which caused a feeling of insecurity and unsafety. The logistic in this case was not favourable to the returnees. However, one must consider that they were returning to a turbulent region where security changes rapidly in certain regions.

*The Migration Office booked tickets to Baghdad not [to the] Kurdistan Region, I told them the road from Baghdad to where I have to live is dangerous, please book us tickets to Erbil or Suleymaniya. but they refused. At the Baghdad*

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<sup>42</sup> Telephone interview with Eva Qvarnström, 19 January 2021.

*airport, the airport staff and security humiliated me and were asking all types of questions, I think it was because I was Kurdish. And they were about to put me in prison because of the passport issued by Iraqi Embassy in Sweden. In Sweden, Iraqi Embassy issued one temporary passport for both of my kids, and at the airport they were not accepting this passport. I managed to book another ticket from Baghdad to Sulaymaniyah Airport, after going through much quarrel and arguing with airport officers in Baghdad.*

Male, 26 years, AFN#48

Some of the Afghan respondents were sometimes “sent back” to a place where they have no connections and where they feel that the context is generally hostile towards them. Iraqi respondents, however, were able to fix their own trip to their region of origin, Afghans were rarely able to do so. The reasons varied, they didn't have the resources, the security situation of the region, no contact with family and friends, etc. According to Cassarino's level of preparedness rejected asylum seekers are the least prepared ones for reintegration. If we consider that they tried to undertake an integration process in the Swedish society, disregarding the low chances of staying, we have a group that is unprepared for life after the return. If we also consider that some of our respondents do not return to the region, or sometimes even to the country where they come from, the readiness is absent. Individuals cannot mobilise any of their few resources in a territory that they are not familiar with, and where they have never been embedded.

## 6.6 Discussion

### Before return: lack of preparedness and an unwilling voluntary return

We have chosen the term preparedness in order to disentangle the problems in phases prior to return which have an incidence in reintegration. The interviews that make up the primary data for this study tell a story of migrants that for the most part have been living in vulnerability (although at varying degrees) before embarking on a difficult and often hazardous journey towards Sweden. They all have in common that their asylum application in Sweden were unsuccessful, and that there are factors before migration and during the time as an asylum seeker that affect their preparedness to return.

An important result is the existence of varying motives behind a voluntary return. Although desirable, the voluntariness is not always lead by the will to return. *A will to return* is rarely the primary reason for voluntariness. We can identify several other reasons such as: avoiding the travel ban in order to be able to re-migrate or help someone in need (a family member in Iraq or Afghanistan).

Another factor was that some returnees were in an unstable psychological condition (often as a result of the circumstances during the time as an asylum seeker) which is described as a reason behind a decision to return. A problem that arises is whether a decision taken under such circumstances can be considered complying with the migration policy goal of legal certainty. Some respondents agreed to voluntarily return out of desperation, or as a consequence of a deteriorating mental condition brought on by loneliness, depression or the conditions at the accommodation centres and, of course, in order to avoid a forced return. The free will behind voluntariness is hindered by conditions that the returnee cannot escape. When it comes to fear to be put into a detention centre and forced return, the conditions are part of the punishment that the state can apply/threaten to push for compliance. Previous research has called this “soft deportation” where although there is a nominally voluntary return, this is partly the result of soft forms of power where the choice besides compliance is reduced (Leerkes et al. 2017).

Voluntariness has been contested as a concept to depict the acceptance of a return decision. As shown in chapter 2, the discussion is mainly centred around the few options the returnee has, and as certain coercive measures are employed, and punishments levied at the asylum seeker if the return is not undertaken voluntarily. The literature indicates that the alternatives are few to none. In this case, the decision doesn't take into account the necessary level of willingness to label the return as voluntary. In addition, the data in this study show multiple motives to return that do not reflect a large degree of free will, or willingness to return. While many returns are classified as “voluntary” they are sometimes perceived as “forced” by the respondents. The decisions may be driven by circumstances in the country of origin, fuelled by a deteriorating mental condition, as a way to enable what is considered a necessary future re-migration, obeying to exhaustion of the asylum system, or the more simple return when an individual accepts that there are no chances to obtain asylum in the host country. All these cases are classified as voluntary although some

were more willing than others to return. Our data shows the need to problematize voluntariness as a heterogeneous and complex category.

In the data, a series of factors emerge affecting the preparedness of returnees that is directly related to the asylum process. The length of the process, poor access to – and communication with – service providers linked to the Migration Agency, and the lack of knowledge about the asylum system, appear to obstruct asylum seeker's abilities to prepare for return. The perception of an unfair situation, often brought on by a lack of understanding of the language and its juridical terms, does not contribute to a feeling of agency or having control over one's destiny. Previous research regarding requirements for psychological well-being within the context of migration mention agency, autonomy and control; participation and involvement; social relationships and networks; and safety (DeBono et al. 2015). We can observe among the narratives of our respondents that many of these requirements were absent already during the asylum process.

When it comes to the acceptance of the return, the chapter has an emphasis on the lack of knowledge about the asylum process. In a way, it could be understood as individuals lacking not only the capacity to grasp the asylum regulations, but also lacking the capacity to plan their future. It is, still, important not to assume away the agency of migrants for not accepting the decision to return. Many respondents were not only ill-prepared to return, they also lacked a plan B, and even though many returned voluntarily very few seem to have wanted to do so: many felt forced to return



## 7. After the Return

Returning to the country of origin after a failed migration project is often difficult. The previous chapter showed that the period before return from Sweden was not exempt from difficulties. Arrival in Iraq or Afghanistan included for the respondents a series of challenges that this chapter takes upon. We analyse different factors associated to the concept mixed embeddedness coined by Ruben et al. (2009) which in the approach used by this study better depicts the complexities of reintegration. Finally, we discuss to what extent returnees can find and define their position in society, so that one day their return could become socially, psychosocially and economically sustainable.

Their experiences from the time of arrival and forward is presented separately for Afghanistan (7.1) and Iraq (7.2), and then analysed together as degrees of re-embeddedness (7.3).

### 7.1 (Re)integrating into Afghan society

Previous studies have shown that post-return conditions in Afghanistan are harsh, characterised by physical insecurity, high unemployment rates and unstable income, with returnees mostly relying on their relatives for basic needs such as food and housing, or received remittances from relatives living abroad (van Houte & Davids 2008; Ruben et al. 2009). Returning empty-handed often means that returnees feel like failures in their communities. Many feel that others harbour distrust and negative attitudes towards them. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who have access to strong networks, capital and are better educated manage the economic situation comparatively better (De Bree 2008; van Houte & Davids 2008; Ruben et al. 2009).

#### A social dimension

Returning home, or arriving some place far away

*It was really hard for me when I arrived in the airport because I was returned to Afghanistan after a long time [in Sweden] in a situation which was really bad. They had provided me with a number in Sweden to a person that would*

*come to the airport to pick me up. I called them but nobody came. Finally, I took a taxi and checked into a hotel. Again, I called that number and this time they [answered and] told me that they would provide me with a place for living. They told me that their person had come to the airport, but I was not there. I told them that I had called [their] number many times, but no one answered.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#102

It is often an underlying assumption that return policies aim to return migrants to their country of origin, and that origin and nationality are the same. But as research has indicated decades of migration, return migration and displacement have complicated and even eroded these ties and blurred the notion of a home country. We know from earlier reports and studies that return does not always mean an end to displacement (IDMC 2018). Many returning refugees have been unable to go back to their areas of origin for several reasons including lack of documentation, cost of travel or lack of housing. In the case of the returning Afghans the picture is very complex.

Nearly half of the Afghan respondents claim to have been living in Iran before their departure towards Sweden. Meanwhile others had Iran or some other country in the region as their transit place. Some may have had stronger ties to Iran, but at the same time only a few ties and family members in Afghanistan. Returnees' survival depends on social networks of family and friends in many ways, a network that was more or less missing for this subcategory of Afghan returnees. Schuster & Majidi (2013) point out that for many Afghans there is a clear distinction between one's homeland and one's home. While a handful had a home to go back to, a few stayed at a hotel in Kabul for a while before going to a place they would call home. But importantly, many also returned to nothing resembling a place to call home upon return, because they had no home, relatives, family or friends in Afghanistan.

Many of our respondents describe that upon arrival in Afghanistan they were shocked, scared and often felt helpless – partly in response to realising the fact that they really were actually deported, some of whom even claiming to have been removed without prior notice. Importantly, many describe a situation in which they didn't know what to do, how to act, where to go. Many returnees describe how they were unfamiliar with Kabul and lacked social



networks there. Some noted that they had never even set foot in Afghanistan previously:

*We got a contact number from the border police in Sweden and when we arrived in Afghanistan we kept calling and they never answered. I was stuck at the airport with no friend or family. Most of the guys there were Afghans who had grown up in Iran. We had not seen Afghanistan before. It was very difficult for us. Two border police officers in Afghanistan showed up and welcomed us at the airport and that was it. They did not guide us to find a hotel or anything else at all.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#105

But some of the respondents also expressed a kind of happiness for at least being back in one's home country and also from seeing family and friends. For most, that happiness could be described as bitter-sweet, since they also acknowledge that while they were happy to reunite with family and friends, all problems and what they described as miseries of Afghanistan became shockingly apparent upon return – with bomb blasts and suicide attacks making many afraid. A very limited number of respondents describe a more unconditional sense of relief to be back home, socially and culturally, typically that would be someone who returned to someone, to something, to a context of familiarity and of social networks.

*When I arrived in Kabul, I was happy to be back and see my family. I even cried ... A lot of my relatives and colleagues came to greet me in my house. My mental situation had automatically improved when I was at home ... to hear the call for prayer and notice people getting ready to pray at the mosque. I felt very good and I cannot explain it."*

Male, 36 years, AFN#109

A major take-away from the interviews with regard to the arrival in Afghanistan is that their stories illuminate a reception procedure at the airport that seems inconsistent – or at the very least, the returnees have experienced the initial return, and in many cases expected welcome, very differently. Many describe how they are dissatisfied with the experience. Some even claim they were laughed at when inquiring whether or not they would be provided with some sort of help upon arrival. This was particularly the case for those re-

turning involuntarily according to the classification made by the Swedish authorities. A few, however, seem to have experienced some sort of welcoming reception at the airport, by the authorities.

Confusion in the reception procedures at the airport, mainly in Afghanistan, is also something that officials on the ground point to. The dysfunctional and bureaucratic procedures at the Kabul airport and the chaotic order makes it difficult to receive the reception support that returnees often had been promised (see section 4.3).<sup>43</sup>

### Access to reception support

When it comes to the issue of reception support, our data is not entirely consistent and sometimes there is a lack of information on the exact circumstances. What we safely can say is that more than half of the respondents from Afghanistan reported to have been given a cash-in-hand support ranging between AFN 11,000-12,500 (roughly equivalent to just under SEK 1,500). Some say this assistance was given to them by the Police at the airport, others claim that it was money from a Swedish agency and some mention that this was IOM who delivered it or that they lived at a hotel that the organisation paid for. Quite a few respondents also describe how they had a hotel reservation in their name waiting, and that the hotel reservation also included meals.

Concerning the length of stay offered to the returnees, it seems to range from a couple of days to up to three weeks. This offer also seems to have been described as contingent on whether or not the returnee in question was from Kabul or if he or she had relatives there.

*They told us that those who have a family here, they could go to their homes; and those who have no families, they should stay in a hotel for some time. Because I had no home and family here, they took me to a hotel but told me I could only stay there for three weeks. They told me that I would have to pay for the hotel from my own pocket after three weeks. The government paid our expenses for those three weeks. I don't know which government(s) or organisations had paid those expenses.*

Male, 40 years, AFN#111

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Kjell-Terje Torvik, 2021b.

*I think it was the IOM who paid some people some cash when their families had come to the airport to pick them up. They also took those who did not have a place to go to Spenzar hotel and paid for their rent and food and transportation for 15 days.*

Male, 23 years, AFN#115

A number of respondents, however, do not mention any cash-in-hand support upon arrival. Some seem to not have been offered accommodations even though they stated that they were not from the area and did not have anyone to go to in Kabul. This could be due to the fact that this reception support in the form of cash, has since April 2019 replaced a former in-kind support with services such as short-term accommodation, medical services and transportation. This reception support is nowadays delivered at the airport in Kabul (£ 147 at present) to those who return non-voluntarily with escorted travels, and no application is necessary.<sup>44</sup> But for logistic reasons some who could have received it did not because they arrived on times that there were no personnel (from IOM) there to receive them and deliver the support.<sup>45</sup> However due to the sometimes messy situation at the Kabul airport and technical issues, some returnees that are eligible are unable to access this support.<sup>46</sup>

The few who were lucky enough to have family, relatives or friends in Kabul or the vicinity were sometimes picked up at the airport, and were, on occasions, offered accommodations at their relatives' places. Still, several returnees mentioned that no one came to greet them at the airport since they had not told anyone that they were returning, mostly due to feelings of shame and not feeling ready to meet the disappointment that they anticipated. For example, one respondent explained that:

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<sup>44</sup> E-mail correspondence, 20 April 2021 with the IOM regional headquarters in Helsinki Finland.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Informant A, Ambassador Liaison Officer 2020 and 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Kjell Terje Torvik 2021b.

*No one came to greet us because we had not informed anyone about our deportation. When we arrived in Kabul, we got money from a Swedish agency to pay for a taxi to go home. We took the money and went to a hotel and stayed for two or three days in order to get our morale up ... Eventually, we returned to our homes.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#101

#### Social perception: Shame, guilt and fear upon return

For the absolute majority of the respondents, returning to Afghanistan is considered to be a huge failure, not only by them, but also by others. Most of the respondents speak of the fear of telling others that they had been returned, or deported, and that they have been ridiculed or taunted for returning. The stigma of returning is tough to cope with for many returnees. This can be seen in the reluctance of many to tell family and friends that they are back, or by the fact that some won't disclose to their acquaintances what they have been through, for example lying and saying that they are students and that's why they are new to the area. It is clear from the interviews that the stigmatisation that comes with being a returnee affects many respondents socially and mentally. Fear of being a disappointment to family and friends is a common theme among the returnees.

*When I returned, it had a very negative impact on my family...My family were both happy and sad; it was a strange situation. They were upset that I had been deported but happy to see me. They were worried about my life in Afghanistan...worried a lot about what would happen to me.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#73

While being reunited with one's family upon return can be joyous for some, most families have been wishing for a different outcome than the one presently faced with. Many respondents note that this is often made clear to them, leading to feelings of shame and guilt, for being a disappointment to the family and a source of their worry.

*My friends ridiculed me and said why would you return from that country? When I informed my family, they were angry and sad. They told me that others are not getting deported when they migrate, so how come you got deported? They said that I must have done something illegal."*

Male, 27 years, AFN#60

The disappointment of, for example, a son returning, partly stems from worries about their future life in Afghanistan. In addition, returning is often thought of being the result of having committed a crime. Indeed, many returnees describe how people in Afghanistan look down on returnees in general, and often argue that for someone to return, they must have committed some sort of criminal offense, turned to stealing or something to that effect, which resulted in deportation. If one, according to this reasoning, have chosen to return from what could only be considered a better life in Europe compared to what they regard to be the misery of Afghanistan, then one must not be particularly wise. But if one, in line with this reasoning, is neither deported (a perceived criminal) nor stupid enough to have placed one's family at risk for nothing, then the returnee is regarded as returning in possession of abundant financial resources. As such, some respondents note a fear of being robbed, leading to further self-imposed isolation:

*I haven't talked to anyone in Afghanistan because I was scared... The people might perceive that I have lots of money or the authorities in Sweden had given me lots of money and therefore they would attack me.*

Male, 23 years, AFN#112

This apparent lack of understanding among the general Afghan population of the asylum requirements and procedures in countries like Sweden places the returnee in a tight spot: either one is so incredibly stupid for having *chosen* to leave (in this case Sweden), risking not only one's own life for nothing, but in extension also others' by way of gathering money to finance the migration in the first place and putting a strain on the family's livelihood upon return; or one is loaded with cash, making the returnee a potential target for robbery. This difficult situation was ironically faced by individuals who for the most part underwent a forced return. Such stigma and fear of identifying oneself as a returnee was mostly mentioned by those whose returned was forced. Voluntariness was usually associated to a plan for re-migration and, therefore, individuals did not necessarily want to regain contact with his previous social life.

Others are afraid of mentioning that they have returned from overseas since they fear that others will see them as infidel converts, even though they may not have converted.

*I am afraid of anyone finding out that we are returnees from overseas. Afghans are traditional people and they might think we are infidels now that we have been to Europe. When people ask, we tell them that we are students.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#94

Those who in fact did convert to Christianity while in Sweden describe how they are ostracised and shunned by their families.

Stigmatisation for being a returnee in Afghanistan is widely noted among the respondents, leading to some not wanting to disclose their return even for those who would constitute their inner circles, their social networks. This stigma arguably places the returnee at a worse position socially, psychologically and perhaps even financially than the average Afghan without migratory experience.

### Psychological dimension: Sense of belonging and adapting to the local context

The dimension of social exclusion (voluntary or involuntary) alluded to above, from fear of disclosing for others that one is a returnee, can also be closely connected to a returnee's sense of belonging, and the ability to adapt to local culture and norms. One respondent for example noted that he didn't feel any sense of belonging because he did not trust people at all.

*They could put me in trouble if they find out I am a returnee. I feel lonely right now and the lack of friends, contacts, together with the insecurity bothers me.*

Male, 23 years, AFN#11

In fact, for most respondents, the ability to adapt is closely linked to a sense of belonging, which in turn seems to be contingent on the capability to trust others in one's society in order to form and maintain social networks. This is when the previous embeddedness to the context shows itself and can be regained. A telling example of this logic is expressed by one respondent that already left Afghanistan after his return:

*I couldn't have adapted to the system of Afghanistan because when I was there, I was feeling scared, frightened and panicked... I didn't go outside because I was feeling scared of people... I didn't have any friend or peer to talk to or to move around with... I was always home.*

Male, 23 years, AFN#51

Indeed, many respondents note that they don't feel a sense of belonging in their present setting. Some describe this as a result of having lived in Sweden (or abroad) for years and becoming accustomed to the culture there, to the openness, and the ability to live freely. Often times the feeling of not belonging is connected to what is perceived as lacking in the Afghan society, and what is perceived of as existing in abundance in the Swedish one, namely, safety, security and sense of humanity.

*I feel strange here. One should feel safe and comfortable in one's own country, but I feel unsafe and uncomfortable here.* (Male, 20 years, AFN#80).

Another returnee noted when comparing Afghanistan to European countries that *[w]hen you are in those countries, whoever you are, they treat you as a human being.* (Male, 30 years, AFN#79).

When there was no previous embeddedness to the context, it is difficult for the individual to recognise the context as his own and thrive on it.

*I spent half my life in Iran and part of it in Sweden. I did not know anything about Afghanistan.* (Male, 21 years, AFN#8)

For most respondents, adapting to the social and cultural fabric of life in Afghanistan is not something that has come easy or even happened at all. For many, that means continued problems and a host of different types of discomforts in life. The difficulty in getting embedded to the context led some to feel that the only solution is to leave Afghanistan, some have indeed already left, others feel depressed and a number express that they have tried or want to commit suicide.

*I have not been able to adjust myself to the norms and culture here. Even though I say this is my country and I am from here, I was born and raised in Iran and I have experienced my youth in a different country. I love my country, but I do not like how people treat other people here. I have not been able to adjust to the discrimination despite living in Kabul for a year and a half now...*

*I can live here in case I am not insulted or being called upon for being Hazara. I think the sooner I leave Afghanistan is for the better. I am done with life here. There is insecurity, discrimination, poverty and also theft and other dangers here.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#2

Yet, this is not the whole picture. Some respondents, particularly those who have grown up in Afghanistan before leaving and have family and friends, and a social network in place, described that they felt a sense of belonging. For several returnees, adapting back to Afghan culture, norms and values is not even considered an issue as they linked it closely to having grown up in Afghanistan. This reflects previous research regarding the importance of maintaining contact with family and friends throughout the asylum period in order to facilitate social embeddedness on return (see e.g. Carr, 2014). One such returnee, when talking about adapting back to Afghan culture and norms upon return, noted the familiarity of the context.

*I was not feeling unfamiliar, because it's my home country. Even if I spend a hundred years abroad, I will never forget my home country and I have not been changed*

Male, 26 years, AFN#76.

Yet another aspect of the difficulty in adapting or feeling embedded in Afghanistan is the perception – and the actual fact – that values, attitudes and practices of legality differ significantly. Returnees may both view a phenomenon like corruption differently from non-migrants in the country and experience it differently. There is a narrative amongst the respondents accompanied by statements like: *"There is no law in Afghanistan."* This points to the fact that the difference in legality is different from what they became accustomed to in Sweden. This does not help returnees to develop a sense of belonging to the community.

*I had a good migration journey, especially [because] I got to know about their laws and regulations. There are good laws and regulations, but there is no law and regulation here at all....*



***Do you think that your migration journey impacted your ability to secure work back home?***

*In Sweden, everything runs according to the law, and we had always obeyed that but in Afghanistan, we don't have any law. Therefore, I have gradually adapted to this system.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#1.

**Migration's (negative) impact on life in Afghanistan**

Among the respondents, there seems a general lack of positive impacts from their migration experience on their current life in Afghanistan. A few noted that the impact of the migration could be two-fold – having positive and negative impacts on their lives. For example, a couple of returnees remarked that based on what they had learned abroad they now could more easily detect discrimination based on ethnicity and religion, and others described how they, by living as migrants, learned how to live and cope with hunger, poverty and separation from family. Among the narratives, some reflected over the fact that in Sweden, they were treated as human beings, and that standard of living they experienced, it is what they wish for their future. This shows a contrast of leaving paternalistic Sweden – considering that many declared to be minors and were, initially, cared as such – to later arrive to a country with a very basic social welfare. Such reasoning reflects other studies about minors returning from the UK (Robinson & Williams, 2015).

Being a former migrant can constitute major hurdles for the returnees in their daily lives, as seen above. And even if one is able to adapt to life in Afghanistan, and if one feels a sense of belonging, the migration for many seem to have had, and sometimes continue to have, negative impacts on their current state of affairs, besides from the most obvious examples listed above. For example, several respondents described that the migration experience has impacted them negatively by setting them behind in terms of time lost.

*This process takes away 90 percent of someone's life. I wasted four years of my life and went under a lot of stress that I still carry with me.*

Male, 29 years, AFN#95

For some, a fairly straight line is drawn between the migration experience and an inability to start a family, – having few to no social connections and lacking the means to start a family – , which seems being crucial to respondents in order to settle in their particular cultural context.

Many described feelings of despair and that their lives are ruined as a consequence of losing what one had before returning. For example, in Sweden several respondents had friends, a job, a home, while currently in Afghanistan those things are described as non-existing in their lives. The migration experience seems to have given them something, which after returning has been lost.

*It has impacted my life a lot; I have lost everything. I have no hope or motivation in life anymore. I do not even have the energy to go back to Europe.* (Male, 21 years, AFN#86).

Some respondents who were unfamiliar with Kabul, most of them with Hazara background, tried to relocate to Herat. This part of the migration experience became associated with great risk, of persecution and discrimination: One respondent described what happened when he moved to Herat:

*When I moved to Herat, I was harassed and bothered. Because the people of Herat discriminate against Hazara people. They believe that Herat belongs to them and we don't have any right to work and live there. Besides, they beat me twice and sent me to the hospital.*

Male, 23 years, AFN#112

Several of the returnees that describe the migration experience as impacting them negatively, note that the negative effect can be seen in the difficulty finding a job, securing an income, or a place to live after their return. It is hard to know if this can be considered a direct result of having migrated. It is clear nonetheless that as of now, most do not have a job, and many regarded the grim situation in which they currently find themselves in as a result of their migration.

## An economic dimension

*I just cannot find any jobs. Everyone I ask about a job tells me that they are also looking for one. I am thinking about joining the police and the army, but my mother tells me that I will be killed if I did that. [...] I was planning to start a shop but all the money I had went to pay for rent and then my mother became ill, so I had to pay for her medical treatment.*

Male, 22 years, AFN#68

The economic situation for the returnees in Afghanistan is for the most part bleak to put it mildly. A very limited few – working in a shop, as a mechanic or taxi-driver – seem to earn enough to suffice, being able to provide for their families and even pay off debts. The majority, however, have no employment or stable income, or at least extremely limited opportunities to get work as day labourers. Many find the situation completely hopeless and describe unemployment as rampant. The potential skills acquired abroad seem to be rendered useless as the level of development is so far behind than that in Sweden. For example, one man learnt how to repair smartphones in Sweden, but quickly realised that the types of mobile phones used in Afghanistan for the most part are older models that he did not have experience repairing. Another respondent described learning how to weld in Sweden, but on types of welding machines that are not yet in use in Afghanistan. And the ability to speak, read and write in Swedish that many of the respondents acquired do not help them much in finding opportunities for earning a living.

But there is one interesting feature that characterises the Afghan returnees worth noting: roughly half of the respondents report that they receive economic support in some form from Sweden since their return. Some even claim to survive from such support whereas others receive smaller sums and more infrequently. The cash transfer often comes from their former host families or guardians who supported them while in Sweden. It is more likely that these ties are stronger for those who returned recently to Afghanistan, but interestingly we see such cash transfers to several informants who returned as early as in 2017 and 2018.

While the Corona pandemic seems to have negatively affected many respondent's ability to find work, many state that they didn't have any source of income prior to the society-wide shutdowns, that even then there were no jobs to get hold of. One should bear in mind that many of the respondents left Afghanistan in the first place for that very reason.

One theme stated by the informants is the corruption and nepotism in Afghanistan. This made their social situation more difficult but most of all, it made it difficult for them to access economic resources. Some mention corruption in its original form when officials ask for bribes in order to provide services, licences, and permissions from government officials. Yet another aspect of corruption is the perception that your property is not safe in a country like Afghanistan. One informant states that land and property was forcibly taken from him - by relatives - and this adds to the perceived insecurity.

Others mention that without the proper *wasta* - personal connections - one often feels doomed in the Afghan labour market which is marred by nepotism. Ethnic affiliations are described as weighing heavier than actual skills when people are selected for work (e.g. Tajiks hire Tajiks, Hazaras hire Hazaras and Pashtuns hire Pashtuns). Many respondents lack *wasta* and likely never had it, and for some who perhaps used to have it but had to leave spending years abroad probably didn't contribute to maintaining *wasta*. One respondent, a carpenter by trade, complained that even though he had eight years of experience he couldn't get work due to nepotism's strong hold on the labour market and his lack of connections. Another respondent noted on the same subject that:

*I have not had any income for the past year and a half. I have been relying on my friends' support. I have not been able to continue my education or find a job because I do not know anyone here. You cannot get a job here unless you belong to a party or know someone. Thank god my friends still support me.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#2

At the same time there is an acute sense of despair present in many of the respondents' testimonies, due to the impossibility to provide for themselves or their families, or pay debts incurred from the migration.

*I don't have any significant work. I go to the labourers' market daily and if someone has work, I work with them ... I am unemployed since the winter as all of the work is stopped for now ... We are four members in the family, and I am the only earner. If the situation continues like this, I am forced to take a gun and start Jihad or robbery.*

Male, 24 years, AFN#33

Many of the Afghan respondents went into debt to finance their migration journey. Some, however, have been able to pay the money back, if not all of the amount at least the most of it. Many note that they used the in-cash support provided upon return to pay the debts, and some mention that they sold other assets, such as land for example. Almost half are still indebted and a few still have debts that they cannot pay, until they find work. That fact scares many, as they think the lenders may threaten their life. In most cases, the young men that left Afghanistan for a better life in Europe often did so with financial assistance from their parents. Fathers and mothers gave them their savings or sold much of their belongings. Several also took out loans to support the migration of their sons, anticipating that they would have money coming back as their sons managed to get a residence permit and could start working. One respondent described the situation as such:

*I left with the help of my parents. We have borrowed about 70 percent of my migration expenses and my father gave everything he had to me and sent me to Europe in order to have a better and peaceful life. They even moved to a cheaper house in order to send me money so that I could reach my destination [...] When I was in Sweden, they told my father all the time to pay his debts and my father told them that 'my son is in Sweden, and we will pay my debts when he gets his residence permit there'. Having returned like this, they will definitely ask for their money back.*

Male, 27 years, AFN#29

Most however seem to have borrowed from relatives, uncles, cousins, etc., to finance their migration. This seems to have resulted in less worry and fear for not being able to meet the lender's demands for repayments. Nonetheless, for those who still have debts, the debt is often perceived as a heavy burden. The Corona pandemic exacerbates this situation as it hinders many from being able to make enough money to pay back, while also putting extra stress on

some returnees that not only struggle to provide for their families and coming up with money for the debts, but also now live with the burden that they are indirectly causing hardships and problems for relatives in dire need of repayments they cannot get. But it is also clear that even without debts it is a heavy burden to come back empty handed, to a situation in which one is the reason for the fact that the family's funds and assets are entirely depleted.

*My family paid for my migration. They had some money saved, they sold their jewellery and other precious things, and told me that Europe is better. I thought that if I go, I would be of help to my family. We didn't borrow any money, but I made my family completely broke. Whatever they had, I took with me but when I returned, I couldn't do anything for them.*

Male, 19 years, AFN#36

#### Setting up a shop (in times of Corona)

Some returnees with previous experience of carpentry or tailoring were able to take up such work upon return. After the onset of the Corona pandemic and the subsequent shutdown and quarantines, much of such work has dried up. Of the few respondents that own shops, most find themselves in similar situations, either not having any customers or having customers that cannot pay for the goods. Instead they have to sell items on credit. Some are fortunate enough to have money sent to them, a couple receive small sums from people in Sweden, some from relatives abroad, or even in Afghanistan.

*I have opened a shop here with the return aid I received from ERRIN. I sell flour, rice and oil in my shop. People buy goods from me but most of them cannot pay because they cannot afford and therefore, they borrow. So I have no income. My daughter sometimes calls [a woman in Sweden] and asks her for money, and then she sends some money and we run our family through that.*

Male, 40 years, AFN#111

It is clear from the interviews that several were able to make use of the in-kind support offered to start up a business. It is not always the case that the business is, or have been, successful, however. Compared to the results of the IOM (2017b) where the Afghan respondents who received in-kind support funded by the ERRIN-programme often – more than two out of three – ended up with well-functioning companies, our respondents did not turn out to be

that successful. For some, as in the case above, the pandemic is likely at least partially to blame for their misfortunes. For others, the fact that they had no previous knowledge about the Afghan market seems to have been a determining factor in the failed business. A returning young man describe that he opened a mobile shop with the in-kind support he received from the ERRIN-provider, but had to close it after only six months. The reason, according to him, was that he wasn't used to the Afghan market, and that he didn't have enough customers. This example point to a fact mentioned in Strand et al (2016) when the respondents felt that those giving the assistance could have done more to advise on what type of in-kind assistance would be most beneficial to them in their unique circumstances and to mentor them better over the first months.

Others were in the process of starting businesses when interviewed. One respondent described how the work was delayed due to the quarantine and restriction that the government imposed in the wake of the coronavirus spreading:

*During the last eight or nine months, I have been following the procedure and provided documentation to ERIN in order to receive the promised assistance for opening a shop and getting a source of income. The aid money should be around 2,000 to 2,500 euro for opening a shop.[...] I want to establish a dessert and grocery shop in partner with some other people, so that I can earn a living and proceed in life. The work to establish such a shop have been under progress, but recently, due to the Coronavirus, the work is delayed ... I visit that office to get informed about my work once or twice a week.*

Male, 30 years, AFN#79

### Receiving what was promised? Reintegration support

As stated earlier, our data on the access to reintegration support is not entirely consistent. Sometimes we lack information and on other times the respondents might have mixed up the organisations or forms of support. Our data does not allow an accurate estimate of what kind of support, from whom and the actual amount, as some individuals were not sure about the source and quantity. Therefore, the numbers mentioned are rough estimations to the best of our knowledge.

Among our 60 respondents from Afghanistan, from what we were able to determine, a large majority roughly 5 out of 6 mentioned receiving some sort of financial support, in-kind or in-cash. The most named one was the small sum of cash at the airport (12,500 Afghani) and some received it in-kind since it was delivered in that form until 2017. This reception support at the airport shall be delivered by IOM to all escorted travels to those who return non-voluntarily. This support was mostly used for transportation and lodging. Some also declare to have received a power bank from the “police”<sup>47</sup> who accompany them on the trip.

To determine how many that received the Re-establishment support and support from ERRIN, mostly in-kind, is more difficult. Since most returns to Afghanistan were in the category forced (see Chapter 3.4 and Casebook) we can assume that most of our respondents did not get the Re-establishment support, but between 10 and 15 most probably did. To determine who would receive the ERRIN in kind-support is even harder, and a raw estimation as that roughly 1 out of 3 respondents did. We can safely say that many more had been in contact with the organisations delivering the grants and support, but some failed to get any and the outcomes for some are uncertain in different degrees.

Most of our informants in Afghanistan experienced problems with the different kinds of re-integration support that was offered. The problems were manifold: Many claimed to have received no information or incorrect information from the Swedish authorities, some claimed to have experienced difficulties – of different kinds – to access the support, some had to wait an unreasonably long time – and a few still were still waiting.

Based on the experiences, the reception support seems to have the least problems. A few had waited for some reception at the Kabul airport without receiving anything, but most told that they had received it and then moved on. The support form that comes out worst seems to be the ERRIN programme and the service providers that have delivered the support to the returnees. Many administrative difficulties were reported and the time from arriving to Kabul and ultimately receiving the aid could be more than a year. Therefore,

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<sup>47</sup> Many respondents referred to the guards who escorted them to Afghanistan as the Police. In reality, these guards belong to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (the International Transportation Unit), who, as Chapter 4 explains, are in charge of carrying out forced returns.



some in view of the difficulties did not proceed with their requests and therefore did not receive anything. The Re-establishment support, that is provided by IOM, also received criticism, although not as much and some also experienced being treated well and receiving their money fast.

There are several narratives describing the frustration by not being able to reach officials from IOM or other service-providers, having been denied some promised part of the reintegration support or waiting for a document or an email that hadn't arrived at the time of the interview. The amount that the respondents mention to have received from the IOM fluctuates between USD 750 to USD 3,000. It is sometimes difficult to know exactly which kind of support they were referring to and why the sum differs to such a large extent.

Although not all respondents could identify the service-provider that gave them their support, nine respondents stated to have received help specifically from the ERRIN programme which was usually 2000 euros. The relatively small number of recipients could be due to the fact that the programme, handled first by IOM and then by IRARA in Afghanistan, had been halted temporarily. It was suspended for Afghanistan in February 2019 before reopened again in November (see Chapter 4). For more than a year the programme was not functioning, and we know that several of the respondents returned during that time. Respondents reported to have received the information about some kind of support from these two organisations and in most cases had signed the necessary documentation. Some respondents mentioned to have been told that they were told that they were either "not on the list" or that they were "not entitled" due to their return not being voluntary. This last reason does not correspond with the official information of the reintegration grant, according to which IRARA, as well as IOM, provides assistance both to voluntary and involuntary returnees.

Only a handful of respondents stated they had received some "in-kind" help. All of them in Afghanistan and on the part of AMASO, a local civil society organisation which has special ties with returnees from Sweden.

Of those receiving return aid, about as many stated that they did experience problems as those not mentioning any problems. In addition, several of the returnees describe ending up receiving much less than what they perceived to have been promised. Those who did have access to it seem to have done as they were told in Sweden, taking a letter previously given to them to the

service provider, IOM or IRARA, they received roughly EUR 2,000. One respondent describes getting timely assistance from IOM when he was in need:

*When I received the AFN 12,000, I paid one month's rent. Then I went to the IOM and told them my problem and they said they would rent a house for me. I told my landlord that the IOM would pay the rent I would like to spend another 6 months at his house. The landlord accepted and we wrote a lease agreement and I took him to the IOM where he was paid his rent. I did not receive that money and it all went to the landlord.*

Male, 29 years, AFN#70

Among the returnees describing difficulty in accessing the return aid, some seem to have been categorised as ineligible for this type of grant and therefore did not receive it. With the data at hand, we cannot determine the reasons that lead to the ineligibility of the grant, although the involuntariness of the return could be behind it, which mean not signing the required return documents.

*They told us that we would receive over 2,000 Euros from the ERRIN office upon arrival in Afghanistan and that they would provide us accommodation too. When I arrived in Afghanistan, they told me that I was forcefully deported so I could not receive any assistance.*

Male, 39 years, AFN#87

In most cases, the reason for not receiving some reintegration support seems to be that the returnee in question had already received some sort of return aid from the other organisation (e.g. from IOM when having stated to have difficulties in getting return aid from ERRIN and vice versa), which then would disqualify them from getting the sought after grant. This may be a result of the fact that a number of returnees seem to be of the impression that they are entitled to both Re-establishment support and in-kind support via the ERRIN programme, claiming that is what they were told. A couple of returnees were unable to remember from which of these organisations they received their support even though they had been in touch with both.

It is difficult to know what caused the returnees to experience these difficulties, at least part could be derived from Corona related lock-downs, hampering the abilities of IOM and ERRIN to deliver on their commitments.

*They provided me a letter for ERRIN, which is currently closed, and no one can get any return assistance from it. The police also said this to me. They told me, however, that this organisation is closed for now, but I could sign the paper because this NGO would get opened some day and would read my letter and would help me.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#102

Quarantine is not the sole reason for the fact that many respondents complained about the process of getting return aid. Indeed, several returnees were seeking some form of return support before the Corona pandemic erupted. In addition, as it was previously stated, the sum received varied significantly among them and sometimes they received less of what they perceived to have been promised. Having been promised either about USD 3,000 or EUR 2,000 a couple of respondents noted that when referring to IOM and ERRIN, they were given USD 900 and EUR 850 respectively. If nothing else, the above result could be an indication of the need for improvement regarding the procedures of informing and delivering return aid.

### Box 3. Re-establishment Support, Reintegration Assistance and Reception Assistance

Respondents refer to different forms of support available. The first form of support mentioned is the *reception assistance* (*ankomststöd*) upon arrival at the airports, when the Police escorted the returnees arriving via chartered flights and regular flights during weekdays. This support is nowadays in cash and amounting to €147. Earlier it was in-kind and covered services such as short-term accommodations and transportation from the airport to their hometown. IOM is the supplier of this support and delivers it directly after arrival at the airport.

*They gave us USD 40 in each USD 10 banknotes in the airport. I spent that at first, which couldn't be my expense for a week. Then my friend sent me some money from Sweden until I received AFN 12,500 from IOM. Male, AFG#65*

*Two police officers had come, took our papers and provided us with AFN 12,500 and told us to leave. There were about 20 people. Those who used to be in Afghanistan, they went to their homes and we, about 10 – 12 people went to Kot-i-Sangi. After that, we sought to find a better hotel because the condition of all guesthouses was bad. Male, AFG#80.*

In general, they name mostly in cash support such as the *Re-establishment support* (*återetableringsstöd*) for those whose application has been rejected or who have withdrawn their application, and who are willing to voluntarily return from Sweden and reintegrate in their countries of origin. This support is in cash amounting to SEK 30,000 for each individual over the age of 18, and SEK 15,000 for minors. A family can receive up to SEK 75,000 in total. The Migration Agency takes the decision on eligibility and the cash support shall be paid out by IOM as a one-time payment.

*In Sweden, we were told that when we get to Afghanistan, we will receive about USD 3,000 or EUR 2,000. They introduced us to IOM and two other organisations. When I referred to IOM, they assisted me with about more than USD 900. The other organisation was ERIN and when I referred to ERIN, they told me that I didn't carry my documents with me. I had taken my documents with me from Sweden, but I didn't carry them with me when I visited the ERIN office, and they didn't help me. Male, AFG#66*

*The 2,000 Euros that I received from the ERIN office was helpful and I started a shop together with my uncle's neighbour. I am busy working at my shop now. Male, AFG#7*

*The Reintegration Assistance (reintegreringsstöd) is an in-kind support for those whose application has been rejected regardless if they choose to return voluntarily their countries of origin or not. This support is amounting to EUR 2,500 for voluntary and EUR 2,000 for non-voluntary returnees through the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN). This support delivers e.g. medical services, temporary accommodation, legal advice, counselling and other services. There were few mentions of this in-kind aid. There are, however, mentions of aid granted to pay for furniture and appliances, such as this example from an Iraqi Kurdish man.*

*The migration office gave us a paper and told us if we sign the return paper, we receive help in Iraq. So upon our return, two organisations helped us: IOM gave us USD 9,000 and another organisation helped us to buy some furniture. Male, IRQ#47*

### Conflicting messages?

Whether or not returnees have been denied aid that rightfully belonged to them is not within the scope of this study to determine. There seems however to be a mismatch between what returnees perceive that they have been promised and what they end up receiving. This implies that there may be conflicting messages conveyed, by different actors, as regards the type of aid, the amount of aid, and the requirements for eligibility as well as how to get a hold of the return aid packages offered through the service providers IOM and ERRIN in Afghanistan.

## 7.2 Reintegration upon return to Iraq

Contemporary return studies focusing on Iraq have usually not differentiated between those who return from overseas and those who return from within, i.e. internally displaced persons that return to where they used to live before being displaced. Still, what they have shown is that returnees, coming back from abroad or from within are often hampered in their reintegration.

Returnees that have entered Iraq since the 2010s have encountered a sectarian and post-conflict environment. Violence and conflict erupt on a regular basis. There is also a disorganised and corrupt bureaucracy plagued with patronage. Research clearly indicates how important it is to belong to the right political or ethnic group(s) and the lethal dangers of not belonging. For permissions and other administrative matters, it is also vital to have connections with those who control the various ministries and public offices. Furthermore, despite having been a rather prosperous country, the situation today is that of an economy that suffers from the political turmoil halting the recovery and therefore not provide the best of conditions for a sustainable return or any of the dimensions of embeddedness (Respond 2018; Edgumbe 2020; Iaria 2010).

Previous studies which also turn to individual experiences of return offer an overall picture where returnees generally do not believe their return could be sustainable, due to the insecurity and faltering economies (Strand et al 2016). In relation to what returnees' experiences, Davis et al. (2018) stressed the importance of security and material conditions – especially rebuilding a home – for returning IDPs in Iraq. Security were also raised by IOM (2015) as being one of the factors that, on the one hand, stopped refugees and IDPs from both wanting to return, but also actually blockade them from returning even when their decision was made.

## Box 4. The autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)

The autonomous Kurdistan region in Northern Iraq where Kurds are the majority ethnic group differs in some respects from the rest of the country. Overall, KRI enjoys more stability, economic development, and political pluralism than the rest of the country. KRI is divided along political lines with two major parties Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) that dominate the system along with two ruling families – the Barzanis and the Talabanis. Despite the relative stability, the security situation between Arabs and Kurds have deteriorated in the past years. Such insecurity is the primary reason behind a decision to migrate for our respondents

*The main reason for my migration is the security situation. Problems increased in Kirkuk, between Arabs and Kurds, which led to the death of my father, in an explosion. We couldn't find his body to bury him. Both my brothers were killed too, just because they were Kurdish and served with the Peshmerga. I was afraid, and my financial situation was very bad, which was another reason [to migrate]. KRI IRQ#20.*

Economically, this region had prospered after the termination of war and political violence in the late 1990s. The economic boom during the 2000:s and the first half of the 2010:s gave a GDP growth and the per capita income grew gradually and the gap versus the rest of Iraq widened. After the economic crisis that started in 2014, the Kurdistan economy more or less collapsed, partly due to the ISIS surge and partly due to lower oil prices. The standard of living declined and the gap versus the rest of Iraq shrank considerably.

*My husband was a member of Peshmerga Forces and was working as the guard and driver of a Kurdish Commander, but the Shia Militant Groups (PMF) didn't like the Kurdish Commander and my husband was involved and become part of this problem. The Shia Militant Group once shot my husband and he lost one of his fingers. So, he was obliged to quit as a Peshmerga and become a worker, and as such, our income declined. These shooting incidents by the Shia Militants were very common after the Shia Militias entered our town. KRI IRQ#54*

*The main reason of my travel is that, after ISIS came to the country, a big tribal problem happened to me, which pushed me to leave my house in Qaraj, and go to one of my relatives' house in Qushtaba. After a while, my dad passed away, and my relatives asked me to leave their house, because of the tribal problem. They were scared for their children. The issue became bigger, which made me think of travelling outside of the country. KRI IRQ#19*

The institutional and political context of KRI is evolving, but still volatile. Efforts via international assistance have aimed to enhance political stability and institution building. The ultimate purpose of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been to receive international recognition and legitimacy for its autonomy within safe borders. The latter has not been achieved since large parts of its territory is disputed and under the control of the central Iraqi government. The quest for more independence culminated in the referendum in 2017 when an overwhelming majority of the population, along with the two major parties KDP and PUK, voted for independence.

## Social embeddedness: Returning home

A difference from the Afghan case is that the Iraqi returnees did not elaborate much on the actual arrival at the airport in Iraq – on potential problems or difficulties after landing in Baghdad, Erbil or Sulaymaniyah. Many of the respondents returning to Iraq simply describe how they were either met by relatives or friends at the airport, and then went on to such relative or friend to stay, at least initially for a couple of days. While several also noted that they were not met by anyone at the airport, they still had a place to go to. Or knew of a place, to where they could go after arriving, for example a relative's house or a friend's house.

*On the day I returned, I went to my family's house, which I reached at night. I stayed with them for two days, until I was able, with the help of one of my friends, to rent a house.*

Male, 30 years, IRQ#34

None of the respondents in Iraq mention any type of reception at the airport by officials or an agency like IOM, and likewise, no one describe receiving any initial cash-in hand support on arrival. Such services are not offered to Iraq which is different from the rules and procedures in Afghanistan.

For some, reuniting with one's family was so joyful that it made them forget the problems and hardships they had been through.

*My family was waiting for me at the airport, my mom and my dad, as well as my sister and her husband ... They were very happy to see me, and, after I hugged my mom and dad, I forgot all the fatigue and unfair things I went through in Sweden.*

Male, 29 years, IRQ#18

For most, however, reuniting with family or friends did not seem to change feelings of despair over that fact that one had returned. In some cases, it had the opposite effect, further increasing feelings of despair. This seems to be the case when relatives do not understand why the individual who returned "decided" to come back; when they do not taking into account that the return may not have been a choice per se, but rather a "choice" which was forced upon one.

*I went to my home, where only my mother greeted me. Yes, she called my brothers, but they refused to come and see me. They consider me as a loser because of my decision to return to Iraq.*

Male, 20 years, KRI IRQ#20

A few respondents said that they felt ashamed upon return. For some, the shame was linked to one's failure to migrate, for others it more closely linked to feelings of guilt for leaving a spouse and children for years and then coming home empty handed. One father described that: *I don't speak about my experience. I feel ashamed that I left my family for five years and came back without any results* (Male, 34 years, KRI IRQ#19).

In comparison with the experiences of return to Afghanistan few returnees in Iraq described being met with negative attitudes for the fact of being a returnee. Nonetheless, for those that did experience such attitude it was described as causing emotional pain and distress.

Several returnees hid the fact that they had returned. Some because they feared they would be sent to prison as a result of leaving their jobs in the military or government following different kinds of accusations there – one describing how he ended up going to prison for a couple of months. Others felt their life was in danger, often for the same reason(s) that made them leave Iraq in the first place – being/feeling threatened by a militia, a local tribe or even relatives. In these cases, returnees did not disclose to anyone that they had returned, some not even to their closest family.

**Towards an economic re-integration: With a little help (from relatives and friends)**

Unlike what was gathered among the respondents in Afghanistan, many of the returnees in Iraq actually describe how people in general, family and friends, for the most part are helpful and seemingly understanding of the returnee's experience or current situation. While it is commonly thought among family and friends of those who return that it would have been better if the returnee had been able to stay in Europe, a sense of empathy for many of the returnees and their situation seems to exist. An elderly woman noted that she was looked upon with mercy and empathy because it was known that she was completely alone in Iraq, her son living with his family in Sweden. Her only wish was to be reunited with her son. One family that returned described



doing so to the neighbourhood in which they used to live. Although they were initially worried about how they would be treated upon the return they soon discovered their neighbourhood to be filled with friendly and helpful neighbours and that the social bond that they had forged before leaving for Sweden seemed to be intact: *Honestly, we were really afraid, but thank god, in our neighbourhood, everyone loves us, especially because my husband is kind and has never harmed anybody* (Female, 36 years IRQ#16).

Similarly to the respondents in Afghanistan, many in Iraq noted that friends and family do not really understand, at least initially, that the return may not have been a choice made completely freely. One respondent noted that: *People were calling me crazy for returning to Iraq ...they thought I was living like the king in Sweden* (Male, 60 years, KRI IRQ#55). While people sometimes find it odd that one have chosen to return, and while people often do not really understand the predicaments surrounding the return following a failed asylum application, only a limited number of respondents in Iraq described being subject to comments regarding the “true” reasons for why they returned – in the sense that they must have committed some sort of criminal offences in Sweden in order to have been “returned.” In the Afghan case, the notion that a returnee must be a criminal for returning was a significantly more prevailing feature in the interviews.

One explanation of this difference could stem from the fact that the interviewers in Afghanistan and Iraq were not the same and likely performed the interviews in slightly different ways. As such, some topics/issues that were elaborated on in one case could have been less so in the other due to methodological reasons (i.e. the way the interview was performed). But the fact that at least a couple of returnees in Iraq do mention that returnees can be looked upon as criminals indicates that the topic/issue was not one that by way of methodological circumstances would be omitted by the interviewer.

We observe that being a returnee in Iraq is less stigmatising than in Afghanistan, at least in sense that one is assumed to be a criminal. One explanation for the comparatively less stigmatised position of returnees in Iraq compared to Afghanistan may be derived from the different individual characteristics among returnees in the two countries. Many more returnees in the Iraqi case had migrated and returned as a family, and in the Iraqi cohort, more women were included. Presumably, even if there is a strong local norm of disbelief

towards the “true” reasons for returning, one would be less inclined to think that a family returning would do so due to committing criminal offenses. Those that described experiencing some sort of stigmatisation upon return, were predominantly men returning by themselves – and tilting towards the younger end of the spectra, which is similar to the case of the Afghan returnees. Another explanation may stem from the fact that Iraqis during the past half century have been forced to leave their homes, and later been able to return, from within and from abroad. Also, being a richer country than Afghanistan, the population in Iraq has to a larger extent than Afghans been able to travel abroad – including people that then became migrants and asylum seekers (e.g. in Sweden).

The picture that evolves from the interviews in Iraq is that most returnees return to a familiar place, and where one knows at least some people, where one is likely to have relatives and even some friends. In contrast to the case of an important part of Afghans, the narratives among Iraqis tells of a return to the place they call as home. Returnees, for the most part, were able to return to existing social networks, to draw on existing personal contact, and had an awareness of the local setting and how to deal with such context. However, not all chose to act on those networks. They were sometimes hiding completely from those they perceive constituting a threat to their lives.

## A psychological dimension

### Feelings of insecurity

*I feel like it is my country, but I am not comfortable* (Male, 43 years, KRI IRQ#60)

While several respondents noted that they do feel a sense of belonging to the society to which they have returned, others feel uncomfortable on it. Still, it is not a completely black or white situation, for many a sense of belonging occupies a space somewhere in between and takes on different shades. A few noted that they feel nothing resembling a sense of belonging to the society in which they now dwell and that the only time they felt a sense of belonging was while in Sweden. And likewise, a couple of respondents note the complete opposite expressing disdain for Swedish society. But even for those who made staunch claims of not feeling a sense of belonging in the Iraqi society, the primary reason for such sentiments seem to be directly linked to feelings of

insecurity, and an understanding of what life in safety, such as that in Sweden, could be like, which in many respects is similar to that of those returning to Afghanistan.

*The only time I felt belonging was when I was in Sweden because in Sweden people were caring and I felt safe. [Adapting back to Iraqi society] is difficult, especially after seeing the stability in Sweden.*

Male, 37 years, KRI IRQ#49.

The feelings of insecurity and vulnerability are striking among the Iraqi returnees. With the exception of a couple of respondents, the returnees describe how they feel unsafe, many constantly having to look over their shoulders. For some, the fear of being kidnapped, tortured or murdered by militias, tribes, government forces or even in some cases relatives is a constant. A Kurdish mother who had returned with her family described how the family had been forced to leave their life in Kirkuk for Sweden due to threats from a militia, and therefore the family could not go back there. But even where they now lived, far from Kirkuk, she still felt afraid, particularly for the safety of her children.

*I was free in Sweden, here we are not, we are scared. Even my kids can't go outside as we are afraid that someone will kidnap them* (Female, 32 years, KRI IRQ#63).

A significant number of respondents describe returning to a situation with an existing threat to one's own life or that of a family member. The very reason that compelled many to flee in the first place is in many cases still present.

*Not everybody knows the details, because we fear that spreading the news of our return would cost us our lives.* (Female, 36 years, IRQ#16)

Another returnee, living in complete hiding with his family, described how he used to work as an officer with the federal police in Iraq before going to Sweden. After eloping and marrying the woman he fell in love with, her tribe came after them in order to kill them. He therefore hid his wife and their child at a friend's place and fled to Sweden. Upon coming back from Sweden, the threat from the wife's tribe was still perceived just as real as when he fled Iraq.

*Nobody knew about my arrival. If they recognise me, they will try to kill me. You know in Iraq especially in the south, honour is a big issue and you won't be*

*excused, because your issue will be with a tribe not with the government [...] Let me tell you, I had a life before. I had a job, my salary was very good, I had the best car, a BMW, all of a sudden, my life turned upside down and I lost everything ... People here see my marriage as a sin, they don't see my problem as a tribal issue, and something caused by the backwardness of our tribal society. [My daughter] is eight, she can't go to school because if they find out about her identity, they will kill her. I bought the curriculum and teach her at home [...] I am tired and scared. My body is tired, and I am psychologically not good. For the last three years, I don't sleep at night, I sleep two hours in the evenings that's all. I always think of the possibility of being exposed and killed by tribal leaders.*

Male, 35 years, IRQ#35

Others, who also have problems stemming from tribal disputes reported less drastic measures of self-imposed social restrictions, but at the same time witness of the mental toll that it takes to lead one's life in constant fear of being exposed.

*I don't give the space to anyone to ask, and I don't speak about my experience, because the security situation is uncomfortable. I feel really tired, psychologically tired*

Male, 47 years, IRQ#28.

But even those who do not necessarily perceive that a threat to one's life is imminent seem to still keep their social contacts to a minimum. Staying at home, staying to themselves, is for some a matter of not wanting others to pry, to snoop around in one's business, as it may prove harmful, and for some a matter of being depressed, devastated and tired.

In the same way as the Afghan case there is a feeling of not being adapted or feeling embedded in Iraq since there is a fundamental difference in norms, values and attitudes on legality in the society. One of the informants stated that: *The difference from the government here is that they are controlled by rules.* (Male, 31 years, IRQ#21). This notion of not living under a government controlled by the law or formal rules is also one of the aspects that affects the psychological embeddedness. In the literature it is often connected to how returnees imagine their new context since it shapes their relationship with the State (Paasche 2016:1089).

## An economic dimension

### Securing basic needs

*I don't have a job, my dad takes me with him sometimes to help him and he pays me for my work, but I don't have a stable job [...] Before leaving for Sweden, people here had jobs, businesses and salaries, but when you come back there is nothing and it is very difficult to reintegrate and start your life because you feel that you are changed, and you don't have any motivation.*

Male, 30 years KRI IRQ#50

Several respondents from both the central and the Kurdish region in Iraq described their life before migrating/fleeing as one that was good, financially and socially. But due to an "external chock," like a threat from a militia, a religious extremist group, or a tribe, one had to quickly sell all personal belongings and flee the country. Upon return, the same job opportunities that one had before leaving were either not existing, or not viable options due to security concerns or previous actions. Many, therefore, struggle to find jobs, some having no luck at all. Several of the returnees do work, a couple of respondents even have continuous work, mainly as taxi drivers. It should however be mentioned that these jobs do not always generate a stable income. Most of those having a job, do so on a more temporary basis. They find opportunities here and there while working as day labourers. For most, the main hardship of life in Iraq is securing the necessities of life, being able to make enough money to cover rent and feed one's family or oneself.

The Corona pandemic, and the subsequent lock-downs, has exacerbated these difficulties. Securing gainful employment and starting a business has become much harder. One respondent for example had recently opened his own shop for antiques and second-hand furniture. But as a consequence of the pandemic, large sectors of society have been paralysed, leading to customers not getting any salaries and as such cannot come to his shop to purchase his goods.

Many of the respondents must, therefore, borrow money to make ends meet. Medication, rent and groceries are items that most seem to have had to borrow for. For most, money is available from family or friends, which are understanding of the situation, and that repaying may take some time. This highlights what has also been noted above that many do have social networks in

place that can help if needed. But it also points to the relative affluence, and availability of opportunities compared to that of the returnees in Afghanistan. It also indicates that the social and economic level of society that the returnee is trying to reintegrate into may differ. Respondents in Iraq do not seem to receive assistance from Sweden, only one respondent mentions that. Those who cannot make both ends meet seem to receive support from mainly relatives in Iraq. Some claim that they borrow from their family, in other cases it seems that this support is more of remittances in its traditional form.

As previously noted, before migrating many had proper jobs, some in government, others with international companies, some owned their own successful shops, and many described their standard of living as good. To migrate, they were able to use their savings and sell off belongings. Therefore, few have debts incurred from financing the migration. The few that do still owe money related to their migration mostly do so to relatives that seem to have understanding and patience regarding the difficulties paying back. Also in the Iraqi case the informants bear witness of the corruption that plagues the society and hurt their financial opportunities. One example mentioned by a former owner of a company, was an experience when a shop selling construction materials was attacked by a gang who threatened the owner. The police, rather than helping the shop owner, supported the gang.

*Yes, for example, there are some shops selling construction materials. Some gangs attacked them, and they threatened the owner that if he did not give a lot of money to them, they would take his shop by force. Unfortunately, some members of the police are supporting them.*

Male, 41 years, IRQ#11

#### Post-return assistance

*They said that an organisation will pay you some money and will help you find a job. I understood from them that they would help me rehabilitate in a general sense. The USD 3,000 I received cannot play an effective role in making me to depend on myself again. However, the amount I received was appreciated and useful.*

Male, 56 years, IRQ#5

The same circumstances that were present in the Afghan case, namely that we lack information to make accurate estimations on post-return assistance are also present in the Iraqi case – if not even more.

Among the 40 respondents who returned to Iraq, from what we could see in the data, a majority had received some kind of support, but a substantial minority did not. Since a larger share of the Iraqis belonged to the voluntary category in the Migration Agency categorisation a larger share seems to have received the monetary re-establishment support, perhaps as many as half of the respondents. The ERRIN support is delivered by the service provider ETTC and a small share, probably fewer than 10, received such support. A few got support from other sources for sure, the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement was mentioned a few times as providing help to cover basic expenses.

To obtain aid from either service-provider, IOM or ETTC, was less problematic than for Afghans. Still, roughly a third of the returnees pointed to the fact that the agencies in Sweden had not communicated well or shown that they had not understood the rules in their responses in the interviews. Also, in the Iraqi case some experienced problems to receive the support they had applied for and been granted. For a few we also know that they had to wait for the payment. The Iraqi data in general tells us less about potential problems and this might indicate that less returnees experienced such obstacles, but no safe conclusions can be drawn. Families returning together reported receiving roughly USD 9,000 – which could be the Re-establishment support that amounts to that sum, and some as much as USD 12,000. Most of those returning alone described getting around SEK 30,000, USD 3,000 or EUR 3,000, which is equivalent to the amount a voluntary returnee can receive by the Re-establishment support. While the money in general seems to be a welcome and useful help to manage the necessities of life, albeit for a limited period, it is at the same time considered insufficient. Particularly, if the purpose of the assistance is for the returnee to become self-reliant again.

Most respondents did not elaborate on how they used the support. Among those who received a reintegration grant, they used resources for subsistence, buying furniture, renting a house and paying off debts incurred from covering daily expenses (including rent, medicine and groceries). Among those

who describe how they spent the resources obtained, they use the reintegration grant to cover basic needs and pay debts, rather than to invest into a productive activity. The cash is used for primary necessities which are more urgent than ensuring future income.

Many simply noted how much money they received, and sometimes by whom – that is, they describe the “in-cash”-type support given. Only a couple of returnees mentioned using the money they received to set up shop or otherwise start some sort of business. For example, a young man from Kirkuk describes how he tried to turn the lump sum cash assistance into a continuously monthly income:

*They gave me the number of ETTC, and I contacted them after I returned. They gave me financial assistance, so I bought 9 or 10 mobile phones and sold them to my brother's friend, who has a mobile shop, so that he could sell them in instalments, so it was some source of income, on a monthly basis. However, the guy, on Christmas Eve, killed himself, even though he was married and had children. When I tried to take the money from his father, he refused to give me anything, and denied that there was such money, so I lost the entire amount.*

Male, 19 years, KRI IRQ#20

While he was seemingly unsuccessful due to the death of his “business partner,” another respondent, a father returning with his family, described how the USD 8,600 they received was used towards obtaining a house and starting a taxi business.

*Currently, I am working as a taxi driver, and thank god, I am covering my kids' needs, in a good way, but I'm trying to start another business.*

Male, 28 years, IRQ#44

As stated, few Iraqi returnees seem to have experienced difficulties getting the support from IOM or ETTC. In one case a returnee described sending his brother to a hotel to pick up the money, but the brother was refused to do so. The respondent didn't seem to be particularly disappointed over this fact, at least he didn't dwell on the issue further in the interview. Perhaps the beneficiary is required to collect the money in person. But whomever was at fault for this situation, it was one of the few unsuccessful experiences when trying to collect reintegration assistance. Many described a seemingly short and



straightforward procedure of getting a call some two months after the return to come and pick up the equivalent to USD 3,000. None seem to have had problems relating to documentation, and complaints of not getting what one was promised were not voiced among Iraqi returnees. Likewise, no one expressed any critical sentiments regarding the time it took from arriving in Iraq to getting hold of the assistance.

A disappointment expressed, with regards to return assistance, is directed towards the information that a number of returnees told that they would receive help with finding work upon return.

*They only gave me the number of ETTTC, and another number in case I wanted to work – I called them and they told me that they do not have any job opportunities for now.*

Male, 34 years, KRI IRQ#19

No one seems to have been helped in finding a job after returning. This could partly be the result of the Corona pandemic and the subsequent shut down of much of the Iraqi society and economy.

## 7.3 A sustainable return?

### Degrees of re-embeddedness

Although most respondents have a relatively low level of what we call in this study as re-embeddedness, there are nuances among them. Despite the difficult contexts to which our respondents were sent to, it is possible to distinguish different levels or degrees of re-embeddedness. It is important to mention that categories are blurred and due to the subjective character of our data we cannot undertake a definitive classification of the respondents' degrees of embeddedness. When trying to classify individuals' re-embeddedness we have considered the relative situation of individuals not only regarding each dimension, but also elements such as future prospects, hopes for the future, health and access to support. The dimensions were then analysed along with other factors considering to what extent these contribute to or hinder individuals' re-embeddedness, according to their own words. Still, since this is a process of mixed-embeddedness, the dimensions are often interlinked and

in the cases of poor or very poor embeddedness all dimensions are more or less weak because they affect each other.

In our data we can distinguish individuals who have achieved a successful integration, other who according to certain criteria have an incipient embeddedness, others who find themselves in a poor condition and a few who are in a very poor state lacking all sorts of preconditions to thrive.

In the cases where a **successful embeddedness** is achieved, all three dimensions of embeddedness have been covered having a good psychological, social, and economic re-embeddedness. Less than a handful of cases could be classified here. These cases involved well-educated individuals who voluntarily returned. All had job experiences in the country and abroad. Although they received a threat, they have been able to reconstruct their lives in their place of birth and with the support of their close families. They or their families own properties and have access to a comfortable life.

*When you see your family, it's the best feeling, and I forgot all the fatigue. My children and my brother were waiting for me at the airport. They were very happy to see me. It was the first day of school in Iraq, so I took them to school... I still work with my food factory, which I built in my house backyard [note: the one he had before he left]... Thank god, my financial situation is good. I have some properties through family inheritance in case I needed something.*

Male, 41 years, IRQ#11

Those who could be considered as successfully embedded have a relatively stable job and good prospects for the future. They are also immersed in a good family and social life. Psychologically, they feel much better than the rest of the respondents. They have a different tone when relating their past and present experiences. They are more articulated and have a more positive vision about the future. They are less critical of their countries but cannot avoid making comparisons with what they experienced when being abroad. Despite their well-being, all of them express some worry about the unstable situation in their countries. Because they return home to a context they already knew, they can be considered as returnees successfully reintegrated to their country.

The respondents who showed an **incipient degree of embeddedness** express optimism in the future and most count with family and social networks. In contrast to the previous category they still feel that life in Afghanistan or Iraq is a matter of survival and express their worries about the future. What makes their embeddedness incipient and not successful is the feeling of insecurity affecting mostly the economic situation as they have not yet found a stable job, and the feeling of safety considering their own well-being and their families' welfare. In the cases where psychological problems were present after the return, these could largely be alleviated with the support of family and friends, although a general sense of unsafety often persist. Those considered belonging to this group – roughly a handful of respondents – tend to experience an unstable economic situation even though they, to some extent, can rely on individual resources which helps them to thrive. In other words, they don't enjoy a stable combination of re-embeddedness over all three dimension (as those in the "successful group") but rather an uneven embeddedness with one or two dimensions (economic and/or psychosocial) being poorly fulfilled.

*Herat has a good security situation but not many employment opportunities. It is very difficult to find a job here. I wanted to go Iran and so I saved some money and got a visa too; I wanted to go to Iran after New Year's Day but then this Coronavirus situation came up.*

*... I sewed purses in Herat. and besides breakfast and lunch. I would get paid AFN 500 per week. When I learned the work better, they paid me AFN 1,000 per week. I did this for a year, learned the first six months and worked easily the remaining 6 months. The purse sewing business also went down and was not good, so I quit it. I did a watchman's job for a while and any other job that I would find I would work at it.*

***Do you feel that you have access to economic opportunities?***

*Things are very difficult in Afghanistan.*

***Do you think that your migration journey impacted your ability to secure work back home?***

*No, it did not impact my ability to secure work. I was in the first year of stone carving there and did not get any hands-on experience with it. I went to Herat once to check out stone carving but figured it was done by hands here*

*whereas in Sweden it is all done with machines. I tried to find a job a lot but could not.*

Male, 22 years, AFG#18

Within an incipient degree of embeddedness, we see individuals who express feeling psychologically better than the majority of the respondents and count with networks, most especially family members. Some young individuals might yet to secure a stable job but have concrete plans to for example start a business and feel more enthusiastic about the future. They have no burden of debts sustained, or these have been paid already.

In Afghanistan, the few located in this category have been in touch with NGOs or other returnees or other type of networks, like family. The psychological wellbeing and future plans are very much linked to the social connections. Among the social connections, private persons and most especially families in Sweden who hosted them, are in permanent contact and, on occasions send remittances.

Even in this category, and although people have the will to make a living in the country, sometimes life gets unstable. For example, even though one respondent declared being able to cover his family's needs, sometimes has needed to ask for help from a private person in Sweden. Some have gotten help from IOM and other organisations. Although many in the next categories also received this financial support, the "incipient-embedded" returnees rely on social networks to succeed with their endeavours.

The respondents classified in a **poor embeddedness** category lack the enthusiasm and positive energy of the two previous categories. All three embeddedness dimensions have yet to be covered, even if in most cases, more than a year has passed since their return. In contrast to the two previous categories, the economic dimension very weak. The degree of support respondents get from their social networks varies within this category.

More than half of our sample can be classified as poorly embedded to the context. Those returning by means of a forced return are overrepresented in this category, even though in Iraq people classified as voluntary returnees by the public authorities also have a poor degree of embeddedness. What is

characteristic for most, especially those who were sent back to Afghanistan is the lack of social support and networks to know how to thrive in the country. Almost the totality of Afghan nationals who grew up in Iran are located in this category. Then it comes to the psychological dimension, the large part does not feel at home and struggle to find some sense of belonging but the fear for the security situation makes it difficult to see a feasible life in there. The concerns for the security situation are also present among returnees to Iraq but they feel one should get used to it in order to move forward.

*Before and after the migration, as long as we live in a country that doesn't have a reliable law, we cannot live safely. That's why people adjust to the situation and the problems.*

Male, 30 years, IRQ#34

Another aspect making difficult the psychological well-being is the stigma of return that was previously discussed in this chapter. People avoid social relations and sometimes they even avoid their family, living in isolation, which worsened an already shaky mental state. The youngest respondents are also still trying to make sense of their migration journey, not understanding the rejection received, feeling being unfairly treated and having an urgent need to leave the country again. Being alone seems to increase their vulnerability

*I am very scared because I am alone. I am a migrant here and I was a migrant there; sometimes I think to myself when this will end. I see that sometimes people are killed here over a phone and if someone finds out that I have returned from Europe, they will definitely threaten me. They do not know what problems I am going through, and they would just think that I have money since I have returned from Europe. I am very careful and when I go to places, I do not go in crowds. The security situation is very bad here.*

Male, 20 years, AFG#74

Some received reintegration support from the respective organisations but in most cases, this support has been used to pay debts and cover daily expenses. In general, they struggle to make ends meet. Over a dozen of respondents in Afghanistan declared to have been able to cover basic expenses thanks to money sent by private persons or families in Sweden.

The respondents who show a **very poor embeddedness** to the context that they were sent back to lack the financial, psychological, and social prerogatives to succeed in life. In contrast to the previous classification, individuals in this one do not count with support that can make them move forward and their psychological state is very weak. In some cases, physical health is also weak having the respondent multiple problems, making it impossible for them to join the labour market in the short run. A handful of respondents in Iraq and about a dozen in Afghanistan could be located here.

Many struggle to find out the location of their family. Those who know where they are sometimes feel a sense of guilt, which is added to the stigma of return. Respondents feel guilty because their families sold everything to finance their migration which was a failure. Therefore, not only the individual deported encounters an impoverished situation but also the whole family finds itself struggling due to an unsuccessful migration project.

*We do not have anything right now. We sold our land and the money was wasted for my migration. My family is now in debt because of my migration. We are still in financial and social trouble now that I have returned.*

Male, 18 years, AFG#105

Some in this group were able to receive a reintegration grant which was entirely used to cover either daily expenses or a trip to Afghanistan or another country, looking for their families. None of them have been able to invest the money in a productive activity, and they don't have the tools to do so. They lack social connections; they have no knowledge of the society and are in constant fear to go outside.

The lack of safety and psychological well-being directly affects their ability to look for help and to have access to employment. Their prospects seem dark considering that they have many symptoms of suffering from depression, which goes undiagnosed and untreated.

*I am not happy about anything. I am sad ever since I have returned. I am always sad, and I was not like this before. I do not have money to go to a doctor either.*

***What problems or hardships do you face?***

*I have economic problems and I am unemployed. I am also worried about lack of shelter. My mother is having problems in Maidan Wardak and I cannot go there because I might get killed if I go.*

Male, 20 years, AFG#103

Most respondents in both countries could be classified as poorly embedded to the context. The characteristics and preconditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, individuals' characteristics and external factors make it difficult to become embedded to the society from an economic, social, and psychological perspective.

Interestingly, we see that reintegration grants were present in all these categories. Therefore, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding whether this support is fostering embeddedness or if it is mainly relieving the urgent needs of deported individuals. In any case, the support does bring some help, even if it is momentary.

A striking result is that in all categories we observe respondents who desire to re-migrate. The primary factor leading people to consider a new migration project is not the lack of or plausibility of reintegration, but rather the feeling of unsafety, the insecurity not only physical but about the future. This should be taken as a source for renovation among the main agencies producing reintegration programmes as if the safety is endangered people are ready to leave everything once again just to be safer.

**Re-migration**

*If I have money, I will not wait here for another two minutes and I will leave. I am worried here that the government might arrest me, and I am also unemployed and fed up with the insecurity... I would leave for Europe right now if I could.*

Male, 20 years, AFG#4

The narratives about a desire to re-migrate are very telling with regards to the goal in returnees' lives, despite the hardships of the previous migration experience. A large part of the respondents has an intention to re-migrate, most especially Afghans. Many of them desire to travel away as soon as they gather

the necessary resources to do so. In the narratives, returnees often describe the desire to re-migrate back to Europe along with the lack of hope in a future in the country of origin. However, the desire to re-migrate is transformed into concrete plans to a different degree among the respondents. Individuals often mentioned that the lack of resources and the travel restrictions due to the Corona pandemic make it difficult to travel at the time of the interview. But if these two circumstances can be overcome many respondents seem willing to go abroad again, most commonly towards Europe.

Some Afghans have already (re)migrated to Iran to reunite with their families. For these respondents, staying in Afghanistan did not make much sense as they had no connection to the country and did not believe they could thrive in it. For those set on leaving for Iran after the return to Afghanistan, all efforts are directed to getting enough financial resources, by means of temporary work, or return aid from ERRIN or elsewhere, so that they can obtain travel documents for the trip (getting a passport/visa/Tazkira).

*I stayed in Kabul for about 5–6 months. I received the return aid, fixed my passport, and came to Iran.*

Male, 22 years AFN#59

A large part of those who desire to re-migrate wants to do it legally, without taking a dangerous route towards an uncertain destiny. Sweden is, sometimes, the target destination. Others, mostly among those having returned to Iraq (though not to KRI), exclude Sweden completely from their plans to re-migrate because of the hardships experienced in the country.

*Yes, if I get the chance, I will prefer to migrate legally to Europe because I am no more able to tolerate all these problems through illegal ways due to my bad health condition.*

Male, 67 years, AFG#12

*To be honest, we all want to live in safety, but I would never go back to Sweden... Yes, I want to go back to Europe but not to Sweden. If there is an opportunity I will go back to Europe*

Male, 42 years, IRQ#36



Some of our respondents, especially in Afghanistan desire to re-migrate back to Sweden through legal ways, supported by friends, sponsors or a former employer. In these cases, when asked about their plans for the future, they are convinced that there is a legal pathway back to Sweden for them. They depict their current situation as a waiting period when they can get their paperwork in order and leave at the end of the Corona pandemic.

*My plan is to wait and get my work permit/residence permit one day so that I can go back. If I cannot get a work permit/residence permit, I will apply again. I do not have any particular problem and I should get a work permit because all of my friends there are supporting me in this process.*

Male, 20 years, AFN#74

Among those who mentioned that they did not receive any reintegration support, the lack of assistance is sometimes blamed for what they describe as a bleak future, most especially in Afghanistan. Even among the few who had access to a reintegration grant, there is a desire to re-migrate. This shows that economic support is insufficient to promote reintegration.

*I was unemployed for a year. Then I had to borrow some money and combine it with what the ERRIN office gave me to start a shop. Even now if I have enough money I will not live in Afghanistan. I will go to live in a European country.*

Male, 23 years, AFN#31

The desirability of re-migration is not always related to the lack of embeddedness with the place where they are returned to. The narratives show that a minority would stay in Afghanistan or Iraq if the conditions were better. The factors mentioned are mainly the same: security and access to education or employment.

*My hopes for myself and my mother are to have a comfortable and peaceful life. If there is security in Afghanistan, I am happy to live here. If there is no security here, everyone thinks about leaving.*

Male, 22 years, AFN#17

Among the few who see themselves having a life in Afghanistan or Iraq, the reasons provided were similar. Key to the intention to stay is existent family and family formation, and access to some type of economic activity.

*I think my future will be here in Afghanistan. I try to work and make some money and get married because I cannot remain single forever and that is my mother's wish too for me to get married... I want to focus on my farming. But I also think a lot about Sweden... My priority is getting married and settling down. If I remain in Afghanistan, I also want to find a good job here.*

Male, 26 years, AFN#35

Having family in the place where an individual returns to, as well as a source of income are two determinants in the narratives that make to discard – at least for the moment being – a new migration journey after the return.

For most respondents, the desirability of re-migration suggests that their return may not be particularly sustainability. Re-migration becomes a hope for those who see no future in the country of origin. A new trip is not only a hope but also a goal that leads people struggle against the odds. The objective is to find resources to move abroad, rather than to stay and succeed in the country of origin.

*I want to migrate if I could get a chance and find money for it, because people insult and ridicule me, as well as, they have negative perceptions about me. At least, there is no one to insult me in Europe, as well as, no one calls me an alcoholic or a bad guy. They never told me why I am not praying but I hear all such things in here. All these things have caused me to suffer from psychological problems. Therefore, if I could get a chance and find the money, I will definitely migrate again to Europe and will continue my education there. Continuing my education is one of my priorities in any condition.*

Male, 22 years, AFG#33

Although Iraqis are able to thrive to a higher extent after the return, more than half of the interviewees consider re-migration. Some mention re-migration as a dream while others have specific plans to return to Europe. In comparison to Afghan respondents they seem to have better chances in accessing the labour market. Employment is sometimes mentioned not as a tool for reintegration, but to save money for a future migration. The desires and plans for re-migration are present across ethnic, age, civil status and gender groups.

*I see the future of my family in Europe. My priority is still to focus on finding a chance to take my family back to Sweden. Building a good life for my kids is the only thing I want.*

Male, 37 years, KRI IRQ#49

*Yes, I want to go back to Sweden, even if I will be back in prison. It's better than living in Iraq.*

Male, 19 years, KRI IRQ#20

For those that do not plan to re-migrate in the immediate future, the access to work was mentioned as a reason to stay in Iraq.

*Europe is lovely, but in Iraq if I have a shop and can work, I will stay here... If there is enough money I will go back to Europe.*

#### **Why?**

*Because my life is at risk here, the same reason that led me to leave... Let me be honest, everything is nice at its time. But now if you can get me job here, I will never leave Iraq.*

Male, 25 years, IRQ#42

The respondents returned to Iraq and Afghanistan relatively recently. At the time of the interviews, they had been in the country of origin between three years to two months. Frustration and fear characterise the state of mind of many. The re-migration plans seem to vary from being a dream to a concrete strategy. It is difficult to determine whether the desire to re-migrate will ever materialise or whether it could fade away if the situation in the country of origin improves and they are able to build a better future for themselves.

## **7.4 Summary and short comparison of the two cases**

The data analysed above points to some of the difficulties faced by returnees when trying to (re)integrate into a new context. All the three dimensions that formed part of our analytical framework departing from the concept of embeddedness point to the complexity where support – in-cash or in-kind – can offer a certain relief, but rarely presupposes a strong input within the reintegration process. While this study is not a comparative one, one cannot

help to notice that there are both differences as well as similarities between returning to Iraq and returning to Afghanistan. Depending on the long- and short-term goals of the sending actor (e.g. the Swedish government, through the Migration Agency), these results can be informative. For example, when trying to figure out how best to design structures for assisting the reintegration of those who return.

Below are a couple of summarising and analysing points related to the differences and similarities of the two cases in this study.

## Factors affecting (re)integration?

### Threat and insecurity

Among the contextual factors that we included in our analytical framework, issues of safety and security became primordial for embeddedness. It is clear from the empirical data that many of the respondents, mostly in Iraq but also in Afghanistan, return to what they perceive to be the very same threat or hostile situation that made them leave the country in the first place. In many cases, this seems to have major implications for their ability to reintegrate – particularly in the social and psychosocial realms of life. Indeed, many were living in hiding to some degree. By hiding, an individual's ability to use existing, or forge new, social networks is limited. This group lives in more or less constant fear of being exposed, as a returnee, or as the individual that others are looking for, which means restrictions to one's ability to decide over one's life, restrictions to being accepted into the wider society, and restrictions to a sense of feeling that one belongs to society.

Iraqi returnees seem to have been living a relatively good life before they migrated. Despite the fact that Iraq was plagued with a tension between different ethnic, religious and political groups and other problems many had access to employment and financial opportunities. They had a place to call home, social networks and friends. Then, an external chock rocked their life-balance and they felt they had to leave on relatively short notice. For example, a tribal feud erupted, militants attacked, etc. For most of the Afghan returnees, the reason to leave have been stemming from years of living in poverty and general insecurity, which made them discontent with and even hateful towards the Afghan society and culture. Some had moved on to Iran in order to draw on the financial opportunities there, before leaving for Europe. Others claimed

that they had never, or at least not for many years, lived in Afghanistan, even though they were Afghan nationals. Many declared that they didn't feel that they belonged in Afghanistan, while that same notion is not as prevalent for those returning to Iraq. For sure, many returnees in Iraq also noted a lack of belonging or difficulties adapting, but for the most part that seems to be mostly connected to the feelings of insecurity, while not feeling as distant, or strange to the culture, as many in the Afghan case. The results show that some of the security-related issues that were described as pushing respondents to migrate to Europe are described as still existing after the return. From that perspective, sustainability of the return becomes questionable, looking very difficult or rather impossible to achieve.

### Family and Social networks

In both cases, the existence of social networks seems to play a very important role for the respondents' ability to (re)integrate. Among the respondents in Afghanistan that seemed to feel a stronger sense of belonging and conveyed a somewhat more optimistic outlook for their future, they depicted having returned to a familiar setting in which they had family, or friends, and some degree of social networks. These were fewer than those experiencing the opposite had. The absence of the above, the lack of social networks and the lack of *wasta*, significantly impeded many respondents' attempts to reintegrate economically and seem to have left many feeling lonely, depressed and vulnerable. In Iraq on the other hand, it seemed that relatively more respondents returned to some sort of familiarity, to family or friends, to existing social networks. Still, a number of respondents in Iraq were unable to draw on such assets since the perceived threat to their lives were such that they deemed it necessary to hide.

One difference between the two cases is the fact that all Iraqis returned to the country where they were from, while nearly half of the Afghans claimed that they were not well-acquainted with Afghanistan. Many of them had been living in Iran before migration. Most of these respondents noted that they would try to go to Iran at their soonest possible convenience, some had even already left for Iran. For those claiming to completely lack any relationship with Afghanistan, *reintegration* would perhaps not be the best term depicting their situation. *Integration* would be a better term as the Afghan society would be new to them, which in many respects would put them in a worse situation than many of their Afghan peers as they would in most cases lack the social

networks, sense of belonging and Afghan identity. This situation could potentially affect all three dimensions of integration since it would place the individual in a psychosocially bad position – a place not recognised as home; socially isolated – no close relatives or social networks; and in many cases even at a worse position than that of other returnees in terms of finding work and being able to pay for daily expenses.

Time wasted, insufficient funds, and feeling deprived of what was, or could have been

The absolute majority of the respondents depict the current economic situation they find themselves in as grim, with a bleak prospective for the future. Unemployment, lack of opportunities, and a constant struggle to thrive, is the reality for most respondents of the study, except for a limited few who seem to make enough money to suffice. For many, particularly the Afghan respondents, the economic situation in that regard is similar to what they left behind when leaving the country for work in Iran and then Europe, or directly towards Europe. But, importantly, they have incurred a huge loss as most sold everything they owned and used up all their savings to finance the migration. Many also borrowed large sums of money, which some have managed to repay, while others have not. For the majority, the financial situation is worse than their pre-migration period. Even though those who have incurred debts by borrowing from relatives or friends to finance the migration – making them less susceptible to debt-related violence or threats – the debts nonetheless seem to be a heavy burden for many of those who still struggle to make instalments to pay off their loans. Finally, since the Corona pandemic forced society into lockdowns, the lender is left in precarious situations with an increasing need be repaid, which has added to the returnees' psychological stress of not being able to repay.

It is difficult to know if the migration experience in Sweden has had any negative impacts on the respondents' abilities to find employment. For many in Iraq for example, the reason behind leaving in the first place (for instance a perceived threat to one's life) seem to be the main obstacle to finding work, if not counting the Corona pandemic. For the Afghan respondents, the time in Sweden doesn't seem to have much positive impact on the ability to find work. Skills that one may have acquired in Sweden, are not easily transferable to the returning context, particularly in Afghanistan. Many feel that they have lost some of their most important years doing nothing to improve their situation.

Therefore, the time spent in Sweden has as such been considered by many as a waste, setting respondents back in time compared to their peers in their homeland, education-wise, work-wise and even family-wise.

Importantly, the migration experience has both a negative and a positive impact on the returnees. It is negative in the sense that they feel deprived of what could have been a better life. The notion of what life could be like in Sweden had they been able to stay, compared to what they now realise they will have to settle for, renders most respondents hopeless and depressed. It could also potentially have other, more positive, socio-political ramifications in the long run as many respondents declared to know now 'how it is to be treated like a proper human being' which in the long run can carry a socio-political remittance by claiming more respect and humanity in their countries. When respondents were asked about their dreams and hopes for the future, a large majority expressed their desire to return to Sweden or to another EU country. Such feeling was expressed almost as a drive to thrive in the present and, someday, be able to return. However, few consider having an opportunity in the short run to return to Europe. For most, the current situation is so precarious that they have very few chances to start saving for a new migration. Importantly, many declared the desire to re-migrate through legal paths as most traumas associated to the failed migration project are associated to the illegality of this.

### Assistance

The support, in cash or in-kind services, received by our respondents does not always fulfil the aim of promoting the returnees' self-sufficiency. Only a few returnees acquire the support and use it to directly invest in an income-generating activity. Some returnees don't receive it at all, others received it after several months. And when they did, it was mostly used to cover basic and immediate needs such as rent, food and in many cases the loan that financed their migration to Sweden. Interestingly, among those who did use the money to start a productive activity, they can do so with the help of family and friends. Without these social networks it is difficult to succeed with an income-generating activity leading to a better socioeconomic situation for the returnee.

There are some shortcomings with the assistance that has to do with information, mainly from the Swedish agencies. Another set of shortcomings

has to do with the implementation on the ground. Not all of this can be contributed to mismanagement from the organisations set out to perform their duties. Both countries are struck with security issues, lack of efficient bureaucracy, corruption which severely constrains implementation.

Return assistance has been criticised for its limitations from micro and from macro perspectives. A micro perspective is the studies evaluating national programmes. An example of this is the study about IRANNA (Information, Return and Reintegration of Afghan Nationals to Afghanistan), a programme implemented by the IOM missions in Norway and Afghanistan. It was available only to Afghans and had additional components: a cash grant of 15,000 NOK, extended information and counselling both in Norway and in Afghanistan, as well as reintegration assistance upon return. When Strand et al (2016) evaluated the IOM implemented programme, they showed that resettlement and in-kind parts of the programme did not meet the expectations of the returnees for a sustainable return. The worsened economic and security situation in Afghanistan was one of the reasons. Besides, IOM did not seem to have managed to shift its orientation from the business option towards education and job placement.

From a macro perspective, studies have been focused on the limitations of this dichotomy. European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) has criticised the point of departure of such schemes, the notion of voluntary, being “mandatory” a more correct depiction (ECRE, 2003). Meanwhile Cassarino (2015) approaches the topic by criticising the term “return” which is actually being implemented as a mere removal without considering the perspectives of the individual as a migrant. An interesting approach is Collyer (2018) concluded that the assistance provided by these do not provide sufficiently substantial financial contributions to make a genuine difference (Collyer, 2018: 123).

Our study can draw similar conclusions. Respondents are often of the impression that the help is “not enough.” In most cases, though, the assistance does provide a much-needed relief upon return to a hostile context. Taking into account the many descriptions of traumatic experiences and low levels of psychological well-being, many respondents would benefit from some sort of counselling or other form of psychological help. Support in finding old social contacts and making new ones could also contribute to their well-being. However, the existing support is mainly focused on economic aspects. In our



data we find that the three dimensions of embeddedness are interrelated which should be taken into account when crafting reintegration support.

### Sustainable return?

Whether or not one can talk about sustainable return and reintegration depends on the definition of sustainable return. Chapter 2 showed that there is no unique form to define sustainability. If the benchmark is simply that someone who is not desiring to re-migrate can be considered sustainably returned, then few in this study can be considered sustainably returned as most seem to have a desire to re-migrate. If the bar is raised a little to those who do not having a concrete plan to re-migrate, then the group grows a little, but is still in the minority. This mostly is a result of the fact that few are able to start saving for another trip, at least in the short term. At the same time the intention to move away could persist if the economic difficulties and most especially, the countries' insecurity continue. If sustainability of return is equated to having the means to sustain one's life financially, self-sustained or not, then again, few in the study would be characterised as sustainably returned. Their situation is still precarious and vulnerable to political and economic instability. For most respondents in Afghanistan, the only way one would be able to describe the respondents as sustainably returned is by adhering to a minimalist (and widely criticised) definition of 'not having re-migrated already', as most seem to have concrete plans for re-migration. For a couple, even that definition is inapplicable as they have already left the country (for Iran). It is clear that in Afghanistan, it is difficult to speak about sustainability, independently of how one defines it. Very few respondents were able to thrive by themselves. If we consider a more comprehensive perspective of sustainability, taking into account social, economic and psychosocial reintegration, then only a handful of our respondents could be achieving sustainable return.<sup>48</sup> Importantly, what seems more relevant for the respondents are not the economic opportunities but the country's security and personal safety. These seem to be more decisive aspects for personal future plans when deciding whether or not one is to stay or re-migrate. An important consideration is that our respondents' situation must be weighed against the population that didn't leave. Not only returnees feel varying degrees of

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<sup>48</sup> In economic terms it is important to note that Afghanistan is a much less developed country than Iraq in terms of GDP/capita or basic social welfare so the relatively better situation for the Iraqis could also be caused by this fact.

insecurity given the security situation in both countries but there is also a general situation for the inhabitants that find themselves in a vulnerable situation. And likewise, economically, unemployment is rampant in both countries, due to previous structural factors, and now exacerbated by the pandemic.

## 8. Conclusion and final thoughts

Early in this project we identified return policies as a priority within the political discourse. This prioritisation usually considers return as the end of the migration cycle. Return has been narrowly defined in the current lexicon of governmental and intergovernmental agencies as the fact of leaving the territory of a destination country (Cassarino, 2008). Our study has shown that return is significantly more complex than leaving a country, and that a non-voluntary return is rarely the last stage in the migration cycle. But perhaps the most significant result is that return is far from being sustainable – independently of the meaning attributed to the concept – because returnees arrive to a context with significantly more difficult living conditions than what they experienced in Sweden and, in many cases, impoverished as compared to their situation previous to the migration. Besides the implications of a failed asylum project, there is also a generally low level of preparedness and few chances to become re-embedded.

We have studied two cases, Afghanistan and Iraq. These are two of the most difficult contexts to return and reintegrate into if we look more closely at the structural factors such as the security situation, political unrest, corruption and to some extent also the economic situation. Therefore, our discussion and last remarks are marked by the particularities of our two cases. Still, some of our results could be used in a more general spectrum within return and re-integration studies and policies. Some results and themes that we believe are more generalisable are mental health conditions during and after the asylum process, the importance of social networks for reintegration and the difficulties in accessing reintegration support among others.

## 8.1 A 'whole-of-migration' perspective to understand return

When planning our study, we realised the importance of looking at the whole migration experience of the respondents. Insights into their origins and the causes that lead them to migrate brought new elements to the analysis. These aspects together with the lived experiences around the asylum process offer specific factors that could affect the return and re-embeddedness of individuals. Some elements can be found in previous research – our study in that sense is not anecdotal but adds evidence found in other studies in the field. However, other elements are seldom mentioned in previous research. Return and reintegration are usually studied within the temporality of the arrival into what is supposed to be a returnee's home country. Our data tells us that many factors prior and during the migration experience could affect reintegration. Besides, almost half of the respondents in Afghanistan do not return to a place they felt they really belonged. Since the sense of belonging is linked to their family and being able to draw from a tight social network, the absence of such mean that the terms "return" and "re-integration" are not applicable in the same way as with other migrants. With that said, a minor number of Afghan respondents, mainly those who had grown up there and had both family and a social network in place, felt that they belonged there.

After exploring our data, we can distinguish factors that affect return and reintegration in all migration phases: Pre-migration, migration journey, asylum process in Sweden and post-return. The richness of our data makes it possible to disentangle elements that affect embeddedness after a return in all three dimensions of our analytical framework. Our first research question was to find out about the pre-migration factors that affected embeddedness which we discuss in the next section

### Before migration: Mobile individuals fighting discrimination and instability

The former asylum seekers from Afghanistan we interviewed had some specific characteristics: a majority was very young at the time of migration and most of them belong to an ethnic group, Hazaras. Coming of age in a turbulent country with difficult political and socioeconomic circumstances is difficult already in itself, belonging to a minority added to the burden. For those who

have roots and family in Iran the prospects of being re-embedded or integrated in Afghanistan are poor.

The pre-migration situation of the Iraqi asylum-seekers, in general, paints a somewhat different picture. The group is more diverse in all aspects and often migrates as family units. They were significantly older, more experienced as well as socio-economically established in their home-country. Possibly these factors also made their journey to Sweden less difficult than for the Afghans. Their difficulties and the reason for their migration can more be described as caused by "external shocks" like threats from militias or religious extremists. In contrast to the Afghans, they more often had ties to Sweden such as family members or friends who also influenced them in their migratory decisions.

The above-mentioned results are more context-specific but they are in broad terms, consistent with earlier research from i.a. Koser and Kuschminder (2015). The level of education, employment status and other socio-economic factors as well as social belonging have consequences for the possibilities to re-integrate.

## Consequences of the asylum period for return and reintegration

Our second research question was whether the asylum process and period in Sweden could affect the return and re-integration prospects. We know from earlier research and government official enquiries that for newly arrived asylum seekers in Sweden, there is an overarching goal of integration from not only the agencies, but a large part of Swedish society. So, the default mode appears to be integration rather than preparing for return, because the premise is that the asylum-seeker will eventually get a residence permit. The respondents in our study are affected by this and as discussed in Malm Lindberg (2020) this is not only a concrete policy, but also attitudes and ways of thinking in e.g. the Migration Agency.

Considering the asylum period, the narratives of the respondents show that they initially have little to no knowledge about the asylum system in Sweden. The process was foreign to them. Sometimes, and even after three rejections, they are still unable to make sense of the process. These failed asylum seekers are sometimes completely detached from their asylum process. The majority was, however, engaged into integrating in the Swedish society with

more or less success. The goal was a much different one than the resultant outcome. As many respondents illustrated, they do not understand the information, and many reported to have received it through third persons – acquaintances for the most part. The respondent's narratives showed that few are able to grasp the significance of a rejection and they are seldom aware of when the actual decision is taken. When they turn to the service providers, they also encounter difficulties since the large majority had not been able to contact their legal advisor.

The long waiting period affect people in different ways. The uncertainty and life in refugee-accommodations had negative repercussions in terms of the mental health of the applicants. In other cases, they invest all their energies and personal resources in integrating into Swedish society. In both cases, this is detrimental for their well-being in the aftermath of their removal. These results are consistent with previous research (see section 2.2) on the consequences of the asylum period for migrants. The respondents in Lennartsson (2007) also mentioned that they felt trapped in limbo during the period of waiting. The experience of seeking asylum generally affects the migrants in a negative way, due to the uncertainty as such and the stress it creates. Such stress leads to lower self-confidence and a deteriorating physical as well as mental health (Esaiaasson & Sohlberg 2018:6–7, 100). The latter phenomenon is especially true for the Iraqi women, albeit few, who participated in this study. But we see signs of depression and other health related issues also among some of the other returnees. Few of the respondents mentioned anything that the agencies –both in Sweden and the international and local agencies in charge of reintegration support – provided that made them more prepared to re-integrate.

We analysed the reluctance that most of our informants expressed to return to Afghanistan. The lack of preparedness to return was first seen as non-acceptance of a return decision. An aspect behind this lack of preparedness to return is the initial approach of the Swedish authorities, under which many activities at the beginning of the asylum process are designed to rather integrate newcomers than preparing them for a potential rejection decision, and then return. Many respondents narrated to have felt welcome when they first arrived in Sweden and reflected over the meaning of being treated as a human being. When someone who is used to be at the bottom of the social pyramid, is treated with respect – the expectations tend to rise. What could

have been done differently? The answer is not to adopt a rude attitude on the part of the institutions. It is rather to offer honest guidance showing accurately the chances to obtain asylum or not.

The understanding of the procedure on the part of the asylum seekers should be ensured not only as a quality checking, but most of all, as part of the legal certainty. A process cannot be considered legally certain if it is hard to understand the procedure itself and the outcomes of such procedure. A large part of our respondents mentioned that many of their acquaintances did receive asylum. Why did they not receive asylum if their cases were practically the same? Questions like these stay in people's minds in the period after the deportation period. It takes time to overcome such a state of mind, but to prevent it could be done already in Sweden.

The frustration that individuals felt regarding a rejection decision as discussed above affects their mental health, which does not seem to improve after the return when other difficulties also affect individuals' psychological status. The difficulty in reaching the organisations in charge of the reintegration grants increases a feeling of frustration for not having control over one's assets. As previous research show (see e.g. De Bono et al. 2015) the lack of control and agency significantly impacts individuals' psychological well-being. Therefore, improving the communication between the agencies and the rejected asylum seekers is desirable not only out of humanity. It also gives agency and a sense of control, which could help individuals to feel better and plan for the future in a situation where they feel defeated.

Another factor hindering preparedness to return is the possibility to abscond. Life without a residence permit is usually regarded as an undesirable option. However, this is neither new nor the least desirable option for many of them. Some participants of this study have been living irregularly for the most part of their lives. The threats in their country of nationality or even a neighbouring country are larger than the ones they would experience in Sweden. In Malm Lindberg (2020:1) experts working with rejected asylum seekers often heard a saying that being illegal on the streets of Stockholm was better than being a legal subject in Kabul. Part of such a disposition can be found among some of our respondents who were willing to stay in Sweden illegally. They were sometimes able to work; they found a place to live and received certain support in the informal sector. The incentives to return are few and both

academic studies as well as policy discussions should take this into consideration.

In conclusion, returnees have, for the most part, very few resources to understand a return decision and prepare themselves to return. Their level of preparedness is low and sometimes inexistent. Several elements during the asylum process could be amended to rectify this situation and make return more humane and legally certain. These elements should always take into consideration the great difficulties present at the context where individuals are returning to.

## Deconstructing “voluntary” return

Some voluntary returns are more “voluntary” than others. The public authorities regard voluntary return as an efficient and therefore desirable outcome. It takes less time, money, and energy. It is less traumatic; it seems clean and problem-free. A voluntary return that is often depicted as an efficient outcome, can in reality be a return forced by other circumstances, or even a strategy for re-migration. Return is accepted not necessarily because the individual has the intention to settle down in the country of origin. The different degrees of “voluntariness” behind the decision, might affect the preparedness to later reintegrate into the country of origin. Such degrees need to be problematised as it might influence reintegration and possibilities for re-migration.

The reasons to voluntary return could be exhaustion of the system, a desire to help family members solve life threatening problems, a re-migration strategy through legal pathways, mental health problems, etc. All these cases are classified as “voluntary return.” However, among these voluntary returnees, few wanted to return to their country of origin. The large variation of the motives behind voluntary return cast doubts over the efficient character of it.

The desire and possibility to come back to Sweden through legal ways is a major incentive to return voluntary. This is a double-faced factor. On one hand, it offers a less problematic return proceeding for all parties involved. On the other hand, it does not encourage reintegration, at least in the long run, since the final goal is to legally re-migrate to Sweden. The individual in question sees return merely as a space of time while the legal documents are processed so that he or she can return to Sweden.



As we discussed in Chapter 2, the dichotomy forced-voluntary has already been widely criticised by researchers. However, it is still the operative classification for states, the EU and many international organisations. There is a need to bridge the gaps between research and practice within this field. To discuss the “degrees of voluntariness,” could presuppose better help to those facing return, more preparedness, appropriate assistance and better outcomes.

### The role of the national authorities

Another key finding was the lack of support offered by the Embassies to returnees. Although the complaints registered were directed towards the Embassy of Afghanistan in Sweden, the Iraqi Embassy was never mentioned as a source of either information or support. This was unexpected since Sweden has readmission agreements with both countries in order to facilitate the return process. On the other hand, research in this field has not found such agreements to be particularly effective (see section 4.3).

Specifically, for the case of Afghans, individuals felt a reluctance by the part of the embassy to process their requests for identification, felt discriminated and frustrated by the lack of support. For those who have little to no contact with and ties to Afghanistan, the experience of not being well-received by their embassy hardly encouraged them to return. Although the embassy declares that vulnerable returnees receive good treatment and their demands are specially attended, our respondents declared something different. The embassy does recognise to be overburdened with consular requests lacking the necessary personnel for the amount of demands received. Such overburdened situation could to some extent explain certain attitudes and feeling of being disregarded.

The existing commitments between Sweden and Afghanistan should encourage a better reception of rejected asylum seekers looking for information or travel documents at the Embassy. Although the facilitation of these travel documents is present in the commitment, a humane and dignified manner to provide services should be ensured, considering the vulnerability of those who seek the services of the embassy.

## After the return: A harsh reality

The fourth question in this report considered whether it is possible to talk about a sustainable return and reintegration (see section 7.3.). In one sense this has to do with definitions, but if we stick to those definitions that don't have re-migration as a target the picture is clearer. Our interviews illustrate that very few of our respondents have living conditions that can be classified into the category of successful embeddedness, which is in an analytical terminology what could be considered as reintegration. Iraqis scored somehow better, but still the majority is classified under a poor degree of embeddedness. The three dimensions of embeddedness discussed in Chapter two, the psychological, social and economic were weak at the time of the interview for the majority of the respondents. Very few were self-sufficient and were able to decide over their lives or felt a belonging and attachment to their society, especially the Afghan returnees. In most cases the return has become a hard life without any certainties and deficiencies in all three dimensions that form our analytical framework.

We have pointed to the many different structural factors that makes re-embeddedness hard in both contexts. The informants gave numerous examples of the insecurity and the threats many felt from both government and non-government actors such as militias, rivalling political parties and sometimes even their own family or neighbours. Many informants also testified about the widespread corruption manifested in problems in setting up businesses and getting employment due to the need for bribes, the need to rely on relatives to pull the strings or not belonging to the right religious, ethnic or political group.

In the early stages of this study, we intended to study the existing support structures in the destination country. But gradually, in the light of our data rendered from our respondents, our focus shifted towards the strategies to cope in a difficult context. The support that individuals can access is scarce and the support structures are, in both countries, poor. Although the preconditions seem better in Iraq considering the economy and stability, these presuppose low chances to succeed in the immediate period after the return. Iraq has a tradition of returning migrants due to the armed conflicts in the country for the past four decades which pushed millions to migrate, but the political instability has made the work of structures supporting returnees more difficult. The Kurdish region seems to have better managed the return

from a diasporic perspective, but returnees in our study were often vulnerable due to health issues and social conflicts. Afghanistan, on the other hand, seems to lack the necessary channels to reintegrate people into society. The primary channels for reintegration in both countries are social networks, most especially family ties.

## The return and reintegration logic

*I faced many challenges. I had never seen my country and my accent was different; I had different habits, and everything was a challenge for me.*

Male, 21 years, AFN#81

Another important result specifically attached to the experiences of Afghan returnees is that a part of them do not really return or that they don't return "home." Having spent most of their lives in Iran, a return to Afghanistan doesn't make sense in their minds. Therefore, return and reintegration are not the terms that depict the process that starts after their order of removal gains legal force, to later send the individual to the country of nationality expecting that he or she is able to make a life in there. This feature of a low level of sustainability for those having returned to another community than that of their origin was also noticeable in the IOM (2021a) reintegration survey.

Within return migration policies, it seems that a removal follows the logic of reintroducing the individual to his or her natural setting. Removals are not always being made to a person's country of origin. If the goal is for returnees to become "sustainably" reintegrated, then definitions and programs may need to be adapted to the specific circumstances of the those who are removed/returned. Studies and policies within the return and reintegration field need to take this into account as those who return to a country they can do not identify as home may be in need of additional support to be able to integrate.

Removals are not always being made to an individual's country of origin. If the focus is on a "sustainable" return, then definitions and programmes need to be fitted to this situation.

## 8.2 Returning from Sweden: Takeaways and social “remittances”

As was stated previously, in section 4.2 for example, there is a dual purpose of the activities for asylum-seekers but one of them is to give basic knowledge and skills that also could enhance their opportunities after a return following a rejection on the asylum application. Does it work in that way? Afghan returnees do not perceive the education and training in skills they achieved in Sweden as resources they can put to use in Afghanistan. Having learned the Swedish language and a certain occupation is, in their perception, of no use in Afghanistan. On the contrary, this is sometimes cited as a strong reason for re-migration to Sweden. The same skills consequently become a push factor to a new migration. These are the direct consequences of a system focusing on integration rather than a potential return.

Having resided in Sweden, in contact with a democracy and democratic society where civil and human rights are respected and a political system that works and where, according to many interviewees, people are treated with respect, makes the return to Iraq and Afghanistan feel like a downgrading in people's lives. The feeling of living in a country run by the rule of law. This may lead to a stronger questioning of the regime and the dominant values in the country of origin as well as reasoning about one's rights. Returning to a country with “no law” and both a perception of and occasionally practical experiences of corruption and other types of ill treatment by governmental officials may add to a sense of discomfort since it comes back to adapting to mind-sets and values so strikingly different from what was left. This could generate more conscious citizens who put pressure for a stronger respect for dignity and humanity, but also who set the bar high for their regime

## 8.3 Reintegration programmes under the light of our data

There is a comprehensive body of literature about programmes aimed to help returnees to achieve a sustainable reintegration. The studies indicate that these programs or support structures does not in itself lead to a sustainable return. The effects are limited or even negative and it seems to be related to the small range of services provided (Ruben et al. 2009).

The overall picture from this study point in the same direction. It seems that our respondents possessed scarce knowledge about the available support. Although they were specifically asked about it, there were few elements in the narratives describing support structures in Afghanistan or in Iraq. This might be a consequence of a lack of efficiency and visibility, but also of the logic of these programmes. A large part of the respondents who received support used it to alleviate the most urgent needs, instead of investing in a productive activity that ensures breadwinning in the long run.

The re-establishment support of SEK 30,000 per individual has been spent on roughly 10,000 Iraqis and Afghans 2007–2020 who returned voluntarily (see section 4.3). Our data tell us that economic support in-cash or in-kind offer some relief, but in only a handful of cases leads to a successful income-generating activity. It is, by no means, wasted money but our data does not suggest that this support, in general, is used as investments promoting sustainability.

Evaluation of the programmes seems urgent, especially in Afghanistan and an in-kind help that is focused on guiding individuals with specific needs seems also necessary. Young people with a trauma need special psychological help and guidance, what can they do with the money obtained without guidance and social networks? The programmes in Iraq seem to work better but are not problem free. Despite that many of our respondents were classified as voluntary returnees, few of them had received the re-establishment support.

We can point to three major deficiencies or problems that are visible and many of the informants mention them in concrete terms. First and foremost, the information from the agencies involved with the return process in Sweden on support and re-integration programme is either misunderstood, or not delivered in a way that made them aware of the alternatives. Secondly, the informants point to obstacles to receive the support after their return. Unpleasant treatment from the personnel is sometimes mentioned, but even more that the procedures are tricky and the conditions hard to fulfil. Thirdly, and related to the second obstacle, is the delays that are present. All programmes receive their share of criticism, along with praise from those who are satisfied; but if we are to distinguish them the reception support comes out better than the others, the Re-establishment support fares worse and the ERRIN in-kind support seems to struggle with especially long waiting

times. Some respondents had to wait many months and even years. Our findings and conclusions on the re-integration programmes are hardly new. They are rather basically consistent with what we know from literature – see e.g. Paasche 2014 – and the problems that have been discussed in the Swedish news media – see e.g. Backman 2016 on the difficulties with reintegration support in Afghanistan – and it ought to be addressed by the agencies and service providers.

Generally, all kinds of critiques are much more widespread amongst the Afghani returnees than the Iraqi. This difference is clear in our data, but the reasons behind are not. It could be that the service providers in Iraq are better equipped to handle the situation. But another hypothesis is that the Iraqi returnees are more educated, established and therefore might be better equipped to handle the information and understand how to access the support.

## 8.4 Key elements of reintegration

The existent support that an individual might count with from a psychosocial perspective seems to be very telling in the success an individual has in reintegrating. Embeddedness depends on different factors, some of them inexistent when there is no previous contact with the country. Being able to mobilise resources to successfully become a member of the society and support oneself proves to be extremely difficult in the cases where an individual does not possess the necessary know-how and structures of support to start over. To feel attached to a context and be able to thrive in it is not only in the hands of the individual

The results of our study seem to point out to social networks as decisive for an individual's adaptation to the place where he or she is sent to. For those who did have social networks in the country before migrating, these are sometimes not available once they are back. Therefore, there are very few possibilities to count on existent social networks for reintegration. This dimension is of particular importance in a country where social relations are important to ensure access to housing, job, and family formation.

## 8.5 Re-migration: A possibility or a dream?

*Will this research help reconsider my case? Or is it useless because I already came back to Iraq and the whole thing is over?*

Female, 37 years, IRQ#6

An important conclusion of this study is that the reasons that lead people to migrate still exist after their return. An insecure situation, violence, threats and political instability, as well as lack of job opportunities do not disappear even when a country is considered safe enough to live in. Still, the hope for a better life exists. Having experienced life in Sweden, individuals reflected over the type of life they want to have. The data tell us about a high probability that our respondents migrate again. Moreover, there is a probability that they do it irregularly. Although many mentioned a desire to re-migrate via legal means, these pathways are few considering their situation.

Back to the literature on return migration, there is an almost forgotten theme within discussions of reintegration programmes. This is the temporality of the return or the intention to stay of the returnee. According to Cassarino, a migration cycle is complete when migrants consider that the factors and conditions that are subjectively viewed as favourable to their life plans, allowed them to return (Cassarino 2015). When an asylum seeker is removed, the State removing him or her considers it to be the *end* of the migration experience. However, from the asylum seeker's perspective, they were unable to achieve the ultimate goal. In order for migrants to successfully attain such a decision, sufficient resources, skills and contacts have been gathered to carry out their projects in their country of origin (Cassarino 2015). That is not the case for most of our respondents who have yet to gather a series of resources in order to achieve their goal of a better life.

Therefore, our data shows that a return is likely to be far from sustainable when the countries they are sent back to are in such shape like the two we have discussed. The persistent difficulties faced by returnees make them think about re-migration once they are back in their country of origin.





## 9. Policy recommendations

This is the concluding chapter of the report. Since we have addressed a range of issues in the return and re-integration process, from the perspectives of the respondents, these recommendations takes on many different aspects. Our ambition is that decision makers as well as practitioners can find something of use here. Some recommendations are more overarching, and others address more specific policies or working methods at different levels, nationally and internationally.

Return and re-integration policies and procedures are typically a mixture with both a national origin and character, but also features from a European and an international level. The earlier mentioned SDGs<sup>49</sup> could overall serve as guidelines for what the international community wants to achieve: how reintegration can be sustainable. Both our interpretation and other definitions tend to focus on features such as economic self-sufficiency, social inclusion within the communities, and psychosocial well-being. These goals, that broadly relate to human security and human development, therefore can be seen as a frame for our recommendations. We believe that development actors can play certain roles in supporting reintegration in line with these development objectives.<sup>50</sup>

This report has highlighted the situation for those who have returned to contexts characterized by political instability, widespread corruption and State-sanctioned as well as other types of violence. The return to such difficult contexts should be reflected in the support that is provided. This report shows that there is no 'silver bullet' to achieve a sustainable reintegration. Still we offer recommendations that can serve to navigate the challenges and opportunities in the area.

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<sup>49</sup> Goal 10.7: facilitate orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies

<sup>50</sup> This perspective is further developed in Knoll et al. (2021)

### **Design a concrete and improved communication strategy between the Swedish Migration Agency and rejected asylum seekers**

The results of the study suggest that lack of preparedness and resistance to return is often influenced by events happening during the asylum process in Sweden: the length of the asylum process; what is described as deficient services associated to the asylum process provided by the public authorities; and the lack of understanding of the asylum system and the subsequent rejection. As for the length of the process, a policy recommendation, to give increased priority to speeding up the process, has been forwarded in the previous Delmi-studies Esaiasson & Sohlberg, 2018:8; Malm Lindberg, 2020:1).

Information about the asylum procedure seems to be either insufficient or somehow lost on the way towards many of the returnees in this study. The Swedish Migration Agency should develop a plan so that individuals clearly understand the implications of seeking asylum in Sweden. They should receive information first-hand and in their own language, have access to professional and trust-generating interpreters, and not have to be subjected to an unnecessary number of intermediaries that affect the quality of the information received. It is imperative to find a way to check whether the asylum seeker is able to grasp the information that he or she receives. This will allow individuals to make a decision with all the necessary information at hand. It is also vital that information regarding return is received very early in the asylum process and at a time when the individual is able to understand the implications of return. This will allow applicants to make a decision with all the necessary information at hand, planning for a future after a rejection. The chances of succeeding in reintegration are at the lowest level when the return is being forced, uninformed and sudden.

Timing is everything when it comes to delivering information. It should take place early in the process and the Migration Agency can then use its tools to clearly inform asylum-seekers about their chances to obtain asylum, or another type of residence permit, and start preparing them for the most possible outcome honestly and directly. At the same time, it must take place when the returnee is able to understand the implications of return and participate in the planning of his or her future life.

Many respondents in this study described having received a 'rejection letter' which they were not able to read or understand. This type of information should therefore be provided in a language that is known to be understandable to the applicant – in writing or in person (via an interpreter when needed). The applicant should be asked whether he or she understands the information and its consequences.

### **Professionalise the service-providers to the Migration Agency**

The interpreter is not only converting words, but also communicating the reasons for asylum from the individual seeker's perspective. It is therefore important that interpreters are professional and sufficiently competent enough to perform their duties in a way that is legally certain and generates trust in the asylum seeker.

The respondents also frequently criticised their legal advisors, who often seemed to be unreachable. This had consequences for the returnee's ability to accept and understand the return decision. A legal advisor should have a level of competence in order to secure the legal certainty and rule of law in the asylum process. This point has also been raised by the public enquiry conducted by the Committee for the future Swedish migration policy (SOU 2020:54, p. 370–1). The Migration Agency should have the power not only to exclude or disqualify legal advisors in the event of misconduct, but also to ban such representatives from being hired again in asylum cases, in line with what was suggested by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and the Chancellor of Justice (Government Bill 2016/17:180 p. 91).

### **Promote an active role of receiving country authorities during the return process**

Difficulties in acquiring travel documents and a feeling of disrespect and lack of empathy by the personnel at the returnees' embassy were frequently mentioned by the Afghan respondents, which at the very least does not facilitate the return process. For the returnee, approaching their embassy is, sometimes, the first contact that they have with a national authority. That first contact might shape the perception of the public authorities and the system that waits for them in Afghanistan. is neither helpful nor welcoming

Readmission agreements and Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) should encourage a good reception of returnees when arriving. These should also be written so that the embassies in Sweden take on an active role by offering assistance to those returning with practical issues and information about the country. These demands may be warranted when agreeing to new or renewed MoUs. A potential way for government-to-government collaboration on return could be co-funded units within the embassies, facilitating the processing of documents needed for asylum and return. Such units could also offer information and advice to potential returnees about their rights and benefits as returnees.

### **Make reintegration programmes individualised and easy to access**

The recommendation on the reintegration programmes concern design and delivery of the support. There is an urgent need to formulate re-integration programmes in a way that these are tailor-made to the individual needs of beneficiaries, and not only designed based on the context of the country. This might be done via an assessment of the returnees needs, capacities, and skills. Inspiration may come from Germany who has gone beyond counselling in their efforts to a better re-integration (OECD 2020:72).

Our study indicates that returnees have different needs and preconditions to (re)start a life. One of the most visible difference is that not all are sent back to their place of origin. Therefore, the typical tools aimed at “reintegration” proved not being enough for the individual to thrive and build a future. At the same time, counselling is necessary to make good use of the resources at hand. It is quite revealing that among the few mentions to “in-kind” support identified by returnees, most described the one delivered by a local NGO in Afghanistan. Local structures could be more efficient in providing “in-kind” support by knowing the situations of the region better and counting with strategic networks helping returnees to access the existing aid or acting as an agent for further support from national or international authorities. Considering the psychosocial needs of returnees, it is vital that the reintegration support considers not only the economic dimension but also provides psychological help before and after the return and access to social networks. To promote a mental as well as physical well-being and giving the prospects for a healthy life, in accordance with the third SDG, should be of utmost importance.

It is also crucial for the support to be easy accessible. The delivery of the in-cash and in-kind support must take place through a process where beneficiaries can obtain information on how to apply and how to access. Complicated procedures can hinder access as well as delivery and should therefore be dealt with. Implement mechanisms that ensure that those who are eligible for and applies for a reintegration grant obtain it in a timely and manageable manner upon arrival at one's destination. A closer look at the service providers in Iraq and Afghanistan could help to shed light on what parts of the implementation process could be improved.

### **Create a systematic evaluation programme for Swedish-funded reintegration support**

The results suggest that there is a need to conduct an evaluation of both the implementation and the outcomes of reintegration programmes in both Afghanistan and Iraq. When individuals receive benefits, monitoring and evaluation of the experiences and outcomes should be followed up at a regular basis by independent investigators or researchers in the field.

### **Reconsider the terminology within return migration: Towards a more sustainable definition of sustainability**

Through this report we have problematized the terms voluntary return, reintegration and sustainability. Still, we have used and struggled with these definitions as authors. Some of the terminology seem to reflect the political will of the sending countries, but not the realities of those being removed.

The criticism towards these concepts is hardly new. Cassarino, 2015, e.g. consider the term "return" an act of removal without considering the intentions of the individual as a migrant. It is part of a policy geared towards dealing with unauthorized migration and protecting state interests not the returnees'. Thus, our critique draws upon the large discrepancies between the individuals' perceptions versus the intention of Swedish authorities and international organisations.

This study therefore makes a call to researchers, civil society organizations but even more so to national and international authorities to discuss and examine current operative definitions used within return migration. The point is that the concepts and terminology that is used frames our thinking and, in the next step, action.

One example is the term *voluntary* return, where we rather would emphasise the different degrees of voluntariness due to the varied motives behind it. But among all the problematic definitions, a “sustainable return” is probably the most troublesome. An OECD report (2020) on sustainable return described different definitions of “sustainable”. These country-based definitions take upon different aspects desirable from an OECD country perspective. However, most of these definitions regard return as the last stage of the migration cycle. From our data we can see that this is far from being the case or the desire of the returnees.

### **Possibilities for legal pathways for a temporary stay in Sweden**

The existence of legal pathways to Sweden, even if these are only temporary, might offer a better basis for an orderly migration system as well as less traumatic experiences for all parties involved within return migration. In fact, the majority of our respondents plan to re-migrate back to Sweden or to another European country. Individuals who desire to migrate back to Sweden specify the desire to do it through legal pathways. Some of them have sponsors in Sweden, others are counting on the support of former employers.

Within this context, the possibilities of study visas and private sponsorships should be evaluated and considered in, for example, a pilot programme. In many cases, individuals had learned the language and had acquired some skills after 4–5 years in Sweden. Therefore, these programmes would not be pure integration schemes for newcomers but rather for individuals who have already undertaken part of this path.

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# Appendix casebook

## Respondents from Afghanistan

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Type of return	Reception support
21	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	Yes
21	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	No
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
26	Male	*	Voluntary	No
23	Male	*	Undefined	No
67	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
21	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
22	Male	*	Forced	No
22	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
27	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
23	Male	Hazara	Forced	No
24	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
26	Male	Pashtun	Forced	Yes
19	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
22	Male	Hazara	Forced	No
29	Male	Hazara	Forced	No
23	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
22	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
27	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
46	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	No
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
35	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
23	Male	Pashtun	Forced	Yes
22	Male	Tajik	Forced	Yes
29	Male	*	Forced	Yes
21	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	Unknown
20	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
26	Male	Tajik	Voluntary	No

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Type of return	Reception support
30	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
18	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
28	Male	Pashtun	Voluntary	No
41	Male	Pashtun	Voluntary	No
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
31	Male	Tajik	Forced	Yes
21	Male	Hazara	Forced	Unknown
39	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
22	Male	Tajik	Voluntary	No
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
22	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
29	Male	Hazara	Forced	No
26	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
21	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
22	Male	Tajik	Forced	Yes
21	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
20	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
18	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
20	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
20	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
36	Female	Tajik	Voluntary	No
33	Female	Hazara	Voluntary	No
40	Male	Hazara	Voluntary	No
23	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
19	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
30	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
23	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes
22	Male	Hazara	Forced	Yes

## Respondents from Iraq

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Type of return	Reception support
56	Male	Arab	Forced	No
37	Female	Arab	Voluntary	No
41	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
28	Male	Arab	Forced	No
36	Female	Arab	Voluntary	No
29	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
34	Male	Kurdish	Voluntary	No
19	Male	Kurdish	Voluntary	No
31	Male	Kurdish	Voluntary	No
29	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
29	Male	Arab	Forced	No
31	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
47	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
39	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
33	Male	Arab	Forced	No
30	Male	Arab	Forced	No
35	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
42	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
61	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
40	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
32	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
37	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
65	Female	Arab	Voluntary	No
25	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
28	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
25	Male	Arab	Voluntary	No
50	Male	Kurdish	Forced	No
26	Male	Kurdish	Undefined	No
37	Male	Kurdish	Voluntary	No
30	Male	Kurdish	Forced	No
27	Female	Kurdish	Voluntary	No
33	Male	Kurdish	Voluntary	No
50	Male	Kurdish	Undefined	No
34	Female	Kurdish	Voluntary	No
60	Male	Kurdish	Forced	No

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Type of return	Reception support
23	Female	Kurdish	Forced	No
44	Female	Kurdish	Forced	No
34	Male	Kurdish	Voluntary	No
43	Male	Kurdish	Voluntary	No
32	Female	Kurdish	Forced	No

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Return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers is high on the political agenda across Europe and much effort is geared towards increasing the rate of implemented returns. A lot has been written on the different measures and conditions, which are supposed to facilitate return and sustainable reintegration. However, few have done so by starting from the perspectives and experiences of the returnees themselves. In this Delmi report Constanza Vera-Larrucea, Henrik Malm-Lindberg, and André Asplund draw on the stories of one hundred returnees to explore different aspects of the migration experience and the asylum process that may affect post-return reintegration. The project is financed by AMIF.

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