The Journey to Europe

A Young Afghan's Experience on the Migrant Route

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Abstract
This chapter tells the story of Akbar, a young Afghan man who left Kabul during the summer of 2015 to escape war and poverty. Three months later, after a torturous journey that included abuse by both smugglers and the authorities, Akbar arrived in Frankfurt, emotionally, physically, and financially broken. The authors frame a harrowing, first-person account of Akbar’s journey across Western Asia and Central Europe: first, recounting his parents’ refugee experiences during the Soviet-Afghan War; later, describing the circumstances that convinced his family to support Akbar’s journey; and finally, explaining his family’s thoughts about Akbar’s future in Germany. The chapter concludes with speculations about the potential political ramifications of the forced repatriation of (perhaps) tens of thousands of Afghans from Europe. This story of one young man and his family’s history helps to humanize the confusing and often impersonal accounts of the global migration crisis and provides necessary historical context for grasping the contemporary Afghan refugee crisis.

Keywords: refugee, Afghanistan, migration crises, human smuggler, Germany, oral history

At 11 PM on a hot summer night in the first week of June 2015, after weeks of delay, the call finally came. ‘The game is on’, the smuggler announced. Akbar was told he had an hour to get across town to the Kabul central bus station.1 With US$250 hidden in the folds of his shalwar kameez and a knapsack containing two pairs of clothes, a sewing needle his mother had

1 The names of the family are all pseudonyms to protect their identity.
taught him to use in preparation for the journey, dried fruit, hard-boiled eggs, naan, and an old Samsung phone, Akbar set off to begin a new life anywhere far from Afghanistan.

Akbar rushed emotional goodbyes with his mom and two sisters. Then Omar, Akbar’s older brother, accompanied him to the bus station. Akbar’s father and eldest brother were at work, unable to say goodbye in person. The two brothers sat at the bus station into the early morning, waiting until it was time for Akbar to board. Akbar was to meet his smuggler in Nimroz, a remote desert province on the Iran-Pakistan border, a lawless region notorious for smuggling and banditry. Fearful, Omar recounted his brother’s departure:

I hugged Akbar a few times, and I told him not to forget us. It is painful to watch your younger brother leave. I cried 100 per cent. He sat in the bus. I said goodbye two or three times, while the bus prepared to leave. This moment was very painful. If he goes to Turkey, and then somewhere else, when his life becomes better, he might forget us. My mom kept calling. We were afraid he would die, or be put in prison. He’d be lonely. He was very young, and never travelled. We did not believe he would arrive.

A few weeks before, Akbar and his father had met Aziz in Paghman to discuss the trip. Aziz’s family is well known locally for smuggling people to Turkey and Europe. US$1500 was deposited as collateral for the transit to Turkey. Aziz directed Akbar’s father to give that money to a third party, an agent on the second floor of a small money exchange shop in a bustling Kabul market. When the agent received a call from Akbar announcing that he had safely arrived in Turkey, the money would be released to Aziz’s associates in Kabul – at least, that was the pre-departure agreement.

This chapter recounts Akbar’s often-horrifying experiences crossing West Asia and Eastern Europe in the summer of 2015. After a 3-month ordeal he arrived in Germany where he sought asylum, and from where, at the time of this writing, he faces the growing likelihood of forced deportation (Strickland 2016). But our account here begins with Akbar’s parents, who were displaced in the early years of the ‘Afghan refugee crisis’ in the late 1970s, when the Cold War first erupted on Afghan soil. At that time, Akbar’s (as yet unacquainted) parents were amongst the two to four million Afghans forced to seek refuge in Pakistan and Iran.

Across four decades, Afghan refugees have had to contend with harrowing journeys, uncertain receptions in host countries, family debt and destitution, and helpless dependence upon reluctant others after arriving
at their destinations. The geopolitical circumstances of the Afghan conflict have evolved, but the contours of the refugee experience remain mostly consistent. Akbar is one of millions who found waiting for the end of conflict at home intolerable in 2015, who took to their feet seeking a better life across international borders, who were imprisoned and abused en route, and who escaped complex conflicts at home for precarious receptions in host countries (BBC 2017). Meanwhile, in Europe, the migration crisis vexes political relations between the states of the European Union and their bordering countries, as Marta Zorko describes in the next chapter of this volume.

This chapter draws upon face-to-face interviews conducted with Akbar's entire family in December 2015, a series of Skype interviews with Akbar (speaking from a German refugee hostel) in early 2016, and life history interviews conducted with Akbar's parents during the summer of 2005. We narrate some of the difficulties and costs of the journey, and describe the tedious circumstances encountered in the German refugee hostel where Akbar currently resides. Readers will find that the narrative changes into the first person when describing Akbar's experiences between Kabul to near Frankfurt. The earlier and later sections, which are based upon extensive interviews with family members, are conventionally told from the authors' perspective. But Akbar's journey is written in the first-person, and draws solely on his account of his experiences in transit. In the conclusion, we consider the implications of the present influx of refugees for Europe and the potential for the forced deportation of Afghans to further destabilize the already fractured social and political environment in Afghanistan.

Third-generation Migrant: Akbar's Family History

The authors' relationship with Akbar and his family began in 2004, when he was nine-years-old. His parents were the live-in caretakers at an American NGO in Kabul where James was based while he conducted fieldwork for a dissertation in cultural anthropology, and where Rohullah was employed after years as a refugee himself in Iran. Many afternoons, the authors joined

\[\text{In 2005 James Weir conducted life history interviews with Akbar's parents, which is the primary source for the biographical information in the family history section. The later sections draws upon family interviews conducted in Kabul in late 2015. The first person account that follows is an edited version of the journey told from Akbar's perspective, based upon Skype interviews conducted in early 2016, while Akbar was in a German refugee hostel. This account has been reviewed with Akbar.}\]
Akbar and the other neighbourhood kids in football matches organized inside the grounds of the compound. Akbar was the youngest boy, and I (James) was the most senior player, so we were often paired when playing on our tiny pitch. My memory of Akbar is as a quiet, respectful boy, sometimes brooding, and often looking bewildered by the extravagant lives of the foreigners that passed through the compound. In a photo of Akbar from 2004, the boy stands awkwardly before a large spread of hors devours while inebriated Afghan and foreign men and women dance to a live Quawalli band.

In November 2015, I returned to the NGO-cum-guesthouse. Akbar’s father, Ghahreman (a nickname meaning ‘champion’), greeted me at the fortified steel gate. After friendly inquiries, grinning while serving pastries and green tea, he asked if I wanted to arm wrestle. A decade older and half a foot shorter than me, and after a life immeasurably harder than my own, he remains fit and playful. He won handily. He then told me that Akbar, his youngest boy, had walked to Frankfurt.

As I settled into a two-month stay in Kabul, Rohullah and I began informally asking Akbar’s family about the young man’s experiences and circumstances. The troubling story that emerged often contradicted our expectations. The expenses, in the end nearly US$7000, and the abuses Akbar incurred en route, culminating with a beating by the Bulgarian police – which broke both Akbar’s hand and his trust in European authorities – were worse than we had imagined. Long acquainted with the family and with our interest and concern now piqued, we asked if we could conduct formal interviews. Our goal was to document the family’s role in the decision and preparations, Akbar’s experiences in transit, and his circumstances in Germany. The family graciously agreed to let us interview them. We decided it was best to keep the identity of the family anonymous, despite the family all saying that it was unnecessary.

Akbar, like a few million Afghan millennials, is a third-generation refugee. He is the middle child of five siblings, all of whom were born as refugees outside of Afghanistan: his two older brothers were born in Pakistan; Akbar and his two younger sisters, in Iran. His parents escaped the Soviet-Afghan War in the early 1980s as young adults with their separate families. They met and married while in exile in Pakistan.

Akbar’s father Ghahreman is from Ghazni: a town that was once a thriving Buddhist centre in the seventh century and, a millennia ago, the centre of the Ghaznavid Empire, which stretched from North India across Afghanistan to include most of present-day Iran and swathes of Central Asia (Patan 2007). As of late 2016, this multi-ethnic city of 150,000 residents, a dangerous three-hour drive south of Kabul, was contested by insurgents. Both the Taliban
and the Islamic State (IS) target the large local Shia population (who are ethnic Hazaras) in an effort, common in many Middle Eastern countries, to provoke civil conflict by fomenting sectarian divisions (Al Jazeera 2015).

Ghahreman was a young man in 1978. He would have been around Akbar’s age when the Soviet military entered Afghanistan to support its beleaguered Communist central government. Ghahreman recounted this period to us as: ‘the mullahs said that the Russians were our enemies, and we must rise against them’. He emphasized the threats his family received if he and his brothers did not join the resistance: ‘the Mujahedeen would have killed us; we had to join them’. Like a tsunami originating from the two great adversaries of the Cold War, money and weaponry washed across the impoverished country, breaking the social and political order in its path. Ghahreman and his companions fought an insurgency against Soviet and Afghan government forces, armed with US and Saudi resources that were distributed by Pakistan. Ghareman’s insurgent group ‘went to the hills’, hiding in the mountainous countryside and often forced to survive without basic supplies (Linschoten and Kuehn 2012: 56).

As an untrained foot soldier on the frontlines of a popular yet disorganized and deadly war, Ghahreman grew disillusioned as he watched what had been at first deemed an honourable ‘jihad’ in defence of Islam and Afghanistan descend into corruption, local rivalries, and rampant lawlessness. The value of his sacrifice then is unclear today. He complains: ‘We stayed in the mountains, hungry and thirsty, feet bleeding, sleeping on the rocks and in caves. Sometimes the villagers fed us, and our leaders conducting the war grew fat and wealthy sitting comfortably out of harm’s way in Pakistan and the Gulf States’. Like many former Mujahedeen foot soldiers, he is careful to distance himself from the notorious abuses perpetrated by most of the Mujahedeen leadership (Barfield 2010: 251-52).

After four years, he escaped Afghanistan to become a refugee in Pakistan, and later Iran. ‘When I got married to Jamila, we had nothing. I was penniless.’ This was an economic reality that tarred his image as a man in a male-dominated society. ‘We stayed at my in-laws’, he continued. ‘Without work, I was ashamed to go home. I borrowed money and we went to Iran.’ And that is where they remained, living in poverty, until 2002.

The corruption, cronism, and lawlessness that took root in the early days of the ‘jihad’ worsened as the Mujahedeen parties took up arms against each other (Barfield 2010: 255). After the Soviet military retreated in 1989, a vicious civil war ensued – and eventually resulted in the emergence of the Taliban. The experience of watching the Afghan resistance to the Soviets become corrupt and then turn against each other has left many Afghans
distrustful of national politics, and most leaders in general. This distrust in and frustration with national and international political processes has only been compounded over the past fifteen years, as extraordinary international expenditures of blood and treasure have had minimal influence on the security and economic welfare of ordinary Afghans. Instead, civilians continue to be caught between a deadly array of anti-government and government actors pursuing a confusing mix of political aspirations and material enrichment (Weir and Azamy 2015). Ten years before Akbar’s departure, Ghahreman concluded his life history interview by saying, ‘I hope my children can get educated, become good men, and be able to feed their mother when I am not alive’. Ten years later, his son Akbar, now a refugee in Germany, echoed his father’s aspirations regarding his future in Europe, stressing the need to take care of an ailing family and his interest in obtaining a good education.

Akbar’s mother Jamila is from a rural village in Paghman, a mountainous farming area on the outskirts of Kabul. She began her life story tersely, ‘There are so many problems in life. Where should one begin?’ paused, and then continued, ‘When I was about seven or eight my father died, a car ran him over, and we were alone’. As a fatherless girl, her life shaped by violence and poverty started when Soviet soldiers entered her village months later.

When the war began, her family risked their lives to support the resistance fighters. Her eldest brother left home to join the Mujahedeen. Young Jamila secretly took food to their hideouts in the mountains. Islam demanded that she support the fight against the communists; she explained, ‘Cooking for the Mujahedeen meant rewards in the afterlife’ – although she also said that she was never sure what the Russians wanted in Afghanistan.

But with young Jamila and her sisters maturing, war and lawlessness made their family of women increasingly unsafe: they became more and more vulnerable to abuse from the men in the Mujahedeen resistance, the Afghan government, and the Soviet forces. Three years into the war, Jamila's mom decided they had to leave; after months of thwarted efforts, the family succeeded in crossing the border on foot into Pakistan. Soon afterwards, Jamila was introduced to Ghahreman, who was fourteen years her senior, through an arranged marriage. Three years later, Ghahreman asserted his role as the head of the family to move the family of four from Pakistan to Iran against Jamila’s wishes in search of work as a labourer. The journey involved long walks, with two infants in tow, across deserts and dangerous border crossings – a route that young Akbar would retrace three decades later when he began his journey to Europe. The family returned to Kabul shortly after the Taliban were forced from power in 2002.
Many factors combine to make Afghans fearful about the future. Despite four decades of nearly continuous conflict, there is no indication of a political or peaceful resolution in the foreseeable future. At the time of this writing, the top US general in Afghanistan had recently warned the US Congress that billions of US dollars and thousands of soldiers were needed to break the stalemate in the country (Ewing 2017). After the initial high hopes of the early years of the 2001 US intervention in the country, the US and NATO withdrew the bulk of their forces in 2014 without defeating the Taliban. As a result, the economy tanked, unemployment surged, and an emboldened Taliban increased its attacks and territorial reach (Sidahmed and Akerman 2016).

Meanwhile, the 2014 Afghan presidential election was marred by widespread fraud, leaving an ineffectual and distrusted ‘National Unity Government’ that was divided between oppositional leaders (Gall 2014). The success of the military operation (Zarb-e-Azb⁵) in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan forced militants across the border into Afghanistan (Zahid 2015). Current estimates list at least twelve and as many as twenty insurgent groups operating on Afghan soil (S. Jones 2016). The most recent, the Islamic State (IS), commenced indiscriminate bombings and kidnappings in 2015, forcing ordinary Afghans to anticipate futures even more dreaded than the return of the Taliban. At the level of individuals, the emergence of IS further radicalizes some Afghans and attracts the desperately poor. IS’ global aspirations and successes in Iraq and Syria promise people agency and reward in places where little of either exist (Azamy and Weir 2015).

Beyond security concerns, inadequate infrastructure and a surging population challenge life in Kabul. The capital city, designed nearly five decades ago for 700,000 residents, is the fifth fastest growing city in the world, with an estimated six million people (Rasmussen 2014). Garish indicators of international influences on the cityscape are the enormous fortified compounds containing mansions of the corrupt elite, who are among the few evident beneficiaries of the mismanaged international largesse. Akbar’s sisters explained that simply walking to school is dangerous: to move through the city, they must find groups of people they trust. Military convoys frequently block traffic for hours at a time, creating insecurity for bystanders because insurgents frequently target those same convoys. Like their mother, these girls have matured amidst lawlessness and conflict, with the threat of abuse challenging their freedom of movement and the family’s honour.

⁵ This is the Urdu name of the operation, which means a sharpening and cutting strike, and also it refers to the sword of the prophet Mohammad.
Life without the promise of an adequate education, without basic health care for an ailing mother, and absent the rule of law on Kabul's streets or in government transactions, all contribute to Akbar's family's desire for a future anywhere else. Thus, when both the 'word on the street' and the international media confirmed that tens of thousands of Afghans were successfully entering Europe, Akbar saw an opportunity. In 2015, nearly 20 per cent (180,000) of the asylum seekers in the European Union originated in Afghanistan (BBC 2017).

But despite the multiple political factors that conspired to propel Akbar from Kabul, national conflicts and international failures were only the backdrop for an even more troubling reality: a problem with two conservative uncles, which became the decisive factor in the family's decision. After the Taliban fell from power in 2001, Akbar's family returned to Kabul, finding work and shelter at the American NGO. The authors first met the family there and Ghahreman remains employed at the NGO today. The entire family had lived in the institute's compound, where Akbar's mother made a living cooking and cleaning, until growing pressure from two uncles had forced her to leave the job. These two fundamentalist uncles have threatened the family for years, calling them kafirs (‘infidels’), ‘slaves of Americans’, and, worse, accusing Jamila of being a 'prostitute' simply because she worked with Americans.

As Akbar grew into manhood, these confrontations grew more heated. After one particularly intense altercation between Akbar and these two uncles who were former Mujahedeen (and locally regarded as drug addicts with Taliban mentalities) nearly turned violent, the family determined that it was time to support Akbar's asylum efforts. Jamila explains, 'the Taliban is threatening because we work for Americans, the boys can be killed if they join government, but these two uncles are even more dangerous'. This factor, likely the most urgent amongst many, convinced the family to support and finance the young man's decision to leave home. Jamila explains: 'In the weeks leading up to his decision to go, Akbar had become quite difficult. He was fighting with his family, especially with his older brother, Masood. He would shout and say how dissatisfied he was with life here. So, when he decided to go after about a week, we decided to support him.'

Akbar's father, Ghahreman, remains a live-in employee at the American NGO, despite his family having to move away. He earns US$250 a month working as a guard by night and caretaker by day. Between the amount required for the smuggler's fee and the travel expenses, the family committed US$1,750 – seven months of Ghahreman's income – for Akbar's journey, believing that this enormous investment would be enough to get Akbar to Europe. Ultimately, the trip would cost the family nearly US$7000, creating a debt that is likely impossible for them to repay.
The Journey

Akbar was eight when he first set foot on Afghan soil. Twelve years later, with the bulk of US and NATO forces recently withdrawn and the Taliban and Islamic State expanding, Akbar became a refugee again, this time crossing his birthplace of Iran for prospects in Europe. In this section, we shift from Akbar’s family history and pre-departure circumstances to narrate his journey from Kabul to his current residence in a German youth hostel. Separated from his family for the first time, having made his way across Western Asia and Eastern and Central Europe, we recount his journey below in the first person: a chronological account of his experiences as gathered through multiple Skype interviews.

Kabul to the Iranian Border

I thought travel across southern Afghanistan would be the most dangerous, but I was wrong. The Taliban stopped and searched our bus multiple times along the way from Kabul to Nimroz. In Nimroz I had to find Aziz, the smuggler, who arranged things. On the first day, I met Ali, from Baghlan. He is a little younger than me. He was scared. We talked and began travelling together.
We took care of each other all the way to the Bulgarian border. He is in Austria now, and we still stay in touch.

Aziz (the smuggler) explained the route, put one guy in charge of us, and then left. After that, he coordinated everything by phone, and we never saw him again. That first night we were walking in a dangerous desert towards Iran. It was so hot. I called my brother Omar and told the family to pray for me. The Iranian border police shoot people.

Suddenly, Toyota pickup trucks drove out of the darkness towards us. Dark-skinned people with black hats pointed guns at us and told us to lie face down and recite the Quran. We waited, expecting them to shoot us. They robbed us and drove away. 

*Three days in, US$150 stolen.*

**Iran**

Two days later we were in Iran. Baluch smugglers took over. They began with the rules: ‘1) Obey us at all times; 2) Don’t speak; 3) Pay in advance; 4) Stay with the group; 5) Or die alone’. They had three Toyota pickup trucks, each crammed with about 20 passengers in the back. They drove too fast across the desert; we bounced in the back and became so caked in dust. We couldn’t tell who was who. Our mouths were coated dry with dust. At stops, they didn’t let us clean.

One boy was weak, vomiting, and with bad diarrhea. When we told the smugglers, they said that if he couldn’t travel he’d be left in the desert. Usually we travelled at night, from near midnight until just before dawn. During the day, we were hidden in basements, farmhouses, stores, and petrol stations. At each location a new set of people took over. They made us clean toilets and carry stuff. We never had enough food or water. When I resisted, they beat me. About five days into the trip, one guy complained and they beat him nearly to death. After that we became quiet.

Sleeping was scary, we were so tired but anything could happen. We slept on the floor; sometimes they gave us straw mats. Someone stole my phone and US$100 from my pocket while I slept, and it was probably the other passengers. We worried they’d abuse (rape) us while we slept, Ali especially.

Near the border, they locked me and Ali up in a stable with cows, sheep, and donkeys. They gave me a phone and made me call my family to tell the agent in Kabul to release the US$1500 to Aziz’s people. At the Turkish border

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4 The Baluch are a large tribal community who live on the dry mountainous Iranian plateau between western Pakistan, southeastern Iran, and southern Afghanistan.
we waited three days. Finally, when they had more passengers, Ahmed, Aziz’s brother, came from Turkey to connect with us and took over.

23 days in, cost US$1,750, including the security deposit released from the Kabul agent.

**Turkey**

Travel in Turkey was easier than in Iran. We didn’t have to hide so much, but Ahmed, the new smuggler, was stingy and cruel. He gave us less food. He would lock me up, force me to clean toilets, and beat me if I complained. He was always grumbling about the cost of my food. He told my family to pay US$800 more: US$200 for a new phone, US$200 for food, and US$400 for travel. He got me a cheap phone and kept the extra money they sent him. One night, after waiting too long in Turkey, I got into an argument with Ahmed. I was weak and don’t remember clearly, but I was ready to die. After this, I left the group along with Rafiq.

Rafiq is a little older than me, about 25 years old, and he is very smart. He speaks English, some Turkish and Norwegian, and had a good phone with GPS. He had lived in Norway illegally for five years, but made the mistake of coming back to Afghanistan for a wedding. We found two Afghan Turkmen smugglers, Arif and Bashir, who demanded US$2500 to get me into Bulgaria. My family was told to pay this amount to an Uzbek carpet dealer in Kabul. After days of waiting at the border, two days before Eid (18 July), the money had been paid and we left for Bulgaria.

48 days since leaving Kabul, US$4950 spent. Akbar’s family in Kabul, fearing for his life, are now at the whim of random human smugglers.

**Bulgaria**

In a small village in Bulgaria, some young guys came up, threatened us and took our valuables; they even got my second phone. I wanted to defend our stuff, but Arif stopped me. Later, I refused to pay him all the money. He was supposed to protect us. The smugglers pointed us to a track through a field.

We walked four days through the forest until we got near Sofia, where we were arrested and were driven by the police for the rest of the way. The police fingerprinted all ten of my fingers. They asked us why we were there and whether we would stay in Bulgaria. We knew if we said we would keep going, they would let us go. Then they filled out a form. People told terrible stories about the Bulgarian police.

The police put us in a huge prison in the middle of a field with bars and razor wire, full of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran. At least we had regular food and mattresses, but the potato soup tasted like they had peed in it.
After about 28 days, the guards collected us and asked if we wished to continue. When we said, ‘Yes, to Germany; we will leave’ they released us. Rafiq and I decided to travel alone, to take taxis, to try to blend in. My family wired US$370 for a taxi. Two days later we got to Serbia.

We got arrested as soon as we crossed into Serbia and we were deported by train back to Sofia, Bulgaria. We rested there for about three days. This time, we took a taxi through the mountains to a bus station in a Serbian village. From there we hitched a ride to Belgrade.

78 days and US$5365.

Serbia, Hungary, and Austria
A taxi driver said he could take us to the Hungarian border for 200 Euros. He asked us to turn off the GPS, and drove around for some time before dropping us at some smelly water. He told us to cross. When we turned on the GPS, we saw that he had just driven us around in circles because we were still in Belgrade. Eight or nine Syrians and Iraqis came towards us, refugees who had just been robbed. They were cold without clothes, and they looked abused.

We didn’t realize this was about to happen to us. After crossing the pond, we saw the police waiting. We ran, but they unleashed dogs. I fell and almost drowned. The dogs bit us a lot but did not break the skin. Some really big guy sat on my chest and punched me. Rafiq told them he knew European law and that he would report them. This made them angrier.

They hung us upside down from a tree, stripped us naked, and beat us. They broke my hand.

My hand is still crooked and hurts. My jaw hurts too. The police, our attackers, searched our bags for money, and said we are evil Afghans coming to destroy their country. After some hours of abuse, they released us. We walked into a small village and fell asleep on the side of a street, exhausted. An old lady found us and brought us food.

We were arrested shortly after crossing into Hungary, driven to Budapest, and each of us had all ten of our fingerprints taken. After two days in prison, we were released. We got a cheap hotel.

After a while we got a ticket that took us almost all the way across Austria. We did not know where we were. We thought we were still in Austria and when the train stopped, I hid under the seat. A fat policeman picked me up using just three fingers. I had never been so afraid; I thought my heart would stop. When the police said we were in Germany, we were happy and relieved. Suddenly I felt more tired than I had ever known.

The entire journey took 93 days and cost $6815.

A flight from Kabul to Frankfurt takes fifteen hours and costs less than $1000.
Life in Germany: Tedium and Trauma

From this first-person account of Akbar’s life in flight, we return now to the third-person as we describe his adaptation to life in Germany. He arrived in Frankfurt three months after leaving Kabul, and was placed in a refugee hostel with other Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis, and Somalis. He takes German classes twice a week and plays soccer once a week. Summarizing his trip, Akbar said, ‘If I had known Europeans were so unfriendly, I would never have left Kabul. Bulgarians, Hungarians, and Serbs are the cruellest people in the world, worse than any Afghan, even the Baluch. They are thieves and smugglers’.

He sounded depressed and traumatized, especially in the earlier interviews. His accounts jumped abruptly from topic to topic. He constantly worries about deportation, and most of the time he endures uncertainty, regret, and boredom, with nothing to do. Relations with his few friends at the hostel can be tense; with some others, they border on combative. He has nightmares and eats irregularly. He sleeps most days.

The trip was a mistake, he explained, at times bitterly blaming his parents for allowing him to come. The debt his family has incurred – enough, he believes, for his family to have bought a house – seems impossible to repay. He had planned to find work as a carpenter, but his broken hand makes
that career uncertain. He shakes hands cautiously, using three fingers, to avoid pain. Over the three-month course of interviews between January and April 2016, his emotional state somewhat improved.

The shame of resuming life with his family in Kabul after failure and debt, especially in the honour-based Afghan culture, is too difficult for him to entertain for long. If forced to return to Kabul or to witness his two uncles abusing his family again, Akbar is not sure what he would do. Although these two uncles appear not to be active Taliban, they are thought to have associations with them, and continue to grow bolder in their demands and threats. Akbar says that returning to the insecurity of daily life in Kabul after the hardships and costs of his journey is impossible. Meanwhile, if given an opportunity to work and study in Germany, Akbar believes that he would one day prove himself and thrive.

In early April 2016, a representative of the German office that coordinates refugees gathered a group of twenty refugees from the hostel. They took a train to an immigration office, which Akbar described as a police station. Akbar was fingerprinted and photographed, his height and identifying features were recorded, and he responded ‘yes’ to the only two questions: ‘Are you from Afghanistan?’ and ‘Are you a Muslim?’ The process took ten minutes. He explained, ‘I was so nervous, my hands were shaking, but when I was given that card, it felt like they gave me a million dollars’. He believed that the card meant that he would not be deported.

His family in Kabul was tremendously relieved that he made it to Germany, and deeply concerned about the prospects of his asylum application. Unlike previous generations of Afghan refugees, digital technologies make it possible for the family to be in frequent contact with Akbar en route, which is emotionally reassuring but financially devastating: continuous contact gives smugglers the upper hand, forcing the family to obtain more and more money in their efforts to keep their son safe.

His sister Kosar explained, ‘We were worried about him, but we were also happy he might get a good education and better employment. Now that we know he is there, we are happy for him, though we know he might still get deported’. Both sisters say, without hesitation, that they would have gone if their family had allowed it. The whole family emphasizes the importance of the education that they believe Akbar will be able to get in Germany, an advantage of being there that rises above all others.

Masood, his older brother with whom he often fought, sometimes intensely, described Akbar since arriving in Germany as ‘transformed’,
saying: ‘Before he left he was a boy, but now he is sophisticated, polite, deep, and optimistic about the future. He gives advice to his brother and sisters, telling us how to treat our parents, and how to make the most out of life’. The authors believe that he has been more honest with us than he has been with his family about the hardships and dangers of the journey, and about his troubled state of mind.

Conclusion: Uncertainty and Instability

Statistics, images of refugee camps, and stories about European political tensions frequently appear in the media, but the family history and transit experiences of people who make the journey mostly escape the public eye and policy analyses. As a quarter million Afghans contend with uncertain futures in Europe, and a mass deportation of Afghans from Europe is in its early stages, we conclude this chapter with two arguments: first, that contemporary Afghan refugees need to be understood in reference to the duration of their national historical experience with conflict and displacement; and second, that the decision to deport large numbers of Afghans from European countries will further destabilize the volatile political circumstances in Afghanistan.

The European reception of refugees, particularly Afghans, grows colder by the day. Afghans were the second largest group of asylum seekers in Europe in 2015, with 196,170 applications. However, policy and legal questions intertwine with a growing fear of Muslims, security concerns, and xenophobic visions of Europe’s non-white, non-Christian future. A central debate surrounding the growing discomfort with refugees in Europe turns on whether this influx of people are war refugees escaping violence and persecution, or economic migrants pursuing a better life. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee cannot be sent back into circumstances where their life and freedom are threatened – the so-called non-refoulement principle (R. Jones 2016). But this simplistic binary has become outdated, and obfuscates both the multiple motivations of asylum seekers and the borderless movements of geopolitical problems in the early twenty-first century; consider as examples the multiple instigators of conflict in Afghanistan, or the borderless challenges posed by climate change (Parenti 2011).

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5 This figure is from the Eurostat database, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database.
In mid-February 2016, central European countries began to deny Afghans access, creating backlogs and resentment. Soon after, Macedonia announced that Afghans would be classified as economic migrants and denied access, leaving thousands stranded at the Greek border. Serbia announced in late February 2016 that it had begun a policy of only accepting refugees from Syria and Iraq (Strickland 2016). Serbia, Slovenia, Austria, Croatia, and Macedonia then signed a joint statement restricting the flow of refugees, envisioning tighter restrictions over time.

Finally, in October 2016, the European Union and the Afghan government signed an agreement that allows the unlimited deportation of Afghans, with the EU using funding to leverage the Afghan government into compliance. The Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said dispassionately, ‘I have no sympathy’ for Afghan migrants (BBC 2016). Beyond the individual suffering, however, if tens of thousands of young Afghan men were to be abruptly and forcibly repatriated it would add kindling to a political environment that is already in flames, where the Taliban prey upon vulnerable and disenfranchised youth. The prospect of resuming life in Afghanistan is economically and emotionally devastating for deportees. Initial studies indicate that the majority would leave again, while some of those who remained would become addicted to drugs or involved in criminal/insurgent activities for money and opportunities (Siegfried 2016).

The EU-Afghan deal also raises questions about the non-refoulement obligations of European Union countries to house people at risk until the danger passes. In Afghanistan, the conflict is approaching a four decades since the Soviet intervention, and a decade and half since the US one. As we write, the Taliban possesses more territory than at any time since 2001. Kundoz City in the north fell briefly in late 2015. Lashkar Gah city, the capital of Helmand province in the south – where, not coincidentally, nearly half of the world's opium is produced – has the Taliban at the city's edge and in control of most of the province. Suicide attacks, IEDs, and recent IS incursions challenge physical security and wreck confidence in the future, even in places where the government is firmly entrenched. The Asia Foundation's 2015 survey of the Afghan people found nearly 70 per cent of Afghans fear for their personal safety, the highest percentage since the survey began in 2006 (Asia Foundation 2015). In a war that all of the parties involved agree will get worse before it gets better, repatriating Afghans contradicts the EU's non-refoulement obligations.

The particulars of Akbar's story are unique, but most Afghan asylum seekers in Europe share the basic arc of his experiences. A family history of displacement due to past wars is the norm amongst Afghans. The high
costs and abuses suffered while being smuggled across borders is also common. In particular, those who travel alone lose the emotional support of their family while adjusting to an unfamiliar culture, learning a new language, and feeling pressure to financially support their family – or repay the debt of the trip – as the possibility of deportation looms. And the journey itself can be psychologically devastating. Akbar was beaten multiple times, hung upside down naked, robbed, punched in the face, had his hand broken by policemen, and jailed, before he was settled into a building full of broken spirits existing at the whim of the German state’s policy decisions on asylum.

The media tells a mostly Eurocentric story focused on water crossing, border defences, and international relations. Their photographs freeze victims in time. The dead wash ashore. Refugees cannot report crimes committed against them by the same authorities from whom they beg asylum. Following the life experiences and history of one Afghan family complicates the simple migrant/refugee divide, while reminding us of the duration of the Afghan conflicts and the complicated geopolitical origins of a ‘war on terror’. By presenting the circumstances of a single family’s struggle to survive across decades of conflict, our conceit is to keep the realities of war victims from being submerged by the abstractions of national interests and policy debates. In the end, after a harrowing and expensive journey, and despite a life in Germany defined by tedious uncertainty, regret, and loneliness, Akbar wants to stay in Europe. He says he would again risk his life to do so, at least until Afghanistan becomes secure: ‘I am changed since I came to Europe; if I am deported back to Kabul, I will not stay.’

References


About the Authors

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