

# The Real Reasons for Afghan Migration

Dermot Rooney



**Afghans are not only forced from their homelands by war and tribal conflict, competition for resources also plays a large part.**

More migrants are coming to Europe from Afghanistan than any other country except Syria. Most commentators have argued they are driven by war, but there is more to the story. What is really driving this mass migration? And what does their movement tell us about the migration 'threat' and the nature of future conflict?

Over the last five years this author has assessed Afghan migration. The work was only a small contribution to periodic assessments of Afghanistan's stability; while the data has always been messy, the work remains the only long-term study of the security implications of Afghan migration, and is based on the best sources available. This article outlines the main findings of this work.

The Afghan people are tired of war, but war alone cannot account for the vast number of Afghan migrants or the great distances they are travelling. Globally, up until 1960, the ratio of refugees to fatalities in conflict zones was below 5:1. This ratio has gradually increased since 1960 but, as Figure 1 indicates, for Afghanistan, in 2015 there was an almost unprecedented 50 asylum applicants for every civilian killed. Whereas in 1979 over 90% of Afghan refugees travelled less than 500 km and crossed one border, now more than 90% travel over 5,000 km to seek asylum, with many crossing ten borders.

While the Afghanistan conflict clearly generates genuine fear, by historical standards the level of risk it presents does not appear to warrant flight in such numbers. Despite the difficulties faced by security forces, Afghan civilians are still much more

likely to be killed in traffic accidents than in conflict.

But alongside war there is a different kind of insecurity. The conflict with the Taliban and Daesh exists alongside competition for land, water, food and income that sets tribal groups, villages and families against one another. These two strands of insecurity push people out of their homes. There are now 1.3 million internally displaced Afghans, with the total increasing by 400,000 a year.

Most of these people live in shanties around towns and cities, where they compete for aid agency and government assistance with Afghans repatriated from their traditional

migrant destinations of Iran and Pakistan. For example: in 2014, 200,000 people fled Pakistani military operations in Waziristan and have been unable to return, while in 2015, 300,000 Afghans were coerced back over the borders from Pakistan and Iran.

Displaced and repatriated Afghans compete for assistance with other groups, propelling the number of Afghans judged to be in need of aid to nearly 8 million. But these are the people at the bottom of the economic pile who cannot afford to reach Europe. The migrants coming to Europe are healthier and wealthier Afghans who see the rising despair around them and try to escape the same fate.



An internally displaced Afghan child stands outside a shanty town in Kabul, December 2010. There are now 1.3 million internally displaced Afghans. Image courtesy of Staff Sergeant Stacey Haga/Wikipedia Commons.

The pull of economic opportunity plays a large part in the decision to migrate. Migrants are more likely to head towards richer countries. Excluding rich countries unwelcoming to Afghans (Spain, France and UK) and smaller economies on the route to Germany (Hungary, Austria and Bulgaria), there is a nearly perfect correlation between the size of a country's GDP and the number of Afghans seeking asylum there.

The migrant pipeline exaggerates the push and pull of insecurity and opportunity. It includes smugglers, agents and money lenders – and is also a well-trodden path, in which old communication networks are enhanced by smartphones and electronic money transfer, and there is assistance along the route from aid stations and previous waves of migration. This pre-existing pipeline reduces the costs and risks of migration; as a decentralised, organic system full of highly motivated people, it gets around piecemeal legal and physical barriers quicker than national bureaucracies can erect them.

Right now, it is feeling a path around the Balkans, trying routes through Russia, Egypt and Albania.

Paradoxically, the efficiency of the pipeline has exposed the gross inefficiencies of the asylum system as a means of helping people. The tragedy is not just the people who die along the way, or the inevitability of so many being sent back, but that all this misery costs so much to help so few. Prices vary, but by the end of 2015 a fit, young Afghan could get to Germany or Sweden for about \$5,000. If the reception process works well, it should cost about \$5,000 to house him for a few months and process his asylum application. If his application fails, as at least half are bound to do, it could cost another \$5,000 to repatriate him. But with the easy routes now blocked and asylum reception teams overwhelmed, the costs to migrants and EU nations could easily be doubled.

Meanwhile, a penniless, internally displaced Afghan family will receive a one-off aid agency payment of \$442 – so helping one relatively rich young

man in Europe can cost the same as helping dozens of destitute families in Afghanistan. With aid agencies already spread thin, pressure to help or return people at the front of the queue in Europe means that resources are taken from those in much greater need at the back of the queue in Afghanistan.

*Unless there is a dramatic improvement in the country's economy and security, in ten years 16 million Afghans will depend on food aid*

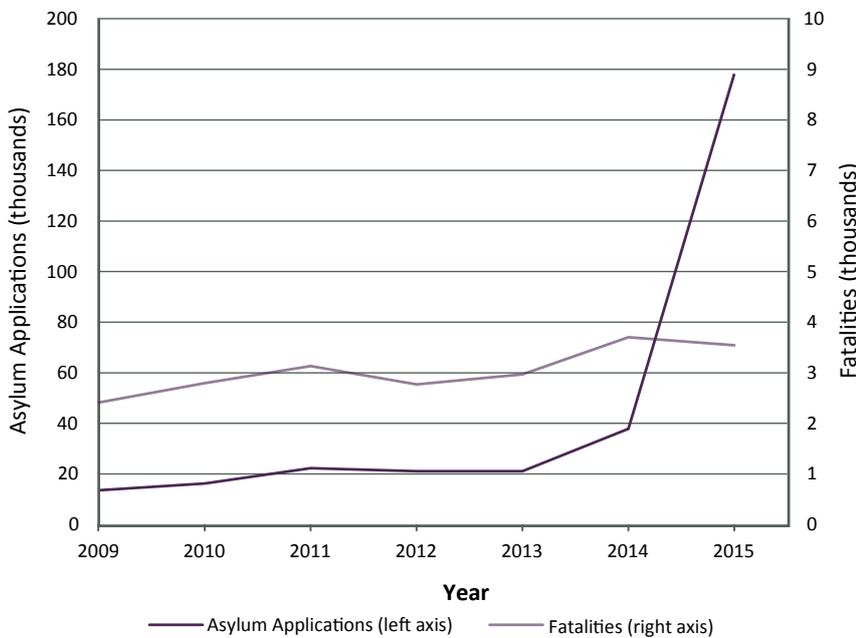
The current migration crisis reflects a fundamental structural change in the way wars and populations interact. Afghanistan's push and pull factors, together with its efficient migrant pipeline, have given it a remarkably high refugee-to-fatality ratio but, as Figure 2 suggests, this forms part of a global trend for more people to flee less destruction.

Efforts to find a common thread underlying the push and pull of conflict migration and to help predict future crises have yielded two main explanatory factors. Half of the change is because of the increased ease with which it is possible to be recognised as a refugee, due to the widening application of the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees. The Convention was clearly one of the humanitarian successes of the late twentieth century, but the migrant crisis has exposed its weaknesses.

One of its key clauses is that asylum is contingent on the applicant conforming to local laws and regulations, but that nations shall not impose penalties on people who, coming 'directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened ... enter or are present in their territory without authorization, provided they present themselves without delay to the authorities and show good cause for their illegal entry or presence.'

The provisions of 'coming directly' and 'without delay' could potentially

**Figure 1: Afghan Asylum Applications and Conflict Fatalities, 2009–15.**



Source: Figures on Afghan asylum seekers to the EU are from Eurostat. Civilian conflict fatalities contained in UNAMA, 'Annual Report 2014', February 2015; and UNAMA, 'Midyear Report 2015', August 2015.

invalidate almost all of the asylum claims in the current crisis: it could apply to those migrants who have not presented themselves to authorities in transit countries, or have presented themselves but then moved on. This and other clauses give countries enormous leeway to bar entry and have helped to generate constantly changing sets of rules between and within countries.

Much of the ambiguity stems from the fact that despite its humanitarian core, UNHCR's reliance on Western funding meant that from 1951 to 1991, refugee policy was often a mechanism for importing politically and economically valuable people from Eastern Bloc countries, with its clauses used selectively to discourage less favoured populations. When borders, information and people were tightly controlled, the Convention was a valuable weapon in the Cold War. But globalisation has weakened these barriers and the Convention's looseness has enabled receiver nations to interpret it in conflicting and contradictory ways.

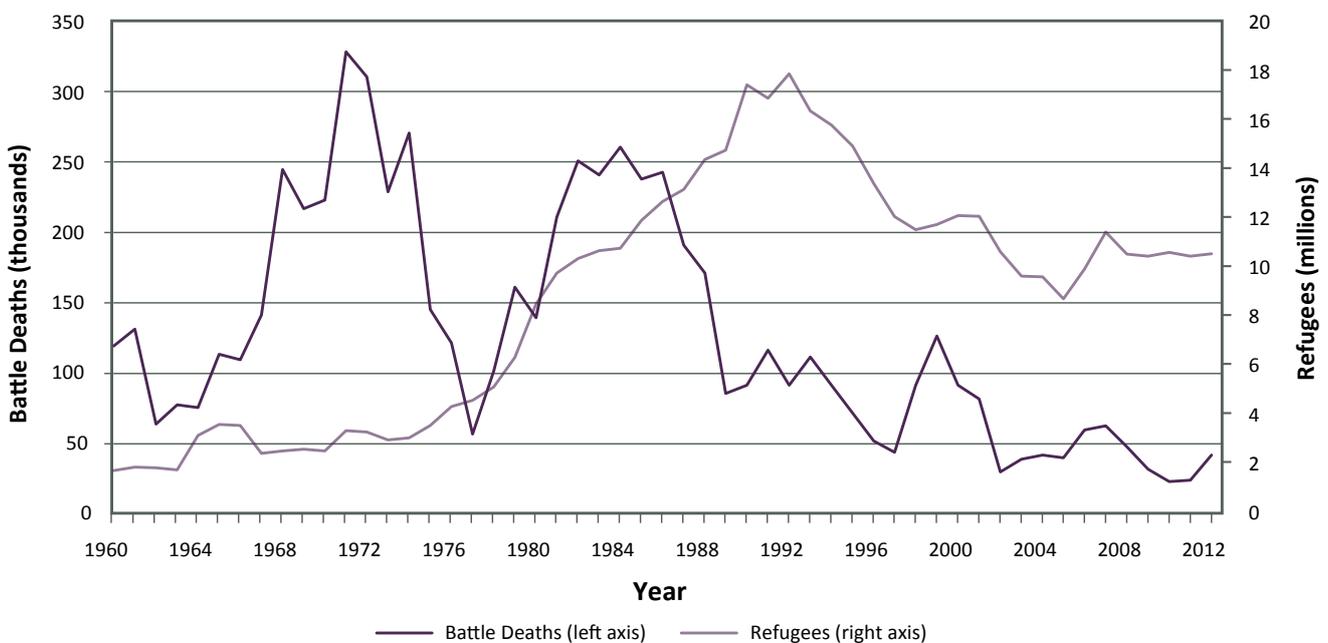
The other half of the deep change in conflict migration patterns is overpopulation. In 2015, the population of Afghanistan was 32 million. Despite being an agricultural economy that has enjoyed four years of good harvests, it is nonetheless obliged to import enough wheat to feed 10 million people, and even then over 7 million are classed as food insecure. This fundamental deficit cannot be explained only by economic and security difficulties. Rather, overpopulation drives these difficulties by creating competition between families, villages and tribes – pushing the losers to the margins of society where they become a cheap resource for extremists.

This gap between the population and the country's capacity to support it is likely to increase rapidly. The natural growth rate of 2.3% a year added 700,000 to the Afghan population in 2015. Expulsions from Iran and Pakistan added another 300,000. If the rate of growth continues, expansion into the West is blocked,

and Iran and Pakistan repatriate only enough Afghans to keep their migrant populations stable, Afghanistan's population will pass 40 million in ten years. Unless there is a dramatic improvement in the economy and security in that time, 16 million will depend on food aid – but only if Afghanistan does not experience one of its frequent droughts or descend into a full civil war before then.

Afghan population growth has its roots in rural communities hemmed in by mountains, deserts and neighbours; places where the pressures of subsistence farming demand a large family. But such communities cannot support all their adult dependents, who then move to the cities to find work. Traditionally these were cities in Iran and Pakistan, but this pattern was disrupted by the international intervention in Afghanistan, when population pressures were softened by military and aid investment. Kabul's population quadrupled to 4 million. Now most of that money has gone, and Pakistani and Iranian hospitality has

**Figure 2:** Asylum Applications and Battle Deaths Globally, 1960–2012.



Source: Global refugee figures contained in UNHCR Historical Refugee Data. Battle death figures contained in UCDP/PRIO, Battle Deaths Dataset 3.0.

worn thin, so the Afghan population has had to move further afield.

The real Afghan migration threat then is not to the EU, but to the ever-increasing millions in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, and to the hundreds of thousands trapped in the pipeline. A system has developed which exploits ambiguities in refugee policy, encouraging Afghans to spend their money and risk their lives illegally, crossing multiple borders, in an unfair and unsustainable competition for security and prosperity. While Western attention remains focused on the politics of rejecting or accepting migrants, the pipeline will always find new ways around blocks and the problem at the source will get worse.

There are many unpalatable implications of this assessment, but the most salient is that a solution can only be found inside Afghanistan and will require all the major players to work together. Afghanistan's capacity to support its population

can be enhanced, and its population growth can be moderated, but only through decades of education and support. This needs Western money and Afghan government assistance – but it also requires the Taliban to allow access to the rural population. From the Taliban's perspective, its insistence on Western military withdrawal will also mean a withdrawal of most international aid and essential government administration. The regional powers that fund Taliban factions – including Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia – must recognise this too, and accept that the population problem will rebound on them unless they seek peace in Afghanistan.

Within in the EU, the debate needs to move beyond pro- and anti-migration positions. The closure of borders and rejection of masses of asylum applications is now inevitable. The sooner this is realised, the sooner the EU can switch its attention from the symptoms of migration to its causes.

So too the UN Convention needs to be re-examined. Its assumptions and ambiguities are unsuited to the twenty-first century. Revision is needed in order to save its humanitarian core and to prevent extremists from exploiting it to herd populations from their homes. An obvious but difficult solution might be to allow asylum applications to be made and assessed nearer to home, rather than for people to have to pay to be smuggled thousands of miles. A solution is needed soon: while Afghanistan may be a leader in population-driven conflict, other countries are close behind.

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*The conclusions expressed are the author's own and do not reflect those of his clients.*

## Nuclear Weapons on Trial: The Marshall Islands Versus the United Kingdom

Emil Dall



***The tiny Marshall Islands goes to the International Court of Justice to compel nuclear weapon states to commit to disarmament.***

In April 2014 the Marshall Islands entered the spotlight on the international political stage when it submitted parallel legal cases against the world's nuclear weapon states to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The small Pacific island nation has argued that nuclear weapon states, even those not party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1970, have failed to comply with their obligations to pursue nuclear

disarmament in accordance with Article VI of the treaty, which commits parties 'to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to ... nuclear disarmament'.

As a card-carrying member of the NPT group, and the only recognised nuclear weapon state to have accepted the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ, the UK is now facing charges at The Hague. Although participation in the ICJ is based on consent, a total of 72

states have accepted the compulsory jurisdiction of the court, which means that they must accept all cases that may be brought against them.

Two other nuclear weapon states, India and Pakistan, have also accepted the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ, and so are facing similar charges to the UK at The Hague; however, since neither country is a member of the NPT group it is harder to argue that a breach has occurred.