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“TRAVELLING THIS PATH IS A GAMBLE”: How Afghan families decide to send members to Europe

AFGHANISTAN ANALYSTS NETWORK

Afghanistan Analysts Network

Migration

November 2026

For many Afghan families, sending a relative abroad is a difficult calculation: whether the prospect of – eventually – a safer, less restrictive future and being able to send remittances home outweighs the risks, costs and likely years of separation. These calculations have always taken into account economic hardship and insecurity, but since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, new pressures have emerged – fears of being seen as disloyal to the Islamic Emirate and, for the very few women who migrate, the multiple restrictions the Emirate puts them under. Asylum application statistics show that Afghan nationals remain among the largest groups seeking asylum in Europe. However, that data reveals little about how the decision for a person to try to get to Europe is made – the household negotiations, resources committed to leaving or the consequences for those who stay behind.

This report by AAN's Jelena Bjelica draws on 22 interviews conducted by the AAN team between June and September 2026 with family members of Afghans who have left the country since August 2021. It examines why people left, how families made decisions, how they financed and organised the journeys and what the migration has meant for households. Some of our interviewees' kin reached Europe and have begun supporting their families, while others remain stranded in Iran or Turkey, hoping to continue onward travel. Together, these accounts show migration is a process that can continue for years, with costs and consequences extending far beyond the price paid for the initial departure.

The report also considers what has changed since a 2016 AAN-Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) study, which also examined how families choose to send members on illegal and often dangerous journeys towards Europe. Ten years on, Afghan families continue to make costly, collective decisions in response to limited prospects at home and fears for their future. Although both studies are small qualitative accounts rather than representative surveys, they nevertheless offer insight into how families weigh constrained choices, mobilise resources and live with the uncertainty of having a family member seeking a future elsewhere.

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INTRODUCTION

Economic hardship, insecurity, lack of freedoms and restricted prospects continue to drive Afghan migration towards Europe. As evidenced by their asylum application numbers, Afghan citizens have made approximately one million asylum applications in EU+ countries (the European Union member states, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland) since 2015. However, this high number of asylum applications does not tell us how families decide to send a member to seek a future elsewhere.

Through 22 family interviews conducted between June and September 2026, AAN sought to understand how families make the decision to send a member to Europe. Afghan migration to Europe has always been predominantly male, mainly because overland travel is especially dangerous for women, with the threat not just of general violence, but also sexual assault, combined with an assumption that men will be able to earn and send remittances home. Our sample also included two women who migrated by themselves, ie not with a male companion. Their decisions to leave were shaped by the restrictions placed on their freedoms after 2021. Independent women’s migration, in itself, is rare. These two cases highlight just how determined a single woman has to be to leave and the support she needs from her family.

The interviews show how these journeys place financial and emotional burdens on families. Interviewees spoke of unemployment, debt, reduced household[1] income and hopes for remittances as recurring reasons for leaving. The Taliban’s return to power in 2021 intensified difficulties for many because of job losses, fears of reprisals against former security personnel and restrictions on women’s education and employment.

We also heard about the routes the migrants took. Most interviewees recounted what they had heard from their relatives about travel through Iran and Turkey and of onward journeys to Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia and further on into Europe. Only a few of the migrants had managed to use medical, study or other visas to ease

[1] For this research, a household is the group of people who live together and share everyday living arrangements, such as food and expenses. This may include parents and children, grandparents, married sons, unmarried daughters, daughters-in-law and grandchildren, living in one home or compound.

the travel. Several journeys remained unfinished, as migrants were forced to make prolonged stops in Iran and Turkey, working, raising money or waiting for another crossing attempt. Interviewees also indicated overall uncertainty as the intended destination of the migrant could change en route in response to family contacts, financial constraints, border enforcement and perceived asylum or employment opportunities.



Afghans, hoping to seek asylum, share a meal in front of their tent in Brussels, Belgium.
Photo: Simon Wohlfahrt/AFP, 13 September 2023

Interviewees also described how their families had financed migration. That often required borrowing, selling assets or mortgaging property. Yet, most saw this as an investment in the future remittances they would receive once their family member had found work, repaid debts and possibly financed another relative’s departure. Families also experienced anxiety during periods without contact, separation and the loss of household labour. Reaching safety brought relief, but did not resolve financial uncertainty.

The main findings were compared with the AAN-FES study “We Knew They Had No Future in Kabul”: Why and How Afghan Families Decide to Leave, published on 27

April 2016 and based on 12 interviews with households whose relatives left in 2015. The 2016 study heard from families who had decided to send young men abroad and heard about their concerns for their safety and lack of prospects for work or education in Afghanistan. It also heard about families’ reliance on networks abroad, exposure to debt and worries about dangerous journeys.

Both sets of interviews show the primary push factors for migration remain the same – economic uncertainty and lack of prospects – although some conditions have changed since the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, creating particular fears for people associated with the former government, security forces, NGOs and the media, while restrictions on women’s education, work and daily life also shaped the decision to leave of the two female migrants featured in this research. The newer accounts describe more interrupted journeys, including deportations and long periods of work in Iran or Turkey. They also give greater attention to the continuing financial and emotional burdens borne by families left behind.

Taken together, these accounts provide valuable evidence of household decisions and their consequences. Yet they also suggest that migration, far from being an individual decision, remains largely a *household* survival strategy when families face economic, political or security pressure, even though its anticipated benefits may take years to materialise or, for some families, remain unrealised.[2]

This report is structured in three parts. The first offers a brief overview of Afghan migration to Europe in the 21st century, including a summary of the 2016 AAN-FES study findings and a ten-year asylum application trend in the EU+ countries. This is followed by a detailed account of the 22 interviews, divided into the five topics discussed: how decisions were made; how the destination was chosen; which routes were discussed and how the journey evolved; how much the family paid; and how they maintained contact with the person en route. The final part of this report compares the two sets of interviews from 2016 and 2026, highlighting what has changed and what has remained unchanged over the span of ten years.

[2] Worth noting, as well, is the high growth in population in Afghanistan, due to falling mortality rates and one of the highest fertility rates in the world, as well as more than six million people forcibly returned from Iran and Pakistan since late 2023. Afghanistan’s GDP per capita has fallen in the last three years (World Bank). Europe, during a similar stage of demographic transition, was also a high exporter of human capital. For more on Afghanistan’s demographic transition, see Kate Clark, More Births, Younger Mothers, Fewer Choices: Is Afghanistan’s fertility transition going into reverse?, AAN, 31 October 2026.

AFGHAN MIGRATION TO EUROPE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Afghan migration to Europe has grown in successive waves, shaped by insecurity and limited prospects in Afghanistan, as well as changing opportunities to travel and seek asylum. During the 2000s and early 2010s, many journeys followed a route through Iran, Turkey, Greece and the Western Balkans towards Germany and other European countries. Family and diaspora contacts helped people arrange travel, while smugglers and local intermediaries facilitated crossings. Europe was usually reached only after a long journey through several countries and migrants’ intended destination could change along the way.

Norwegian sociologist Kristian Berg Harpviken argued in his seminal 2009 work on Afghan migration that social networks fundamentally shaped it by providing information, financial resources and security.[3] Rather than acting independently, smugglers were embedded in wider networks of relatives, friends and diaspora communities. Trust and reputation were essential, with migrants typically choosing facilitators recommended by family members or previous migrants whom they knew, rather than unknown brokers. This network-based organisation reduced both the perceived risks of migration and the transaction costs associated with illegal travel.[4]

By 2010, Greece had become the principal gateway for Afghan migration into the European Union. The Evros/Maritsa River between Greece and Turkey emerged as a major entry point and Afghans constituted one of the largest groups seeking asylum in Greece. During this period, Athens developed into an important staging area for Afghan migration networks. Routes typically followed the sequence Afghanistan–Iran–Turkey–Greece–North Macedonia–Serbia–Hungary–Austria and then on to Germany and other Western European destinations.

However, after the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)[5] deployed its first-ever Rapid Border Intervention Teams (RABIT) to the Evros region in

[3] Kristian Berg Harpviken, Social Networks and Migration in Wartime Afghanistan, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

[4] See Jelena Bjelica and Fabrizio Foschini, A Good Smuggler is Hard to Find: The evolution of Afghan smuggling networks in the Balkans, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 25 July 2026.

[5] Frontex is the European Union agency responsible for supporting EU and Schengen countries in managing the Union’s external borders, coordinating joint border operations and combating cross-border crime. It was established in 2004 and became operational in 2005.

November 2010, the situation changed and in the years that ensued, the current incarnation of the Balkan migration route emerged. Although the RABIT mission ended in March 2011, Frontex has maintained a permanent operational presence and continued surveillance and border management activities along the Evros border to date. These increased controls, including the construction of fencing along the Evros River, encouraged route diversification north, through Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary. During this period, migrant smuggling expanded significantly in the Western Balkans, with Afghans also involved in the smuggling side of the business, mainly as recruiters, brokers, payment coordinators and providers of information for other Afghans, while local Balkan facilitators managed transport, accommodation and border crossings.

In 2015, migration from Afghanistan increased sharply, driven by insecurity in Afghanistan, combined with the opening of the Balkan humanitarian corridor for refugees from Syria (later to include Afghans) and Germany’s asylum policy and perceived openness.[6] The opening of the Western Balkan humanitarian corridor for migrants between September 2015 and March 2016 provided Afghans, Syrians and Iraqis with transport to the outer fringes of the European Union and temporarily reduced migrants’ dependence on smugglers, as governments themselves facilitated transit by registering migrants, organising transport and showing a degree of official tolerance (AAN). In 2015, Afghans lodged 190,013 asylum applications in the EU+, according to the European Asylum Support Office; of them, 178,230 were first-time applicants. According to UNHCR, Afghans made up the second-largest nationality of asylum seekers after Syrians in Europe in 2015.

[6] In 2015, Germany’s welcoming stance towards refugees, together with widespread media coverage, contributed to a perception among Afghans that they would have a reasonable chance of obtaining asylum or protection in Europe, even though recognition rates varied by nationality. See also Thomas Ruttig, Afghan Exodus: Afghan asylum seekers in Europe (3) – case study Germany, AAN, 17 February 2017.

The main findings from the AAN 2016 study

The 2016 AAN-FES study “We Knew They Had No Future in Kabul”: Why and How Afghan Families Decide to Leave was a small, illustrative interview study with 12 Afghan households who had sent family members to Europe in 2015. All the migrants the families reported on were male (brothers or sons), with the exception of one case where a husband, wife and two young children travelled together.

The study portrays migration as a response to accumulated insecurity and a perceived absence of opportunity, negotiated within families and made possible through taking on substantial debt. Its central finding was that security and prospects for the future were intertwined reasons for leaving Afghanistan. It also found that encouragement from friends and relatives already in Europe could influence a young man’s decision to leave and his choice of destination.

Families of migrants described unemployment, difficulty entering university and little hope of building a life in Afghanistan as the main push factors for leaving. Families also feared worsening violence, threats against particular relatives and the possibility that unemployed sons might be drawn into the war. In some households, the prospective migrant had lobbied to leave despite family objections; in others, parents or older siblings urged a reluctant son or brother to go for safety or economic reasons.

Paying for departure in most of the cases was a family investment and a family risk. Relatives helped choose a smuggler and raise money, often by borrowing or mortgaging property. Reported costs ranged from USD 5,000 to more than USD 8,000 per person. Families hoped the migrant would be safe, would be able to study or work and eventually support them financially, but also worried about the dangers of the journey and the consequences of an unsuccessful asylum claim.

Most travelled through Iran and Turkey, intending to cross by boat to Greece and continue through Europe. The journey involved long waits, failed sea crossings, arrest and mistreatment. Germany was a frequent destination, although some travellers chose or changed their destination en route according to the availability of money, relatives’ advice, information from other migrants or smugglers’ guidance.

The changes on the Balkan route



An Afghan migrant sits while another sleeps on a deserted platform at the former Belgrade Central Railway Station in Serbia. Photo: Andrej Isakovic/AFP, 23 October 2019

The closure of the humanitarian corridor in March 2016, as AAN reported, revived demand for clandestine facilitation services.[7] This was especially true at the most critical border crossings, such as those between Turkey and Greece/Bulgaria or between Serbia and Hungary/Bosnia/Croatia. Additionally, this closure made the journey longer, mainly because people could not move as quickly or smoothly across borders. Now, migrants had to wait for smugglers, try several border crossings and were often pushed back to a country they had already crossed, reversing their progress. This resulted in many spending extended periods in transit countries before moving on. AAN’s 2026 research describes Afghan smuggling networks that emerged in the Balkans between 2016 and 2020 as decentralised brokers, intermediaries and

[7] See Martine van Bijlert and Jelena Bjelica, Afghan Exodus: The opening and closing of the Balkan corridor, AAN, 5 August 2016; Martine van Bijlert and Jelena Bjelica, Afghan Exodus: The re-emergence of smugglers along the Balkan route, AAN, 10 August 2016; Noah Arjomand, Afghan Exodus: Smuggling Networks, Migration and Settlement Patterns in Turkey, AAN, 10 September 2016; Martine van Bijlert and Jelena Bjelica, The Aftermath of an Exodus: The Balkans’ Old Smuggling Routes and Europe’s Closed Borders, AAN, 14 June 2017.

guides embedded within Afghan migrant communities, often connected to their ‘customers’ through family, village, ethnic and diasporic ties. The research found that, after the closure of the Balkan corridor, Serbia, particularly Belgrade, emerged as a major logistical hub where migrants regrouped, arranged payments, received instructions and organised onward travel towards Hungary, Croatia, Austria and Germany.

From approximately 2021, a change became evident, as reported by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), Europol and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN).[8] While Afghan networks were still community-based and flexible, parts of their smuggling operations appear to have become more professionalised, territorial, transnational and violent. They also became more visible on social media platforms, which they were increasingly using to promote their services and recruit new low-level smugglers and clients.

In 2022, Europol described migrant-smuggling groups (of all nationalities) in Europe as dynamic transnational enterprises, operating through compartmentalised cells. It described their exploitation of digital communications, encrypted applications and online recruitment methods and said:

> *Criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling are adaptable and responsive to changes in their environment, and are flexible in the routes and modi operandi used. Furthermore, criminals plan their routes by capitalising on existing infrastructure such as availability of transport logistics, travel restrictions, law enforcement presence or weather conditions.*

Most significantly, there has been the emergence of violence as a defining feature of parts of the migrant-smuggling economy in northern Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Investigations by BIRN describe Afghan groups as among the principal actors competing for control over profitable crossing corridors near Subotica, Horgoš and the Hungarian border fence.[9] Armed confrontations between Afghan

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[8] See Europol, European Migrant Smuggling Centre, 6th Annual Report 2022, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, The internationalization of migrant smuggling through the Balkans, May 2025; Fabrizio Foschini, Keep on Moving on the Balkan Route: No quarter for Afghan asylum seekers in Croatia and Serbia, AAN, 26 September 2023.

[9] Saša Dragojlo, Serbian Police Operation Targets People-Smugglers After Armed Clashes, BIRN, 12 September 2023; Saša Dragojlo, Serbian Police Stage Crackdown on Armed Smugglers at Hungary Border, BIRN, 1 August 2023.

and Moroccan groups were reported in 2023, with accounts featuring automatic weapons, territorial disputes and clashes over access to migrants and border routes.[10] According to a BIRN journalist, Saša Dragojlo, the change in the way the smuggling networks operate has also brought a shift in how gangs deploy violence: “Violence shifted from primarily inter-gang conflicts to more violence against migrants themselves, as a model of smuggling changed from smuggling fees to extortion and kidnapping as revenue streams.”

The significance of Afghan smuggling networks has been bolstered by the fact that, in the last ten years, Afghans aged 14 to 23 became the single largest migrant group in the Western Balkans.[11] That strength in numbers has helped change the way Afghan smuggling networks and groups operate. The networks themselves have demonstrated high adaptability, responding rapidly to changes in migration policies, border controls and law-enforcement pressure. Yet it would be inaccurate to describe Afghan smuggling in the Balkans as controlled by a unified ‘Afghan mafia’. Afghan migrant smuggling networks more closely resemble a fragmented ecosystem of numerous and often competing networks of varying size, sophistication and criminal orientation.

Many migrants are stuck at various points along this route, but if they can reach it, Italy, and in particular the border city of Trieste, remains one of the major gateways for Afghans entering Europe through the Balkan route, as AAN has reported.[12] Many migrants travel onwards from there, although more are considering asylum in Italy as other European destinations become harder to access.

2016-26 asylum application trends

Before looking in detail at the themes emerging from our 2026 interviews, it is worth placing them in the context of broader trends in Afghan asylum applications in the EU+. These were exceptionally high in 2016. There were 186,550 applications, reflecting the large number of people who had reached Europe during 2015 and the time it took to register their claims. Applications then fell sharply after the Balkan

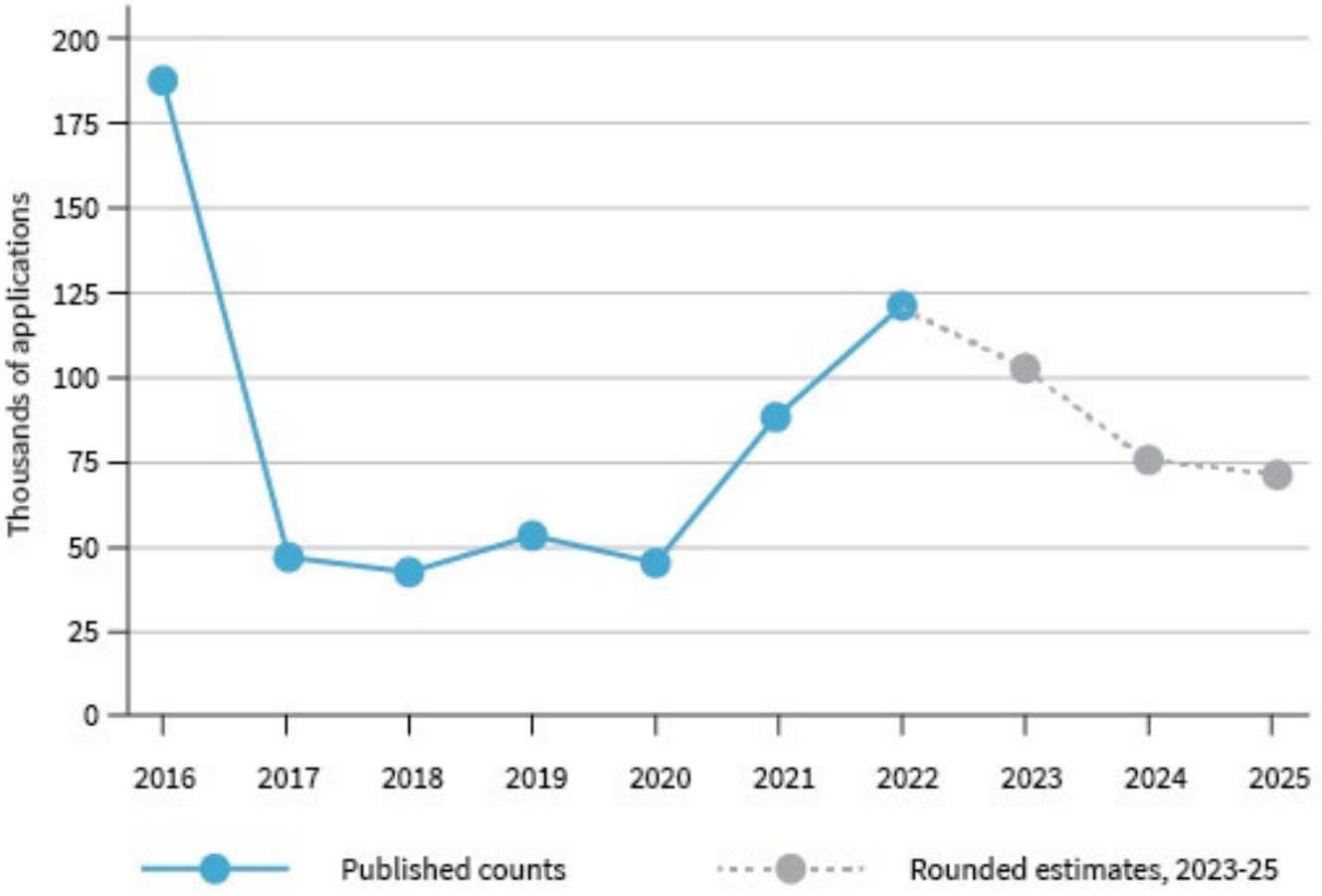
[10] Saša Dragojlo, Albanian-Supplied AKs Fuel Violence on Refugee Route through Serbia, BIRN, 4 September 2023; Vladimir Karaj, Tommi Siviero and Saša Dragojlo, As Borders Tighten, Violence Rises on Migrant Route Through the Balkans, BIRN, 20 November 2024.

[11] These are estimates from IOM and the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia.

[12] See Fabrizio Foschini, Afghan Migration To and Through Italy: No place to call home, AAN, 17 October 2026.

humanitarian corridor closed and border restrictions increased, although Afghans remained a major applicant group. Numbers rose again after the Taliban returned to power in 2021. In 2022, Afghans lodged about 129,000 applications, the highest annual total since 2016; around 92 per cent were first-time applications. The numbers subsequently fell to about 114,000 in 2023 and 88,000 in 2024. This was in addition to 22,000 Afghans who were evacuated between 15 and 30 August 2021 by EU member states.[13]

Figure 1: Afghan first-time asylum applications in the EU+



Source: EUAA and Eurostat

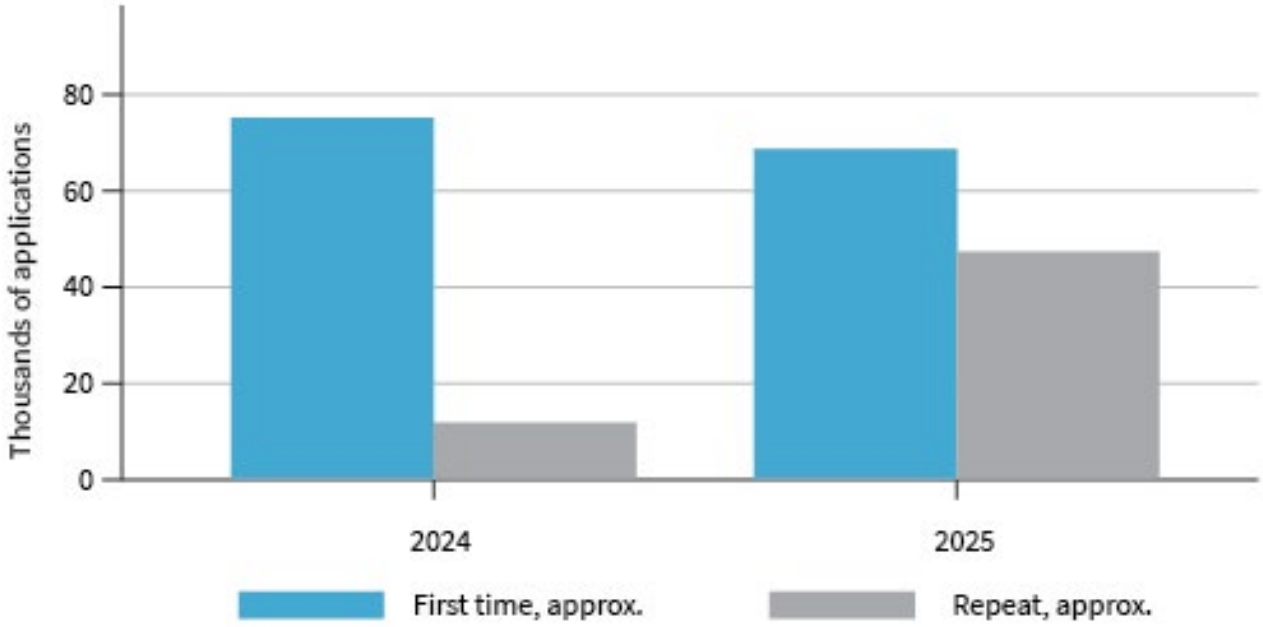
[13] See the 2021 European Parliament briefing, Evacuation of Afghan nationals to EU Member States. For a detailed breakdown of the number of people granted asylum or other forms of protection, see also EUAA, ‘4.16.3.1. Humanitarian admission programmes’ in Asylum Report 2022, May 2022.

Between 2021 and 2025, almost 38,000 Afghans were resettled in the UK through three humanitarian routes (UK Home Office). During that same period, almost the same number – 37,000 – claimed asylum in the UK. See Rachel Reid and Francesca Gilks, Afghans in the UK: Uncertain times ahead, AAN, 9 April 2026.

Roughly 200,000 Afghans were also admitted to the US in humanitarian schemes after August 2021; see Jelena Bjelica, From Welcoming Allies to Threats of Deportation: The changing status of Afghans in America, AAN, 1 June 2025.

The total number of applications increased to about 117,000 in 2025, making Afghans the largest applicant group in the EU+. This rise, however, should not be read as a surge in new arrivals: it was driven substantially by repeat applications from Afghans already in Europe (see Figure 2 and Table 1 below). In the first half of 2026, Afghans lodged about 39,000 applications, seven per cent fewer than in the same period of 2025, as both first-time and repeat applications declined.

Figure 2: Rounded first-time and repeat applications in 2024 and 2025



Source: European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and Eurostat

Table 1: First-time and repeat asylum applications by Afghans in the EU+

Year	First-time applications	Repeat applications	Total applications
2020	—	—	~49,000
2021	~87,000	~15,000	~102,000
2022	~119,000	~10,000	~129,000
2023	—	—	~114,000
2024	~76,000	~12,000	~88,000
2025	~68,000	~49,000	~117,000

Source: EUAA and Eurostat

Across the decade, application numbers show that Afghans have remained a major group seeking protection in Europe, whether as first-time or repeat applicants.

WHO DID WE INTERVIEW?

Between June and September 2026, the AAN team conducted 22 qualitative interviews across 14 provinces (see Map 1 below) with family members – namely parents and siblings – of Afghans who have left the country since August 2021 (see Annex 1: Coded list of interviewees). We interviewed five mothers, one sister, seven brothers and nine fathers from different ethnic and social backgrounds. None of the interviewees was the wife or fiancée of a migrant. They may have given different accounts of the decision-making: a husband or fiancé planning years of absence may feel very differently from a son or brother leaving.[14] Our interviewees were between 24 and 68 years old.

All but two of the migrants discussed by our interviewees were male. The two female migrants were from Bamyan and Kunduz, respectively. Independent migration by Afghan women stands out in these interviews because the journey demands money, contacts and repeated travel through places where families fear arrest, exploitation and sexual violence. The fact that these two young women decided to leave, despite these dangers, may point to wider changes in norms and beliefs in some parts of Afghan society.

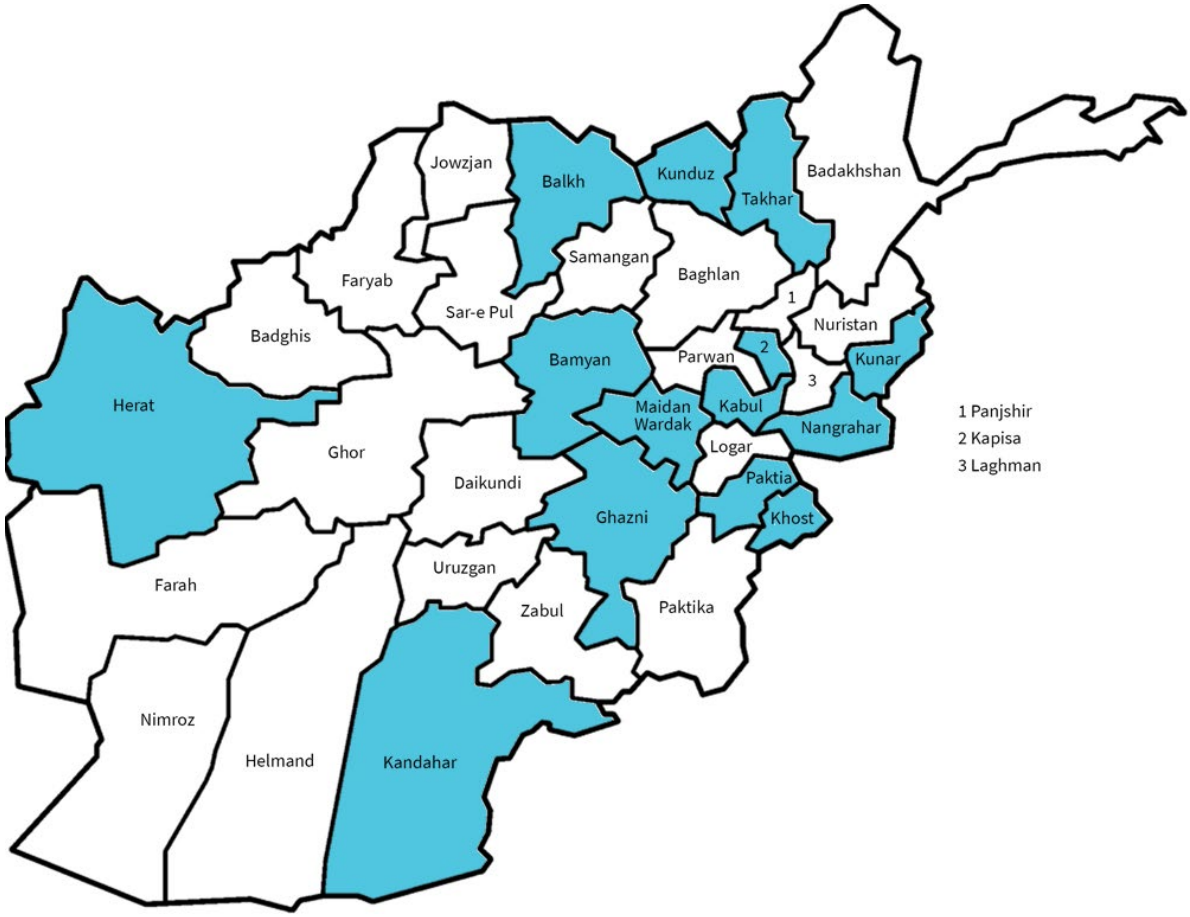
The median age among those who migrated was 24 years. The youngest migrant was 17 and the oldest 36. Several interviewees discussed more than one migrant, ie more than one son or brother who has left for Europe since August 2021, bringing the total number of people whose journeys were discussed to 26.

Two of the 26 migrants were married when they left Afghanistan; two were engaged at the time; two got engaged after leaving; and one got married after he got his status settled in Europe, ie after the interview.

Only two migrants had a specific intended destination and had arrived there at the time of the interview. Seven were still in Iran or Turkey at the time of the interview.

[14] Male migrants who abandon their wives, fiancées and sometimes children has become enough of a phenomenon for the Emirate to give some protections to fiancées, although not to wives. See some accounts in Kate Clark and AAN team, Afghan Women Left in Limbo: Decree 18 and the struggle to end a marriage, AAN, 19 September 2026.

Map 1: Location of the 22 interviewees in 2026



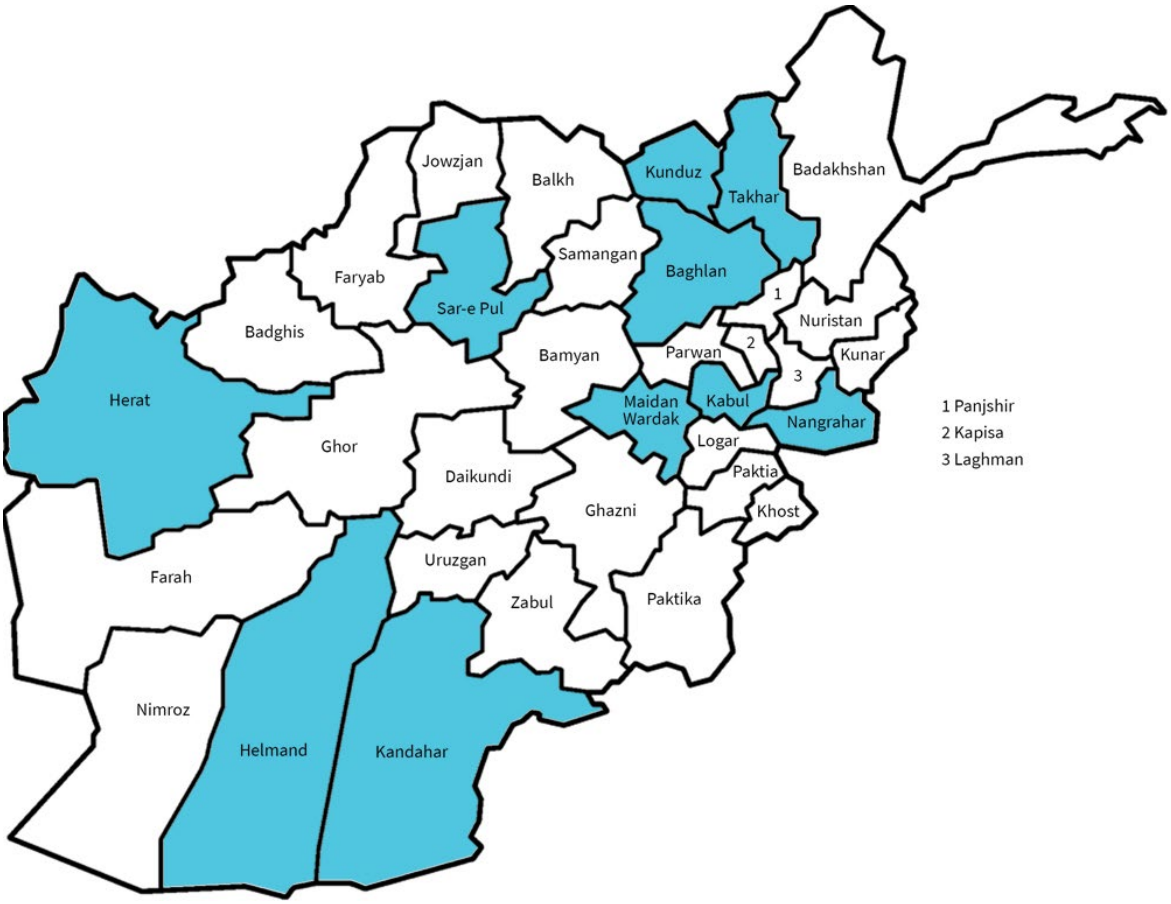
The migrants came from households of very different sizes, from about five or six members in some cases to large extended households of 15 to 20. The households varied in their economic standing, but they were generally not among the poorest. Some families owned a house, land, shops or a vehicle; others had relatives abroad who could lend money or help arrange travel. Even families who described themselves as poor had an asset to draw on, savings or a lender who trusted them. Such resources matter because sending someone towards Europe requires money well before any earnings or remittances could be expected. The interviewees, therefore, do not include the poorest strata of society; the migrants featured come only from households with some capacity to finance a journey.

Guided by a research questionnaire, the interviews explored the circumstances leading to departure, household decision-making, intended destinations, migration routes, financing, contact during the journey and the consequences for the relatives who remained behind. The accounts were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and differences across households. Particular attention was paid to the

interaction between economic pressures, security concerns and loss of freedoms following the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021. The analysis distinguishes between intended destinations, attempted routes and migrants’ locations at the time of the interview.

The findings were compared with the 2016 AAN-FES study of 12 households across 10 provinces (see Map 2 below) whose relatives left Afghanistan in 2015. This was possible because the original 2016 questionnaire was only slightly adjusted in 2026, leaving the main topics discussed intact and allowing for comparison. The comparison explores continuity and change in families’ experiences.

Map 2: Location of the 12 interviewees in 2016



Finally, the interviews capture the perspectives of relatives, whose knowledge of events along migration routes is incomplete and, at best, second-hand. The findings therefore offer insight into how the interviewed households understood, supported and experienced their relatives’ migration, rather than the migratory journey itself.

WHAT DID THE INTERVIEWEES SAY?

The 22 interviews cover different circumstances and stages of migration and offer insight into family decisions. Below is a brief summary of key findings, followed by detailed accounts from the interviews, divided into five topics: how decisions were made; how the destination was chosen; which routes were discussed and how the journey evolved; how much the family paid; and how they maintained contact with the person en route.

While reasons for leaving were usually connected – interviewees described unemployment, falling household income and limited prospects for education or work, alongside, for some, fears about personal security – decisions were made in different ways. Some prospective migrants persuaded initially reluctant parents. Others left without telling their families. In several households, parents or siblings had urged a relative to go because they believed that person faced danger or had better prospect of finding work abroad than anyone else in the family. Reaching an agreement for a family member to leave could take months and anxiety about the journey remained.

The most commonly described route went through Iran and Turkey towards Europe, although routes and destinations changed along the way. Friends and relatives abroad influenced country choices by offering advice, accommodation or hope of work. Deportations, difficulties crossing borders, lack of money and time spent working in transit could interrupt a journey for months or years.

Paying for departure was a major household undertaking. Families borrowed, used savings, sold assets or mortgaged property and migrants sometimes worked in Iran or Turkey to fund the next stage. Reported prices covered different lengths and parts of the journey and cannot be reduced to one typical fare. Failed crossings and unexpected demands added costs.

Contact during travel was often irregular. A call from a city or border crossing brought relief; a period of silence could leave relatives fearing detention, injury or death. Once migrants arrived, some sent money that helped households repay debt and meet daily costs. Others were not yet able to work or send support back home.

How were decisions made?

There is no single pattern of household decision-making; our interviews show that deciding to leave was rarely shaped by one event alone, but by a series of events and decisions important to each family’s context. In some households, the prospective migrant raised the idea and spent months persuading relatives. In others, parents or siblings urged someone to go because they feared for that person’s safety or because that person was no longer able to contribute to household income and was felt to have better prospects outside Afghanistan. But even when everyone eventually agreed, family members we interviewed often remained deeply uneasy about the journey.

Some of the migrants who initiated the decision themselves, then sought family support, included two young men, aged 26 and 17, from Mazar-e Sharif who decided to leave despite their mother’s objections. She feared for their lives. “It was entirely their own decision,” she said, adding that the main reason for her older son to leave was that he could not afford to marry or support a family. Her son worked as a butcher until the family’s meat business lost its hotel contracts after the Taliban takeover. After that, his earnings could barely cover household needs, let alone a wedding.

> *He has been engaged for four years, though not yet married; he couldn’t provide enough for a family or even afford to get married. This was a major reason why he decided to leave, to eventually be able to support a family and finally to marry.*

The mother was very worried about the younger son leaving too:

> *There was a promise of a better future and they’d be able to work together to support the family. He was young and I was worried, but he didn’t have work at home. There are no jobs for him here. We didn’t have any choice. At least he wasn’t going alone, his older brother was with him.*

The two brothers left in February 2026. They faced hunger, overcrowded vehicles, failed crossings and long periods without contact with home as they travelled through Pakistan and Iran. In Iran, the younger brother turned back and returned to Afghanistan; the older successfully reached Turkey, where he is now working and waiting to continue towards Greece. Distant relatives in Turkey promised to help him travel onwards.

In Kandahar, a 28-year-old man left with friends without telling his family beforehand. He travelled with two classmates from Kunduz province. “They persuaded him to go with them. He never discussed it with us and we didn’t know he had gone until he reached Iran,” his father told us. He left four years ago and is now in London.

Some migrants spent months daydreaming about leaving until their families agreed to let them go. A 62-year-old father in Nangrahar said he offered to help his son start a business at home, but could not change the mind of a son who dreamed about Europe.

> *Most of his friends had gone and he would talk to them and they would tell him what a good place Europe is. They would post photographs and my son would show them to me and say, “Look how happy they are there.” I did not agree because I have only two sons, but he kept insisting. It was as though he was not living a life here, but only passing the time and counting the days until he could go to Europe.*

The father eventually agreed, on the condition that he would find a safer way for his son to travel (explored below). His son now lives in Belgium.

In another case, a family from Kapisa decided to send one son to Europe because they needed income and money for his father’s medical treatment. The father, a former police officer, had lost his feet in an explosion and also had kidney problems. Sending a son to Europe had long been mulled over, the mother said:

> *The discussion started years ago; it was ongoing. … My elder son wanted to go, but then he got married and we decided he shouldn’t go and we started planning for our second son to leave. We hadn’t succeeded in sending our elder son to Europe because we couldn’t find the expenses for him and then he got married. After that, we agreed to talk to a smuggler and to mortgage our house for our second son.*

Some decisions began with a shared assessment of danger, especially after the 2021 change of government intensified pressures on some parts of the population. Former members of the security forces were most fearful because of their previous work. In Takhar, one former soldier left for Germany after his entire family was harassed by the Taliban for months. It was a decision the whole family made together. “The Taliban demanded he hand over his weapon, his gun, threatened him with fines and asked for bribes. Our whole family was harassed because of this,” his father said: “We decided together that it was best for him to leave the country. … It was an ongoing

discussion. During that time, we sought advice, gathered information about possible routes and, most importantly, tried to raise the money to pay the smugglers.” However, a younger brother also left, secretly, and made it to Germany, said the father:

> *My younger son’s decision was entirely his own. He decided by himself, without telling us. We did not want him to leave because he wasn’t facing any real threat. He left secretly for Iran without telling anyone. We only found out through his older brother that he had gone.*



Afghan migrants push a pickup truck stuck on a desert road near the Afghanistan-Iran border in Nimroz province. Photo: Wakil Kohsar/AFP, 17 February 2022

In Paktia, the family of a former sergeant had been discussing sending him abroad for some time and looking for a legal route. The decision became urgent when Taliban authorities summoned him. His father, who had initially opposed the dangerous journey, said:

> *We were truly very frightened about why they had summoned him. I went to the district headquarters instead of my son and asked what the matter was. They told me I had to bring my son and hand over any weapons or anything else he had in his possession. I told them he had left his job two years earlier and that we hadn’t had*

> *any government weapons in the house. They did not accept that and demanded that I present my son. … On the same day, when I returned home, I told my son he must leave the country. … That very night, I sent my son towards Iran.*

His son left in late 2022 and, a year later, reached France, where he still lives.

In a Kabul household, relatives likewise agreed that a former military officer should leave after the Republic fell, but his mother and wife opposed sending him overland through Iran. The family waited while a brother in Germany arranged a visa and a safer route.

In Kunduz, a young man proposed leaving after losing his NGO job. He was the family’s main breadwinner. His family discussed whether he was the best placed to make the journey and decided he was: he was more educated, spoke English and they believed he had a better chance of finding work abroad than his brothers. “He raised the idea with the family first,” said his brother, “and it became a shared decision, not sudden, but something we discussed over time.”

For the two women who migrated, the pressure was different, but still decisive. A young woman from Bamyan decided she could not live under the Taliban’s restrictions. Her mother and brother were acutely worried about her travelling alone. Her mother kept saying it was unsafe for “a young girl to travel alone.” They accepted her departure more readily when she obtained a scholarship in Uzbekistan, though she later travelled by plane to Italy and then to Germany, where she applied for asylum. In another case, a mother from Kunduz described how her daughter, left alone in Iran after the rest of the family was deported, travelled onwards against her wishes: “She made her decision and left suddenly. I didn’t speak to her for a while after that: I was worried and angry.” The mother understood why her daughter did not want to return to Afghanistan. “Without work or study, just staying at home, I know she would have become depressed, on top of the fear of what the Taliban might do, [such as] forced marriage and our lack of any power to fight against it.” Her daughter left in 2025 and is currently in Turkey. “She wants to go on to Germany, but doesn’t yet have the money for it.” She is working in a nail salon, trying to save enough to pay smugglers for the next part of the journey.

Joblessness and the desire to improve the household’s income were frequent push factors. Respondents repeatedly described unemployment, failing businesses, debt, rising expenses and the hope that the migrant would eventually earn and remit money. A man in Herat whose brother left for France in late 2023 identified poverty

and debt as the main reasons for his brother’s departure. His brother had been working as a day labourer in Afghanistan.

A man in Khost whose younger brother left described a large household of 20, including his wife and daughter, parents, seven brothers, three sisters and four nephews, and growing expenses:

> *My older brother works in a factory in Kabul. Another brother has a taxi and I myself have a grocery shop. My two younger brothers go to school. Our income comes only from the taxi and the shop. We don’t have any other income, but we have our own house. Also, we have a small piece of land and the whole family lives together.*

His 24-year-old brother, who left first for Turkey in 2022 and later continued to the United Kingdom, had worked as a tailor, but after the Republic fell, “the tailoring shop he had in the district market started losing business. … One day, he said he wanted to close the shop and go to Europe. … The lack of work had really got him down. He couldn’t even earn enough to cover the shop rent.” He reported that his brother had been adamant about leaving, saying, “‘If you don’t let me go, I will go on my own.’” Rather than let him set out without support, the family borrowed money and asked someone they trusted to arrange the journey.

There are also accounts of a family making the decision as an investment in its future. In Balkh, the mother of a son who had lost his livelihood selling produce from a pushcart took the initiative. The father objected because they had no money. After three months’ discussion, she sold a gold ring and borrowed from her brother to fund his departure. Another interviewee in Kapisa also decided to send his young son to relatives in Iran to find work.

Of those who left with their family’s blessings, the decision was shaped by whether a member faced a risk if they stayed, which family member might best be able to find work, who could travel and who it was best to leave at home to care for relatives. Discussions could last years, but a job loss, harassment, a deportation or the availability of money and contacts could speed up a final decision and set a departure in motion. The accounts also distinguish the decision to leave from the decision about how far to go: families sometimes agreed to a first move to Iran or Turkey, while opposing a further journey to Europe. In these cases, agreement did not mean that parents stopped fearing the risks; it meant they wanted some influence over how their sons and daughters travelled.

Choosing a destination

For more than half of our interviewees, ‘Europe’ was the initial objective; the specific country was often chosen later. Interviewees said the choice of destination was shaped by relatives already in a destination country, perceived prospects for asylum and work, language and advice received while travelling.

A destination is often settled only after departure. A family in Maidan Wardak initially agreed that their son should reach Europe and then decide where to stay. When he called from Serbia, his father sought advice from a friend in Germany about living and working there. The family and the migrant then chose Germany.

A migrant from Kandahar likewise set out without knowing much about European countries; according to his father, friends’ contacts later encouraged him to head for London because they believed he would be treated better there.

Plans could also be constrained by smugglers, border enforcement and money. The Takhar migrant considered more than one destination and eventually arrived in France. One Kapisa family had a general aim of reaching Europe, but their two sons are still in Iran after an unsuccessful attempt to cross into Turkey. The father of the two young men, now aged 21 and 17, who left in 2023, said:

> *Leaving for Europe was their first choice, though we didn’t have any specific country in mind. We only knew it would be somewhere in Europe, perhaps Germany, France, Switzerland or any other European country and we planned to decide once they arrived and could see where the best opportunities were.*

Relatives and friends abroad were often the most influential sources of information. Stories from relatives and friends about work and study opportunities often triggered discussion and, in some cases, a decision to leave. For example, a young man from Herat and his brother chose France because a relative by marriage was already there. Relatives and friends also helped provide accommodation or practical support and sometimes put families in touch with people who could arrange the next stage of travel. In Nangrahar, a father contacted people from his village who were already living in France before agreeing to let his son go; they had offered to help him find work and look after him. These connections made a country feel more reachable, even when the journey itself remained uncertain.

Germany figured prominently in many families’ plans. Interviewees associated it with better chances of asylum, employment and education, largely on the basis of

what they heard from Afghans already there. These were families’ perceptions of the options available to them, based on word of mouth and social media rather than verified comparisons of European asylum systems. The brother of a migrant from Kunduz said they had heard about Germany through social media and from other Afghans living there. Their brother in Austria had also warned that acceptance there would be difficult, reinforcing Germany as their first choice.



Migrants aboard a smugglers’ boat attempt to cross the English Channel.
Photo: Guillaume Saligot/AFP, 21 September 2026

Plans also changed when a route proved too difficult or an intermediate country did not offer the future the migrant expected. The second Kapisa family first considered London, where they had relatives, but chose France after hearing how perilous the onward journey to the UK is, typically on a small, overcrowded boat across the English Channel. A family in Khost initially sent their son to a cousin in Turkey to work. After several months, he decided the work was unsuitable and pressed to continue to Europe. In Takhar, a migrant whose broader ambition had included the US ultimately travelled with a group heading to France after his plans changed in Greece.

The interviews show destination choice as an ongoing negotiation between aspirations and what can actually be arranged or afforded. Family networks and accounts from earlier migrants shaped preferences; money, visas, smugglers, border conditions and experiences in transit all shaped where people went. Some migrants had reached their chosen country, while others were still in Iran or Turkey when their families were interviewed. For them, the final destination remained a hope rather than an outcome.

Routes and the journey

Iran featured in 20 of the 22 interview accounts, including failed attempts and journeys that stopped there. 16 described onward travel from Iran to Turkey, though some had stopped in Turkey, one interviewee described a return to Iran and some had made it on into Europe proper. Several journeys continued via Greece; a couple of accounts mentioned Bulgaria and Serbia.

Nimroz appeared repeatedly as the departure point from Afghanistan, although some travellers first crossed through Pakistan to get to Iran. There were some exceptions. A man from Nangrahar reached Turkey by air with his father on a medical visa, then continued through Greece to Belgium. A former Afghan security officer from Kabul travelled to Turkey by air and later to Germany with a visa arranged with help from a brother in Germany. The woman from Bamyan returned to Afghanistan from Iran and from Afghanistan went to Uzbekistan on a scholarship, then reached Italy by plane with a visa and continued to Germany, where she requested asylum.

An unsuccessful crossing could mean starting again. For example, an interviewee from Kunduz said his brother tried to enter Iran twice and was deported both times. He then obtained a Russian study visa, travelled to Russia and crossed from there through Poland to Germany. This was a less common route in the interviews but shows how a failed first plan could lead a family to spend substantially more on an alternative. A father in Paktia also described how his son was being repeatedly turned back while trying to reach Turkey, including two deportations from Iran to Afghanistan before he was finally successful.

Families frequently knew the broad route but could not say exactly where their relative had crossed each border. For many, the journey unfolded in stages rather than as one continuous trip. Access to documents, money and contacts altered the route unpredictably and Iran and Turkey were often extended stages rather

than brief transit points. Migrants waited for a smuggler, worked to earn the next payment or stopped with relatives while deciding whether to continue.

For example, a man from Khost initially went to a cousin in Turkey and worked there for six months before pressing on towards Europe. Two men from Kapisa remain in Tehran; the third young man from Kapisa is still working in Iran with no clear plan as to where to go in Europe. Interviewees from Balkh, Kunduz and Kabul all said their sons/brothers were in Turkey at the time of the interview, still short of an intended European destination.

The mother of a 26-year-old man from Balkh who left in February 2026 and spent a long time on the road in Pakistan, then two weeks on the Pakistan-Iran border, followed by some time in Iran, said:

> *He is currently in Turkey and his situation has improved somewhat; he is working there now. He doesn’t plan to stay in Turkey long-term; the plan is to continue on to Greece and then to another European country. He is working there while waiting for the smugglers to find the right time and opportunity to move him onwards and he’s also trying to save some of the money he needs himself, with help from friends. He’s in a lot of debt and also needs to support himself during the journey.*

Travellers and their families were aware of the dangers, although they could not always predict or control them. The brother of a migrant from Khost, who had previously travelled the route himself, put it starkly: “Travelling this path is a gamble: either you reach your destination alive, or you get arrested, or you die.”

Interviewees reported their family members walking for hours, being short of food and water, being detained, deported and mistreated by smugglers or border authorities. A brother of a migrant from Nangrahar said his family member sometimes “runs out of water or walks for 18 hours at a stretch through forests.” The mother of a man in Balkh also described her son’s ordeal:

> *For about 15 days, he was stuck in the Pakistan-Iran border area, waiting for the chance to cross into Iran. During that time, he went hungry for days. The smugglers gave the group barely anything to eat, sometimes just a single piece of bread for the whole day. They were kept in a closed, windowless, completely dark room for those 15 days, waiting for the right moment to cross.*



Afghans wait for transport arranged by smugglers in Tatvan, on the western shore of Lake Van in eastern Turkey. Photo: Ozan Kose/AFP, 15 August 2021

Families often played an active role while the migrant was travelling. They found contacts, borrowed money and transferred funds when a migrant reached the next stage. Some payments were held with a money exchanger and released only after the migrant confirmed their arrival. This gave families some control over payments, but did little to ease the uncertainty when calls stopped. Migrants often move at night, stealthily, and cannot openly answer the calls. An interviewee from Herat said his brother asked the family not to contact him while he travelled from Turkey towards Europe: “He would call me himself after he had any opportunity,” he said.

The interviews depict a journey shaped by repeated decisions and frequent interruptions. Each border, deportation, period of work or new payment could alter the route, delay departure or bring the journey to a halt.

How much does the trip cost?

Journeys often shifted financial risk onto the migrant’s household. Families borrowed from friends or relatives, mortgaged property, sold assets or combined

savings with money supplied from abroad. In Takhar, the father mortgaged part of the family’s agricultural land and two of their four shops to finance his older son’s journey to Germany. The family spent about a year raising USD 7,300 for that journey. He said the two shops and part of the land were still mortgaged at the time of the interview, reducing the income available to the household. Yet, the mortgage had covered only his older son’s journey, not the younger son’s. In Kabul, a family borrowed money and also sold the father’s taxi. In Khost, a family borrowed to pay for a brother’s travel and still had some debt outstanding at the time of the interview.

These costs complicate expectations around remittances. A migrant will need to secure work and may then have to repay travel debts or finance another relative’s journey before their family sees the fruits of their migration. For example, in the case from Takhar, mentioned above, the family had incurred debts for the first son’s journey to Germany, so when the older son decided to help with his brother’s journey to join him, he had to delay sending remittances home, as his father explained:

> *For my second son, it was my older boy who arranged contact with the smuggler, since he already had the experience and connections, and he also helped cover the costs. He didn’t explain exactly how he managed the money, whether he saved it himself, worked extra hours or borrowed from friends; he just told us not to worry, that he would handle it. I believe he borrowed money from a friend in Germany – because he’d recently arrived and couldn’t have easily gathered that much money, maybe part of it was borrowed and part came from overtime. But during this time, he told us he wouldn’t be able to send us money for a while and asked us to manage on our own income so he could focus on helping his brother. I think he now earns good money in Germany, working as a plumber.*

Of the 22 interviewees, 15 cited an amount of money paid in connection with the journey; the other seven described paying, borrowing or using savings without stating a cost. The figures vary too much to calculate a meaningful average – some payments covered only one border crossing, others a visa or an entire journey. Several migrants had yet to reach Europe. Reported payments for travel to Iran included 20,000 afghanis (USD 300) from Kabul. One family said they had paid USD 1,500 from Kabul to Turkey. Reported costs for longer journeys to Germany ranged from USD 7,500 to USD 8,000. A trip via Italy to Germany was reported to cost USD 13,000 and one to London about USD 15,000 in total.

The interviews also show that travellers needed money for successive stages and living expenses; deportation meant paying to try again. An interviewee from Khost said that an initial payment of about USD 1,500 was needed to get his brother from Kabul to Turkey; the family later negotiated and raised more for the onward journey. In Nangrahar, a young man paid for the early stages from his own savings, but ran out of money in Turkey and asked his family to arrange payment for the rest.

Among families who used savings or raised funds against property was a mother of a migrant from Kapisa, who said her family had mortgaged its house to finance her son’s journey to France. They placed the payment with a money dealer, to be released to the smuggler only if their son reached the agreed destination. A father in Maidan Wardak described a similar arrangement for a journey priced at USD 13,000: the money was held by a dealer until the smuggler had delivered his son to the agreed point in Italy. These arrangements let families make payment conditional on arrival, but required them to raise a large sum before departure.

Other households were unwilling or unable to risk their remaining assets. A man in Kunduz said the family borrowed from several people after the first, cheaper attempts to send his brother through Iran ended in deportation. They eventually paid more than USD 6,500 for a route through Russia and Poland.

> *The first two attempts through Iran cost 20,000 afghanis [USD 300] each time and he was deported both times before he could arrange onward smuggling. After that, he obtained a Russian study visa for USD 4,500. He had no real intention of studying; it was simply another way to reach Europe. That cost covered the university entry fee, the visa and the person organising everything in Russia. The journey from there to Germany added further costs, bringing the total to more than USD 6,500.*

The brother said his family had no such money, so they borrowed it from friends who knew them, promising to repay it once his brother arrived and started working. “The only asset we had was the house we live in and we couldn’t risk mortgaging or selling it,” the brother said, since if anything went wrong, they would have had nowhere to live. “I’m grateful there were people willing to lend us the money; otherwise, I don’t know what we would have done.”

A mother in Ghazni also said the family had borrowed from relatives in Iran rather than sell their land, despite several poor harvests. “Land is gold,” she said. For these

families, paying for departure meant weighing the hope of future income against the risk of losing the assets that those staying behind depended on.

The obligation to repay did not end when a migrant arrived in Europe. In Kunduz, the brother who had reached Germany worked and sent money home, but the family still faced pressure from those who had lent them the ‘fare’. Other interviewees described a more favourable outcome: a father in Nangrahar said his son’s wages in Germany had enabled the family to clear its debt.

The anxiety of waiting for a call

Phone calls and WhatsApp allowed many families to follow the journey, but contact was uneven. Silence could mean a border crossing, detention, a change of smuggler or a lost phone, leaving relatives unsure whether the traveller was safe. A father from Paktia described such a loss of contact:

> *Whenever [my son] reached a new area, he tried to get in touch with us on WhatsApp and we stayed in contact with him all the way until he reached Turkey. After that, his phone was off for a whole week. We were really worried about what had happened to him and we couldn’t reach anyone – neither the smuggler nor anyone else. When he reached Bulgaria, he called to say he was there and had lost his phone along the way, which was why he couldn’t get in touch. During that time, it was emotionally very difficult for all the family, especially because we didn’t know where he was or what condition he was in.*

Migrants called when they reached a city, found internet access or confirmed a successful crossing. Switching off a phone was often at the smugglers’ instruction. A man from Takhar, whose brother left in late 2021 and is now in France, said: “No phones are allowed on these routes; the smugglers threaten to confiscate them if anyone tries to use one. So I only heard from him once he reached a city, not while he was en route.” He heard nothing for more than a month before learning that his brother had reached Tehran.

In Kapisa, a father received news of his two sons through their uncle in Iran because the boys could not use a phone while travelling. Other migrants called regularly during relatively settled periods, then asked their families to wait for them to make contact once they were on the move again.



Afghans prepare food at a makeshift migrant camp in Velika Kladuša on the Bosnian-Croatian border. Photo: Elvis Barukcic/AFP, 15 October 2021

Families knew enough about the routes to fear the worst, even when migrants withheld details to reassure them. A man in Nangrahar said his brother told their father everything was fine, while separately describing how the group had run out of water and walked for long stretches through forests.

The Khost interview with the brother of a migrant also gives an example of a different kind of problem with a smuggler. After Bulgarian police set dogs on the group and his brother was bitten, the smuggler said they could not wait for him or change the route. The interviewee’s brother continued in the same group towards Italy despite his injury. He then encountered more problems in the final leg of his journey. His brother recalled:

> *From France, my brother was on his way to the UK. He went on a boat with several other people, crammed in together. They went through a lot of hardship – my brother said they lost all hope of surviving since the boat was travelling only with great difficulty and had gone too far to the north. But luck was on his side and he reached the shore in the UK. He fell ill and went to a camp, where he spent several days. He was released from the camp after he recovered.*

In Balkh, a mother said smugglers handed her son to another group and the family lost contact: “For two whole months, it wasn’t clear to us if he was alive or dead. We had no idea where he was.” The smugglers eventually called to demand more money, which the family had to find in order to secure his release.

> *The smuggler asked us to pay him 35,000 afghanis [USD 530]. He called and told us to provide that amount within a specific period or he would kill our son. We had to sell our fridge and carpet and borrow some money from relatives to get the money for the smuggler to release our son. Once we had the money, the smuggler gave us instructions and finally told us to send it through hawala.[15] We completed the transfer at 10:00 that day and at 10:30 they released our son.*

It turned out he was still in Afghanistan. “After his release,” his mother said, “he went to Pakistan on his own and from there to Iran.”[16]

The uncertainty and anxiety could persist even after a traveller reached an intermediate country. A mother in Kunduz had opposed her daughter’s decision to leave Iran with another young woman. After a period without contact, she learned that her daughter had reached Turkey, but feared her daughter might move on again without warning. “I’m constantly stressed,” she said, “worried that she might suddenly continue her journey, disappear or move on somewhere else.” Knowing her daughter was working in Turkey and hoped to reach Germany eventually brought some relief, but it did not end the anxiety.

The departure of a family member also changed life at home. Households had borrowed money or sold assets to pay for the travel and some faced repayment demands while still waiting to learn whether the migrant had arrived safely and/or found work. A father in Takhar worried about the land and shops he had mortgaged and about the wives of his two sons who remained in Afghanistan, one with a newborn child. In Kabul, a family that had sold its taxi to help fund a journey said they no longer had that income source, even while debts remained and were difficult to repay.

For families whose relatives had reached safety and found work, the accounts often combined relief with anxiety about separation. Some reported remittances

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[15] Hawala is an informal, trust-based money transfer system.

[16] Kidnapping of other gangs’ migrants for extortion has also become common in the Balkans. See Jelena Bjelica and Fabrizio Foschini, A Good Smuggler is Hard to Find: The evolution of Afghan smuggling networks in the Balkans, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 25 July 2026.

and repayment of debts; others described relatives still facing uncertain asylum decisions or delayed earnings. There are also practical losses. The man in Kapisa, for instance, now manages all the farm work without the son who used to help him. Relatives also expressed hopes that spouses or children might eventually join those who have reached Europe, but there is no guarantee that will ever happen.

Even when families later benefited financially from the migration, they still missed those who had left. An interviewee from Nangrahar described the anguish of not having seen his brother for four years: “It almost feels he’s died.” An interviewee from Paktia, whose son was helping with household expenses from France, said that migration affected the entire family, not just the individual who had left: “Even now, my feelings remain twofold. I’m glad he’s in a safer place and can work towards his future, but it’s hard for me because he’s away from me.”

The interviews show how worries can shift over time: during the journey, the immediate question is whether the traveller is alive and safe; after arrival, questions about debt, legal status, work, reunion and the care of those left behind can continue for years.

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE 2016 AND 2026 INTERVIEWS

The 2016 AAN-FES study and the newer interviews both described mainly young people with limited prospects, families who initially resisted or encouraged their relative embarking on a dangerous journey and households that eventually helped finance it. In the newer interviews, the political motivation, ie the Taliban’s return to power, was a much more explicit turning point, but still, reasons for leaving post-2021 were mixed – past employment during the Republic might create a fear of reprisal, and for the two female migrants, the curtailing of their freedoms drove them to desperate measures, while job loss added to existing economic pressures.

The 2016 study found that younger migrants often cited poor employment and educational prospects, while families sometimes pressed someone to leave because of insecurity. It also documented initial parental opposition, followed by efforts to obtain money and find a smuggler once departure seemed inevitable. These closely parallel the 2026 interviews from Mazar-e Sharif, Kandahar, Kapisa and Takhar.

What appears to have changed since 2016

The source of danger is described differently. In 2016, respondents spoke of insurgent threats, the recruitment of young men, attacks and insecurity under the Republic. In the newer interviews, several families described risks *after* the Republic’s collapse. Former soldiers in Takhar and Paktia and a former officer in Kabul left amid fears connected to their service. The Kunduz family linked dismissal from employment after the takeover to the loss of its breadwinner’s income. This is a change in the circumstances reported by these interviewees, while the combination of insecurity and economic pressure is familiar from the earlier study.

Women’s restricted futures are more visible in the newer material. However, this is largely due to the sampling. The 2016 report’s migrants were all male, except for one woman who travelled with her husband and their children; discussion of education and work concerned sons and brothers. The 2026 interviews with female migrants’ families in Kunduz and Bamyan described decisions shaped by fears and

restrictions after 2021. Several respondents described daughters or sisters whose studies or work stopped, even when the migrant was male, showing that the loss of women’s education and work was part of the families’ wider circumstances and their sense that their future in Afghanistan had narrowed. For example, the brother of a migrant in the second interview from Kunduz said that one sister had worked as a teacher and another had attended university, but both were now at home, neither working nor studying. In Kabul, the migrant’s sister said her own university studies had ended and their younger sister could no longer attend grade 10. A mother in Mazar similarly reported that her two younger daughters, who had previously studied, were now at home.



Young men wait in an abandoned railway carriage near Thessaloniki, Greece, before continuing on to North Macedonia. Photo: Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto via AFP, 12 October 2022

Iran and Turkey remain central, but the newer accounts make unfinished journeys particularly visible. The earlier study recorded delays and work in Turkey. Yet almost everyone interviewed described family members having reached Europe by the time of the research. In the newer set, the Balkh and Kunduz families had relatives in Turkey hoping to continue and the Kapisa family’s sons remained in Iran after a failed crossing. For these households, migration to Europe is still a

project in progress, with costs and uncertainty continuing long after departure from Afghanistan. The 2016 report also cautioned that relatives often had only sketchy knowledge of the European legs of a journey. That limited knowledge remains relevant now.

A few families found alternatives to the usual overland route. No migrant in the 2016 sample had received a Turkish visa. In the newer interviews, a former officer from Kabul travelled to Turkey by air and later obtained a visa for Germany with his brother’s help and a Nangrahar father and son entered Turkey on medical visas. Another migrant, after unsuccessful attempts through Iran, travelled via Russia and Poland, while the Bamyan woman reached Europe following study in Uzbekistan. These are exceptions within the 22 interviews and underline how documents, contacts and resources can affect the options available.

What has remained similar

The two sets of interviews portray departure as **a decision almost always made by a family, even when it has been driven by one person’s insistence on leaving**. In some cases, this decision was reached when the migrant was already en route, ie after the person left secretly; the family always agreed in the end to support the journey, both morally and, when they could, financially. Relatives weigh the risk of the route against the perceived risk or lack of prospects at home. They seek advice from people abroad, raise money, find intermediaries and wait for news. The 2016 report describes borrowing and mortgaging property, payment in stages and the mixture of relief and hope once someone arrived. The newer interviews repeat these experiences, as shown through the Takhar and Kabul accounts.

CONCLUSION

Ten years apart, the two studies tell a remarkably similar story: families never decided to send someone to Europe for one reason alone. In the 2016 AAN study, insecurity, unemployment and a belief that young people had little future in Afghanistan reinforced the decision to migrate. The same pressures appear in the 22 recent interviews. A person might first propose leaving because they could not find work, while relatives supported the decision because they also feared for that person’s safety, worried that the person might leave anyway or realised that migration might be good for the household’s economic future.

The circumstances have changed. In the recent interviews, the fall of the Republic was a decisive event for families connected to the former security forces, government, NGOs or the media. Restrictions on women’s education, work and daily life also shaped the decisions of the young women who left, sometimes against their families’ wishes. Yet the interviews show that multiple factors motivated their flight. For many of the interviewees, a loss of employment followed the change of government, a person facing threats still needed a way to earn a living, and families often weighed both concerns when deciding who should go.

As in 2016, departure was a household decision and often an investment, even when the migrant initiated it. Relatives debated the risks, sought advice from people abroad, found smugglers or arranged visas and borrowed or raised money. Some tried to prevent a dangerous journey. Others agreed because they feared the person would leave by themselves or decided on, for example, the son who had the best prospect of finding work and sending money home. The familiar route through Iran and Turkey remained important, but the recent accounts also describe journeys altered by deportation, prolonged work in transit or access to visas and alternative routes. Reaching Iran or Turkey did not mean that a migrant would reach Europe.

Neither set of interviews can establish how common any particular motive or route is among Afghan migrants as a whole. Together, however, they show why the decision to leave cannot be understood without consideration of the family and its assessment of safety, livelihood opportunities, the risks of the journey and expectations of remittances. Migration remains a key survival strategy for many Afghan households that find themselves under economic, political or security

pressure, even if the migrant made the initial decision alone. Families contributed money, judged contacts, negotiated disagreements, monitored dangerous journeys and absorbed the consequences of absence. A son (or a daughter) abroad is a promise of a more secure and prosperous future for the whole family. He or she also carries the hope that they may eventually be able to get more family members to the new country. Yet when a member leaves, there is also the sadness of knowing that it may be many years before the family sees them again.

ANNEX 1: CODED LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

	Province	Gender of interviewee	Age of interviewee	Ethnicity	Relationship to migrant	Gender and age of migrant(s)	Year of departure	Intended destination	Location at time of interview
1	Balkh	Female	55	Tajik	Mother	Male, 27 and 22	2021 and 2026*	Germany	Turkey
2	Balkh	Female	48-50	Tajik	Mother	Male, 26 and 17	2026	Europe	Turkey, Afghanistan**
3	Bamyan	Male	39	Hazara	Brother	Female, 24	2025	Italy	Germany
4	Ghazni	Female	57	Hazara	Mother	Male, 25	Late 2021	Germany	Iran
5	Herat	Male	40	Pashtun	Brother	Male, 23	2023	France	France
6	Kabul	Female	24	Tajik	Sister	Male, 26	2025	Europe	Turkey
7	Kabul	Male	50	Pashtun	Brother	Male, 36	Late 2022	Turkey	Germany
8	Kandahar	Male	60	Pashtun	Father	Male, 28	2022	Europe	UK
9	Kapisa	Male	52	Pashtun	Father	Male, 18	2025	Europe	Iran
10	Kapisa	Female	60	Tajik	Mother	Male, 28	Late 2022	UK	France
11	Kapisa	Male	68	Tajik	Father	Male, 21 and 17	Late 2023	Europe	Iran
12	Khost	Male	35	Pashtun	Brother	Male, 24	2022	Europe	UK
13	Kunar	Male	55	Pashtun	Father	Male, 24	2024	Iran	UK
14	Kunduz	Female	50s	Arab-Tajik	Mother	Female, 23	2025	Europe	Turkey
15	Kunduz	Male	31	Tajik	Brother	Male, 27	2023	Germany	Germany
16	Maidan Wardak	Male	50	Pashtun	Father	Male, 24	2023	Europe	Germany
17	Nangrahar	Male	35	Pashtun	Brother	Male, 18	2022	Europe	France
18	Nangrahar	Male	30s	Pashtun	Father	Male, 22	2022	Germany	Germany
19	Nangrahar	Male	62	Pashtun	Father	Male, 24	2026	Europe	Belgium
20	Paktia	Male	55	Pashtun	Father	Male, 28	2022	Europe	France
21	Takhar	Male	61	Pashtun	Father	Male, 26 and 21	2023 and 2025***	Germany	Germany
22	Takhar	Male	28	Uzbek	Brother	Male, 26	Late 2021	Europe	France

* The older brother left in 2021 and the younger in 2026.
** The older brother reached Turkey; the younger returned to Afghanistan.
*** The older brother left in 2023 and the younger in 2025.

Jelena Bjelica

“Travelling this Path is a Gamble”: How Afghan families decide to send members to Europe

November 2026

Edited by Kate Clark and Roxanna Shapour
Design by Žolt Kovač
Cover photo by Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto via AFP, 6 October 2022 / A group of migrants climb a hill after an unsuccessful attempt to cross the border from Greece into North Macedonia.

If you would like to share feedback or get in touch, please contact the research team at info@afghanistan-analysts.org.

We would like to thank everyone who participated in this research, including interviewees and those who otherwise provided valuable input.

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