



COI QUERY

Country of Origin	Afghanistan
Main subject	Afghan nationals perceived as 'Westernised'
Question(s)	<p>Information on the treatment of Afghan nationals perceived as 'Westernised' (2018-2020):</p> <p>1.1 <u>What behaviours and/or appearances are reported to be seen as 'Westernised' and what is the attitude and treatment by Afghan society of people returning to Afghanistan from abroad, in particular from Western countries?</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- <u>Behaviour and appearance seen as 'Westernised'</u>- <u>Attitude and treatment by Afghan society of returnees from Western countries</u> <p>1.2 <u>What is the situation of in particular women and girls, who are seen as having adopted a 'Westernised' behaviour or way of life?</u></p> <p>1.3 <u>Are there documented cases of mistreatment or targeting of individuals seen as 'Westernised' by:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- <u>the family, community and/or broader society?</u>- <u>by the Afghan State authorities?</u>- <u>Anti-Government Elements (AGEs)?</u> <p>1.4. <u>Is there any difference in treatment between rural and urban areas and in particular in Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif and Herat City?</u></p> <p>1.5 <u>How did the Afghan State respond to documented cases of mistreatment directed at individuals seen as 'Westernised'?</u></p>
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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policymakers, and decision making authorities. The answer was finalised on 2 September 2020. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.



COI QUERY RESPONSE

Information on the treatment of Afghan nationals perceived as 'Westernised' (2018-2020):

1.1 What behaviours and/or appearances are reported to be seen as 'Westernised' and what is the attitude and treatment by Afghan society of people returning to Afghanistan from abroad, in particular from Western countries?

Behaviour and appearance seen as 'Westernised'

While abroad, returnees may have been exposed to a more liberal environment that could make integration in Afghanistan more difficult.¹ Rejection by the family and society could be triggered by 'speaking with an accent, engaging into conversation when not talked to, dressing differently, going to the gym, using skype to speak to friends abroad', as reported by Asylos in their August 2017 study on returnees from Western countries to Kabul.² Other reasons include a different haircut and style of dress³, relaxed position towards religion or consumption of alcohol.⁴ Friederike Stahlmann, a social scientist and an Afghan expert from Germany,⁵ stated in an expert opinion for a German court, in support of an asylum case, that in Afghanistan, all returnees from Europe are suspected that they have adapted themselves to the [informal translation] 'European culture and lifestyle' while abroad.⁶ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicated that the returnees can be seen with suspicion by both, local communities and state authorities.⁷

Friederike Stahlmann indicated that Westernised Afghans are in Dari called '*qarb-zadeh*' and the reasons to be seen as *qarb-zadeh* could include personal expressions that cannot be spontaneously suppressed such as posture and gesture. The returnees then could be seen as having become less religious in the West and in order to avoid this accusation they have to demonstrate their faith in a 'particularly convincing' way in their daily lives.⁸ Stahlmann further wrote that [informal translation]:

¹ OXFAM, Returning to Fragility: Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan, 31 January 2018, [url](#)

² Asylos, Afghanistan: Situation of young male 'Westernised' returnees to Kabul, August 2017, [url](#), p. 100

³ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁴ Asylos, Afghanistan: Situation of young male 'Westernised' returnees to Kabul, August 2017, [url](#), pp. 99-100

⁵ Friederike Stahlmann is a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Germany) with a focus on Afghanistan. The author is specialised in social, religious and legal questions on Afghanistan and has submitted materials on Afghanistan to British and German courts in asylum cases. See: Stahlmann, F., Studie zum Verbleib und zu den Erfahrungen abgeschobener Afghanen, 2019, [url](#), p. 276, and Max Planck Institute, Friederike Stahlmann, n.d., [url](#)

⁶ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 312

⁷ UNHCR, UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan, 30 August 2018, [url](#), pp. 46-47

⁸ Stahlmann, F., Studie zum Verbleib und zu den Erfahrungen abgeschobener Afghanen, 2019, [url](#), p. 280



'[...] the expected misconduct also includes extramarital relationships, consumption of pork, alcohol and drugs, as well as all possible forms of apostasy - from neglecting religious duties such as regular prayer, through various forms of blasphemy, to conversion to Christianity or atheism. Asylum seekers in particular are suspected of having converted because there is an increasingly widespread rumor in Afghanistan that European countries allegedly only grant protection to Christians.'⁹

Stahlmann noted that deportations of Afghans from Europe are widely covered in the media and deportees are often identified by their full name what makes their return to the country publicly known.¹⁰ And, according to Stahlmann, the longer time the deportees have spent abroad, the more difficult will it be for them to hide the changes in their behaviour and looks and to fit in.¹¹ According to the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), '[t]he risk of being suspected is greater the longer you have been outside Afghanistan and the further away you have been.'¹²

The Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) referred to Melissa Kerr Chiovenda, an anthropologist at the Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, who noted in an email that [informal translation]:

'[M]any Afghans who return from the West certainly are viewed with suspicion, and the degree to which they experience this depends upon where they are from and their social class. (ie someone from Kabul would have an easier time than someone from Jalalabad, someone from an educated class that has sent a lot of people to study in the West would have an easier time than someone who was a farmer). A lot of this has to do with fear about possible conversion. This level of suspicion can, among certain areas, even be elevated when someone has simply spent time with foreigners. People in certain areas of Afghanistan who spend extended time with foreigners may be chastised by their communities, so you can imagine that in such places, the effect is even worse for those who have spent time in the West.'¹³

In a response to the ACCORD, Noah Coburn, a Bennington College (Vermont, US) social and cultural anthropologist with focus on Afghanistan, stated that certainly not all returnees are confronted with such suspicion because of 'Westernisation', as there are many Afghans that were once refugees. According to Coburn, it is regularly the case for Shia Hazara who are often not considered 'real Muslims'.¹⁴

⁹ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 314

¹⁰ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 300

¹¹ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 301, 313

¹² DRC, Tilbagevenden til Afghanistan, October 2017, [url](#), p. 16

¹³ ACCORD, Afghanistan: Apostasie, Blasphemie, Konversion, Verstoß gegen islamische Verhaltensregeln, gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von RückkehrerInnen aus Europa, 15 June 2020, [url](#), p. 17

¹⁴ ACCORD, Afghanistan: Apostasie, Blasphemie, Konversion, Verstoß gegen islamische Verhaltensregeln, gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von RückkehrerInnen aus Europa, 15 June 2020, [url](#), p. 17



Attitude and treatment by Afghan society of returnees from Western countries

Enforced returns from Europe can be seen by the society and families as shame and failure.¹⁵ An expert interviewed by Asylos stated that '[m]any of these young men come back with debts and with nothing in their pockets: a return within the family or the community is therefore impossible as it would shame everyone, the returnee included.'¹⁶ To be returned to Afghanistan without a secured status in Europe is seen as failure, whether it is voluntary or forced.¹⁷ If someone returns without money and presents for the family members, it is associated with 'stigma of failure'.¹⁸ According to a study published by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) in January 2019, '[w]hile direct family tend to be welcoming, there is evidence that deportees are viewed negatively in their communities and there is stigma around those who migrated irregularly to Europe.'¹⁹ Some Afghans believe that returnees must have committed crime abroad and that caused their deportation.²⁰

In October 2018, Save the Children released a report documenting experiences of child returnees from Europe to Afghanistan that found that 'stigmatisation due to perceived 'westernisation' is a very real fear.'²¹ The same source noted that '[w]hile having spent time abroad does not always imply a risk of specific targeting, the risks faced by returning children are worsened by the fact that, in some cases, the threats that led families and individuals to go abroad, such as targeting by insurgent groups or fear of kidnapping, remain upon return.'²² The report added that threats experienced by the children were related to their personal enemies, risk of kidnappings and 'the impact of Westernisation', without further elaborating on the issue.²³

Many returnees entirely depend on the support of their family members.²⁴ It would be therefore more difficult for the returnees returned to areas from which they do not originate.²⁵ An International organisation interviewed during the Finnish fact-finding mission in Kabul in 2019 stated that the

¹⁵ Asylos, Afghanistan: Situation of young male 'Westernised' returnees to Kabul, August 2017, [url](#), p. 97; Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 21; Seefar, Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter, July 2018, [url](#), pp. 30, 33

¹⁶ Asylos, Afghanistan: Situation of young male 'Westernised' returnees to Kabul, August 2017, [url](#), p. 97

¹⁷ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 302

¹⁸ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 305-306

¹⁹ MMC, Distant Dreams, Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees, January 2019, [url](#), p. 41

²⁰ AI, Rückkehr in Schuld und Scham, 28 August 2019, [url](#); Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 21; Diplomat (The), The Ceaseless Struggle of Afghan Migrants, 27 May 2020, [url](#); MMC, Distant Dreams, Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees, January 2019, [url](#), p. 41; Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 307

²¹ Save the Children, From Europe to Afghanistan: Experience of child returnees, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 51

²² Save the Children, From Europe to Afghanistan: Experience of child returnees, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 51

²³ Save the Children, From Europe to Afghanistan: Experience of child returnees, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 33

²⁴ MMC, Distant dreams, Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees, January 2019, [url](#), p. 40

²⁵ Belgium, CGRS, Cedoca, Afghanistan: Security Situation in Kabul City, 8 April 2020, [url](#), p. 34; Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 21



'[n]ewcomers are welcomed by the community to a certain extent and many share houses with each other.'²⁶

The Afghanistan Migrant Advice and Support Organization (AMASO), a humanitarian, non-governmental and non-profit organization, which supports deported Afghan asylum seekers from Europe and Australia, indicated that the biggest challenges in general for returnees are lack of income and networks.²⁷ A 2017 study by the REACH Initiative, a humanitarian initiative providing data and analysis related to crisis, disaster and displacement, found that in general, obstacles faced by Afghan returnees include unemployment, homelessness, insecurity and lack of networks.²⁸ Similarly, the January 2019 MMC report noted that 'discrimination is a lesser challenge for many returnees. Most Afghans know at least one returnee and are often sympathetic to their situation. The majority (58%) of returnees in to a 2017 UNHCR survey reported problems with their communities relating to jobs and the cost of living (rather than discrimination). Skilled returnees may be seen positively if they promote business or employment.'²⁹ On the other hand, sources reported on an increased risk of kidnapping because of a perceived wealth accumulated while abroad.³⁰

An article by Deutsche Welle (DW) also indicated that returnees from Europe may be seen as wealthy and that could put their lives in danger.³¹ A supposed success could be assumed because of a variety of reasons, including having a new smartphone or a laptop.³² Referring to a variety of sources, Stahlmann concluded that returnees and their families are exposed to the risk of daily criminality and criminal networks that think that they could make a huge profit through blackmailing and kidnapping of the returnees because of the assumed immense prosperity in Europe.³³

1.2 What is the situation of in particular women and girls, who are seen as having adopted a 'Westernised' behaviour or way of life?

Only limited information on the situation of returnee women and girls who are seen as 'Westernised' could be found in the consulted and used sources. Sources indicate that majority of returnees to

²⁶ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 21

²⁷ Paris Globalist (The), Afghans - Europe's forgotten refugees, 20 October 2018, [url](#)

²⁸ REACH Initiative, Migration: A study on Afghan returnees from Europe, their motivations and challenges to reintegration, 7 November 2017, [url](#), pp. 21, 22

²⁹ MMC, Distant Dreams, Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees, January 2019, [url](#), p. 41

³⁰ Asylos, Afghanistan: Situation of young male 'Westernised' returnees to Kabul, August 2017, [url](#), p. 97; DRC, Tilbagevenden til Afghanistan, October 2017, [url](#), p. 16; Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Country of Origin Report Afghanistan, March 2019, [url](#), p. 93; Save the Children, From Europe to Afghanistan: Experience of child returnees, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 33

³¹ DW, Afghans deported from Germany face violence, other perils, 26 May 2019, [url](#)

³² Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 322

³³ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 321



Afghanistan are men³⁴ and that it would be difficult for a single Afghan woman to leave the country in the first place.³⁵

According to a Thomson Reuters Foundation poll, Afghanistan was the second most dangerous country to live for a woman in the world in 2018.³⁶ Describing the situation in Afghanistan in 2019, Amnesty International (AI) note that 'Afghan women and girls continued to face gender-based violence throughout the country, especially in areas under Taliban control. Incidents of violence against women are believed to be significantly underreported.'³⁷ Gender inequality in Afghanistan remains a challenge.³⁸ Report by the Dutch government dated March 2019 indicates that social position of women is better in the Shia communities of Afghanistan.³⁹ Hazara women are reportedly enjoying more freedom than women of other ethnic groups in the country.⁴⁰ The situation of women and girls in urban and rural areas also differs.⁴¹ In the major urban centers such as Kabul, Mazare Sharif and Herat, women can move alone in the public space without a male companion if they family agreed to that.⁴²

During an online event organised by the ACCORD in May 2020, F. Stahlmann noted that many Afghan girls and women have themselves limited their movement in the public as they were afraid that someone could take picture of them and publish them online and that these could be seen in Afghanistan.⁴³ In 2018, Stahlmann reported of cases of young women who were allowed by their families to work and study, but this was forbidden as soon as they have noticed changes in their behaviour influenced by these new freedoms.⁴⁴

Referring to the concept of 'male honour', an Afghan sociologist explained to the BBC News that '[t]he harshest and toughest men are the most respected and honourable men in society. If the female members of their family are liberal, they are considered promiscuous and dishonourable.'⁴⁵ In some areas of the country, female clothing was subjected to the 'conservative social mores' and sometimes enforced by the Taliban and religious leaders.⁴⁶

³⁴ MMC, Distant Dreams, Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees, January 2019, [url](#), pp. 19, 44; Norway, Landinfo, Afghanistan; Kvinners bevegelsesfrihet, 29 May 2020, [url](#), p. 4

³⁵ Norway, Landinfo, Afghanistan; Kvinners bevegelsesfrihet, 29 May 2020, [url](#), p. 4; Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), pp. 304, 313

³⁶ Thomson Reuters Foundation, The world's most dangerous countries for women, 2018, [url](#)

³⁷ AI, Human Rights in Asia-Pacific; Review of 2019 - Afghanistan, 30 January 2020, [url](#)

³⁸ MMC, Distant Dreams, Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees, January 2019, [url](#), p. 45

³⁹ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Country of Origin Report Afghanistan, March 2019, [url](#), p. 88

⁴⁰ Australia, DFAT, DFAT Country information report Afghanistan, 27 June 2019, [url](#), p. 35; Norway, Landinfo, Afghanistan; Kvinners bevegelsesfrihet, 29 May 2020, [url](#), p. 11

⁴¹ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Country of Origin Report Afghanistan, March 2019, [url](#), p. 88; New Yorker (The), Peace talks, the Taliban, and Afghan women's uncertain future, 19 December 2019, [url](#)

⁴² Norway, Landinfo, Afghanistan; Kvinners bevegelsesfrihet, 29 May 2020, [url](#), p. 12

⁴³ ACCORD, Afghanistan: Apostasie, Blasphemie, Konversion, Verstoß gegen islamische Verhaltensregeln, gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von RückkehrerInnen aus Europa, 15 June 2020, [url](#), p. 13

⁴⁴ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 312

⁴⁵ BBC News, WhereIsMyName: Afghan women campaign for the right to reveal their name, 25 July 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁶ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2019 - Afghanistan, 11 March 2020, [url](#), p. 21



In March 2019, Dutch government released a report that indicates that women seen as Westernised 'are at risk of being targeted by AGEs.'⁴⁷ The report further states that: 'Afghan women who have lived in Western countries for a long time, been educated there and come to cities such as Kabul, Herat or Mazar-e Sharif are more likely than local women to find work, for example at an international organisation.'⁴⁸ In Kabul, 'tens of thousands' of women now reportedly work outside of their homes.⁴⁹

Women participating in public life as, for example, civil servants, lawyers or teachers, can be seen as 'immoral' by segments of society.⁵⁰ According to the United States Department of State (USDOS) report covering 2019, '[w]omen active in government and politics continued to face threats and violence and were targets of attacks by the Taliban and other insurgent groups.'⁵¹ UNHCR noted that 'women in the public sphere and those holding public office continue to be subjected to threats, intimidation and violent attacks' because of supposed transgression of social norms and immorality of such behaviour.⁵² Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on 'high rates of sexual harassment and violence against women in Afghan public life' in 2019.⁵³ Additionally, single or divorced women are not seen positively by Afghan society.⁵⁴

Save the Children reported on the following issues that girls returning to Afghanistan are facing: a lack of freedom, violence against women, social pressure, and limited ability to protect themselves from harassment.⁵⁵ The same source has also found that none of the girls they interviewed would seek formal justice in case of harassment.⁵⁶ The January 2019 MMC study reported that female child returnees have to face social pressure, harassment and violence after their return to Afghanistan.⁵⁷

In March 2020, it was reported that the Taliban 'will protect women's rights, but only if they don't violate Islam or Afghan values, suggesting it will curtail some of the fragile freedoms gained by women in the past two decades.'⁵⁸ Already in February 2019, it was reported that Taliban was to allow women to work and study, as long as 'cultural and religious codes' are maintained, indicating rejection of Western clothes.⁵⁹

⁴⁷ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Country of Origin Report Afghanistan, March 2019, [url](#), p. 92

⁴⁸ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Country of Origin Report Afghanistan, March 2019, [url](#), p. 93

⁴⁹ Reuters, Afghan working women still face perils at home and office, 20 May 2019, [url](#)

⁵⁰ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Country of Origin Report Afghanistan, March 2019, [url](#), p. 88

⁵¹ USDOS, Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2019 - Afghanistan, 11 March 2020, [url](#), p. 27

⁵² UNHCR, UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan, 30 August 2018, [url](#), pp. 45-46

⁵³ HRW, World Report 2020 - Afghanistan, 14 January 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁴ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Country of Origin Report Afghanistan, March 2019, [url](#), p. 92

⁵⁵ Save the Children, From Europe to Afghanistan: Experience of child returnees, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 45

⁵⁶ Save the Children, From Europe to Afghanistan: Experience of child returnees, 16 October 2018, [url](#), p. 44

⁵⁷ MMC, Distant dreams, Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees, January 2019, [url](#), p. 29

⁵⁸ RFE/RL, How The Taliban Went From International Pariah To U.S. Peace Partner In Afghanistan, 23 March 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁹ RFE/RL, Afghan Taliban Open To Women's Rights -- But Only On Its Terms, 6 February 2019, [url](#)



The Afghan Women's Educational Center (AWEC) is providing literacy and tailoring classes for returnee women in Kabul, according to Oxfam.⁶⁰

1.3 Are there documented cases of mistreatment or targeting of individuals seen as 'Westernised' by:

- **the family, community and/or broader society?**
- **by the Afghan State authorities?**
- **Anti-Government Elements (AGEs)?**

Family, community and/or broader society

The MMC study has found that the returnees 'may be disproportionately targeted in intercommunal violence and robbery because of a lack of local connections.⁶¹ Friederike Stahlmann mentioned cases when family members beat the returnees and blamed them for their deportation.⁶² In their 2016 report, Refugee Support Network (RSN) reported on two cases of young male returnees being killed because of their stay in the UK and Norway, respectively. One killing was attributed to the Taliban, no information on the perpetrators was provided regarding the other.⁶³

Returnees from Europe may be associated with shame and failure and rejected by their families, according to the Asylos report, and some prefer to remain homeless upon return to Afghanistan rather than face rejection by their families.⁶⁴ According to the Amnesty International (AI), many returnees to Afghanistan fear being targeted on suspicion that they behaved in an unislamic way while abroad, including drinking alcohol and meeting with women.⁶⁵

According to Friederike Stahlmann, as reported by the ACCORD, to be seen as 'Westernised' can result in threats to the returnees by their family members and neighbours. Most of the [informal translation] 'politically motivated attacks on the ground on Westernisation' known to the author came from the neighbourhoods.⁶⁶ The source mentioned a case when a returnee was physically assaulted by his father and neighbours, as well as six other cases when returnees were threatened or attacked in the public because they were seen as 'traitors' or 'unbelievers'.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Oxfam, Returning to fragility, Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan, January 2018, [url](#), pp. 23-24

⁶¹ MMC, Distant Dreams, Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees, January 2019, [url](#), p. 41

⁶² Diplomat (The), The Ceaseless Struggle of Afghan Migrants, 27 May 2020, [url](#)

⁶³ RSN, After return: Documenting the experiences of young people forcibly removed to Afghanistan, April 2016, [url](#), pp. 29-30

⁶⁴ Asylos, Afghanistan: Situation of young male 'Westernised' returnees to Kabul, August 2017, [url](#), p. 100

⁶⁵ AI, Rückkehr in Schuld und Scham, 28 August 2019, [url](#)

⁶⁶ ACCORD, Afghanistan: Apostasie, Blasphemie, Konversion, Verstoß gegen islamische Verhaltensregeln, gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von RückkehrerInnen aus Europa, 15 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

⁶⁷ Stahlmann, F., Studie zum Verbleib und zu den Erfahrungen abgeschobener Afghanen, 2019, [url](#), pp. 279-280



In Afghanistan, converts from Islam may be abandoned by their families.⁶⁸ According to the USDOS, Afghan Muslims converting to Christianity have received threats from their family members.⁶⁹ The source adds that '[a]ccused blasphemers, like apostates, have three days to recant or face death, although there is no clear process for recanting under sharia.'⁷⁰ Despite no official prosecutions in the last five years, individuals have experienced rejection by their families.⁷¹

Afghan state authorities

Afghan constitution guarantees to every Afghan the right to travel abroad and to return.⁷² Returnees from Europe and Western countries represent only a small fraction of returnees to Afghanistan.⁷³ In 2016, Afghan government and the European Union adopted a document 'on addressing and preventing irregular migration, and on return of irregular migrants'.⁷⁴ In 2018, Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation published Return and Reintegration Response Plan - 2018 for returnees from Iran and Pakistan.⁷⁵

The Afghan government may support returnees from Europe with legal aid, job placement, land, and housing, according to the Asia Foundation.⁷⁶ In July 2018, Seefar⁷⁷ published a study that has found that 'very few individuals' received other form of support upon return than transportation and financial assistance, provided by a sending country and the UNHCR.⁷⁸ In August 2019, Al Jazeera reported that IDPs in Kabul complained of a lack of governmental support.⁷⁹

A November 2019 joint report by the Medico International and Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO) has found that '[t]he Afghan government has done nothing to tackle the grievances of the deportees from Europe. Instead, it has contributed to them by harassing some of the deportees at the airport. The only assistance that the deportees have received, has been small amount of cash by the deporting countries.'⁸⁰ The August 2017 Asylos report indicated that

⁶⁸ Australia, DFAT, DFAT Country information report Afghanistan, 27 June 2019, [url](#), p. 28

⁶⁹ USDOS, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom), Afghanistan, 10 June 2020, [url](#), pp. 2, 17

⁷⁰ USDOS, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom), Afghanistan, 10 June 2020, [url](#), p. 6

⁷¹ USDOS, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom), Afghanistan, 10 June 2020, [url](#), p. 9

⁷² Afghanistan, Islamic republic of, The Constitution of Afghanistan, 26 January 2004, [url](#), art. 39

⁷³ Oxfam, Returning to fragility, Exploring the link between conflict and returnees in Afghanistan, January 2018, [url](#), p. 3

⁷⁴ EEAS, Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues between Afghanistan and the EU, 2017, [url](#)

⁷⁵ Afghanistan (Islamic Republic of), Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, Return and Reintegration Response Plan, 2018, [url](#)

⁷⁶ Asia Foundation (The), A survey of the Afghan returnees, 2019, [url](#), p. 47

⁷⁷ Seefar describes itself as "Our vision is for a world in which vulnerable people have more opportunities to advance themselves. The purpose of our social enterprise is to work with those people to build a better future." See: Seefar, About us, n.d., [url](#)

⁷⁸ Seefar, Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter, July 2018, [url](#), p. 14

⁷⁹ Al Jazeera, 'Poor people's Eid': How Kabul IDPs welcomed Muslim celebration, 13 August 2019, [url](#)

⁸⁰ Medico international and AHRDO, Deportation to Afghanistan: A Challenge to State Legitimacy and Stability?, November 2019, [url](#), p. 19



returnees are seen as a financial burden and a security threat by the state.⁸¹ Sources noted that the returnees largely depend on the support of their family members.⁸²

In a December 2019 report, UNHCR noted that:

‘Security forces and officials regularly accuse Afghan returnees of having betrayed their country by fleeing, to be infidels or even converts. Several deportees reported that state actors insulted or threatened them with violence. This includes not only members of pro-government militias. Some deportees reported that security forces at the airport questioned whether they were Afghans, on the basis that Afghans are expected to defend their fatherland instead of seeking safety abroad. Some deportees reported that the officers denied them the issuance of their ID-card, on the basis that they had fled to Germany.’⁸³

According to F. Stahlmann, as quoted by the UNHCR, ‘[d]eportees often lack social and political support as well as money for bribing security officers in order to ensure their help.’⁸⁴ Stahlmann added that organised crime networks count on the corruption of the justice system and de facto immunity for their acts.⁸⁵

According to the Medico and AHRDO report, ‘Afghan President Ghani upholds and promotes a nationalist discourse of state-building. Within this framework, it is expected that every Afghan citizen acts patriotically. Escaping the country for whatever reason is considered an unpatriotic act, therefore reproachable in and of itself.’⁸⁶ As such, President Ashraf Ghani views people fleeing as both, a destabilising and a discrediting factor.⁸⁷ In 2018, a government spokesperson assessed a deportation from Europe to Afghanistan as a punishment for a crime, as reported by Stahlmann.⁸⁸

In their June 2019 report, Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) stated that ‘DFAT has no information to suggest that returnees from western countries attract negative attention from state authorities for having sought and failed to gain asylum.’⁸⁹

⁸¹ Asylos, Afghanistan: Situation of young male 'Westernised' returnees to Kabul, August 2017, [url](#), pp. 96-97

⁸² Belgium, CGRS, Cedoca, Afghanistan: Security Situation in Kabul City, 8 April 2020, [url](#), p. 34; MMC, Distant dreams, Understanding the aspirations of Afghan returnees, January 2019, [url](#), p. 40; REACH Initiative, Migration: A study on Afghan returnees from Europe, their motivations and challenges to reintegration, 7 November 2017, [url](#), p. 22

⁸³ UNHCR, Afghanistan: Compilation of Country of Origin Information (COI) Relevant for Assessing the Availability of an Internal Flight, Relocation or Protection Alternative (IFA/IRA/IPA) to Kabul, December 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁸⁴ UNHCR, Afghanistan: Compilation of Country of Origin Information (COI) Relevant for Assessing the Availability of an Internal Flight, Relocation or Protection Alternative (IFA/IRA/IPA) to Kabul, December 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁸⁵ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 321

⁸⁶ Medico international and AHRDO, Deportation to Afghanistan: A Challenge to State Legitimacy and Stability?, November 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁸⁷ Medico international and AHRDO, Deportation to Afghanistan: A Challenge to State Legitimacy and Stability?, November 2019, [url](#), p. 17

⁸⁸ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 307

⁸⁹ Australia, DFAT, DFAT Country information report Afghanistan, 27 June 2019, [url](#), p. 51



Anti-Government Elements (AGEs)

In their August 2018 report, the UNHCR noted that '[t]here are reports of individuals who returned from Western countries [to Afghanistan] having been threatened, tortured or killed by AGEs [Anti-Government Elements] on the grounds that they were perceived to have adopted values associated with these countries, or they had become "foreigners" or that they were spies for or supported a Western country.'⁹⁰ The same source indicated that the following individuals could be additionally seen as Westernised by the AGEs: humanitarian and development workers, and women in public sphere.⁹¹

In their December 2019 report, UNHCR quoted F. Stahlmann who concluded that: 'The fact of having been in Europe is enough to be targeted by the Taliban. From the Taliban's point of view, Afghans who risked their lives to ask the "infidel occupiers" for protection "clearly defected to the other side." They are not only accused of being infidels, but also of being spies and traitors.'⁹² In an online event organized by the ACCORD in May 2020, Stahlmann noted that in relation to the Taliban, the accusation of being an unbeliever may have two meanings, religious and political. The latter could imply a person who was in contact with their perceived enemy.⁹³

According to Stahlmann, emigration to Europe is seen as an act of political opposition by the Taliban. All those seen as the opponents could be declared apostates, spies or foreigners, which could bring them to a deadly danger.⁹⁴ Two deportees from Australia have been previously killed by the Taliban on the ground of being in an infidel country.⁹⁵ In 2016, RSN reported on a young returnee from Norway killed by the Taliban.⁹⁶ In their annual report covering 2019, Amnesty International stated that '[u]pon their return, many Afghans were exposed to renewed threats and violence from armed groups and local militias they had sought to escape', without providing further details.⁹⁷

According to Friederike Sstahlmann, returnees from Europe could be betrayed to the Taliban also in big cities Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e Sharif and Jalalabad and the risk [informal translation] 'is really based only on the escape [to Europe]'.⁹⁸ The source further indicates that there is 'a big difference' between those who had gone to Iran and those who had gone to Europe and that emigration to Iran is not sot

⁹⁰ UNHCR, UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan, 30 August 2018, [url](#), pp. 46-47

⁹¹ UNHCR, UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan, 30 August 2018, [url](#), pp. 46-47

⁹² UNHCR, Afghanistan: Compilation of Country of Origin Information (COI) Relevant for Assessing the Availability of an Internal Flight, Relocation or Protection Alternative (IFA/IRA/IPA) to Kabul, December 2019, [url](#), p. 20

⁹³ ACCORD, Afghanistan: Apostasie, Blasphemie, Konversion, Verstoß gegen islamische Verhaltensregeln, gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von RückkehrerInnen aus Europa, 15 June 2020, [url](#), p. 14

⁹⁴ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 310

⁹⁵ Stahlmann, F., Gutachten Afghanistan, 28 March 2018, [url](#), p. 311

⁹⁶ RSN, After return: Documenting the experiences of young people forcibly removed to Afghanistan, April 2016, [url](#), pp. 29-30

⁹⁷ AI, Human Rights in Asia-Pacific; Review of 2019 - Afghanistan, 30 January 2020, [url](#)

⁹⁸ ACCORD, Afghanistan: Apostasie, Blasphemie, Konversion, Verstoß gegen islamische Verhaltensregeln, gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von RückkehrerInnen aus Europa, 15 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

seen as ‘an escape’ by the Taliban.⁹⁹ F. Stahlmann has documented a case of two Afghans returned to Afghanistan from Germany, who were arrested by the Taliban at a checkpoint. They came under the suspicion because they didn’t wear a beard. They were later mistreated because they were suspected of working for ‘the unbelievers’.¹⁰⁰ The same source concluded that [informal translation] ‘violence against deportees or their families due to their return is not only to be expected, but also occurs within a very short time.’¹⁰¹

Accusations made to the returnees include lack of belief, espionage and betrayal. Some 20 % of 31 deportees in the Stahlmann’s study were either directly threatened by the Taliban or blackmailed to be handed over to the Taliban because of their stay in Europe.¹⁰² Similarly, an older study from April 2016 by the RSN found that returnees were in danger because the Taliban could see them as infidels and spies.¹⁰³

Sources suggest that returnees may be at higher risk of recruitment by armed groups.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, men and women accused of immoral behavior in the Taliban controlled areas can face sentences including lashings and death.¹⁰⁵

On 31 July 2019, the attack on the Department of Refugees and Returnees in Jalalabad left 15 people dead.¹⁰⁶

In June 2020, FDD’s Long War Journal informed about a Taliban video that called ‘atheism, communism, secularism, democracy, and other satanic western and disbelieving ideologies’ ‘poisonous deviant beliefs’.¹⁰⁷

1.4 Is there any difference in treatment between rural and urban areas and in particular in Kabul, Mazar-e Sharif and Herat City?

⁹⁹ ACCORD, Afghanistan: Apostasie, Blasphemie, Konversion, Verstoß gegen islamische Verhaltensregeln, gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von RückkehrerInnen aus Europa, 15 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

¹⁰⁰ Stahlmann, F., Studie zum Verbleib und zu den Erfahrungen abgeschobener Afghane, 2019, [url](#), str. 279

¹⁰¹ Stahlmann, F., Studie zum Verbleib und zu den Erfahrungen abgeschobener Afghane, 2019, [url](#), str. 278

¹⁰² Stahlmann, F., Studie zum Verbleib und zu den Erfahrungen abgeschobener Afghane, 2019, [url](#), str. 278

¹⁰³ RSN, After return: Documenting the experiences of young people forcibly removed to Afghanistan, April 2016, [url](#), pp. 28-29

¹⁰⁴ Asylos, Afghanistan: Situation of young male ‘Westernised’ returnees to Kabul, August 2017, [url](#), pp. 46-47, p. 101; DRC, Tilbagevenden til Afghanistan, October 2017, [url](#), p. 16; Medico international and AHRDO, Deportation to Afghanistan: A Challenge to State Legitimacy and Stability?, November 2019, [url](#), pp. 6, 21; Seefar, Examining Return and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Why Psychosocial Interventions Matter, July 2018, [url](#), p. 40

¹⁰⁵ UNHCR, UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Afghanistan, 30 August 2018, [url](#), p. 79

¹⁰⁶ UNSC, Letter dated 10 June 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council, 13 June 2019, [url](#), para. 58

¹⁰⁷ Roggio, B., Taliban denounces ‘deviant beliefs,’ including ‘satanic western and disbelieving ideologies’, In: LWJ, 10 June 2020, [url](#)



Only limited information on difference in treatment of returnees from Western countries in urban and rural areas could be found in the consulted and listed sources. See also 1.2 and 1.3.

Sources indicate that there are differences between more liberal urban centers and traditionally conservative rural areas in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁸ Over 70 % of the Afghan population lives in the rural areas.¹⁰⁹ The March 2019 Dutch government report quoted a confidential source that stated that ‘armed opposition groups are the de facto rulers in the countryside and they impose their own values and principles on the population.’¹¹⁰

The Afghan capital Kabul hosts a diverse society including young and educated urbanites seen as more liberal¹¹¹ but also some very conservative segments of the society¹¹². Similar differences between conservative and liberal members of the society were described also in the city of Herat.¹¹³ In April 2019, it was reported that religious authorities in Herat managed to ban live concerts and celebrations of the Valentine’s day in the city.¹¹⁴

In an email exchange with ACCORD in June 2020, Kerr Chiovenda indicated that the acceptance of a returnee from the West depends on the region of origin and a social position of a person, so for example, [informal translation] ‘it is easier for a person from Kabul than for a person from Jalalabad.’ The same source adds that [informal translation] ‘in some regions of Afghanistan it can happen that a person who has spent long periods of time with foreigners is punished by their community. So one can imagine that the consequences for a person who lived in the West could be even worse.’¹¹⁵

1.5 How did the Afghan State respond to documented cases of mistreatment directed at individuals seen as ‘Westernised’?

Only limited information on the Afghan state response to the cases of mistreatment of individuals seen as Westernised could be found in the consulted and listed sources.

Afghanistan Migrants Advice and Support Organization (AMASO), an Afghan NGO interviewed during the Finish fact-finding mission in Kabul in April 2019, stated in relation to targeting of returnees by family members and other individuals, that ‘[t]he Afghan police are not able to deal with these cases

¹⁰⁸ GSR, The Price Of Inequality: The Dangerous Rural-Urban Divide In Afghanistan, 9 June 2019, [url](#); Guardian (The), The female journalists defying taboos and braving death threats in Afghanistan, 31 May 2017, [url](#)

¹⁰⁹ Australia, DFAT, DFAT Country information report Afghanistan, 27 June 2019, [url](#), p. 51; GSR, The Price Of Inequality: The Dangerous Rural-Urban Divide In Afghanistan, 9 June 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁰ Netherlands (The), Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Country of Origin Report Afghanistan, March 2019, [url](#), p. 87

¹¹¹ Spiegel, Afghanistan's Young Liberal Elites Challenge the Taliban, 24 July 2017, [url](#)

¹¹² EASO, EASO Country of Origin Information Report Afghanistan Individuals targeted under societal and legal norms, December 2017, [url](#), p. 100; NYT, For Women in Kabul, ‘It Is Just Me and the Water’, 22 December 2019, [url](#)

¹¹³ Gandhara RFE/RL, In Push For Afghan Peace, Society Weighs Tradition And Modernity, 23 April 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁴ Gandhara RFE/RL, In Push For Afghan Peace, Society Weighs Tradition And Modernity, 23 April 2019, [url](#)

¹¹⁵ ACCORD, Afghanistan: Apostasie, Blasphemie, Konversion, Verstoß gegen islamische Verhaltensregeln, gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung von RückkehrerInnen aus Europa, 15 June 2020, [url](#), p. 17



because the police are busy tackling the Taliban and ISIS terrorism. The police are not able and not interested in dealing with personal cases.’¹¹⁶

An expert interviewed by the Asylos in June 2017 noted that there is ‘very little sympathy for returnees. It is often expressed through rudeness and insults from authorities, but also an unwillingness to address returnees’ claims or requests.’¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Finland, Finnish Immigration Service, Afghanistan: Fact-Finding Mission to Kabul in April 2019 - Situation of Returnees in Kabul, 15 October 2019, [url](#), p. 22

¹¹⁷ Asylos, Afghanistan: Situation of young male 'Westernised' returnees to Kabul, August 2017, [url](#), p. 96



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