

OXFAM VIEWS AND VOICES

Afghanistan: the tragedy of return

[Dr. Jorrit Kamminga](#)

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Are the returnees to Afghanistan safe in what is still a conflicted and fragile state? Dr. Jorrit Kamminga introduces a [new report](#) which explores this.



Afghanistan, Herat, November 8, 2017. 20-year-old Sahar became a refugee in Iran when she was 6 months old. Credit: Joel van Houdt

With headline news carrying stories about a string of bloody attacks in Afghanistan, it's important to remember that there is another side to the Afghan tragedy that is not making the headlines. In addition to the Afghans fleeing war in their country, there are the massive numbers returning home – more than 2.3 million Afghans since the beginning of 2015. But they are not just coming back to their country – they are coming back to conflict and fragility.

Many have been forced to return home unwillingly and most of them have to live in precarious conditions that are often far away from their family lands in areas that are already highly unstable, unsafe and poor.

In Europe, we read about Afghan families that are sent back, but we never read about the life that awaits them – and how this affects the situation in Afghanistan which, according to the UN, is still a country in conflict. To make matters worse, the current situation in Pakistan may mean that more Afghans could be forced back.

One 22-year-old woman, Sahar, told Oxfam she left Afghanistan when she was 6 months old and was deported from Iran last year, arriving back to a country she did not know. When we met her, she was living in a transit camp with her brother and cousins. With the rest of her family still living in Iran, Sahar was very worried about her future: “I can stay here for a little while, but I do not know what to do next. Here in Afghanistan everything is new and unfamiliar to me. I do not have anyone here and do not see any future prospects for myself. I am really scared because of the conflict and insecurity in Afghanistan.”

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Linking returnees and conflict

Reports by [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#) and others have described the impact on individuals, so Oxfam in Afghanistan took a look at the bigger picture and asked: What is the link between those people returning and the ongoing conflict? More importantly, what could happen in Afghanistan if people continue to return at the current rate?

Our report, [Returning to Fragility](#), sheds much-needed light on the risks that many Afghans face when they return to the country. Our research in four provinces found that high numbers of returnees are putting pressure on scarce resources, increasing friction and distrust within local communities.

But while there are tensions between local communities and returnees, we have also found a surprising level of resilience with some communities extending a welcoming hand to offer food, shelter and sometimes even jobs, even if only on a temporary basis. That is astonishing in the current fragile context. However, this should not be misinterpreted by policymakers as a green light for returns to continue as many returnees cannot count on the safety net of extended family networks, local community hospitality and international support.

A double tragedy

There is no silver lining to this sad story. Afghanistan is already well beyond its capacity to absorb returnees and meet humanitarian needs and more Afghans return every day to a situation of conflict compounded by growing poverty and instability. If these fragile conditions continue, forced returns remain a dangerous option, and the safety and dignity of those returning continue to be undermined. People who are unable to return to areas in which they own land or can be supported by their family or community, often end up internally displaced. It is an avoidable double tragedy. This fragile situation will remain unchanged unless the root causes of conflict are addressed in a sustainable way.

Governments hosting Afghan nationals must therefore immediately stop forcing people to return home. The Afghan government should not promote returns until they can happen safely and with access to land and basic social services.

Fueling fragility

The writing has been on the wall for years: political instability with no formal peace process; a Taliban able to control and dispute large parts of territory; and the surge of Islamic State after 2014, have all led to an increase in violence, including an increase in attacks on Shia

Afghans. Meanwhile, NATO countries are again sending more troops to the country. This huge number of returnees being sent back to Afghanistan could fuel the fire of an already highly fragile situation.

Afghanistan is not safe enough for all these millions of returnees.

But not sending back Afghans will only alleviate part of the problem. The international community should honor current financial pledges, expand long-term assistance programs and stop putting conditions on its funding that force the Afghan government to accept more returnees.

Dr. Jorrit Kamminga

Dr. Jorrit Kamminga is Strategic Influencing Advisor of Oxfam in Afghanistan. Since 2014, he has been working in various positions for Oxfam Novib, always in support to the Oxfam's country office in Afghanistan. He has been working in the country since 2005, covering various issues within the nexus of security and development. In addition to his work for Oxfam, Jorrit is a senior fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael and a consultant for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).