

# Outward and upward mobility

How Afghan and Syrian refugees can use mobility to improve their prospects

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Jordan and Pakistan are among the countries that host the most refugees worldwide—refugees who come from countries facing protracted conflicts with no end in sight. TRAFIG research at multiple sites in Jordan and urban Pakistan (conducted before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021) found that, despite myriad challenges, many refugees are mobile—and they are using this mobility to unlock a range of opportunities. However, the potential benefits of mobility are far from being fully leveraged. This *policy brief* examines how and why refugees are moving after their initial displacement and suggests how policymakers in the region and elsewhere, in collaboration with humanitarian, development and integration stakeholders, can help Afghans and Syrians tap into outward mobility to improve their upward mobility.

### Key findings and policy implications

1. Many refugees move out of camps to other cities in Jordan and Pakistan to join their networks and seek employment and better living conditions. Permitting freedom of movement within host countries would enable more displaced people to maintain their networks, find employment and achieve a sense of stability.
2. While mobility to and from Syria and Afghanistan is particularly important for maintaining networks and livelihoods, some also seek opportunities within the wider region. In allowing for circular mobility, ensuring that any return movements are voluntary is crucial, particularly given the continually changing conflict dynamics in refugees' countries of origin. Making sure that all returns are voluntary means that mobility can serve as a resource that helps refugees earn a livelihood rather than a feature of protracted displacement and limbo.

3. Movements beyond the region include a mix of short-, medium- and long-term opportunities, including business travel, education, employment and refugee resettlement, but are generally difficult to access. Leveraging the potential of humanitarian and non-humanitarian pathways to expand options for mobility beyond the region, including chances to resettle, reunite with family, work and study, is critical to improving access to sustainable solutions while also easing the strain on major host countries.

## 1. Introduction

The long-running conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria continue to make the headlines in 2021—and continue to trigger displacement. The announcement of the withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan spurred increased violence against civilians and uncertainty about the country's future, leading to 270,000 new displacements between January and July (UNHCR, 2021f) and a rising interest in leaving the country (Wolfsgruber, 2021). In the wake of the subsequent Taliban takeover in August, foreign governments evacuated tens of thousands of Afghans, while many others sought refuge across the border. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, has said that as many as half a million Afghans may flee to other countries in the region by the end of the year (Nebahay & Farge, 2021). Meanwhile, Syria entered its second decade of conflict this year, and a Norwegian Refugee Council analysis estimates that continued conflict, instability and economic decline could lead to the displacement of a minimum of six million more people over the next decade (Saieh, 2021). The United Nations reported in August 2021 that escalating violence spurred the highest level of displacement in the past year (UN News, 2021). As of 2020, Syria was the top source country of refugees (6.7 million refugees), while Afghanistan ranked third (2.6 million refugees), behind Venezuela (UNHCR, 2021a).

TRAFIG researchers have been investigating the situation of refugees from Afghanistan and Syria in two neighbouring countries in which many have sought refuge, Pakistan and Jordan, respectively.

While there are important differences between these two contexts, there are nonetheless some similarities in how the situations are evolving for refugees—including the use of mobility as a tool for survival and solutions. This is the focus of the present policy brief, which examines the different types of movements that refugees are undertaking after their initial displacement across the border. Drawing lessons from TRAFIG’s empirical research, it makes the case that, while expanding access to the traditional durable solutions (voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement) continues to be essential, alternatives are also sorely needed. For both traditional and innovative solutions, mobility plays a significant role—and supporting refugees’ mobility could help more people secure improved living conditions and livelihoods.

## 2. Context: What durable solutions?

As the international community commemorates the 70th anniversary of the [1951 Refugee Convention](#), this *brief* zooms in on two major host countries of refugees who have signed neither this Convention nor its 1967 Protocol. Additionally, both countries lack specific domestic legislation regarding refugees. Instead, refugee governance frameworks in both countries centre on agreements with UNCHR: in Jordan, a Memorandum of Understanding, and in Pakistan, a Tripartite Agreement including Afghanistan (Tobin, Knudsen, Momani, Al Yakoub, & Al-Jarrah, 2021; Mielke, Shahid, Khatana, Ahmad, Irshad, Kiran, Etzold, Asghari, & Javed, 2021).

Pakistan (population 220.9 million) is host to the third-largest registered refugee population in the world—1.4 million Afghans (World Bank, n.d.; UNHCR, 2021a). The majority (68%) live in urban areas, while 32 per cent live in UNHCR-supported refugee villages (RVs) (UNHCR, 2021c). Counting the 1.4 million registered refugees as well as undocumented migrants who applied for Afghan citizen cards with Pakistani authorities in 2017/18 (879,000) and mid-range estimates of the undocumented population (one million) brings the total number of Afghans in Pakistan to over three million—before taking into account recent arrivals. Pakistan has been hosting Afghan refugees for more than four decades, meaning that it is now home to a first, second and third generation of Afghans. Over the years, there has been a shift from a sense of welcome to one of burden, meaning that the present situation is often characterised by co-existence in tension (Mielke et al., 2021).



At the end of 2020, Syrians and Afghans together comprised 1 in 3 of the world's 24.6 million refugees.

Figure 1: One in three refugees worldwide is from Afghanistan or Syria

Note: This figure does not include refugees under UNRWA's mandate.

Source: UNHCR, 2021a

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In May 2021, Jordan (population 10.2 million) was hosting more than 755,000 refugees under the mandate of UNHCR, the vast majority of whom are Syrians (World Bank, n.d.; UNHCR, 2021b). Most refugees in Jordan (83%) live in urban areas, and nearly half (46%) are children under the age of 17 (Isikozlu, Tobin, & Momani, 2021). The country has long taken in refugees from countries in the region, including over two million registered Palestine refugees, many of whom now have citizenship in Jordan and live outside of refugee camps (UNRWA, n.d.). These refugees are under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and also include Palestine refugees displaced from Syria.

The traditional durable solutions for Syrians and Afghans in Jordan and Pakistan, respectively, remain out of reach for most. **Local integration** is a sensitive issue. With long-running conflicts next door, the Jordanian and Pakistani governments have often viewed refugees through a security lens, and this has been connected to the use of **return** as a governance strategy. In Jordan, the threat of involuntary return has been used to deter refugees in camps from violating policies (Tobin et al., 2021). However, returns remain low due to the destruction of homes and property, lack of work opportunities and fear of violence. Meanwhile, Pakistan sees return as the only possible or acceptable durable solution for its refugee population (Mielke et al., 2021). Thus far, the numbers of refugees returning voluntarily from Jordan to Syria remain relatively low—approximately 57,000 from January 2016 through May 2021 (UNHCR, 2021e). Since 2002, UNHCR has coordinated the voluntary return of nearly 4.4 million Afghans from Pakistan (UNHCR Pakistan, n.d.), but these returns have in many instances been unsustainable, as illustrated by large-scale re-migration (Mielke et al., 2021). The recent events underscore that safe return will continue to be challenging. **Refugee resettlement**, the remaining durable solution, has been minimal compared with the sheer scale of

displacement: A little more than 40,800 Syrians were resettled from Jordan between 2011 and July 2021 under the UNHCR resettlement scheme, and in the same period, just over 6,700 Afghans were resettled from Pakistan (UNHCR, 2021d). Against this backdrop, truly durable solutions remain largely absent, as protracted conflicts and displacement persist and even worsen: Without true integration or real prospects for return or resettlement, many have become de facto integrated (see Box), meaning that they may be able to survive but are not upwardly mobile.

**What does de facto integration mean?**

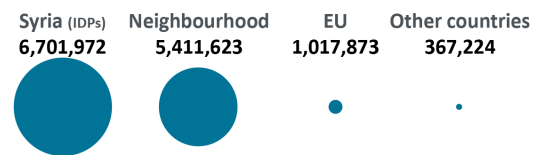
With possibilities for return and resettlement largely absent, refugees and locals must find ways to live together, even if this is not something welcomed by host governments or communities. For instance, Syrian refugees remarked that their relations with Jordanians were amicable but distant (Tobin et al., 2021). In Pakistan, a substantial share of interviewees expressed a strong desire to be legally, and not just de facto, integrated. De facto integration was associated with a feeling of not belonging (Mielke et al., 2021).

In cases of de facto integration, refugees enjoy basic though unsustainable and sometimes haphazard protection. They may remain without a long-term or even temporary status and without access to basic services and needs—and thus effectively remain in a protracted situation, which deprives them of certainty for future planning and a sustainable livelihood.

**3. Findings: How is mobility helping refugees cope with displacement?**

TRAFIG research at multiple sites in Jordan and urban Pakistan found that, despite myriad challenges, many refugees are mobile—and they are using this mobility to unlock a range of opportunities. These movements may be shorter or longer in terms of duration and distance, but all aim to maintain connections, seek opportunities and improve prospects. Below, these mobility patterns are divided into three types, based on distance: national, regional and farther afield. Overall, TRAFIG survey data indicate that Syrian refugees in Jordan are more mobile within the host country, have a higher intention to move onward to another country and have comparatively better access to resettlement than Afghans in Pakistan. Return intentions and actual circular mobilities to and from the country of origin have been higher amongst Afghans in Pakistan than Syrians in Jordan. Yet, both groups experience significant barriers to their mobility (TRAFIG, n.d.).

**Where are Syrians displaced (end 2020)?**



**Where are Afghans displaced (end 2020)?**

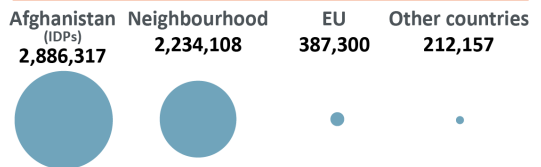


Figure 2: The majority of Afghans and Syrians are displaced in origin countries and neighbouring countries  
 Note: The circles represent the percentage of the respective displaced populations. The number of Afghans and Syrians abroad encompasses refugees and asylum seekers.  
 Source: UNHCR, 2021g  
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**National mobility**

The first two generations of Afghan refugees arrived in Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s. After their arrival and initial stays in camps, many Afghans have moved to another place within Pakistan, seeking better livelihood opportunities and living conditions. With Afghans officially allowed to reside outside camps in 1995, many moved to cities to seek employment. Other translocal movements have been driven by marriage. Many Afghans have settled in areas where they have relationships or share a background with other residents. Local social networks, including mutual assistance from close and extended family, ethno-religious support networks and the local Afghan community more broadly (as well as NGOs) represent community-level strategies for coping with displacement. However, while these strategies could be an indicator of self-reliance, interviews revealed a high level of precarity. Local networks help refugees mitigate daily challenges but do not assist with upward social mobility: Connections mainly offer non-material mutual support, including consultation, advice and other moral support, with financial support forthcoming only in emergency situations (Mielke et al., 2021).

While Afghans may wish to move about the country, according to a survey by TRAFIG researchers, 57 per cent of Afghans in Pakistan face mobility restrictions within the country, mainly due to their registration status. While proof of registration (PoR) cards can help facilitate mobility in theory, in practice, they do not enable their holders to move freely within Pakistan, and Afghans may face discrimination, police harassment and extortion (Isikozlu, Mielke, & Javed, 2021). Undocumented Afghan migrants, who lack PoR cards and Afghan Citizen Cards, are especially likely to face abuse and detention while on the move, and fear of this may keep people in one place (Mielke et al., 2021).

Since the outbreak of war, many Syrians in Jordan have opted to leave or avoid refugee camps altogether, settling instead in urban and semi-urban areas. Thus, for many refugees, camps were temporary places to stay until conditions and regulations allowed for onward movement, and most refugees in Jordan live outside of camps. Reasons for this include the lower social status and poorer living conditions associated with camps and higher degrees of surveillance. However, while camps often restrict opportunities for refugees, they can mean access to more humanitarian assistance. In contrast, refugees in urban areas are self-settled and have more individual freedoms but face gaps in aid provision that can lead to considerable hardship (Tobin et al., 2021; Isikozlu, Tobin, & Momani, 2021).

For most Syrians, mobility within Jordan has meant leaving a refugee camp or moving between northern cities and semi-urban areas. Many left Zaatari camp through the Kafala (“sponsorship”) system, which required a Jordanian national to serve as legal guardian or sponsor for the departing Syrian refugee (this policy ended in 2015). For those without extended family in Jordan, the only way to leave the camp was to do so without permission, meaning that refugees risked their legal status in Jordan as well as UNHCR assistance. Thus, refugees with more networks were better able to leave the camp. Reflecting this, TRAFIG research found that refugees living outside of camps are far better connected, both translocally and transnationally, than those still living in the camps. Family networks are, therefore, among the factors influencing refugees’ translocal mobility. However, while family was central to facilitating movement out of camps, its influence on later mobility is less definitive, as other factors like local reception and financial need also play an important role (Tobin et al., 2021).

### **Regional mobility**

Many extended families are split between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with cross-border mobility a long-standing tradition in the region. Visits enable Afghans in Pakistan to stay connected with family who remained in or returned to Afghanistan, for instance, by attending weddings, funerals or other occasions. Close extended family networks are further strengthened by intra-family marriages, including between Afghans born in Pakistan and their relations in Afghanistan. The relocation of spouses to Pakistan after marriage has contributed to the growth of family networks in Pakistan and has built new connections among different cities in both countries, spurring further circular, translocal and transnational mobility. However, second- and third-generation Afghan refugees do not have the same emotional connection and tend to lose their sense of belonging to Afghanistan, which results in fewer travels there (Mielke et al., 2021).

Return is also connected with circular mobility—in multiple ways. Some visits are for the purpose of scoping out conditions back home to see if return is feasible or desirable. For instance, Afghans may wish to explore what their livelihood prospects are. But it is not always easy for Afghans to re-integrate “back

home.” While a considerable number of Afghans have returned from Pakistan, several interviewees reported re-migrating due to the lack of security and livelihood opportunities in Afghanistan. Some encounter hostility or a lack of acceptance due to a perception that they are “cowards” for having left and do not have a right to come back; many are also marginalised having returned from Pakistan where many were born and raised, due to their accent and appearance. Circular mobility between Afghanistan and Pakistan also occurs because of the lack of basic services such as healthcare in Afghanistan, especially for those with more serious or long-term health conditions. Additionally, undocumented Afghans who were returned from Pakistan may re-migrate (Mielke et al., 2021).

Mobility within the region, mainly to Afghanistan and Iran, is a more important livelihood strategy for less educated and skilled Afghans. In contrast, their better-off compatriots are generally able to use their capital to seek livelihoods farther afield. Of Afghans interviewed with elementary or intermediate education and skills, a small share has made a living from transnational production and trade in carpets, dried fruit or fabric, where different steps of production take place in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and final products may be sold in additional countries. However, most rely on self-employment or day labour that does not feature such transnational ties (Mielke et al., 2021).

Efforts to seal the Pakistan–Afghanistan border and enact strict visa regulations are constraining the mobility of many Afghans. The Taliban takeover caused the government of Pakistan to insist on a border closure, opting only for camp settings along the border should large numbers of refugees arrive. Since the closure of the Torkham border crossing in 2016, women who would usually use it due to geographical proximity reported that they increasingly avoid visits and family events in Afghanistan. This is because they would need to take a long detour peppered with hostile checkpoints at provincial borders and at Chaman border crossing, where personnel often abuse Afghans travelling in either direction, verbally and otherwise. Thus, it is more often men who put up with the hassle of long detours due to security concerns about female family members (Mielke et al., 2021).

With a significant degree of translocal and transnational family networks, most Syrians interviewed indicated a wish to conduct visits to maintain and revitalise their connections. However, the fear of conscription for young Syrian men if found crossing the border is the single greatest deterrent from returning to Syria, even for a short visit. Thus, security concerns add an extra layer of complexity that makes it even more challenging for many Syrian males, and female heads of their household, to maintain connections in their origin country (Tobin et al., 2021).

### Mobility beyond the region

More well-off Afghans are especially likely to have ties beyond Afghanistan via family members, marriage ties and business networks. For instance, those in the carpet business have also travelled beyond the immediate region to Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia. Their carpets are exported to a wide range of countries, including Australia, Germany, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. These individuals operate out of Pakistan with their Afghan passport and a Pakistani visa, travelling monthly to Afghanistan for business reasons, but not as refugees (Mielke et al., 2021). This example shows how short-term movements have played a key role in the livelihoods of some upper-middle class Afghan businessmen who have opted into Pakistan's visa scheme.

These businessmen reported having kin in Canada, Germany, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Kingdom, although they only saw ties in Canada and Turkey as helpful for realising their migration aspirations. Interviewees found Turkey's [investment-based citizenship scheme](#), under which individuals meeting certain investment, banking, property or job creation thresholds can be eligible for citizenship, particularly appealing. Reported pathways to Canada, meanwhile, were less clear, although Canada has a long-standing [refugee sponsorship scheme](#) that includes the option to name refugees to be sponsored (e.g. extended family members). Generally speaking, though, labour migration and remittances play just a minor role in the livelihood strategies of Afghan refugee families, and financial support is given largely in emergencies only (Mielke et al., 2021).

Regarding humanitarian migration pathways, opportunities for resettlement—the most significant humanitarian channel for migration to third countries—pale in comparison with the need, as already mentioned. While resettlement prospects for Afghans were slim in past decades, the Taliban takeover in August 2021 spurred many countries to open resettlement places, mainly for newly displaced Afghans. Without resettlement places, displaced Afghans have used irregular channels to make a better life in the past, as reflected by some interviewees who reported having family members in Europe who had arrived via Iran and Turkey since 2016, seeking asylum (Mielke et al., 2021). This can be expected to increase in the near future given recent developments.

While the Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) have not admitted Syrians as refugees, they have allowed certain Syrian migrants to live, work and study. Such opportunities require work contracts or university acceptances and visas, and some refugees are assisted in securing these documents by extended family members. Only migrants meeting certain income thresholds are able to bring their families with them. Those able to live in the Gulf countries often send remittances to support their family members in other countries; this income support represents an important survival strategy for some families (Tobin et al., 2021).

Most Syrians interviewed by TRAFIG had not registered for resettlement, reflecting limited knowledge of the system and also some scepticism of resettlement as a viable—and desirable—outcome for them. One interviewee had been offered resettlement to Spain but turned it down, citing concerns about safety and living conditions that she had heard from co-nationals who had resettled there. Additionally, some women interviewed were hesitant to resettle in Europe due to perceived differences in cultural and religious norms (Tobin et al., 2021). However, some refugees, facing challenging circumstances in Jordan and few prospects for resettlement elsewhere, have headed to Europe of their own volition in the hope of receiving asylum there.

### Mobility, a coping strategy to overcome protracted displacement

For a large share of Afghans and Syrians in Pakistan and Jordan, translocal and transnational lives are a reality. However, both groups still contend with considerable barriers to mobility, whether due to government policies, limited networks, financial limitations or other obstacles. Facing restrictions on mobility and challenges to building a secure future in Pakistan and Jordan, a significant share of refugees thinks about making a life elsewhere—but often lacks a realistic pathway to achieving this (Kvittingen et al., 2019). While migration aspirations do not always translate into actual movements, including because of policy constraints, it is clear that refugees see mobility as an important part of the solution.

Also important, these mobility ambitions vary and are often at odds with host country policies (e.g. a focus on return) and available opportunities (e.g. limited resettlement and other legal pathways). For instance, in Jordan, refugees living outside of Zaatari camp had more connections and also were less interested in returning to Syria than their peers living in the camp (Tobin et al., 2021). In Pakistan, first-generation Afghan refugees largely prefer to stay in Pakistan, and only a few would like to return to Afghanistan if conditions allow. This differs from second- and third-generation Afghan youth, many of whom are frustrated with social immobility and future prospects in Pakistan, and therefore aspire to migrate to Europe (Mielke et al., 2021). Within these host countries, many refugees wish to travel domestically for family and employment purposes. When looking at mobility as a tool for solutions, it is essential to understand the (differing) aspirations of refugees.

## 4. Policy implications: How to better leverage mobility to scale up access to solutions?

While Jordan and Pakistan have made significant contributions to the global refugee response by hosting large and long-term refugee populations, they also face increasing challenges in doing so. Similarly, refugees in these countries contend with growing pressure. These host countries and the international community need to ramp up humanitarian and development support for long-term *and* newly displaced people. In this context, learning from past lessons is essential, including the crucial role mobility can play in providing access to truly durable solutions. The scale and persistence of displacement in Pakistan and Jordan clearly underscore the urgent need to expand multiple solutions—not just local opportunities but also ones in third countries. Ultimately, the cases of Jordan and Pakistan present a test for the international community, which committed to shared responsibility under the [2018 Global Compact on Refugees](#). Sufficient support from the international community to major host countries like Jordan and Pakistan is critical for supporting displaced people until durable solutions are found, and also for giving host governments more political space to develop supportive refugee policies.

Research shows that mobility is a critical tool for people coping with and overcoming protracted displacement after and on top of the initial flight from persecution and war. Refugees face huge challenges to finding sustainable solutions without the element of mobility—even if this only entails moving a short distance, such as out of a camp. But while many refugees use mobility for survival and solutions, many more cannot fully leverage its potential benefits. Above all, granting refugees a legal status makes it possible for displaced people to use mobility as a resource. Legal status and documentation are essential to help protect against refoulement, reduce the risk of police harassment while mobile, assist refugees in taking up employment once they move to a city and shape eligibility for refugee resettlement and complementary pathways. Enacting a national refugee law would mark an important step in this direction (Isikozlu, Mielke, & Javed, 2021). In addition, governments in and beyond the region, in collaboration with humanitarian, development and integration stakeholders, should help refugees tap into outward mobility to improve their upward mobility by:

**Permitting freedom of movement within host countries, and allowing refugees’ circular mobility to and from their origin country for livelihood and networking purposes. This would enable more displaced people to maintain their networks, find employment and achieve a sense of stability.**

- Easing restrictions on movement within host countries (whether or not displaced persons are formally registered as refugees), and ideally also to/from countries of origin, would allow displaced people to access livelihood opportunities and maintain ties with their networks that could unlock further prospects.

- Given recent reports that the Taliban are not allowing refugees to leave Afghanistan, it is even more important for countries in the region to keep their borders open for those who manage to get there.
- Additionally, with many refugees in Jordan and Pakistan living outside of camp settings, these populations must also be adequately supported with aid and integration programming (see Isikozlu, Tobin, & Momani, 2021).

**Ensuring that return movements are voluntary is crucial, particularly given the continually changing conflict dynamics in refugees’ countries of origin. Making sure that all returns are voluntary means that circular mobility can serve as a resource helping refugees earn a livelihood rather than a feature of protracted displacement and limbo.**

- Host countries in the region, as well as countries receiving asylum seekers in Europe and other regions, should avoid forced returns of Afghans and Syrians to countries of origin.
- Receiving countries farther afield should also avoid returning refugees to host countries in the region, as doing so would further exacerbate the challenges of supporting already sizeable refugee populations in countries like Jordan and Pakistan.

**Leveraging the potential of humanitarian and non-humanitarian pathways to expand options for mobility beyond the region, including chances to resettle, reunite with family, work and study, is critical to improving access to sustainable solutions while also easing the strain on major host countries.**

Reflecting commitments to responsibility-sharing made in the Global Compact on Refugees, governments should significantly expand their offers of resettlement and complementary pathways for Afghans and Syrians (Wagner & Katsiaficas, 2021).

- Alongside evacuations from Afghanistan, states should offer a substantial number of refugee resettlement places for Afghans and Syrians to better reflect the scale of the situation and demonstrate responsibility-sharing.
- Meanwhile, targeted community sponsorship initiatives for Afghan and Syrian refugees, including the option to name who will be sponsored, could play an important role and also tap into refugees’ transnational networks to support their mobility and integration (see La Corte, 2021; Wagner & Katsiaficas, 2021).
- Additionally, policymakers in Europe and elsewhere could develop labour migration agreements with Pakistan and Jordan that are inclusive of registered Afghans and Syrians to open up avenues for refugees to earn a livelihood abroad.

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