

ICMPD Regional Migration Outlook 2021 South and West Asia (Silk Routes)



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1. Introduction

The global upheaval inherent to 2020 magnified the challenges already associated with migration and mobility within the region of South and West Asia (henceforth known as the Silk Routes region). Prominent issues faced by migrants within the South and Western region of Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan) included: reintegration challenges linked to large number of returns; restricted mobility due to strict lockdowns and persistent security challenges; and migrants stranded across the neighbourhood unable to reach their destinations nor return home.

Furthermore, the impact of COVID-19 on the flows and safety of irregular migrants, who traditionally already face greater adversity in accessing essential services, drew national and regional attention. The knock-on effects on the economies of destination countries and already fragile economies in the region will be crucial to understanding the migration trends in the region. Notably, the emigration of South Asian migrants, especially to the major destination countries of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), has slowed or halted completely, and they have returned *en masse* over the course of the year. Between 2000 and 2020, the largest growth corridor for migration was Central/South Asia to North Africa and the Middle East, fuelled in part by Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani migration to the GCC countries.¹ However, preliminary estimations suggest that the pandemic will slow the growth in the stock of international migrants by around 2 million by mid-2020, 27 per cent less than the growth expected since mid-2019.

2020 also saw a continuity in the national and regional conflicts that have characterised the region, reinforcing a growing sense of endemic instability for its inhabitants. The highs and lows of the conflicts, accompanied by seasonal environmental disasters, in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past decade have exacerbated displacement in the region and beyond. Recent developments in terms of the peace process in Afghanistan, as well as geopolitical struggles of Iran-US and citizens' discontentment with the political status quo in Iraq, echo these longer-term trends.

Because of this, migration has become a salient policy issue in recent years and remained a priority for the year. Countries in the region have increasingly engaged in regional intergovernmental dialogues and global consultative processes on the topic, to enhance their migration management capacities, which speaks to the increased relevance of the migration issue at the political level. Speaking to this, several countries developed migration management strategies and policies related to the reintegration of returnees, explored labour agreements, developed capacities on Border Management, and enhanced their outreach towards members of their diaspora community.



The Silk Routes Regional Outlook aims to offer a deeper regional perspective to ICMPD’s Migration Outlook 2021.¹ This Regional Outlook delves deeper into the key trends, relying on ICMPD’s presence and expertise in the region, as well as desk research from public data sources, as available.² The report proceeds as follows: first, it provides an analysis of the key current and emerging trends in the region’s “hotspots”, focusing on Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan (and India and Iran tangentially). Then, the report will qualify these trends in terms of both scale and migration patterns. Next, the report highlights the migration policy trends for these countries, and outlines how these developments influenced observed trends. Finally, the report concludes by looking to the future and highlighting possible migration specific trends and policy developments, as well as focus areas for policy makers in 2021.

2. Migration ‘hotspots’

South and West Asia are sub-regions at the nexus of a number of migration trends. While this Regional Migration Outlook cannot cover all trends in depth, it focuses on the situations in Afghanistan, India, Iraq and Pakistan as typifying trends developing in the region. For these countries, the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated ongoing economic and geopolitical considerations, delayed the potential for successful peace talks, and raised a greater interest in mobility amongst residents thereby raising governments’ increased urgency towards migration management initiatives. Further afield, developments in GCC countries, Turkey, and Iran-P5+1 negotiations (towards renewed cooperation under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action — JCPOA), influenced migration in and out of Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a key country of origin for asylum seekers in the European Union, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, and it is the leading global recipient of EU development assistance. 2020 saw the passage of Presidential elections, the resulting power sharing agreement in May, and a peace deal between the United States and the Taliban (on American troop withdrawal by May 2021). Nevertheless, almost four million Afghans remain internally displaced due to climate change, conflicts and escalating violence across the country. Although, the series of ongoing peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban remained stalled, political consensus considers that its fate will act as a proverbial linchpin in the country’s migration and refugee management.

¹ Significantly, that report already highlighted key trends for countries in the region, notably instability and forced displacement trends, as well as economic issues faced by major host countries in the region.

² It is important to highlight at the outset that accurate and timely data for 2020 is often unavailable or incomplete. Thus, we sometimes rely on forecasts or older more reliable datasets, as well as on qualitative information.



With over 2.4 million registered refugees globally, the onset of COVID-19 in Afghanistan magnified the endemic challenges facing the country and its citizenry both in and out of the country. Estimates expect the country's economy to shrink by 4-5% due to the border closures, lockdowns, disrupting trade and transportation.ⁱⁱ Given the decades long conflict, hundreds of thousands of Afghans who had left in search of safety and security to Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, now face return, voluntarily and involuntarily. From Iran alone, during 2020, IOM estimates 859,092 undocumented returnees.ⁱⁱⁱ Thousands returned from Pakistan, Turkey (to a lesser extent), and the European Union (EU).

Not only did such returns draw heavily on the resources of the Afghan Border Force, but also the country's Ministry of Public Health now faced an additional strain on its health care facilities and health care professionals to fight the spread of the COVID-19 virus within its territory. Those that returned complained of facing exclusion in host communities (Iran and Pakistan)^{iv}, limited access to medical assistance, and lack of employment opportunities. Border Crossing Points became the front-line in the country's efforts to manage COVID-19, with a dangerous narrative emerging that returnees were bringing the virus with them resulting in anti-migrant stigma and locals isolating their migrant brethren.^v

Internal displacement – due to a combination of environmental factors (flooding in in the eastern and western provinces of Nangarhar and Parwan) and continued inward mobility of rural residents inundating urban centres in search of employment – placed additional pressures on local governments to provide support and services during a time of national strife. Afghanistan's agriculture is heavily dependent on rain-fed agriculture and snowmelt and in the absence of snow and rain estimates expect as many as 17 million Afghans, or about 42% of the total population, will be impacted by drought and famine.^{vi}

Iraq

Iraq's economy has been hit hard by the collapse of oil prices in 2020, and the volatility of the oil market is foreseen to continue in 2021.^{vii} Iraq's fragile public sector has been stretched even further by the pandemic, and at the end of the year, Iraq devalued the dinar, in order to give the government much-needed extra funding to pay public servants. Iraqis, however, worry that this will lead to increased prices of goods in the country, impacting their living standards.^{viii} These factors could increase Iraqis dissatisfaction with the government and contribute to migration decisions in the coming year.

Nonetheless, *the* major driver for Iraqi migrants continues to be security issues in the country. It has also limited return for Iraqis abroad, despite increased unemployment and COVID-19 restrictions in destination countries. The recent spike in security tensions, related to the Iran-US



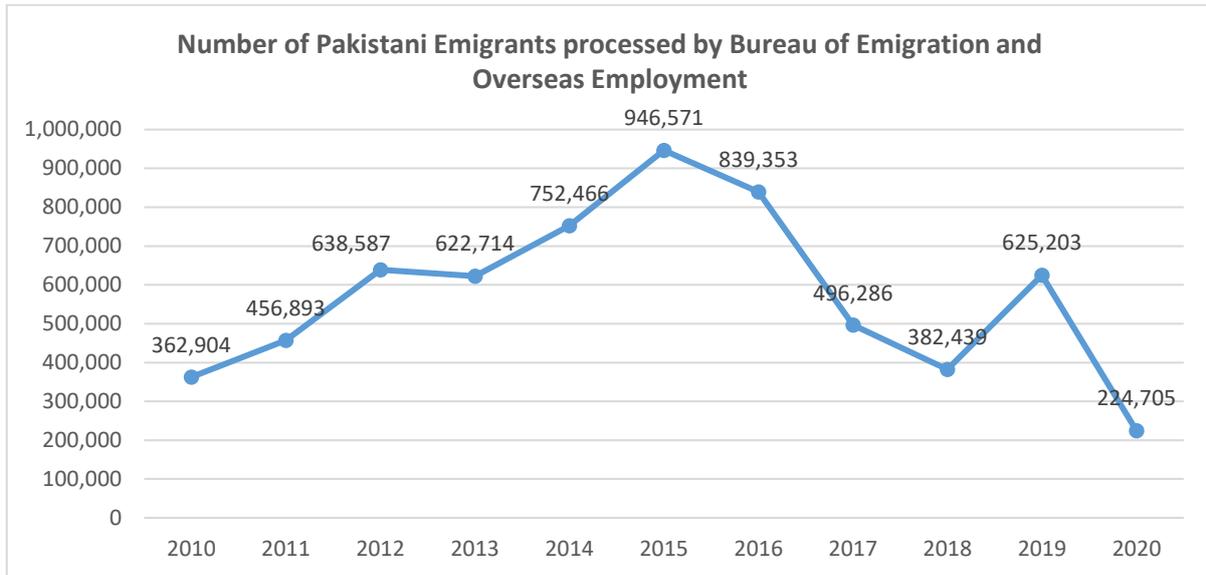
security conflict playing out on Iraqi soil, as well as citizens' disenchantment with the Iraqi government, despite the change in administration in 2020, discourage migrants from returning and will continue to drive migration trends. Upcoming elections foreseen later this year and a potential drawdown of US engagement³ in the country may compound these issues even further.

Internal displacement has been an important challenge facing Iraq in recent years: over the past few years, the number of estimated IDPs in Iraq has dropped significantly (see table in next chapter).^{ix} Addressing internal displacement is a priority area for the Iraqi government, and in mid-October 2020 the government announced that they would begin rapid closure of IDP camps across the country. The speed of the closures has alarmed humanitarian organisations: UNHCR and IOM have been particularly critical of the rapid closure and the potential negative impacts on an already vulnerable population.^x IDPs in Iraq face particular obstacles to return in terms of housing, safety and security concerns, social cohesion, and lack of documentation for travel and access to public services within Iraq. What is more, the pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities this population faces: IDPs have reported loss of employment or livelihoods as the main impact of COVID-19, as well as ongoing difficulty accessing medical treatment and heightened anxiety about covering their rent for accommodation.^{xi} Thus, IDP return and reintegration will be an important challenge for 2021, and an area where the international community could engage to support the Iraqi government's efforts.

Pakistan

As a result of the pandemic, huge numbers of South Asian migrants have lost their jobs in major destination countries, particularly the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council countries). This has impacted Pakistan significantly: over six million Pakistanis currently live abroad, the largest share of which are in the GCC.^{xii} Moreover, for the first time in almost 15 years the number of Pakistanis processed for emigration abroad dipped below 300,000, as emigration processes in Pakistan came to a halt in 2020.^{xiii} A large proportion of emigrants are employed in the construction, hospitality, retail and transport sectors in GCC countries. Between 2000 and 2020 the largest growth corridor for migration was Central/South Asia to North Africa and the Middle East, fuelled in part by Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani migration to the GCC countries.^{xiv} Therefore, previously forecasted growth along this migration corridor may decline due to the loss of jobs in these sectors.^{xv}

³ This drawdown was announced and projected under the Trump administration but has not yet come to fruition. At the same time, under the Biden administration nothing concrete has been announced as of end of March 2021, although an apparent review of U.S. policy in the country is underway.



Source: BEOE

Related to this trend, Pakistan observed a counter-intuitive growth in its remittances for 2020. This can be attributed to a number of factors specific to Pakistan, in particular: increased numbers of unemployed returnees bringing their savings home, increased use of formal channels due to incentives⁴ and travel restrictions, increased remittances due to economic downturn in Pakistan, decreased spending on Haj and depreciation of the rupee.^{xvi} According to the Bank of Pakistan, two-third of the recorded remittances received in 2020 came from GCC countries, with over half coming from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.^{xvii} While Pakistan has observed a strong increase in remittances in 2020, if this trend overwhelmingly reflects return migration, 2021 figures may be significantly lower.

India

With the largest diaspora worldwide, ranging from 18-33 million Indians, and over 9 million living and working with the GCC, the events of 2020 were bound to have an adverse effect.^{xviii} Visual media reports^{xix} illustrating the unimaginable feats emigrants undertook to return home remain one of the strongest messages of the adverse effect economic closures had over the course of 2020 on migration and mobility within the region. Migrants faced a broad swathe of challenges: the harsh realities of unemployment, homelessness, discrimination brought upon by GCC countries rushing to nationalise their work force, challenges related to rising Islamophobia and xenophobia, and a backlog of unpaid wages. Exercising one of the largest repatriation efforts globally, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) – under the Vande Bharat Mission – began in May 2020 and has thus far repatriated over 6 million people through eight phases (up to March 2021).^{xx}

⁴ These include tax breaks, discounts for schools for children of migrants, direct payment for relevant services (e.g. utilities) from abroad.



Internally, the nationwide lockdown pushed India's 454 million migrant workers (60 million being inter-state), the bulk of whom live in and around urban centres, into a state of extreme vulnerability and peril.^{xxi} According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), an estimated 122 million people lost their jobs in April alone and three-quarters of these were small traders and wage labourers.^{xxii} Furthermore, natural hazards – such as Cyclone Amphan – further contributed to internal displacement (2.4 million new) and follow up tensions caused by the adoption of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).^{xxiii}

3. Migration trends in the region

Over the course of 2020, the main causes of migration and mobility patterns within the region are primarily, pandemic-induced, and secondly to do with issues of insecurity. This section will highlight the main trends for the region in qualitative and quantitative⁵ (when available) terms.

Returns from within the region and neighbouring countries were of primordial importance as countries of origin suddenly faced large numbers of their citizenry in need of **repatriation** and related health and legal assistance. India, Pakistan and Afghanistan witnessed large numbers of returnees: India to date⁶ has repatriated over six million Indian citizens from across the globe with continued demand from GCC countries. Pakistan over the same timeframe has repatriated over 220,000 Pakistanis stranded in 88 countries worldwide. IOM reports that in 2020, over a million undocumented Afghans returned from Iran⁷ and Pakistan. In most instances, those repatriated reported being in situations of lost employment, unpaid daily wages, possessing an inability to return, or feeling uneasy about the prospects of waiting out the pandemic in host societies. Recent research in Bangladesh noted issues related to wage theft, stigmatisation in communities of origin due to perceived risk of illness, and lack of access to remedy or reporting mechanisms due to quarantine or lockdown measures.^{xxiv}

As a major migrant-sending (and receiving) region, for South Asia, **remittances** are vital: for Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan remittances represent around or over 5% of their GDP.^{xxv} However, the World Bank forecasted a seven to nine percent decline in remittances to low and middle income countries globally for both 2020 and 2021.^{xxvi} This is attributed to weak economic

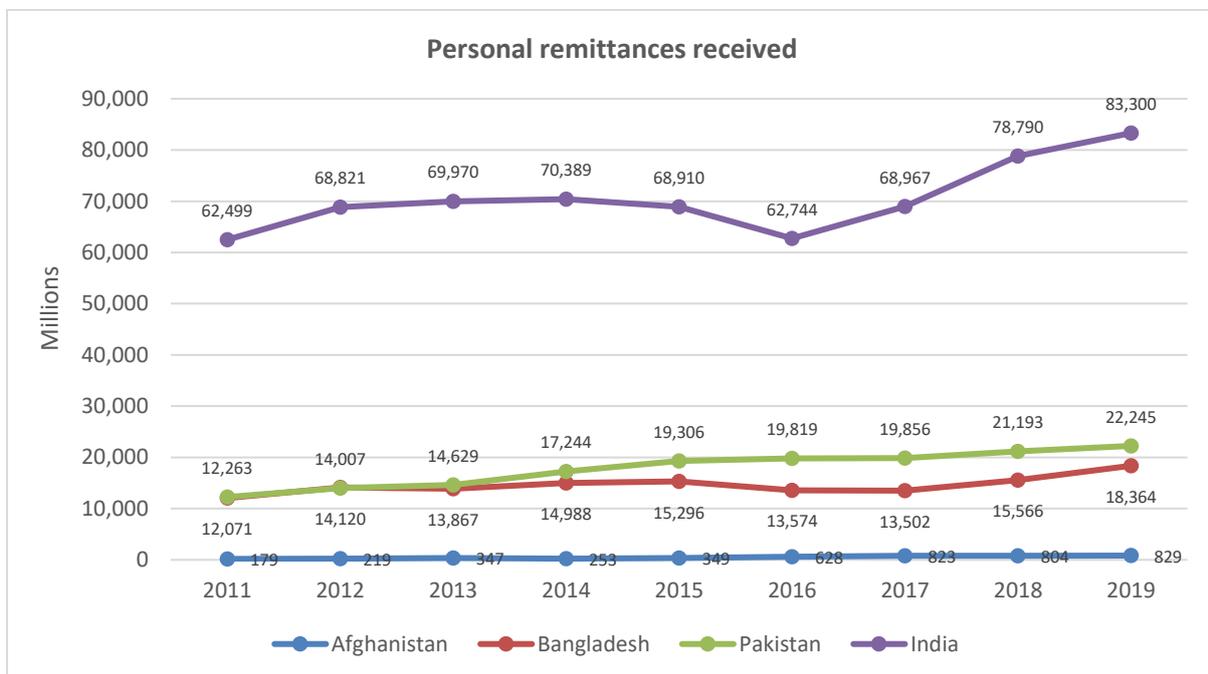
⁵ One of the more important impacts of COVID for migration researchers has been the reduced availability of accurate, timely and complete data for 2020. This is a particular hindrance to the quantitative analysis of this report. Nonetheless, certain trends were witnessed related to forced displacement, irregular migration and the sending of remittances.

⁶ May 2020 - March 2021

⁷ Iran was one of the first countries in Asia to experience a surge in coronavirus cases and by mid-year 2020 had one of the highest number of cases in Asia (after China). Therefore, it faces a severe economic and social crisis from three external threats: the collapse of the international oil market; the imposition of US economic sanctions; and the pandemic caused by COVID-19.



growth and employment levels in destination countries, weak oil prices (particularly impacting GCC countries) and depreciation of the currencies of countries of origin against the US dollar. In some parts of the region, this decline is more profound, with recent research in Bangladesh suggesting a 30% drop in remittances as compared to the previous year.^{xxvii} Conversely, for Pakistan, the amount of recorded remittances in 2020 skyrocketed, as described in the previous chapter.^{xxviii} These trends in remittances will have an important impact on the livelihoods of migrants and their families in countries of origin. For return migrants, reduction in their family income suggests that reintegration and/or re-migration will be central to their livelihood strategies and key areas of intervention for countries of origin in 2021.

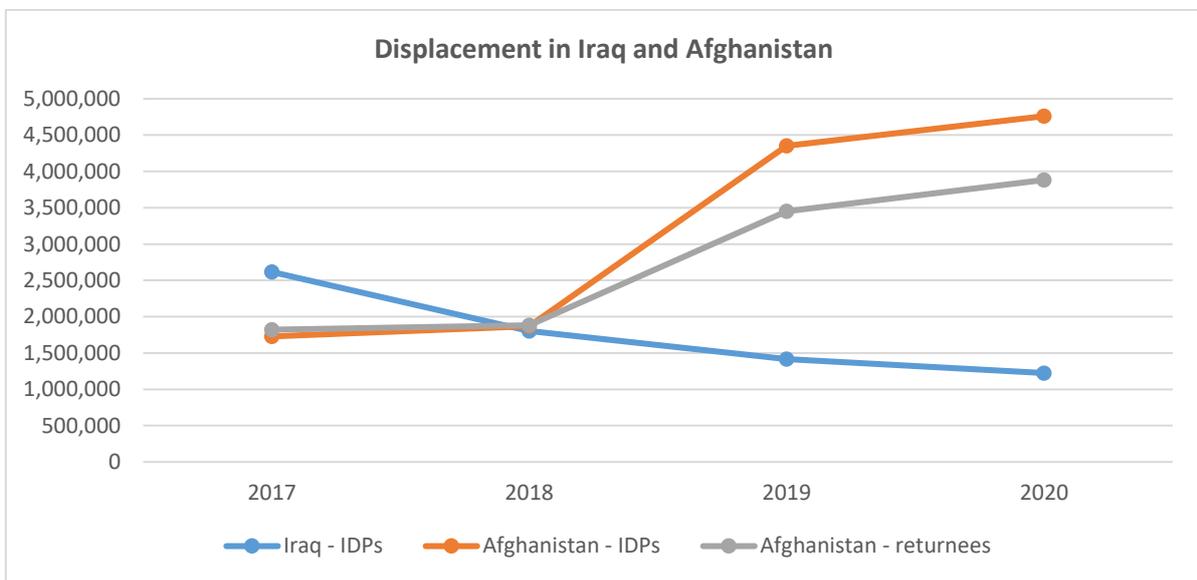


Source: World Bank (all numbers are in USD\$)

Iranian remittances, since 2011, are difficult to estimate as data remains incomplete and many use informal channels to bypass economic sanctions. However, an interesting development worth highlighting is Iran's emergence as the world's leading cryptocurrency landscape. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Iranian emigrants are using bitcoin to send remittances to family members in Iran and to store their value, diverting from traditional transfer channels (informal and formal).^{xxix} Bitcoin mining "farms" have popped up throughout Iran in recent years. They use large collections of computer servers to verify digital bitcoin transactions (i.e. "mine"), a highly energy-intensive process that can sap hundreds of megawatts from the power grid. These farms are representative of a broader cryptocurrency movement in Iran in an effort to engage in international commerce without relying on the U.S.-dominated banking system – a system that in recent years has been shut off to Iranians because of sweeping U.S. economic sanctions.^{xxx}



Forced displacement trends have been particularly important for Iraq and Afghanistan (see table below). While internal displacement has been steadily declining in Iraq, the number of IDPs and returnees have risen substantially in recent years for Afghanistan (reaching over 4.5 million) due to a combination of natural disasters (seasonal flash floods, landslides, avalanches) and conflict or violence. The COVID-19 pandemic, absence of successful peace talks between the government and Taliban leaders, as well as security challenges and seasonal disasters continue to aggravate their situation. In the coming year, given the foreseen closure of IDP camps in Iraq, as well as the heightened number of Afghan returns from host countries in the region, reintegration of IDPs and other returnees will be a particular challenge for both countries.



Source: IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix

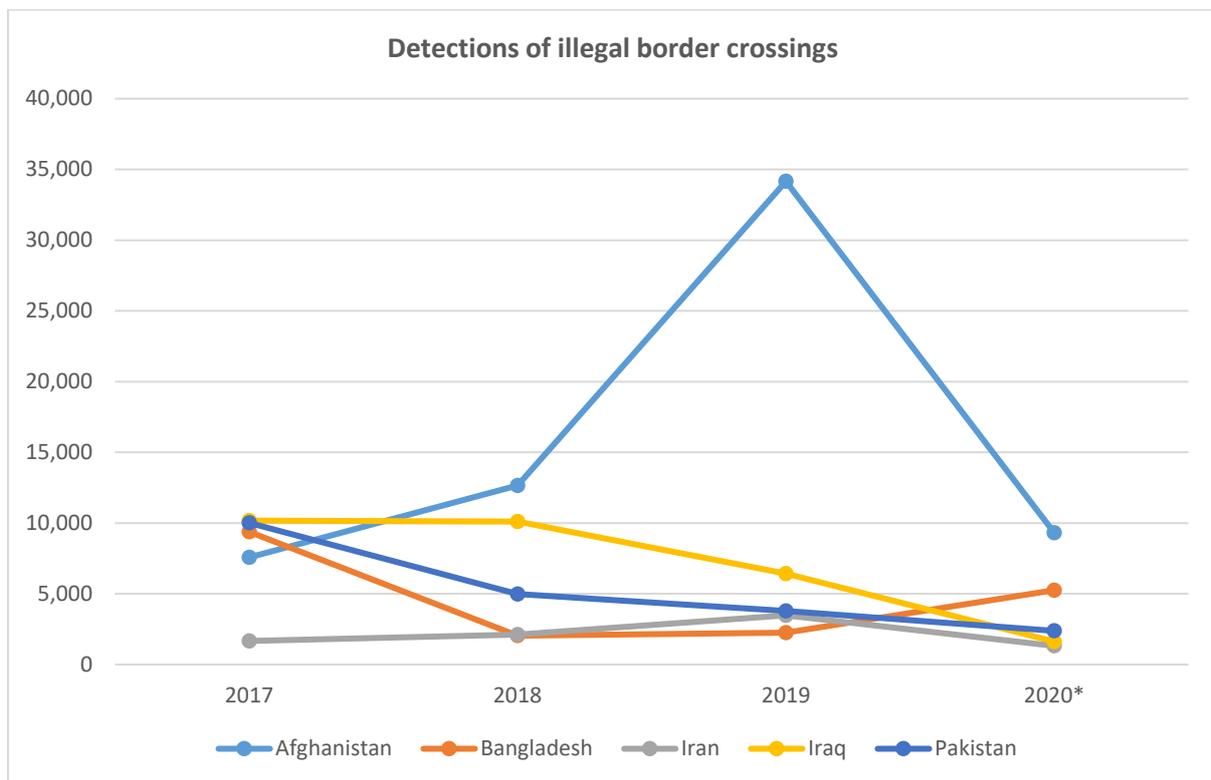
With regard to **irregular migration** trends, most recent data available reflect irregular migration routes from South Asia via Iran and Turkey to the EU, but there is also significant undocumented mobility among the countries in the region. For 2020, there have been relatively high return and/or deportation numbers of Afghans and Pakistanis from Iran, but these seem to be in line with or only a slight increase on previous years' trends.^{xxxi}

For the migratory routes towards Europe, Frontex and Turkey's DGMM have recorded the lowest number of illegal border crossings at their borders in years (since 2013 and 2014, respectively). However, irregular migration trends within the region do not involve all nationalities in similar ways (see table below). For nationals of Iraq and Afghanistan, the reduction in detections at the EU's external border was largest, amounting to approximately 15%⁸ of the previous year's flow. Citizens of Pakistan and Iran were also detected at much lower rates as compared to 2019, at

⁸ Accounting also for the lack of reporting on December 2020, the authors estimated based on the proportion of detections December 2019 represented for that year per country.



about two-thirds and one-third of their previous detections (respectively for the EU and Turkey). On the other hand, Bangladeshi migrants are outliers in terms of this trend – their detection rate at the EU’s external border was over two times higher for 2020 as compared to 2019.^{xxxii} If regular migration channels do not re-open in 2021, and heightened unemployment levels remain, it is likely that we will observe increases in irregular migration trends from this region towards Europe. However, a potential increase is unlikely to reach 2019 levels, as migrants may have fewer resources to commit to a migration journey, due to the economic impacts of 2020.⁹



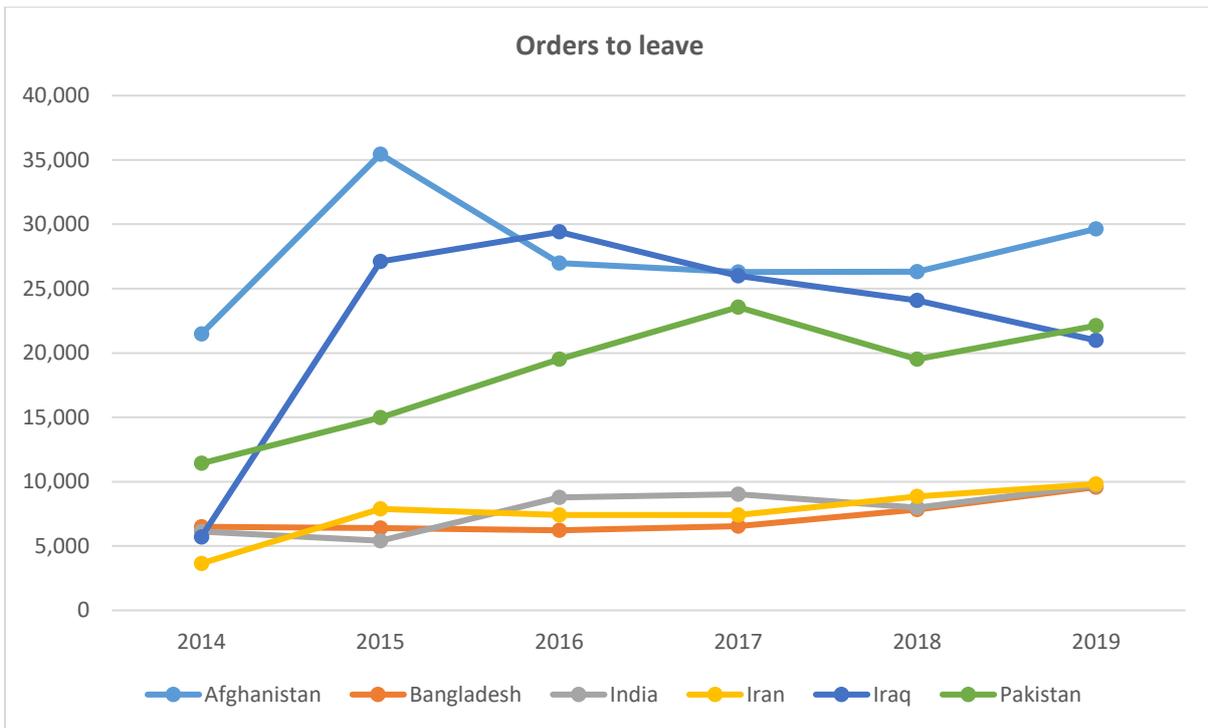
Source: Frontex Note: January to November 2020 data only.

In terms of illegal stays detected within the EU, as of end of 2019, Afghan citizens were the highest number detected (56,200) among the Silk Routes countries, and increase of 46% compared to the previous year. Iraqi nationals were the only among the countries to demonstrate a decrease in detections from 2018 to 2019. Data for 2020 is not yet available. Of those detected, Afghanistan and Iraq had the highest percent of children, at 30% and 15% of all detected illegally present of those citizenships.^{xxxiii}

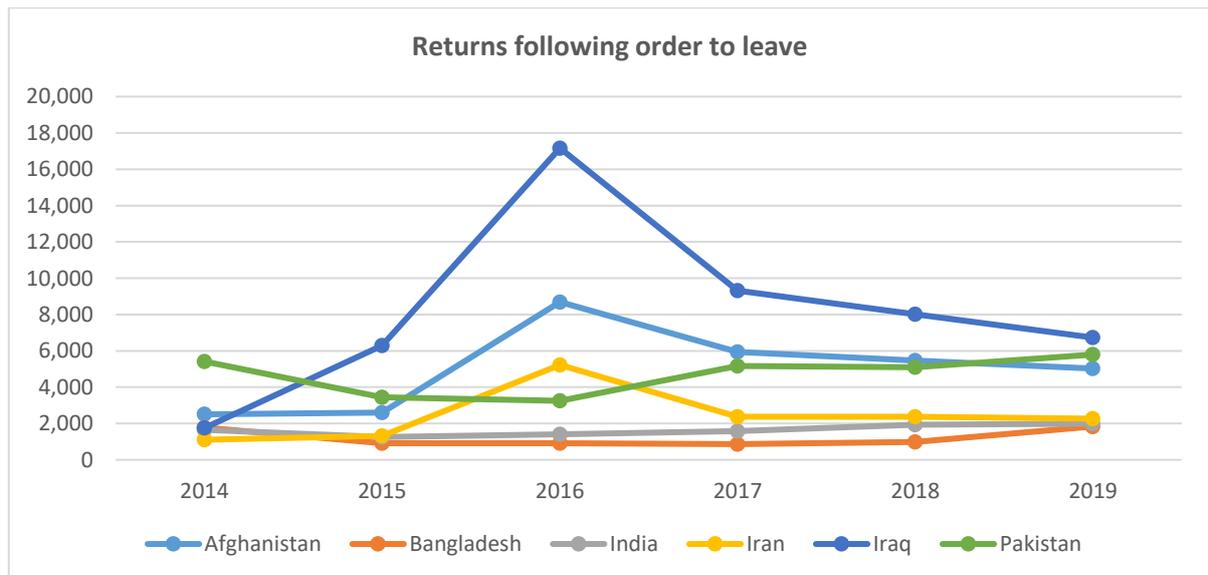
⁹ This also depends of course on whether migrants intending on migrating irregularly depend on the services of smugglers and how the demand affects supply. Smugglers often adjust their pricing accordingly. See: Optimity Matrix, ICMPD, ECRE (2015). A study on smuggling of migrants. Characteristics, responses and cooperation with third countries. Brussels: EMN.



In terms of **return trends from Europe**, nationals of Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan consistently receive the highest number of orders to leave, and as such also have the highest return numbers among the Silk Routes countries (See tables below). However, Iraq has the highest return rate (32% for 2019), followed by Pakistan (26%), and Afghanistan the lowest (17%). It is unclear as of yet how the changes of 2020 – border closures, decreased air travel – would affect these trends.



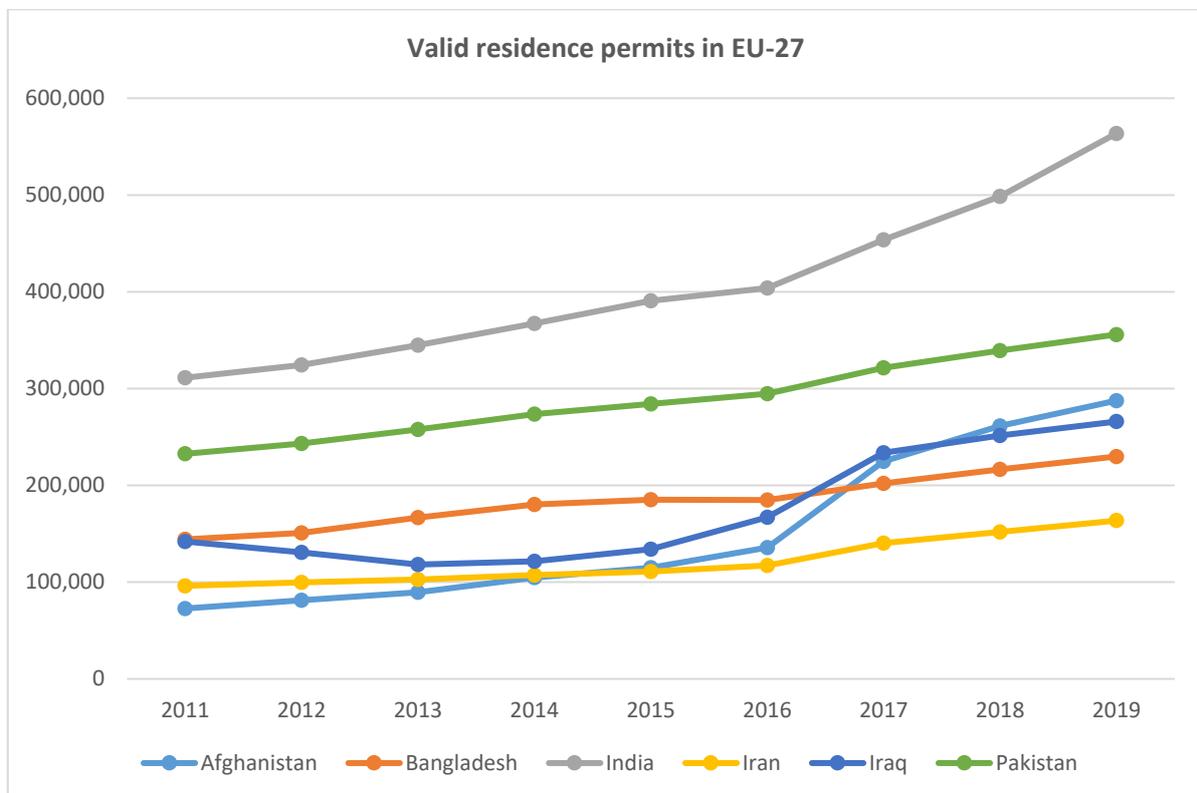
Source: Eurostat



Source: Eurostat



With regard to **asylum trends** for Europe, among the Silk Routes countries, Afghan nationals regularly lodge the highest number of asylum applications in EU Member States (48,105 in 2020), with Germany and Greece receiving the highest share (23%) followed closely by France (22%). Iraqi nationals follow, yet there was a steep decrease in claims in 2020 as compared to 2019 (approximately 40% decrease, from 31,320 to 19,410). The majority of asylum claims of Iraqis are to Germany (57% in 2020). Asylum claims from Pakistani nationals followed a similar trend as with Iraqi nationals, but slightly less (from 28,735 to 18,520). As expected, Afghan and Iraqi nationals have the highest recognition rates (58% and 43% in 2020).^{xxxiv}



Source: Eurostat

Note: Numbers are as of 31 December each year

Aside from irregular migration trends, the Silk Routes country nationals also make use of **regular migration channels to the EU**. In terms of residence permits in EU Member States, Indian nationals receive the highest number regularly and by far as compared to the other Silk Routes countries (563,650 in 2019). The majority of residence permits held by Afghan and Iraqi nationals are for Germany (56% and 64% for 2019), while for Bangladesh, India, Iran and Pakistan, Italy was the more prominent country of residence. In terms of reasons for which residence permits were granted, for Afghan and Iraqi nationals the vast majority have been issued for protection reasons (refugee status or subsidiary protection, 71% for Afghan nationals in 2019 and 64% for Iraqi nationals), with most of the remainder issued for family reasons (family reunification, at 15% and 21%). For the other Silk Routes countries the reasons are more distributed, primarily between



family and remuneration reasons, yet Iranian nationals had the highest percent of permits issued for educational reasons from among the Silk Routes countries (at 12%).^{xxxv} While data is not yet available for 2020, as this data refers to stocks of residence permits in the EU among third country nationals, it is unlikely that the developments of 2020 would greatly impact these trends. Rather, issuance of new residence permits would have had the more significant impact.

4. Migration policy developments in the region

In light of the developments in 2020, many policy developments have emerged within the region. Some were initiated in advance but approached finalisation, whilst others were initiated given the pressures exerted over the course of an unprecedented year of limited mobility. Of particular relevance, was the announced planned abolishment of the *kafala* (sponsorship) system in Saudi Arabia and Qatar which, once implemented over the course of 2021, is expected to improve the labour rights and job mobility of tens of millions of migrant workers from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and the larger Silk Routes region^{xxxvi}.

Afghanistan

For Afghanistan, the development of a migration policy began in 2018 and already highlighted the importance of building a comprehensive policy across all four pillars of migration management, i.e. return and reintegration; regular migration; prevention of irregular migration, and migration and development. The Comprehensive Migration Policy for Afghanistan (CMP) continued development during the course of 2020 and defines more than ninety policy measures to address pertinent migration related challenges.

The CMP remains the de-facto national migration management framework, by national counterparts, and drew a great deal of attention over the course of the year, due to migration and mobility (especially return and repatriation of Afghans) grabbing a great deal of attention. Although pending adoption¹⁰, the Ministry of Refugee and Repatriation (MoRR) is in the process of building its five-year strategic action plan including concrete migration management measures. Pursuant to the development of CMP, the Afghan government has requested assistance in establishing a governance framework for the CMP at national, regional, and local levels. Given the importance of return and reintegration over the course of 2020, institutional reform – witnessed by the transferring of the Displacement and Reintegration Executive Committee to the Vice President’s office – further illustrates the priority paid to the matter.

¹⁰ Adoption of the CMP, and of its costed action plan, has been identified as a target within the Afghanistan Partnership Framework at the Geneva Conference for Afghanistan.

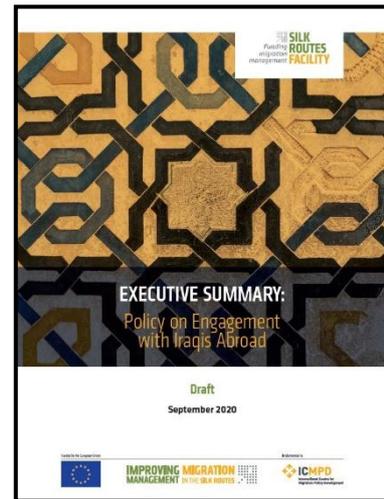


Afghanistan continued to seek opportunities on bilateral labour mobility channels with its neighbors and, mechanisms for the transfer of high-value remittances to its economy (akin to signed memorandums of understanding with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates to enable temporary labour migration to these markets).

Iraq

In recent years, Iraq has developed comprehensive migration policies to address a large range of needs, as a country at the nexus of forced displacement and labour migration. The recent development of its national migration strategy and a separate Policy on Engagement with Iraqis Abroad¹¹ will support the government in setting its migration-related priorities in the coming year. In particular, voluntary return and reintegration of IDPs and Iraqis abroad will be focus areas in the coming year, as well as attracting talent and expertise from the diaspora.

At the same time, border security has become even more of a global priority in 2020 with the spread of COVID-19, and Iraq has had to rapidly adjust to the changing operational situation at the border, particularly in terms of customs and trade facilitation. The Ministry of Health has now become increasingly relevant and engaged at the border and in the development of strategic response frameworks in the country. Due to these recent developments in 2020, border management as an area for cooperation has emerged as a key link in the chain of economic development through trade facilitation, and is increasingly a nexus for health, migration and crisis management priorities alongside existing national safety and security concerns present at Iraq's borders. In line with this prioritisation, Iraq's Integrated Border Management Strategy¹² and accompanying Action Plan will be developed over the course of the next year.



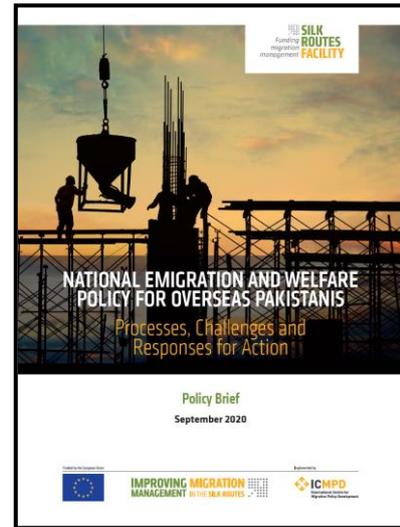
¹¹ Developed with technical and expert support from ICMPD, this policy is to be formally adopted in 2021.

¹² Developed with technical and expert support from ICMPD.



Pakistan

The Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOPHRD) is in the midst of finalising their National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis¹³, which should be adopted in 2021. The policy comprehensively deals with the migration process and brings together the key priorities for the government, notably promoting regular migration channels, protection of migrants abroad and engaging the diaspora and return migrants. Due to the urgency of needs of migrants abroad and returning, certain areas have already been prioritised for implementation. The Ministry also plans to spearhead a policy focused on reintegration of returnees, a direct response to the pressing needs that have emerged in 2020 due to COVID-19-related returns.



Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 to Pakistan’s border authorities and the government, 2020 and early 2021 have been marked by several indicators that the Government of Pakistan is increasingly prioritising border management for both security and prosperity reasons, and recognising that improved coordination on the topic is required at a national level. This includes planned launch of biometric systems (for visas, e-passports and immigration processing) and improving border management procedures and infrastructure at BCPs (notably Torkham and Chaman), with the aim of enhancing the effective facilitation of intra and inter-regional trade through Pakistan and ultimately fulfilling its potential as regional transport hub.

At the same time, the Government of Pakistan has been looking towards diversification of destination countries for its migrants. Recent MoUs with Japan and Romania, as well as the government’s interest in the EU Pact’s talent partnerships scheme, reflect this desire to reduce the dependence on GCC countries for labour migration.¹⁴ Likewise, Pakistan has increased the engagement of Community Welfare Attachés abroad, who are tasked with responding to the

¹³ This policy has been developed with technical and expert support from ICMPD.

¹⁴ This is particularly apt considering recent developments: as of November 2020, the UAE has halted visa issuance for Pakistan and 11 other Muslim majority countries. While security and COVID-19 have been given as official reasons, media accounts have suggested this is related to mounting pressure to normalise relations with Israel among Muslim-majority countries, as well as to Pakistan’s recent alignment with the Iran-Turkey-Malaysia geopolitical alliance, rather than the Saudi-Emirati bloc. This development may also have an impact on migrant smuggling trends in the future, as the air route from Pakistan to GCC countries (including UAE) is one important modus operandi for smuggling operations to Europe and the Gulf.



needs of the Pakistani community in the country, but also to investigate the potential for legal migration pathways.

India

With the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, millions of migrant workers have been forced to return home, from other parts of India and from other countries. To ensure sufficient support for the reintegration of those returnees into the labour market, India's Union Cabinet has approved a scheme, Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES)^{xxxvii}, to conduct a skills mapping exercise of these workers. Collected information is expected to be shared with Indian and foreign companies (in India) so that they may contact the migrant workers directly if their skills are needed.

Aside from crisis response, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has simultaneously been engaged in coordinating the revision of its emigration policy. As it stands, it governs all matters related to the emigration of Indian nationals abroad, but remains in need of reorientation and update. The Emigration Bill of 2019 put forward a responsive, easily accessible, and technology-driven institutional framework that strengthens the welfare and protection of Indian nationals who are abroad.^{xxxviii} The MEA spent 2020 revising the bill after its failure in Parliament.

Nonetheless, the MEA through its Overseas Indian Affairs division, have launched updates to key initiatives in support of its diaspora over the course of 2020. These include strengthening existing initiatives, such as 'version two' of the e-migrate system^{xxxix}, and integrating passport issuance systems in 70 Missions and diplomatic posts abroad.^{xl} A new Global Pravasi Rishta portal^{xli} and app were also launched by the government connecting its 30 million plus diaspora across the world. Still in development, it aims to create a three-way communication between the ministry, Indian missions and the diaspora aiming to assist in crisis management and lend a helping hand to its citizens and OCI community¹⁵.

At the same time, in parallel with its new National Education Policy, India has been developing student mobility exchanges and joint programmes with universities abroad, facilitated through legislative and regulatory frameworks. Support and guidance will be necessary as they try to navigate the challenges commonly associated with larger-scale student mobility.

¹⁵ The mobile app will be used by the diaspora and the Indian nationals, while the portal web interface will be used by the missions.



5. Conclusions for 2021

The year 2020 brought significant changes globally and for the Silk Routes region. In terms of migratory trends, COVID-19 magnified existing issues within an already complex region. The associated returns and pressures on reintegration amplified displacement and mobility issues across Afghanistan, India, Iraq and Pakistan. With border closures and travel restrictions, irregular crossings and deportations temporarily reduced or maintained similar levels to previous years. Remittances generally fell across the region (except for Pakistan) and unemployment rose (India alone had over 120 million unemployed by May 2020). The need for more comprehensive and inclusive border management strategies (Iraq, Pakistan), retraining schemes for returnees (India) and measures to relieve socio-economic pressures on countries of origin, highlighted the urgency for progress within the political, policy, and implementation spheres.

The following considerations will be crucial in addressing migration trends within region during the course of 2021:

Ongoing peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban in Doha, and the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will prove to be ‘push’ or ‘pull’ factors.¹⁶ If both proceed in a positive and promising manner, expectations are that Afghan refugees will slowly return home voluntarily from Iran and Pakistan in search of economic promise.^{xlii} If on the other hand intra-Afghan talks collapse, or seem to have limited prospects for success, Afghan refugees in Iran may be left with little choice but to head further west – whether within the region or beyond. Similarly, with the prospect of a Taliban-dominated regime in Kabul, groups and individuals having ties to the republican government would have reason to fear for their personal safety. Depending on the outcome of these negotiations and the nature with which the Taliban assumes political responsibility, those Afghans that returned and others - such as women - may seek a new life in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. The implementation of the EU-Iran Migration Dialogue will also have implications for migration management within the region^{xliii}.

Sustained Return and Reintegration support is the most important priority area for the region.

This concerns both the large number of return migrants, particularly from the GCC, as well as those who have been, or become, internally displaced within their country. COVID-19 has placed a heavy burden on social services for all of the countries in the region, which have already been hit economically by the pandemic and are struggling to ensure education, health care, and unemployment support for its citizens. Many of these countries in the region have already developed policies and mechanisms (or have prioritised action in this area for the coming year) in

¹⁶ The fact that Pakistan and Iran host large numbers of Afghan refugees means that events in both countries will remain inextricably interwoven.



the area of return and reintegration. Lack of sustained reintegration support (beyond the traditional post-arrival assistance) can have knock-on effects related to unemployment, social cohesion, and increased vulnerability to trafficking or other risks related to irregular migration. Interventions in this area are of particular urgency.

Experts noted a heavy toll on the flow of remittances globally, expecting a precipitous drop of roughly 20% this year. More specifically within the region, the impact ranged from a 5-7% drop when compared to 2019 (except for Pakistan, which experienced growth for country-specific reasons). Operational disruptions (i.e. with lockdowns in place throughout the region, travelling home, visiting banks, Money-Transfer-Operators, or post offices have been an impossibility), foreign exchange volatility (thereby increasing the total cost of remittance transactions), and a reduction in income (i.e. temporary and long-term unemployment as well as wage theft) were highlighted as immediate and short term impacts. In the longer term, a sustained drop in economic activity (including for Pakistan) could result in a continued and deeper reduction in income, thereby leading to further drops in remittances.

Internal displacement-specific issues will remain paramount for the region with environmental and security issues persisting. For Iraq, this is an important priority for 2021, with the aim of returning all IDPs and closing all camps. On the other hand, for Afghanistan, considering the still significant numbers, it is important for the government, together with humanitarian and international organisations, to focus on the need for local integration of IDPs where possible. Considering the ongoing barriers to services and support IDPs face, they will need assistance in accessing education and health services, and other basic services. For India, where internal mobility limitations caused great strife, for its intra-migrant workers, 2021 will see further work on a new National Policy and Action Plan led by the Ministry of Labour and Employment.¹⁷

The importance of well-functioning borders was thrown into sharp relief in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic and the global impact it had on cross-border mobility and trade. Efficient cooperation and coordination between border authorities was the foundation for rapidly putting contingency planning and containment measures at border crossing points into motion, and will continue to be necessary in charting a return to normal operations as the region emerges from COVID-19. Support to strengthening **border management** capacities will remain a priority.

Migration policy development has reached important milestones in the region over the past year and the coming months will see finalisation and adoption of respective comprehensive policies as

¹⁷ It is expected to create Migrant Resource Centres and a hotline; provide proper working conditions, minimum wages, grievance and redress mechanisms, protection from abuse and exploitation, enhancement of the skills and ensuring social security to those working as day labourers.



well as the launch of implementation plans. Labour mobility, engagement of the diaspora, as well as return and reintegration, have been key areas of development and will remain important aspects for countries in the post-COVID-19 recovery period. **Most of the countries within the Silk Routes region have been developing labour migration policies and strategies**, consequently diversifying destinations for their migrant workers to Europe and East Asia (e.g. Afghanistan is in the process of establishing a labour migration system).

In light of ongoing deliberations on matching labour and skills needs within the EU the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, through the development of Talent Partnerships, focus has typically been on the traditional categories of highly skilled (i.e. ICT workers, engineers, doctors). However, 2020 illustrated the **need for a broader outlook on professions in short supply** and that is 'essential' work. As the EU emerges out of 2020 and into 2021, **Talent Partnership discussions will be a vital component of the EU's economic revival**. Focusing on the highly-skilled would be a missed opportunity, and special attention ought to be paid to professions such as health care (mid-level practitioners, assistants, aids, infection control and quality assurance personnel, care givers to the elderly), food and agriculture (workers supporting retail and restaurants, food ingredient production and processing facilities, farmers, harvesting, packing, storage), energy, manufacturing, transportation and logistics.

6. Five things to look out for in 2021

New displacements due to developments in geo-politics, conflict, unrest, and/or environmental causes will be an area to look out for in the coming year and should keep migration high on the agenda of decision-makers. The ongoing and fragile peace negotiations in Afghanistan, tense US-Iran relationship, environmental crises such as floods in Afghanistan and Bangladesh, insecurity in Myanmar, and upcoming elections in Iran and Iraq, are just some of the considerations that will affect mobility patterns within the region over the course of 2021.

The rollout of COVID-19 **vaccinations and related easing of restrictions on mobility** will also be an important aspect with huge potential for disruption or facilitation of future mobility in the region. Access to vaccines, on the one hand, and re-opening of legal migration channels, on the other, will affect access to work for millions of migrant workers in the region. Employment abroad, and particularly in the GCC, has been an important livelihood strategy for the South Asian region, and the extent to which the GCC economies can recover and are willing to re-open to migrant workers will be important in the short term. The diversification of skills of migrant workers and destination countries will be an important strategy for the countries' future.



The development of **strategic frameworks for IBM coordination**, whether through the development of strategic documents, guidelines, coordination groups or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), will be complemented by technical advice for optimised procedures, well-trained staff and well-planned infrastructure.

To facilitate an increase in remittance transfers, **countries within the region may embrace initiatives to actively promote and enable the adoption of innovative digital means**. Furthermore, categorising remittance services as “essential services” so that migrants may continue to send and receive funds (via banks or money transfer operators) may occur if closures resume during subsequent waves of COVID-19.

Adoption of and building upon existing policies and processes in-country to ensure **comprehensive migration management are expected**. Taking policy forward and linking with action plans and institutional reform will be key areas of development. This is especially relevant for Afghanistan where financial commitments – outlined at the 2020 Geneva conference – are linked to the fulfilment of key actions on migration.^{xliv} For Pakistan and India, implementation of measures to support reintegration and/or remigration, given the significant impact of COVID-19-related return on both countries, will be of particular priority.



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