

## FFVT on point: Forced Migration in Afghanistan and Afghan refugees in the region

Panel discussion „FFVT on point: Forced migration in Afghanistan and Afghan refugees in the region“, 8 November 2021

On 8 November 2021, FFVT organised the online panel discussion “FFVT on point: Forced migration in Afghanistan and Afghan refugees in the region” to discuss and assess the current situation with academics and practitioners. In a lively debate, Mojib Atal (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg), Muhammad Mudassar Javed (Society for Human Rights and Prisoners’ Aid [SHARP], Pakistan), Dr Sibel Karadağ (Kadir Has University, Turkey), Dr Katja Mielke (Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies) and Dr Hidayet Siddikoglu (billim Research and Social Studies, Afghanistan) shared their expertise and diverse knowledge on forcibly displaced Afghans in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey.

The discussion illustrated the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan and in the region and provided a stimulus for reflection on displacement issues in general. Hence, the collapse of the Afghan government and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban in August 2021 came as no surprise to the panellists given the developments of recent years and the country’s long history of war. Many misjudgements by the United States of America and its allies, as well as a lack of coordination had led to the failure of the intended democratisation efforts. As a result, predominantly Afghans who worked with them and the urban middle class continued to try to flee the country for fear of prosecution by the Taliban. Closed borders with neighbouring countries, the obstruction of evacuation processes and the unavailability of official documentation further complicate the situation. Nevertheless, the Western public and media often seem to forget that many people in less urbanised and more remote areas have already lived under Taliban rule for some years. At the same time, the current situation for Afghans remained unpromising due to massive shortages in food and medication and the inaccessibility of the country’s cut-off mountainous regions. On an international level, the perception of Afghan refugees seemed to have changed this summer. Contrary to popular and social media portrayals, however, the panellists believe that it seems unlikely that the current situation would trigger a “new Afghan exodus”. Nonetheless, the situation of Afghan refugees was increasingly politicised, and they were scapegoated for social or economic problems elsewhere whereby the degree of politicisation depended on the context.

In Pakistan, the situation for forcibly displaced Afghans remained ambivalent. In general, while the government took a relatively open and flexible stance towards Afghans, there was a lack of clear government policies. This was partly due to the fact that Pakistan is no signatory state of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Hence, Afghans find themselves in a state of limbo without adequate protection. This situation was also reflected in the mixed sentiments of Pakistani politicians and society towards Afghans, where Afghans were repeatedly considered to be associated with Taliban terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

In Turkey, the public perception of Afghans changed in the summer. According to the participants, relevant discussions had been absent in the media and the public over the last decades, and suddenly, perception increased and led to a dramatised portrayal. Images of an alleged “Afghan invasion” were conjured up, even though this could not be substantiated with facts. This led to an increased securitisation of the Turkish–Iranian border. On a more general level, Turkey seemed to search for a balance in its deportation strategy between systematic pushbacks of Afghans to manage societal tensions and the country’s need of cheap labour. Within the country, Afghans find themselves in a situation of limbo, as the government does not grant them protection status or access to humanitarian aid. Hence, Afghans live in highly precarious situations as a socially marginalised group. They are vulnerable to exploitation on the Turkish labour market as they have no rights, passports or documents while trying to make ends meet as day labourers.

In general, there was an immediate need of humanitarian assistance and action by the international community to better support and protect forcibly displaced Afghans in their country and in the region. In this regard, it was important to note that the Taliban had changed over the last decades. Today, the group was more fragmented with diverging visions of religion and governance, with one side showing some interest in collaborating with the USA and its allies and the other side strictly opposing the idea. Furthermore, in the past, UNHCR had played an ambivalent role in the context of displacement of Afghans, leading critics to say that UNHCR was not advocating enough for Afghans.

Viewed in a broader context and taking into account that forced displacement is a key characteristic of the 21st century, the situation of Afghans was exemplary for issues of increasing global inequalities. Rich countries are increasingly trying to externalise migration issues by using peripheral countries as gatekeepers. This included the unofficial support of illegal pushbacks and the increasing securitisation at the borders. At the same time, poorer receiving countries are trying to exploit forced migrants as bargaining chips in international negotiations.

In their final statements, the panellists provided policy recommendations for the international community. According to them, the international community should work with the Taliban through international organisations to ensure that humanitarian concerns were addressed in Afghanistan. In addition, it was necessary to offer Afghans with medium and long term perspectives in the country through international agreements. Finally, they called for the adoption of a migration policy framework similar to the mechanisms in place between the European Union and Turkey.

*Merlin Flaig*

With this event, FFVT introduced its new discussion format FFVT on point. The format serves as an irregularly recurring platform to discuss current issues of public relevance in Forced Migration Studies. The objective is to engage in dialogue between researchers, actors from politics, public administration, the media, and the public to contribute to a more evidence-based social and political debate on forced migration and refugees.

## Project Info

### *Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer*

The cooperation project “Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer” (FFVT) aims to strengthen interdisciplinary forced migration and refugee research in Germany. To this end, the project, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), brings together research on migration, development, conflict and violence, climate change, health, governance and human rights and other topics. In this way, FFVT supports the networking of researchers and institutes working in all relevant research fields dealing with forced migration. To provide young academics with teaching and training opportunities in forced migration and refugee studies, it plans to establish study and graduate programmes. Furthermore, FFVT plans to promote the internationalisation of German research activities further and, therefore, offers a global fellowship programme, among other things. The dialogue between academia, practitioners, the media and politicians is another key element of its work. FFVT is to contribute to establishing a sustainable infrastructure for research on forced migration and refugee studies in Germany to facilitate excellent academic work in this field.

FFVT is jointly run by the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), the Centre for Human Rights Erlangen-Nürnberg (CHREN, University of Erlangen Nuremberg), the German Development Institute (DIE, Bonn) and the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS, University of Osnabrück).

Please note that the content provided is a summary of the points discussed during the event. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of FFVT, its members or funders.

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