

## Forced Choices: Push-Pull Dynamics of Illegal Afghan Migration and Returnee Reintegration Experiences - A Mixed-Methods Analysis

Ebad Ullah AMIR<sup>1</sup>, Fayaz Gul Mazloun YAR<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sayed Jamal Uddin Afghani University, Afghanistan

<sup>2</sup>Nangarhar University, Afghanistan

### Article Info:

#### Article History:

Received: 2024-11-05

Revised: 2024-12-23

Accepted: 2025-01-09

### Keyword:

Afghan Migration, Push and Pull Factors, Illegal Migration, Returnees, Mixed-Methods, Migration Policy, Reintegration

### Corresponding Author:

Fayaz Gul Mazloun Yar

### Email:

[fmazloumyar@gmail.com](mailto:fmazloumyar@gmail.com)

### Paper Type:

Research Paper



### Abstract:

#### Purpose:

Complex factors—poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and lack of jobs—drive illegal migration from Afghanistan, which remains a major socio-economic challenge. While existing studies have explored the causes of migration, gaps remain in understanding the nuanced interplay between push and pull factors and the post-return experiences of Afghan migrants.

#### Methodology:

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with 150 returnees from Iran, Pakistan, and selected European countries. Data were analyzed using SPSS and NVivo software.

### Findings:

The findings reveal that economic deprivation, insecurity, and political instability are dominant push factors, whereas job opportunities, safety, and better quality of life in destination countries are key pull factors. Furthermore, returnees report significant challenges in reintegration, including socio-economic marginalization and lack of institutional support, increasing their risk of re-migration.

### Implication:

This study contributes to migration scholarship by offering a contextualized analysis of Afghan returnees and highlighting the need for responsive policy frameworks to address the root causes of migration and support sustainable reintegration.

## INTRODUCTION

Illegal migration has emerged as one of the most critical social and economic challenges of the 21st century, affecting both sending and receiving countries (Castles & Miller, 2020). Afghanistan, in particular, has faced a significant outflow of its population due to persistent insecurity, widespread poverty, high unemployment rates, and limited access to essential services (Smith et al., 2021; Zlotnik, 2021). These structural deficiencies have compelled millions of Afghans, primarily youth and economically vulnerable groups, to migrate illegally to neighboring and distant countries, including Iran, Pakistan, and European nations (Yar, 2024; Johnson & Lee, 2022).

Migration decisions are often influenced by a combination of push factors, such as violence, lack of employment, and political instability, and pull factors, like perceived safety, job availability, and improved quality of life in host countries (Lee, 2018; De Haas, 2014). While the migration discourse is well-developed globally, there is a notable gap in understanding how these factors specifically manifest in the Afghan context, particularly concerning returnees—those who return to Afghanistan after an irregular migration journey (Brown & Taylor, 2023; Anderson & Clark, 2023).

Existing research primarily focuses on migrants in host countries, often overlooking the complex post-return experiences that may contribute to re-migration tendencies (Rahimi & Sadat, 2023). Returnees often struggle with reintegration, facing limited job prospects, social marginalization, and a lack of support from government

and non-government actors (Wilson, 2024). This study addresses this research gap by providing a comprehensive and comparative analysis of push and pull factors in Afghan illegal migration and by examining the reintegration experiences of returnees from Iran, Pakistan, and Europe. The findings are intended to inform national migration policy and enhance strategies for sustainable reintegration.

**Problem Statement.** Illegal migration continues to represent a pressing issue within Afghan society, exacerbated by ongoing political instability, economic collapse, and security threats (Smith et al., 2021). As of 2022, more than 3 million Afghans were residing illegally in countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and various European states, placing considerable strain on both Afghan institutions and host country resources (Yar & Sadaat, 2025; Johnson & Lee, 2022). Migration among Afghan youth, in particular, is rising due to limited domestic opportunities, unmet aspirations, and worsening living conditions.

Despite a growing body of research on migration, significant gaps persist in understanding the psychological, social, and economic motivations behind illegal migration decisions. Moreover, the experiences of returnees—especially those deported or voluntarily returned—remain underexplored, particularly in terms of their social reintegration, economic recovery, and potential for re-migration (Brown & Taylor, 2023; Ahmad & Hussain, 2023). The lack of contextualized, data-driven studies on Afghan returnees has hampered efforts to develop effective migration governance and reintegration support systems.

This study seeks to address these knowledge gaps by focusing on several key dimensions:

1. **Migration Drivers:** Analyzing the economic, political, environmental, and social factors that compel Afghans to migrate illegally.
2. **Returnee Experiences:** Exploring the challenges encountered by migrants upon return, including joblessness, stigma, and reintegration difficulties.
3. **Migration Impact:** Assessing the social and economic consequences of illegal migration on returnees, their families, and local communities.
4. **Re-migration Tendencies:** Investigating the extent to which returnees consider migrating again due to unresolved structural challenges.
5. **Policy Recommendations:** Proposing strategies to reduce the incentives for illegal migration and support the returnees' reintegration.

#### **Definitions of Key Terms.**

- **Illegal Migration:** The movement of individuals across national borders without legal authorization or documentation.
- **Returnees:** Migrants who return to their country of origin after residing in a foreign country, either voluntarily, forcibly, or through deportation.
- **Push Factors:** Conditions in the home country that force individuals to migrate (e.g., insecurity, poverty).
- **Pull Factors:** Conditions in the destination country that attract migrants (e.g., employment, safety).
- **Reintegration:** The process by which returnees re-establish their lives economically and socially in their country of origin.

By investigating these dimensions, the study aims to provide empirical insights that can support evidence-based policymaking in Afghanistan and promote sustainable, rights-based migration management.

**Literature Review.** Illegal migration has been the subject of extensive academic attention, particularly within the context of developing countries such as Afghanistan. A significant body of literature has addressed the push and pull factors that influence migration decisions. However, much of this research tends to focus either on general migration trends or on Afghan refugees in host countries, with limited attention to the nuanced dynamics affecting returnees. This section critically reviews the scholarly literature on key themes, including push factors, pull factors, experiences of returnees, and the socio-economic impacts of illegal migration, while identifying research gaps relevant to the Afghan context.

**Push Factors in Afghan Migration.** Push factors are structural conditions in the country of origin that compel individuals to emigrate, often involuntarily. In Afghanistan, prolonged conflict, political instability, lack of employment opportunities, and environmental degradation are widely cited as key drivers of irregular migration (Johnson & Lee, 2022; Smith et al., 2021). Anderson and Clark (2023) emphasize that insecurity and exposure to armed conflict significantly influence migration intentions, particularly among youth and rural populations. Additionally, economic collapse and declining public services exacerbate these pressures. While the literature has adequately documented these factors, there is a growing need to explore the role of environmental triggers, such as droughts and floods, in shaping contemporary migration flows. Recent findings suggest that climate-related displacements are becoming more frequent but remain underrepresented in Afghan migration research (Wilson, 2024).

**Pull Factors in Destination Countries.** Conversely, pull factors refer to the perceived advantages in destination countries that attract migrants. These include better economic prospects, security, access to healthcare and education, and established migrant networks (Brown & Taylor, 2023; De Haas, 2014). Afghan migrants are particularly drawn to Iran and Pakistan due to cultural and linguistic affinities and the relatively low cost of entry (Rahimi & Sadat, 2023). Meanwhile, European countries offer the allure of stability, legal asylum processes, and long-term integration prospects. Despite these perceived benefits, several studies report that many Afghan migrants face labor exploitation, discrimination, and precarious legal status in host countries (Ahmad & Hussain, 2023). These contradictions suggest a gap in the literature concerning the mismatch between migrants' expectations and their lived realities abroad.

**Returnee Experiences and Re-Migration Risks.** Research into the experiences of Afghan returnees remains limited but increasingly important. Studies reveal that returnees often face numerous reintegration challenges, including unemployment, loss of social capital, stigma, and limited access to reintegration support (Brown & Taylor, 2023; Sharifi, 2024). Anderson and Clark (2023) note that these conditions often trigger a cycle of re-migration, particularly when the return is involuntary or unaccompanied by adequate support mechanisms. Moreover, existing reintegration programs are criticized for being inconsistent and underfunded. The literature suggests a significant need for more empirical data on post-return experiences and on the role of host-country deportation policies in shaping returnee outcomes (Wilson, 2024).

**Social and Economic Impacts of Illegal Migration.** Illegal migration also produces complex socio-economic consequences in both sending and receiving countries. In Afghanistan, migration leads to the loss of a young labor force and skilled professionals, contributing to brain drain and weakening domestic productivity (Zlotnik, 2021; Castles & Miller, 2020). However, remittances sent by migrants provide crucial financial support to families, which can enhance household welfare and reduce poverty (Borjas, 2017). This duality reflects the ambivalence in policy debates: while migration may relieve immediate economic pressures, it also reinforces long-term dependency and reduces state accountability. Studies like those of Bettin et al. (2019) argue for a nuanced analysis that considers both macroeconomic benefits and social fragmentation effects. Notably, research is scarce on the impact of migration on community-level social cohesion and intergenerational aspirations in Afghan society.

**Identified Research Gaps.** Although existing literature has shed light on various aspects of Afghan migration, several gaps remain unaddressed:

- Limited empirical data on returnees' reintegration experiences across different host countries;
- Underexplored environmental drivers (e.g., climate change) as push factors;
- Insufficient focus on gender dynamics and the role of social networks in facilitating migration or reintegration;
- A lack of comparative analyses between irregular migration trajectories to neighboring countries versus Europe.

While quantitative studies have documented migration volumes and demographic patterns (Smith et al., 2021; Johnson & Lee, 2022), fewer researchers have employed mixed-methods approaches to capture both the statistical trends and lived experiences of Afghan migrants. The methodological gap is particularly evident in

research on returnees, where qualitative dimensions of reintegration struggles remain underexplored (Wilson, 2024). This study addresses this methodological limitation by integrating survey data with in-depth interviews, providing both breadth and depth in understanding the migration cycle.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by offering a multi-country, mixed-methods analysis of Afghan returnees, thereby contributing to both theory and policy on migration governance.

**Theoretical Framework.** Understanding the complex phenomenon of illegal migration necessitates a sound theoretical foundation that captures its economic, political, and socio-cultural dimensions. This study draws upon several interrelated migration theories, with a focus on the Push-Pull Framework, while incorporating perspectives from Dependency Theory and Functionalism to contextualize Afghan migration patterns.

**Definition of Migration.** Migration refers to the movement of people from one geographic location to another to settle temporarily or permanently. Migration may be voluntary or involuntary, legal or illegal, and internal or international (Castles & Miller, 2020; Zlotnik, 2021). In the Afghan context, illegal migration primarily involves unregulated cross-border movement driven by structural vulnerabilities.

**Factors Influencing Migration.** Migration decisions are typically shaped by a combination of factors categorized as follows:

1. **Economic Factors:** High unemployment, income disparities, and poor economic infrastructure are prominent drivers of Afghan migration. Studies show that wage differentials between Afghanistan and destination countries act as a significant pull factor (Borjas, 2017; Dustmann & Frattini, 2014).
2. **Socio-Cultural Factors:** Social exclusion, limited access to quality education and healthcare, and community pressure can influence migration aspirations. Furthermore, the existence of ethnic or familial networks abroad facilitates both initial migration and long-term settlement (Massey et al., 2016; Waldinger, 2015).
3. **Political and Security Factors:** Armed conflict, political instability, and human rights abuses are critical push factors in Afghanistan. These conditions disproportionately affect youth and minority groups, who perceive migration as a survival strategy (Sassen, 2018; Koser, 2016).
4. **Environmental Factors:** While underemphasized in theory, environmental stressors such as drought, flood, and land degradation are increasingly influencing displacement, especially in rural provinces (Wilson, 2024).

#### **Migration Theories.**

1. **Push-Pull Theory:** Originally conceptualized by Lee (1966), the push-pull framework posits that migration occurs due to unfavorable conditions in the home country (push) and favorable conditions in the destination country (pull). This theory remains highly relevant for analyzing Afghan migration, especially regarding economic insecurity, violence, and asylum opportunities abroad.
2. **Dependency Theory:** As advanced by Frank (2019) and Amin (2018), this theory views migration as a consequence of structural inequalities between the global North and South. It posits that underdevelopment and dependency in periphery countries like Afghanistan are perpetuated by global capitalist systems that extract resources and labor.
3. **Functionalist Perspective:** Functionalist theorists such as Parsons (2017) argue that migration is a necessary response to social disequilibrium, redistributing labor and skills across regions to meet systemic needs. In Afghanistan's case, however, such redistribution often results in brain drain, limiting functional benefits at home.
4. **World Systems Theory (optional extension):** While not directly employed in this study, World Systems Theory provides an important backdrop by situating migration within the global capitalist structure and explaining labor mobility from peripheral to core countries (Wallerstein, 2004).

**Relevance to the Present Study.** Among these, the Push-Pull Theory provides the primary lens for this research, as it directly explains the motivations for Afghan citizens to engage in illegal migration and how their socio-economic and political environments shape these. The integration of Dependency Theory and Functionalism enhances this framework by highlighting structural and systemic dimensions often overlooked in



policy analyses. This multi-theoretical approach enables a more holistic understanding of both the causes of migration and the reintegration challenges faced by returnees.

## METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to analyze the push and pull factors influencing the illegal migration of Afghan citizens and to explore the experiences of returnees from Iran, Pakistan, and selected European countries. The methodological framework is built on both quantitative and qualitative strategies, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the complex and multidimensional nature of irregular migration and reintegration dynamics.

1. **Research Design:** A descriptive and analytical approach was employed, using both primary and secondary data sources. The integration of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews allows for triangulation and enhances the validity of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The design facilitates the identification of statistical patterns while capturing lived experiences and contextual nuances.
2. **Study Population and Sampling:** The study population consists of Afghan returnees who had previously migrated illegally to Iran, Pakistan, or European countries and have since returned to Afghanistan. Returnees were selected from three provinces—Herat, Nimroz, and Nangarhar—based on their high migration rates and geographic proximity to international borders.

A purposive, stratified sampling technique was used to ensure representation from each returnee subgroup. The sample was stratified by destination country and included:

- 60 returnees from Iran
- 60 returnees from Pakistan
- 30 returnees from European countries

These participants were chosen based on their migration history, availability, and willingness to share their experiences.

3. **Data Collection Tools:** To collect robust data, the following instruments were employed:
  - **Structured Questionnaires:** Used to collect demographic and migration-related quantitative data, including age, gender, marital status, education level, duration of stay abroad, and reasons for migration and return.
  - **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted with 45 selected participants to explore returnees' personal experiences, motivations, coping strategies, and social reintegration challenges. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes and were conducted in local languages with prior consent.
  - **Document Review:** Secondary data were sourced from reports published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, focusing on returnee trends, migration routes and policy responses.
4. **Data Analysis Techniques**
  - **Quantitative Data:** Data from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS (Version 25). Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, and mean) were used to characterize demographic trends. Correlation and regression analyses were employed to assess relationships between push-pull factors and re-migration intentions.
  - **Qualitative Data:** Interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo (Version 12). A thematic analysis approach was adopted, combining inductive and deductive coding to identify core themes such as motivations, obstacles, and returnee vulnerabilities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emergent patterns were categorized to align with theoretical constructs such as push-pull theory and reintegration frameworks.
5. **Validity and Reliability:** To enhance the trustworthiness of findings, several measures were adopted:

- Content Validity: All questionnaire items and interview protocols were reviewed and validated by migration and social science experts from Nangarhar University.
  - Instrument Reliability: The internal consistency of the survey was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The validity and reliability measures (expert review, Cronbach's alpha = 0.85) are commendable. Ethical considerations are noted (George & Mallery, 2003).
  - Credibility of Qualitative Data: Transcripts and thematic interpretations were subjected to member-checking with interviewees and peer-review by external researchers. It ensured the accuracy of meaning and minimized bias.
6. Ethical Considerations: All research procedures followed established ethical guidelines for social research (Bryman, 2016). Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were briefed about the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality protocols. No personally identifiable data were collected, and all responses were anonymized.
  7. Research Limitations: While the methodology is robust, the study faced certain limitations:
    - Geographical Access: Insecurity and dispersion of returnees across rural areas limited accessibility, particularly in remote districts.
    - Self-Reporting Bias: Some participants may have under or over-reported sensitive information due to fear of stigma or legal repercussions.
    - Scope of Countries: The study focuses on returnees from Iran, Pakistan, and Europe, excluding those from Turkey and Gulf states, limiting generalizability.
  8. Methodological Rationale. The mixed-methods design was selected to account for both structural patterns in migration behavior and the subjective experiences of returnees, which are often overlooked in purely quantitative studies. By combining statistical evidence with personal narratives, the study contributes to both empirical migration analysis and policy-relevant discourse.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data gathered from 150 Afghan returnees. The results are categorized into six main subsections, including demographic characteristics, push and pull factors, migration costs, employment status before and after return, re-migration intentions, and migration trends. Tables and figures are referenced explicitly and serve to clarify the patterns observed. The findings are interpreted in light of the study's research questions and broader migration theories.

**Demographic Profile of Returnees.** Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The data reveal that the majority of returnees are young males with limited formal education.

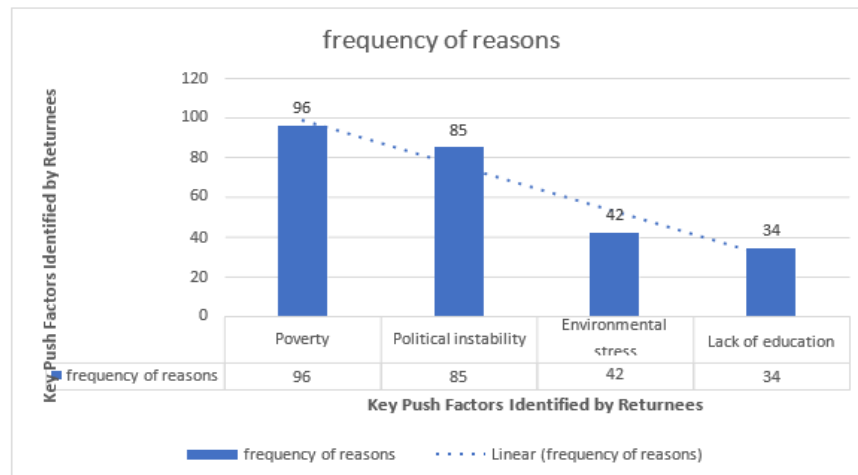
**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 150)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	137	91.3%
	Female	13	8.7%
<b>Age Group</b>	18–30	80	53.3%
	31–50	62	41.3%
	Over 50	8	5.4%
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married	95	63.3%
	Single	55	36.7%
<b>Education Level</b>	Illiterate	48	32.0%

Primary (1–6)	40	26.7%
Secondary (7–12)	59	39.3%
Higher Education	3	2.0%

As shown in Table 1, male returnees account for 91.3% of the sample, underscoring the gendered nature of migration, often driven by economic roles and social expectations. More than half of the participants (53.3%) were aged between 18 and 30, highlighting those young adults form the largest migration cohort. Education levels were generally low; only 2% held a tertiary qualification, limiting their competitiveness in both foreign and domestic labor markets.

**Push Factors Driving Migration.** Figure 1 and Table 2 summarize the key push factors identified through survey responses and thematic coding of interviews. Economic deprivation and insecurity emerged as the most cited reasons for illegal migration.



**Figure 1.** Key Push Factors Identified by Returnees: Bar chart illustrating frequency of reasons: Unemployment, Insecurity, Poverty, Political instability, Environmental stress, Lack of education

**Table 2.** Primary Push Factors Cited by Respondents

Push Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Unemployment	129	86.0%
Security threats (conflict)	118	78.7%
Poverty and debt	96	64.0%
Political instability	85	56.7%
Environmental hardship (drought)	42	28.0%
Lack of access to education	34	22.7%
Healthcare unavailability	6	4.0%

Unemployment (86%) and insecurity (78.7%) were the most frequently reported push factors. These findings are consistent with prior studies that highlight deteriorating economic and security conditions in Afghanistan as central migration drivers (Johnson & Lee, 2022; Smith et al., 2021). Though cited less frequently,

environmental stressors such as drought were notable among respondents from rural provinces, signaling an emerging migration pressure rarely emphasized in Afghan migration literature (Wilson, 2024).

**Pull Factors in Host Countries.** Table 3 presents the main pull factors that attracted participants to their destination countries.

**Table 3.** Primary Pull Factors Reported by Respondents

Pull Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Availability of jobs	125	83.3%
Perception of safety/stability	101	67.3%
Cultural/religious similarity	88	58.7%
Better education opportunities	42	28.0%
Healthcare access	19	12.7%
Existing diaspora networks	17	11.3%

The most dominant pull factor was job availability (83.3%), followed by the perception of greater personal safety (67.3%). Cultural affinity was particularly influential in decisions to migrate to Iran and Pakistan. Pull factors associated with Europe, such as access to education and legal asylum procedures, were reported primarily by younger and more educated respondents.

**Migration Costs and Means.** Migration journeys were often financially and logistically burdensome. Respondents reported paying smugglers between USD 500–5,000, depending on the route and destination. Table 4 provides an overview of cost ranges.

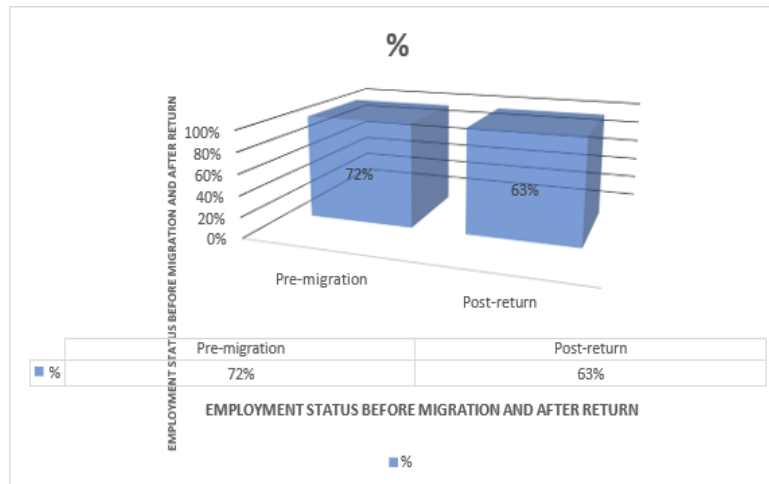
**Table 4.** Migration Costs by Destination Region

Destination	Average Cost (USD)	Range (USD)
Iran	\$700	\$500 – \$1,200
Pakistan	\$450	\$300 – \$900
Europe	\$3,700	\$2,000 – \$5,000

Smuggling networks were the most common mode of illegal entry, especially for Europe-bound migrants. Many respondents reported selling family assets or borrowing money to finance their migration, exacerbating post-return indebtedness and economic vulnerability.

**Employment Status Before and After Migration.** A comparison of employment status pre-migration and post-return reveals a limited reintegration into the Afghan labor market. Figure 2 illustrates this shift.





**Figure 2.** Employment Status Before Migration and After Return

Employed vs Unemployed rates before and after

- Pre-migration: 72% unemployed
- Post-return: 63% unemployed

Despite modest improvement, most returnees remain unemployed or underemployed. Only 37% secured work after return, often in informal sectors such as street vending, day labor, or agriculture. Barriers to employment included a lack of skills, psychological distress, and the absence of institutional support.

**Re-Migration Intentions and Trends.** Returnees were asked whether they intended to migrate again under current conditions. Table 5 displays their responses.

**Table 5.** Re-Migration Intentions

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Intend to remigrate	92	61.3%
Do not intend	32	21.3%
Undecided	26	17.3%

The fact that over 60% of returnees express intentions to re-migrate is alarming. This tendency is strongest among those facing continued unemployment and debt. Interviews revealed frustration with the lack of government support and persistent insecurity. Respondents from Herat and Nimroz also cited harassment during return processes and community stigma.

**Summary and Interpretation.** Overall, the findings underscore the multidimensionality of illegal migration from Afghanistan. Economic desperation, insecurity, and political instability remain the leading push factors, while job availability and perceived safety abroad serve as potent pull factors. Reintegration remains largely ineffective, as reflected by high unemployment and a striking tendency toward re-migration. These patterns reaffirm the relevance of the push-pull framework and illustrate the structural failures of Afghan migration governance.

Furthermore, the emergence of environmental and psychological factors, such as drought, trauma, and social stigma, warrants further scholarly and policy attention. The results demonstrate the urgent need for multi-sectoral interventions that address both the causes of migration and the reintegration needs of returnees.

From a practical standpoint, these findings are valuable for policymakers and planners. For example, creating sustainable jobs and improving security conditions in Afghanistan may reduce push factors. Strengthening regional cooperation (with Iran and Pakistan) to provide legal/social support for migrants and returnees is also crucial.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyze the push and pull factors contributing to the illegal migration of Afghan citizens and to assess the reintegration experiences of returnees from Iran, Pakistan, and Europe. Through a mixed-methods approach incorporating surveys, interviews, and document analysis, the research yielded important empirical and theoretical insights.

Findings revealed that economic deprivation, unemployment, and insecurity remain the dominant push factors, compelling individuals to leave Afghanistan in search of better opportunities. At the same time, employment prospects, relative safety, and social networks in host countries act as strong pull factors that shape destination choices. Notably, the study identified emerging environmental factors, such as drought and land degradation, as additional drivers of migration, especially in rural areas—an insight that adds new depth to existing migration discourse.

Returnees often encounter significant reintegration challenges, including limited employment options, social stigma, psychological trauma, and weak institutional support. A majority of participants expressed intent to migrate again, highlighting the cyclical nature of migration in the absence of meaningful reintegration programs. These results underscore the limitations of Afghanistan's current migration governance system and the need for integrated policy responses. Theoretically, the findings reaffirm the relevance of Lee's (1966) Push-Pull Framework while also supporting insights from Dependency Theory and Functionalism, offering a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional nature of Afghan migration.

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