

## Why Afghan refugees are heading for Europe

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Alongside the Syrians and Iraqis fleeing violence at home and [pouring into Europe](#), many [Afghans](#) too are giving up on their country. The civil war with the Taliban continues unabated even as the last US and Nato troops prepare to leave.

Afghans constitute the third biggest group of those arriving in Germany after Syrians and Iraqis, German officials told me in Berlin last week. If all gateways into Europe are counted, Afghans could constitute the second highest number of recent arrivals, according to a senior UN official in Geneva. He said many Afghans had been waiting for months in Turkey, Iran and Greece for the moment when European borders came down. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that almost 80,000 Afghans applied for asylum in Europe in the first six months of 2015, compared with about 24,000 during the same period last year.

The Afghans' tragedy is compounded by the fact that, though the international community has not come up with a new plan to end the war in Syria, attempts are at least being made – while there is hardly any international focus on Afghanistan.

Instead, Taliban attacks have multiplied, the government is floundering and following the withdrawal of most western forces earlier this year the country is in the throes of an economic downturn.

The worst news, according to the UN official, is that many of the Afghans trying to reach Germany are the best and the brightest: educated, middle-class young Afghans who came of age after 9/11 and held down good jobs while the US and Nato were in the country. Now the majority have lost their jobs, they see no hope of an economic revival and so they are leaving.

The Germans rightly fear an even larger exodus of Afghan refugees if the remaining 12,000 US and Nato forces pull out. German diplomats told me their troop contingent, which is based in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, would stay on if the Americans did so also. However, so far US officials have rejected such requests.

Many of the Afghans arriving in Europe are coming from [Pakistan](#), where there are still 1.5m registered and 1m unregistered Afghan refugees – a leftover population from the Afghan wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Pakistan is now refusing to host these refugees beyond the end of this year and will force them back into Afghanistan if the international community fails to come up with a solution. This is prompting many Afghan families to leave Pakistan and take the perilous bus ride through Iran and Turkey to try and reach Europe.

Another big source of Afghan refugees are the Hazaras targeted by the Taliban and al-Qaeda for being Shia. Even worse – some Hazara Shia refugees in Iran are being recruited to fight for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and that makes them even more of a target for Sunni extremists in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama has been silent on Afghanistan and its refugee crisis, although both regional and European countries still look to the US for ways to end the war and mobilise greater economic support for the government. The total US withdrawal of its troops by next year makes the chances of any Afghan settlement even less likely, however. Even though there is much handwringing in Washington at the perceived collapse of US power and influence under Mr Obama, the fact remains that the US leadership remains indispensable in resolving crises such as those of Afghanistan. The Afghan refugee crisis is the result of a web of more than three decades of wars, invasions, Islamic extremism and multiple dislocations of populations.

Yet the Taliban is more prepared for peace talks than the Islamic State ever will be, and Afghanistan is more ready for a political settlement than Syria will be for a long time.

Wherever one looks the migrant crisis is intimately linked to the wars that plague countries in the region. There is a desperate need to look again at these wars and consider how they could be ended through diplomacy and negotiations. If that does not happen we could see large proportions of the civilian populations of Syria and Afghanistan abandoning their homelands.