



Those who were sent back

Return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers has received a great deal of attention from policymakers across Europe, since few actually return. Much has been written on the different conditions and circumstances which are supposed to facilitate return and sustainable reintegration. However, few have done so by starting from the experiences and perspectives of those who have been through the asylum and return process and now are trying to reintegrate in the country they once left. In this study, *Those who were sent back: Return and reintegration of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq* financed by AMIF, Constanza Vera-Larrucea, Henrik Malm Lindberg, and André Asplund draw on the stories of the returnees to explore various aspects of the migration experience and the asylum process that may affect post-return reintegration.

Increased attention on those who are not allowed to stay

Only one-third of those who are not entitled to stay in the EU leave and of those who leave, less than a third do so voluntarily. Much effort is geared towards increasing the share of those who leave as well as encouraging them to leave voluntarily. Most recently this can be seen in the “New Pact on Asylum and Migration” that was proposed

by the European Commission, which also highlights sustainable reintegration and proposes different strategies for supporting returnees in their reintegration.

To promote return, particularly voluntary return, among those that are not allowed to stay, a significant amount of resources have been directed towards various forms of return and reintegration support and assistance (in-cash and in-kind). This is offered as an incentive to return voluntarily, since voluntary return is considered more

cost-effective and humane. Even those who return involuntarily sometimes stand to benefit from certain types of re-integration assistance. A rich body of literature exists which explores different conditions for a smoother return and a successful reintegration. However, less is known about the individual experiences of return and personal approaches to reintegration from the perspectives of the returnees themselves. In this study, such experiences take centre stage as the researchers explore the aspects of life as a migrant, being an asylum seeker in Sweden, and the return process that seem to shape their post-return outcomes. What does life look like upon return, what do returnees struggle with, are they able to draw on experiences and knowledge acquired abroad, and to what extent can and do they make use of any return and reintegration support and assistance? In short, what can be learnt from the experiences of those who have been through the return process and are expected to become sustainably reintegrated?

Experiences of rejected asylum seekers

The report draws on the personal stories of one hundred rejected asylum seekers that have returned from Sweden to Afghanistan or Iraq during the past years. The analysis of the data is structured around a framework that assumes that reintegration upon return is a complex process that takes place at different levels or dimensions, economically, socially, and psychosocially. It includes elements such as having access to resources and services (*economic embeddedness*); having access to social networks through which information can be delivered and relations with peers can be nurtured (*social embeddedness*); as well as having the ability to decide over one's life, feel a sense of belonging, and not fearing for one's safety (*psychosocial embeddedness*). Different aspects and experiences of the migration cycle – during the time before migrating, the journey towards Sweden, the time as an asylum seeker, the return process, and ar-

rival in the country of origin – are assumed to facilitate or hinder different kinds of embeddedness and as such affects the returnee's ability to reintegrate.

What does life look like for those who had to return?

Many of the returnees in the study described living in different forms of vulnerability before embarking on a difficult and often hazardous journey towards Sweden. Afghans seem to have been driven to migrate mostly by years of living in poverty and insecurity, and for feeling persecuted. Some had moved on to Iran to draw on the financial opportunities there, before leaving for Europe. Others stated that they were born in Iran and had never set foot in Afghanistan, even though they were Afghan nationals. Iraqis, however, to a much larger extent than Afghans seem to have been living relatively decent lives, with access to employment and financial opportunities before migrating. After an external shock rocked their life balance – a tribal feud or militia attack – they felt that they had no choice but to leave the country.

Different aspects of being an asylum seeker in Sweden seem to have affected their preparedness to return following a rejected asylum application. The length of the asylum process, poor access to and communication with service providers linked to the Migration agency, and the lack of understanding of the asylum process, appear to obstruct a preparation for a return. As such, many respondents appear to have been ill-prepared, lacking a plan on how to restart life after arrival in their country of origin. Difficulties in acquiring travel documents and a feeling of disrespect and lack of empathy by the personnel at their embassy were frequently mentioned by the Afghan respondents, which at the very least did not facilitate the return process.

Upon return, many describe experiencing the same threat or hostile situation that made them leave in the first place. This poses challenges to their ability to reintegrate – par-

ticularly in the social and psychosocial realms of life. The financial situation for the absolute majority of those who returned is dire. Unemployment, lack of financial opportunities, and a constant struggle to thrive, describe life for most. The bleak financial reality for many can likely in part be explained by the Corona pandemic lockdowns of much of society that were in place during the time of the interviews. For most of the Afghan returnees, the financial outlook is as bad, if not worse, than what they left when migrating in the first place. For most Iraqis, the situation seems, at least financially, to be much worse than when they left, since they were relatively better off than the Afghans but seemingly paid more for their migration.

In both cases, the existence of social networks plays an important role for the returnees' abilities to reintegrate. Many Afghans seem to lack social networks, family and relatives as well as *wasita* (personal connections), which impede economic reintegration and leave many lonely and vulnerable. In Iraq, relatively more respondents returned to some sort of familiarity, to family or friends, to existing social networks. Still, a number of respondents in Iraq were unable to draw on such assets since the perceived threat to their lives was such that they deemed it necessary to hide.

The report suggests that skills and knowledge acquired in Sweden are not easily transferable to the returning context and, as such, do not contribute to the reintegration process in a meaningful way. The period in Sweden is, for most, regarded as a waste of time, setting them back in time compared to their peers. Many returnees feel both hopeless and depressed when they compare the realities that they now have to settle for with what might have been: a better life if they had been able to stay in Sweden. Particularly so given that they also harbour an acute sense of injustice for not having been granted asylum.

The different kinds of return assistance available, particularly the *reestablishment support* and the small *reception support*, (nowadays in cash) offer some relief from the

financial chock that meets most returnees on arrival. The *reestablishment support* (approx. EUR 3 000 delivered by IOM to those returning voluntarily) is often used for subsistence, spent on housing, food items, and paying off debts. Only in a handful of cases is it used for income generating activities that may lead to self-sufficiency. The study suggests that there is room for improvement regarding the information on assistance. Some note that they did not get information from the Swedish authorities, while others claim that they only got partial information of what kind of assistance they could obtain upon return. Some point to obstacles in receiving the assistance, such as difficult procedures, conditions that are hard to fulfil, and long delays. All three forms of return assistance have received their fair share of criticism in terms of how accessible it is perceived among the returnees. The *reintegration assistance* provided by the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), an in-kind support for things such as assistance with starting a business (up to EUR 2 500), receives much criticism, particularly with respect to long waiting times. The small *reception support* (USD 147, cash-in hand at the airport in Kabul) on the other hand is rarely noted as being difficult to get.

For most of the respondents, the current situation is precarious, vulnerable, and very sensitive to political and economic instability. Whether or not one can talk about sustainable return and reintegration depends on the definition of the concepts. If sustainability of return is equated to having the means to sustain one's life financially, self-sustained or not, few in the study would be characterised as sustainably returned. If the social and psychosocial dimensions of integration, or embeddedness, are also included, even fewer respondents could be considered sustainably reintegrated. In fact, what seems more important for the returnees in this study than financial opportunities, is the perceived sense of security and feelings of personal safety. For many, those aspects were considered determinative for their plans to remain in their home country or remigrate to Europe.

Policy recommendations

A number of policy-related measures can be recommended in order to increase the preparedness of the returnees. The first set of recommendations has to do with the asylum process. To begin with, the time spent waiting for an asylum decision should be shorter. Moreover, our results suggest there is a need for better communication between applicants and the Migration Agency. The information regarding the asylum decision, return procedures, and available return assistance must be conveyed in a way that is fully understandable and comprehensible to the returnee. Having access to professional and trust-generating interpreters and legal advisors, and avoiding unnecessary intermediaries, affect the quality of the information received by the asylum seeker.

A second recommendation refers to bilateral relations. A suggestion for government-to-government collaboration on return could be co-funded units within the embassies, which have as their function to facilitate the processing of documents needed for asylum, or for return. Such units could also offer information and advice to returnees about their rights and obligations as well as support structures for reintegration.

A third set of recommendations is focused in the time after a return. Implementing mechanisms of return and reintegration support must ensure that those who are eligible for and applies for a reintegration grant obtain it in a timely and manageable manner upon arrival. At the same time, considering the different preconditions for reintegration among the returnees, it is important that the programmes address individual needs and are not designed as a “one-size-fits-all” solution. Besides, there is a need for independently conducted, systematic evaluations of the service providers in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan that could help to shed light on what parts of the implementation process that could be further improved.

Finally, the report recommends that the relevant authorities, organizations and the academic community should reconsider definitions within the field of reintegration, most especially “sustainability”, so that these reflect the real processes and needs of individuals subjected to return and reintegration.



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Delmi Policy Brief 2021:10

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