

Afghans Fleeing Home Are Filling the Lowest Jobs in Istanbul

After years working on American bases in Afghanistan and fearful of the Taliban, Afghans are heading to Turkey and Europe.



By Carlotta Gall

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ISTANBUL — In a derelict house in one of the oldest quarters of Istanbul, a group of Afghan migrants were welcoming new arrivals — two teenagers who had survived the perilous two-month journey on the migrant trail from Afghanistan.

“Wherever there is money and food,” said Idris, 18, in April. “Wherever we can earn money to send back to our families who are hungry, we will stay.” He and several other Afghans gave only one name, since they were in the country without documentation.

A former athlete from Kabul, he said they had just arrived overnight in Istanbul after a 60-hour trek over the mountains from Iran into Turkey. A high school student who came with him was hunched over a cellphone, calling his mother in Afghanistan.

The number of Afghans arriving in Turkey has soared over the last seven years as the United States and NATO forces have wound down their military presence. With the Taliban gaining strength and the last American forces preparing to leave this summer, more turmoil could force an even greater exodus, according to refugee officials and the migrants themselves.

More than 200,000 Afghans were caught entering Turkey illegally in 2019, many of whom were deported back to Afghanistan. But despite a reduction of overall numbers in the last year because of the pandemic, Afghans still represent by far the largest migrant group making the dangerous crossing by sea or land to Greece.

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is among those calling for the Biden administration to set up a large visa program to manage an expected outpouring of Afghans after the disengagement of U.S. troops.

In one abandoned compound in Istanbul, 28 Afghans live in makeshift shelters eking out a living by scouring dumpsters for paper and plastic for recycling.



Twenty-eight Afghan migrants live in a derelict house in one of the oldest parts of Istanbul. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times



Refugees waiting to break their Ramadan fast. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

Afghans are the lowest in the pecking order of casual laborers who fill this teeming city of 20 million. As many as 200,000 are living in Turkey, according to refugee officials. They make up the second-largest migrant group in the country, after Syrians and are by far the most impoverished. They do the lowliest jobs while risking frequent detention and deportation by the Turkish police.

Across the city in a neighborhood of condemned housing, another group of Afghans sat on blankets on the floor in a tiny hallway to break fast together for Ramadan. Trained electricians and plasterers from years working on military bases in Afghanistan, they now work as illegal subcontractors in Turkey, often going unpaid for months.

They said they all had to abandon their families and homes because of threats from the Taliban for their work with the American military or American contracting companies.

"The Taliban were getting closer to our village. That was the main reason," said Najibullah Qarqin, 25, who worked as an electrician for four years on U.S. bases and diplomatic compounds. "This is why I am here, because of security."

Ethnic Turkmen from northwestern Afghanistan, he and his friends worked for Turkish and American contractors building military bases around the country for as many as eight years. Mr. Qarqin and several others had even worked on U.S. Embassy buildings in Kabul and in Nouakchott, Mauritania.

Their employers told them they would take them to America at the end of the contract under the Special Immigrant Visa program, Mr. Qarqin said, which allows for some Afghans who worked for the American military or some American companies to resettle in the United States. But with no jobs and violence escalating, it seemed safer to leave immediately for Turkey.

"Some friends made it," he said. "They are in America now."



Juma Muradi, a painter and plasterer, showing a picture from his long overland journey to Turkey. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times



Afghans who worked for years on American bases in Afghanistan live under constant fear of deportation. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

Work dried up in 2014 as the United States began winding down its involvement in Afghanistan and transferring responsibility for security to the Afghan government. The group of friends made their way to Turkey, some legally through the Turkish companies that had hired them in Afghanistan, and some making the two-month trek mostly on foot with smugglers from southern Afghanistan through Pakistan and Iran to Turkey.

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Juma Muradi, 44, a painter and plasterer, said he had made the dangerous journey three times after being deported by the Turkish authorities twice. The last trip was the hardest, he said, as stricter border patrols forced the smugglers to take them higher into the mountains. He passed the bodies of two Afghans from an earlier group — they had died on the trail. Of the 200 in his group, most were detained by border guards, he said, and only 40 made it through to Turkey.

“If there was peace in my country, I would never take this risk,” he said.

Yet after six years helping build American military bases around the country, he had ended up jobless, watching the Taliban taking over his rural district of Andkhoi in northwestern Afghanistan, and sought work abroad. He now shares a three-room house with seven others in a rundown neighborhood that is scheduled for demolition.

Mr. Muradi said he worried for his wife and four children on their own at home, since he had no immediate family there to protect them. The Taliban are a mile from his home and have traded mortar fire with government forces sometimes hitting the village, he said.

Their village no longer has cellphone service, so he can talk to his family only when they climb a nearby mountain to catch a signal, he said.

Turkey provides a safe refuge at least, but for many it is just a staging post where they can earn money for the next leap to Europe. Most said they were barely surviving. The group of Turkmen have an advantage in that they can speak Turkish, which is close to their own language. But all of them said the fear of deportation made working in Turkey untenable in the long term.

"There is not enough work here, and when there is work, they do not pay you on time," said Nurullah Mohammadi, 26, an electrician. The pandemic has deepened Turkey's economic recession, and some contractors are up to a year behind in payments, he said.

The electricians were working on a hospital project, but without work permits they were working illegally as subcontractors, accepting lower wages, 10-hour shifts and no insurance or social security. Even those who arrived legally on visas are not entitled to work or to set up their own business.



Clothes hanging out to dry amid the burnt-out upper floor of a derelict building where more than 20 Afghan refugees live. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times



"The Taliban was getting closer to our village, that was the main reason" to flee, said Najibullah Qarqin, 25, who worked as an electrician for four years on U.S. bases and diplomatic compounds. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

"The lira lost its value, so now when we send money home it is worth much less than before, and things are very expensive here," said Baba Geldi, 39, who worked on American construction projects at the Kabul and Kandahar airports.

He, like many other Afghans, said he planned to move on from Turkey to Europe, but the legal avenues are few. Smugglers' prices to Europe have soared to as much as \$6,000 per person as border controls have tightened, but touts openly negotiate with Afghans seeking passage to Europe on one of Istanbul's main squares.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Yet returning to Afghanistan is not an option for many of those who worked for the Americans. The Taliban control the road to Mr. Mohammadi's village, he said, so his family has already been forced to leave and moved to Kabul, the capital. "I would rather stay in my home country, but I cannot," he said.

Most of the men in the recycling yard are waiting for the end of the fasting month to head for Europe. They have few belongings and barely a change of clothes each, and share the strongest pair of shoes for work. They have a few phones between them, and Idris was trying to sell his to send the money home to his family.

"Some will die, some will be deported," said Muhammad Haroon, 19, who had trained as a teacher but has been collecting garbage in Istanbul for more than two years.



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Most of the Afghans expressed deep disappointment at the failure of the American intervention in Afghanistan.

“When they came, they said they would eliminate terrorism and destroy Al Qaeda,” said Mr. Muradi. “At that time, there were very few Taliban, but now there are thousands and thousands of them and I am feeling angry. What have the Americans done to our country?”

Like many Afghans, he called on the United States to put pressure on Pakistan to cease its support for the Taliban.

“The world knows we have been at war for 40 years,” he said, “and the world should have mercy on us to stop the war.”

Ruhullah Khapalwak contributed reporting.