

Returned to a land of war and want

Europe has adopted a hard line against Afghan asylum seekers, deporting thousands in the past two years. But what awaits them back home?



On Nov. 28, 2017, Inamullah, left, who like many Afghans uses only one name, and Ahmad Wali walk through what was supposed to be a zoo before the funding dried up in the Deronta neighborhood of Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Both fled West before they were forced to return to their war-torn country.

Story by [Pamela Constable](#) Photos by [Andrew Quilty](#)

MAY 25, 2018



JALALABAD, Afghanistan

For Hewad Sobhani, three years in Brussels gave him a taste of Western society — an apartment, a social life, a job in a cafe. It also gave him hope that he had escaped his conflicted homeland forever, just as waves of other Afghans had done before him.

Today he is back where he started, one of thousands of Afghans deported from Western Europe in the past 30

months after being turned down for asylum. Jobless and living in a rented room in this eastern border city, he is in limbo — a man changed forever by his worldly exposure but now adrift in an impoverished, tribal society that no longer feels like home.

“I worked hard in Belgium,” said Sobhani, now 25. “I paid taxes. I learned French. I had friends and privacy.” But shortly after his asylum claim was denied, he was put on a plane to Kabul. “When I came out of the airport, I saw all the dust and dirt,” he said, “and I saw my sad future unfolding in front of me.”

During three decades of war and upheaval that ended with the fall of Taliban rule in 2001, millions of Afghans were accepted — if not always eagerly welcomed — by other countries. Most simply crossed the border to Pakistan or Iran as refugees. Hundreds of thousands reached the West and built new lives in immigrant enclaves.

But in the past two years, Western Europe has tightened borders, rejected more asylum petitions and speeded up deportations. Even as Afghan and NATO forces continue battling aggressive insurgencies in Afghanistan, European governments say, the country is not dangerous enough for most Afghans to need foreign sanctuary.

Yet that does not mean Afghanistan is prepared to receive even the brightest and most ambitious of the young migrants as they step back in time into one of the world’s poorest countries. Like Sobhani, the returnees came of age in a post-Taliban era that dangled visions of change and freedom but offered few concrete prospects for the future. That frustration propelled them abroad as much as war.



Source: Maps4News/HERE



THE WASHINGTON POST

Now they are back, facing bleak job prospects with unemployment at nearly 40 percent, war refugees being pushed back from Pakistan and Iran, and 400,000 people entering the workforce each year. Families may see them as unexpected burdens, and many owe relatives thousands of dollars they borrowed to make their way West.

And while few of them may be on Taliban target lists, their communities are far from secure. Insurgents control or influence nearly 40 percent of Afghan territory and stage frequent attacks in cities. Some of their families have fled rural fighting, weakening their social support networks. The returnees may not face imminent harm, but they see no way to build a future.

While international law bars governments from sending migrants back to places where their lives will be in jeopardy, it does not keep them from returning people to lives with little hope.

The question the migrants raise, and that European governments are still struggling to answer, is how to decide which people fleeing poor, conflicted nations deserve a chance at a safe and meaningful life. In other words: how to draw a line between danger and despair.



Back in Afghanistan after three years in Brussels, Hewad Sobhani rents a room, shown above, in a cheap hotel in Jalalabad for about \$9 per month. He and three friends, all deported in recent years from Europe, pass some of their days here.

HARDENING LINE

It was not invading forces, insurgent attacks or religious repression that drove tens of thousands of Afghans to flee their homeland and head west in the past several years. They left during a period of democratic rule, supported by the United States and NATO, while their own government was [urging longtime refugees to return home](#).

Most were single young men, like Sobhani and three of his friends. Some came from rural areas where the Taliban were a constant threat; more came from cities where they were not. But when Western troops pulled out in 2014, the foreign-fueled war economy collapsed.

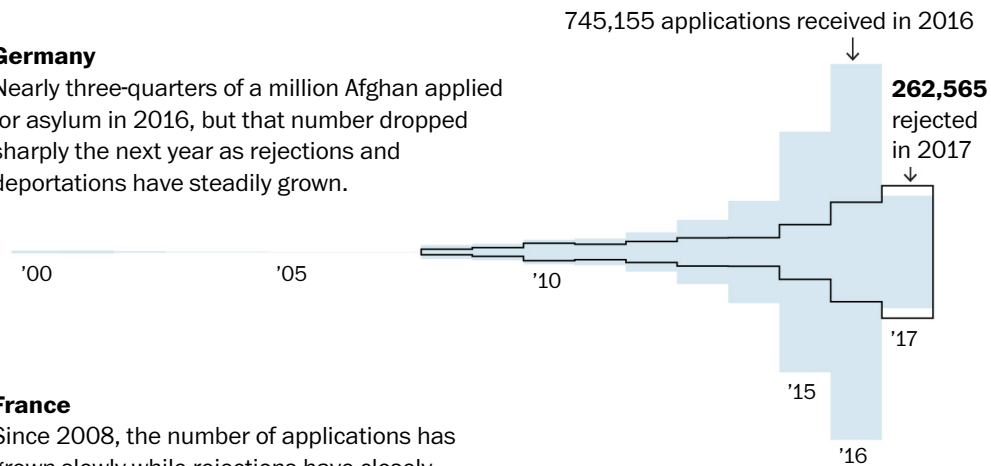
As news spread that refugees from Syria were reaching Europe and being allowed to stay, Afghans decided to take

the same risk, joining the [largest global exodus from troubled lands since World War II](#). Often urged on by their families, they traveled thousands of miles across Turkey and Eastern Europe, most with no legal travel documents and no plans except to secure asylum in the sympathetic West.

Asylum seekers from Afghanistan face a changing immigration landscape in Europe

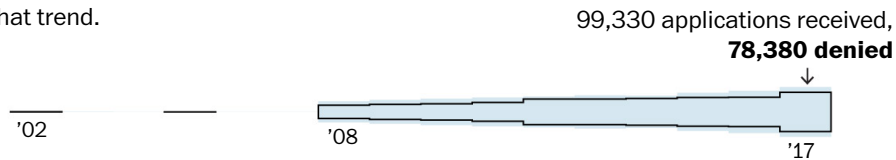
Germany

Nearly three-quarters of a million Afghan applied for asylum in 2016, but that number dropped sharply the next year as rejections and deportations have steadily grown.



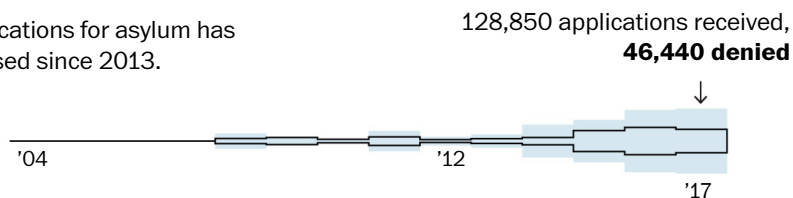
France

Since 2008, the number of applications has grown slowly while rejections have closely matched that trend.



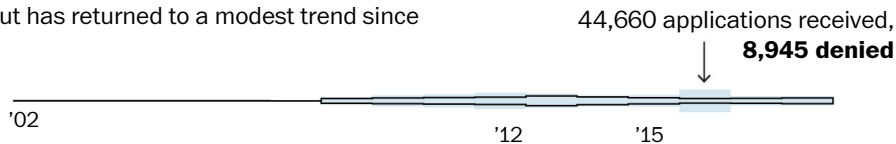
Italy

The number of applications for asylum has continuously increased since 2013.



Belgium

The number of applications received hit a record high in 2015, but has returned to a modest trend since then.



Source: Eurostat

THE WASHINGTON POST

In 2015, more than 200,000 Afghans reached Western Europe; 80 percent applied for asylum and received temporary shelter in affluent welfare states, especially Germany. People were helpful; lodging and language classes were free. As the months passed, the migrants allowed themselves to believe that eventually they would be granted full legal status.

But attitudes in Europe changed as the tide of migrants swelled, turning compassion to anxiety and fueling anti-immigrant movements. The horrors in Syria had shocked the world, but the plight of Afghans was not as clear-cut. One of Sobhani's fellow returnees claimed he had been threatened by the Taliban because he worked with the U.S. military, but he had no way to prove it.

In Germany, officials adopted a noticeably harder line. Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière, announcing in late 2015 that most Afghan asylum seekers would be rejected, said many were middle-class Kabul residents who should “remain and help build [their] country up.”

Scores of Afghan asylum applicants in Europe began receiving rejection notices. They had been judged not to be refugees fleeing dire harm, but illegal migrants seeking a more comfortable and secure life. Despite pleas from Afghan officials, by early 2017, more than 10,000 Afghans had been transported home — some voluntarily, others under protest and under guard.

Human rights groups denounced the tough new policies and demanded that Europe stop repatriating all Afghan asylum seekers. Last May, after a [truck bomb in Kabul](#) killed 150 people, Germany agreed to deport only those with criminal records or other problems.

Today, conditions are arguably worse. Taliban and Islamic State forces have staged dozens of [attacks in Kabul](#) and other cities, [civilian casualties](#) remain near record levels, and the Taliban control more territory than ever before. But [under an agreement last fall](#) with European donor nations, Afghanistan must accept every failed asylum applicant.

“We have security problems. We have economic problems. We have 1.6 million refugees back from Pakistan and Iran,” said Hafiz Ahmad Miakhel, a spokesman for the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations, which strongly objected to the pact. “We have signed the deal and we are cooperating, but we have requested again and again that Europe review its Afghan policies.”



From left, Hewad Sobhani, Abdul Samed, Ahmad Wali and Inamullah huddle together in Sobhani's rented room in Jalalabad. Of the four, only Wali has found a job since they were deported to Afghanistan from Europe. 'I am starting over at zero,' he said.

'EVERYONE HATED ME'

Abdul Samed, 23, came from a poor village in Konar, a province near Jalalabad where Taliban insurgents were active. It was 2015, and his family was worried. Samed had only a ninth-grade education, but his parents decided that as their oldest son, he should take his chances on reaching the West.

“They sold their fields so I could get the money to leave. They were so happy I would be far away and safe,” Samed recounted over tea in a shabby hotel with Sobhani and two other returnees, all of whom met and became friends after being sent back. He eventually reached Germany and applied for asylum. But instead of finding work and settling in, he was deported after just a few months.

When Samed landed in Kabul, there were no relatives waiting to shower him with hugs and rose petals, just a man from the Ministry of Refugees, directing him toward a

spartan hostel where he was welcome to stay for exactly two weeks. He dreaded going home and facing his family. He had nothing to show for his harrowing trek across Eastern Europe, for the sacrifices they had made to finance his escape. He had failed them.

“When I got there, everyone hated me,” he said. “They kept asking why I had come back and what I had done with the money.”

Ashamed, Samed went to stay with an uncle in Jalalabad. He had hopes of getting married, but with no job and nearly \$10,000 in travel debts, he could not provide the customary substantial dowry. With insurgent violence growing in the region — including a suicide bomb that killed eight people two blocks from his uncle’s house — his father began pressuring him to try to reach Europe again.

“This time he wants me to take my younger brothers, but they would never survive what I went through,” Samed said glumly. “The police beat us badly in Serbia. It was awful. I can’t let them come with me, but I know in the end he is going to force me to go and try again.”

‘STARTING OVER AT ZERO’

If any of Sobhani’s friends should have had a strong asylum case, it was Inamullah, who like many Afghans uses only one name. He fled the country in 2013, when he was just 15, after Taliban fighters came looking for his

older brother, who worked at a U.S. military base. Soon after that, he said, his brother vanished.

Related

**'There is nothing here but dust':
What Afghan deportees face after
years as refugees in Pakistan**

**Amid Kabul winter, Afghan war
refugees shiver in frigid informal
settlements**

Inamullah's trek west was especially harsh — he was jailed in Greece, cheated by smugglers and abandoned in a frigid Italian forest, he said. He had no passport and no proof of what had happened to his family. He ended up in Amsterdam, where he was given special treatment as a minor. But after three years, on his 18th birthday, he was sent home.

"I went looking for my family right away, but I never found them," said Inamullah, who has a perpetually gloomy stare. He sneaked into their village, sought out relatives, filed a report with the Afghan Red Crescent and even visited the base where his brother had worked. "They told me to go away," he said. Even now, after two years, he has no idea what happened to them.

In a society where family means everything, Inamullah is lost. He said he is taking medication for depression. He spends his days looking for work as a day laborer and many nights on a couch at Samed's uncle's place, which has become a clubhouse where the returnees can trade memories of Europe, compare job hunts and try to lift one another's spirits.

Only one of the four, Ahmad Wali, 23, has finally found a job. A former teacher and the best-educated member of the group, he flourished during a three-year stay in Austria, a prosperous country with 5.5 percent unemployment, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. He learned German quickly and enrolled in a university in Vienna.

Like Inamullah, Wali thought he had a solid case for permanent refuge. Before fleeing Afghanistan in 2013, he said, he had worked as a translator at the U.S. military base. After he was warned that the Taliban would kill him unless he quit, Wali's family urged him to flee and loaned him travel money.

But 18 months ago, when his asylum interview in Vienna finally came, he said: “They didn’t believe my story. They thought it was all a lie.” When he came home one evening, he said, he found a police squad waiting in the vestibule of his building, telling him not to move.

“I am starting over at zero,” Wali said bitterly during a conversation last winter. “My uncle keeps asking for the money I borrowed, but what can I do?” He still considered himself a professional, but his German was now useless, foreign aid for education projects had plummeted, and personal ties mattered more than skills.



LEFT: Inamullah, left, and Ahmad Wali walked through the abandoned site of a planned zoo in Jalalabad. Upon their return to Afghanistan, they faced bleak job prospects; unemployment now stands at nearly 40 percent. RIGHT: Ahmad Wali, foreground, and Inamullah, center, along with other onlookers, watch as a young man climbs high in a tree above looking for branches to break off and use as firewood.

For months Wali languished in self-pity, killing time with his returnee friends. Finally in January, he found a part-time position teaching in a literacy program, and his spirits began to lift.

“It doesn’t pay much, but I feel proud to hear someone call me ‘teacher’ again,” he said.

Sobhani still harbors illusions of finding his way back to Brussels. He keeps his city bus pass tucked in his wallet and practices his French by saying “merci” and “apres vous” to a Western reporter. Often he gazes wistfully at selfies of a grinning young man in front of a Brussels cafe.

“Sometimes,” he confided, “I look at these pictures and wonder, is that guy really me?”

After months of sporadic efforts, Sobhani has given up searching for work — in part because Jalalabad is crammed with idle men displaced by rural fighting or newly returned from Pakistan, but mostly because his heart is not in it.

“In Europe, there is law; there is respect for humanity,” he said. “Here we don’t even feel safe crossing the street. We have no hope.”

Credits: Story by **Pamela Constable**. Photos by Andrew Quilty. Graphics by **Aaron Steckelberg**. Designed by **Madalyne Bird**. Photo Editing by **Olivier Laurent**.