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ILLUSTRATION: SAHAR GHORISHI

# AFGHANS IN GREECE

a story of strength, resilience  
and survival





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# AFGHANISTAN: FOUR DECADES OF FORCED DISPLACEMENT

For more than forty years, the people of Afghanistan have been forced to flee their homes and country. Marked by decades of wars, violent conflicts and natural disasters, the situation in Afghanistan has resulted in one of the world's largest refugee populations.

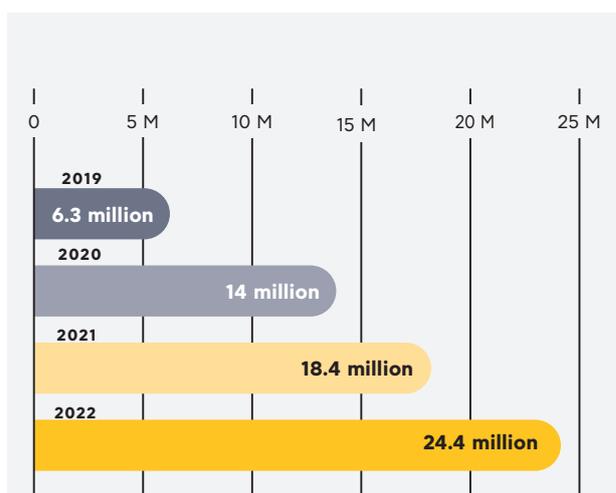


GRAPH 1 **GLOBAL DISPLACEMENT FIGURES OF AFGHANS 2021**  
Source: [UNCHR, Afghanistan Situation Update 1 July 2022.](#), [UNHCR, Data Finder.](#)

## WHY ARE AFGHANS FLEEING TO EUROPE?

While Afghans have had to struggle for decades to survive amidst wars, conflict, insecurity, recurring natural hazards, chronic poverty, drought, widespread food insecurity and a weak or declining economy, the situation today is catastrophic. Since the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (commonly known as 'the Taliban'), took control of the country in August 2021, international donors immediately suspended most non-humanitarian funding and froze billions of dollars in assets. Without this funding, the economy has spiralled downward with profound consequences for the people of Afghanistan, who are now facing one of the worst humanitarian crises worldwide.

The ongoing violence, fear, insecurity and deprivation continue to drive Afghans to seek safety, protection and asylum across borders. Yet neighbouring countries, such as Iran and Pakistan, which are already hosting over 90% of all registered Afghan refugees, are facing increasing constraints on their ability to support incoming arrivals and provide protection. Simultaneously, safe and regular pathways to seek protection in Europe remain extremely limited, including through very low resettlement commitments in general, and particularly for Afghan refugees. This inevitably leaves people with no other choice than to embark on difficult and dangerous journeys, often via Turkey, to try to reach Europe.



GRAPH 2 **PEOPLE IN NEED IN AFGHANISTAN**  
24.4 million Afghans, more than half the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance. This is nearly four times the number of people in need compared to just three years ago.

Source: [OCHA, Afghanistan humanitarian response plan January 2022.](#)

These journeys are made even more dangerous by the practice of 'pushbacks' taking place at Europe's land and sea borders, which have become a de-facto general policy in Greece according to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. 'Pushbacks' denote a set of illegal practices whereby people fleeing war and persecution are denied access to the territory of a state, and therefore prevented from seeking asy-

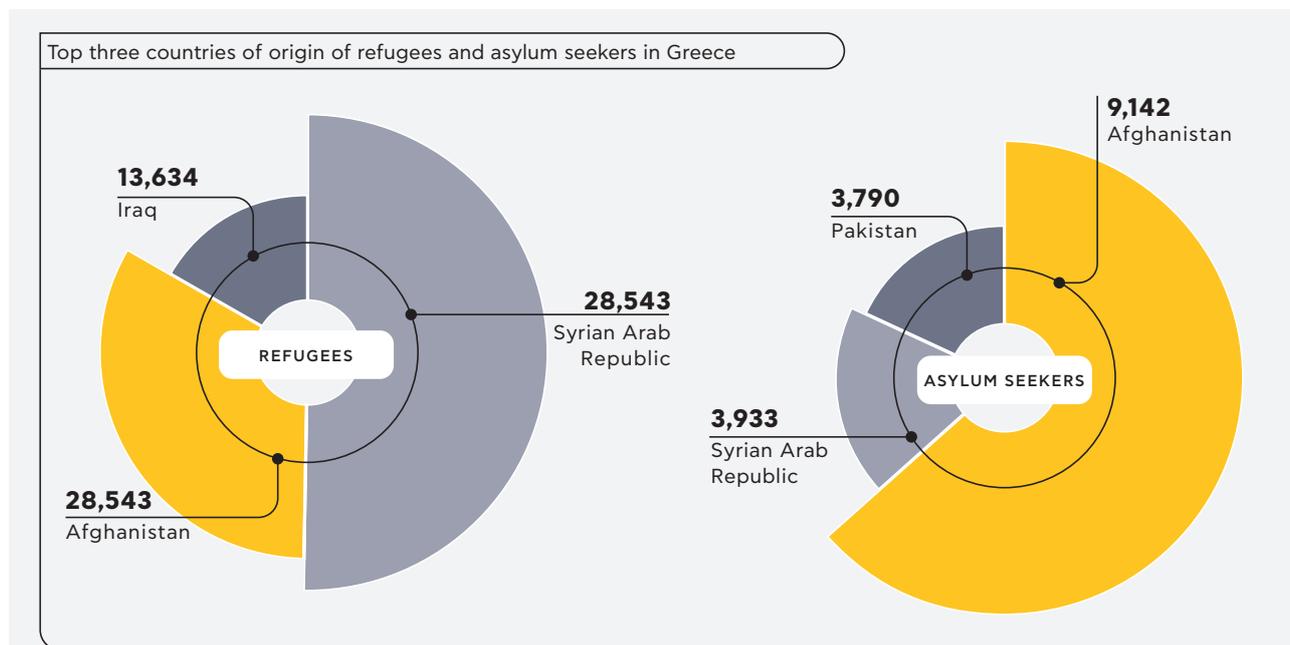


lum. These incidents usually involve several criminal offences by authorities, such as neglecting to provide life-saving aid, beatings, theft, and other inhuman and degrading treatment. Of around 6,000 cases of pushbacks from Greece reported through survivor testimonies to the Border Violence Monitoring Network since 2017, a shocking 98% involved the use of violence. While the Greek Ombudsman is currently investigating over 50 pushback incidents involving 10,000 people, Greek authorities have consistently denied the practice.

Afghans have consistently been the second largest nationality applying for asylum across the EU since 2016,

following Syrians. Between August and December 2021, following the shift in power in Afghanistan, Afghans became the largest group applying for international protection in Greece and across the EU. So far in 2022, Afghans are the second largest group applying for asylum in the EU, after Ukrainians.

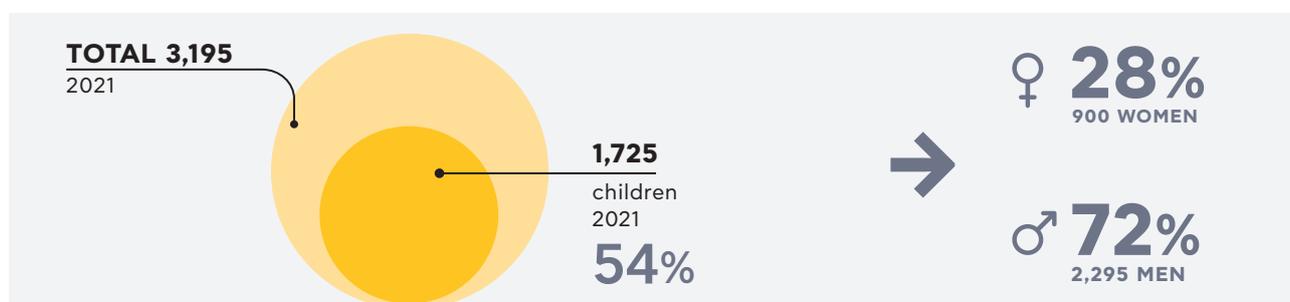
Despite the persecution and dangers they flee from, Afghan refugees in Greece face considerable barriers in accessing full and fair asylum procedures, as well as dignified reception conditions and integration support to rebuild their lives.



GRAPH 3 **PROFILE OF AFGHANS IN GREECE**

Latest data from December 2021 shows 28,543 (23.9% of 119,650) refugees and 9,142 (24.7% of 37,047) asylum seekers in Greece are from Afghanistan, making them the second largest refugee population after Syrians, and the largest population of asylum seekers.

Source: [UNHCR, Greece Bi-Annual Factsheet February 2022., 2021 Mid Year Statistical Report and data finder platform.](#)



GRAPH 4 **PROFILE OF AFGHANS IN GREECE**

First-time Afghan asylum applicants by age and gender, annual aggregated data 2021 (rounded).

Source: [Eurostat, Database first-time asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age sex, annual aggregated data \(rounded\) 2021.](#)



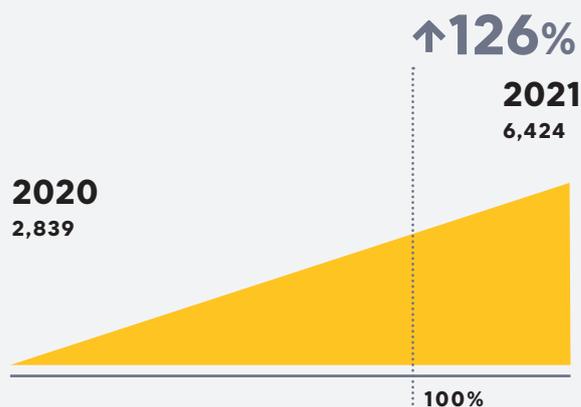
# BARRIERS TO PROTECTION IN GREECE

## 1. Barriers to fair asylum procedures

In June 2021, Greece decided that Turkey was a “safe third country” for people from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia, and Syria, through a [Joint Ministerial Decision \(JMD\)](#). Based on this policy, asylum applications of people from these five nationalities are not examined based on their individual circumstances and the risks they face in their country of origin. Instead, they are presumed to be safe in Turkey, and only if Turkey is proven not to be safe, are these applications deemed ‘admissible’, and Greece will examine them. Concerningly, three out of the five nationalities (Afghans, Somalis, and Syrians) mentioned in the JMD are those who are [most often recognised as refugees in Greece](#).

The implementation of the JMD prevents thousands of Afghans from reaching the in-merit interview to explain why they are in need of international protection and condemns them to be returned to Turkey. However, Turkey has stated it will not accept return operations and has not, since [March 2020](#). As a result, for the past two and a half years, people deemed ‘inadmissible’ have been stuck in Greece in a legal limbo: they face significant barriers in re-accessing the asylum procedure, no documents indicating their legal status, and no right to housing, cash assistance, work, or catering services in the camps they reside in. Moreover, although the JMD assumes Turkey is safe for Afghan refugees, Turkish authorities have been conducting [unlawful returns of Afghan asylum seekers](#) back to Afghanistan. This not only impacts Afghans’ access to international protection, but it also causes significant distress and confusion as people naturally do not understand why they are only being asked about Turkey, instead of why they were forced to flee Afghanistan.

By the end of 2021, rejection rates under the “safe third country” concept rose by a staggering 126% across these five nationalities. For Afghans, 42.2% (2,167 of a total of 5,173) of asylum applications in 2021 were rejected on the basis that Turkey would be a “safe third country” to return to.



GRAPH 5 REJECTION RATES OF APPLICANTS BASED ON THE “SAFE THIRD COUNTRY” CONCEPT

The nationalities for which Turkey is considered a “safe third country” in the JMD directly resulted in a sharp increase in rejections based on the “safe third country” concept - from 2,839 in 2020 to 6,424 in 2021. Of those, 5,922 (92%) were issued under the JMD.

Source: Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum Coordination Service Office of Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, No. Protocol. 2608/24-1-2022 Question

**Mojdeh<sup>1</sup> and her 8-year-old daughter arrived on Samos, Greece in 2018. After five months they were transferred to Ritsona camp on the mainland. They had to wait over three years as asylum seekers for an interview date to explain why they had been forced to flee Afghanistan. However, when the interview date finally arrived, Mojdeh was instead interviewed about whether she could be returned to Turkey:**

“ **I gave the ‘Turkey interview’ recently and they rejected my case... [My daughter and I] appealed and now we have been waiting months for the appeal decision.**  
**We barely even saw Turkey; We know nothing about it. The Turkish police even beat my daughter when we crossed the border from Iran to Turkey— my daughter was only three years old at the time...**  
**We have nothing – no documents. It is very difficult for me, alone here with my daughter... It is very difficult without status; our future is unknown. ”**

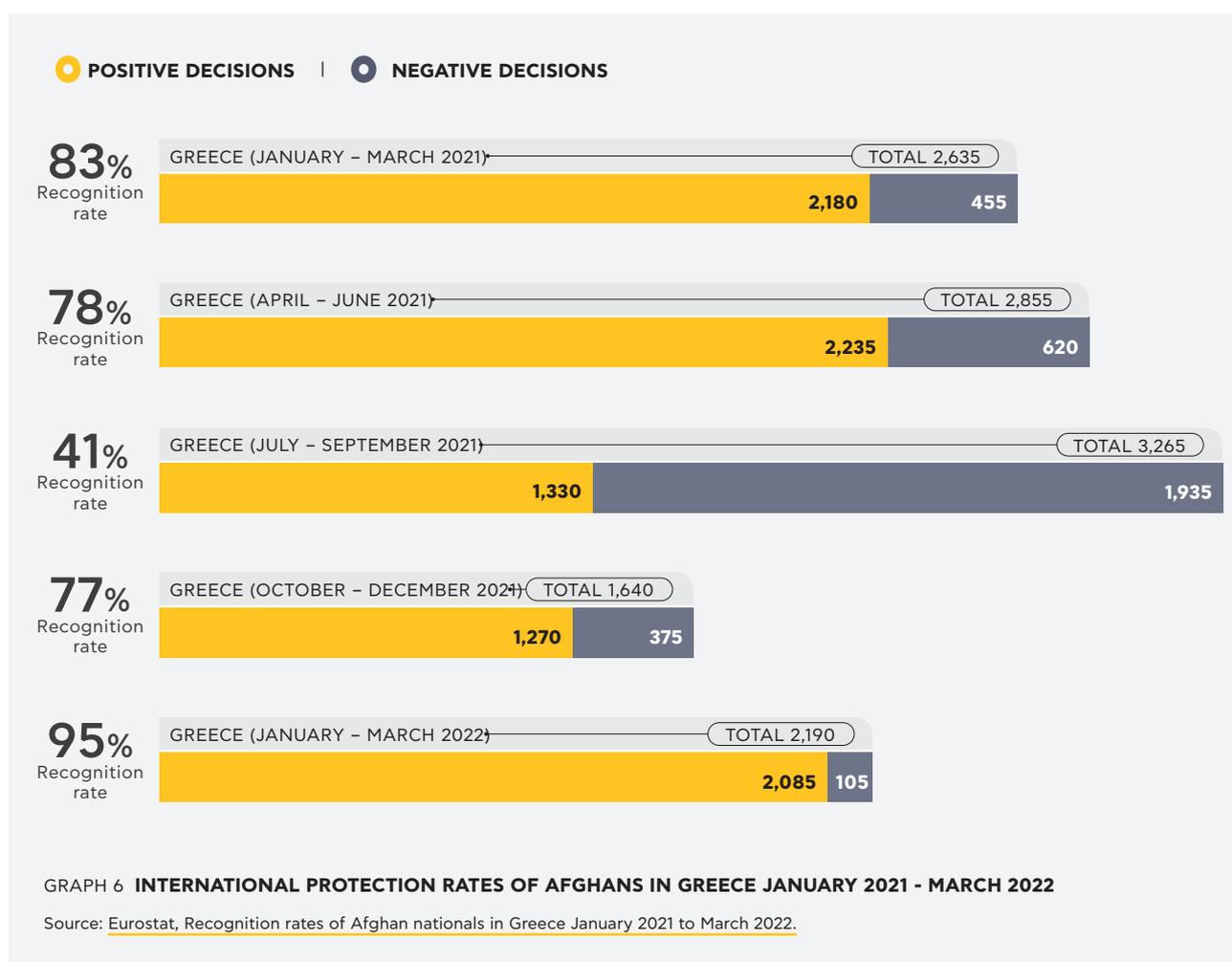
Mojdeh, 26-year-old woman from Afghanistan, interviewed in Athens, 2022

1 Real names hidden to preserve anonymity

## Recognition rates prove international protection needs

Despite a lack of access to sufficient safe and regular routes to Europe, Afghans who manage to arrive and have their asylum claims properly assessed based on their experiences in Afghanistan, receive international protection at high rates. For instance, in October and November 2021, after the shift in power in the country, regional recognition rates in the EU were above 90%. This EU-wide trend continues to be evident in Greece, where recognition rates for international protection of Afghans reached 95% in the first three months of 2022. However, while this is encouraging, it is important to note that high recognition rates following the events of

August 2021, are largely due to evacuees being given emergency pathways to the EU and channelled into asylum procedures, and to most countries suspending negative decisions for Afghan nationals in response. Indeed, while recognition rates were high after the establishment of the de-facto government in Afghanistan, there are suggestions that overall support across the EU is now waning, with recognition rates dropping steeply from 68% in February down to 53% in May 2022. Yet not all Afghans had or will have access to evacuations through emergency pathways – which means it is critical for Greece and Europe to ensure all Afghan asylum seekers are able to access full and fair asylum procedures.



## 2. Barriers to dignified living conditions

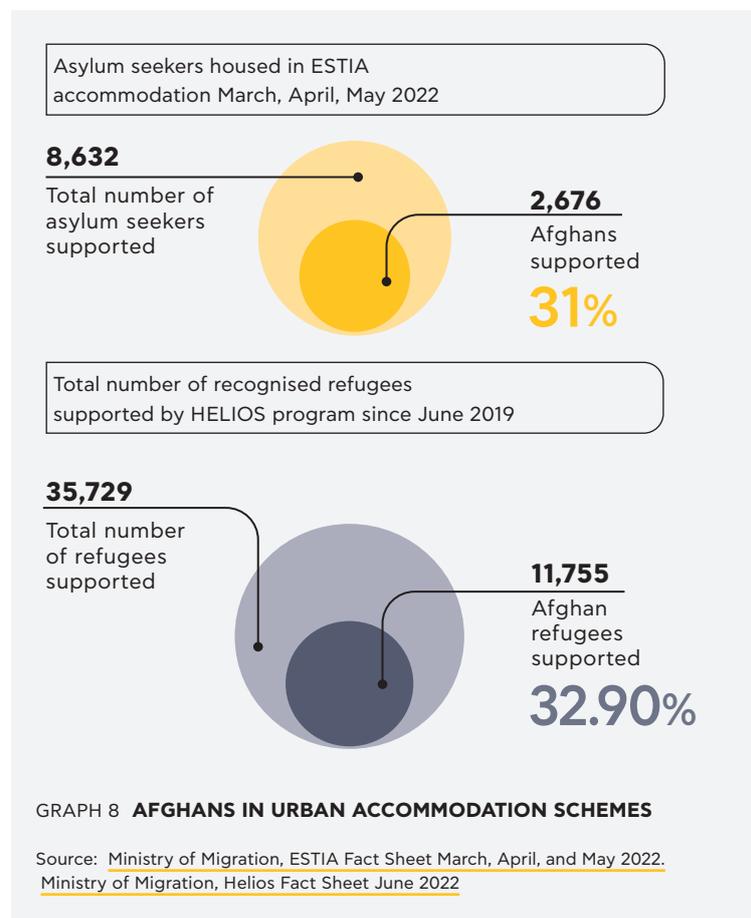
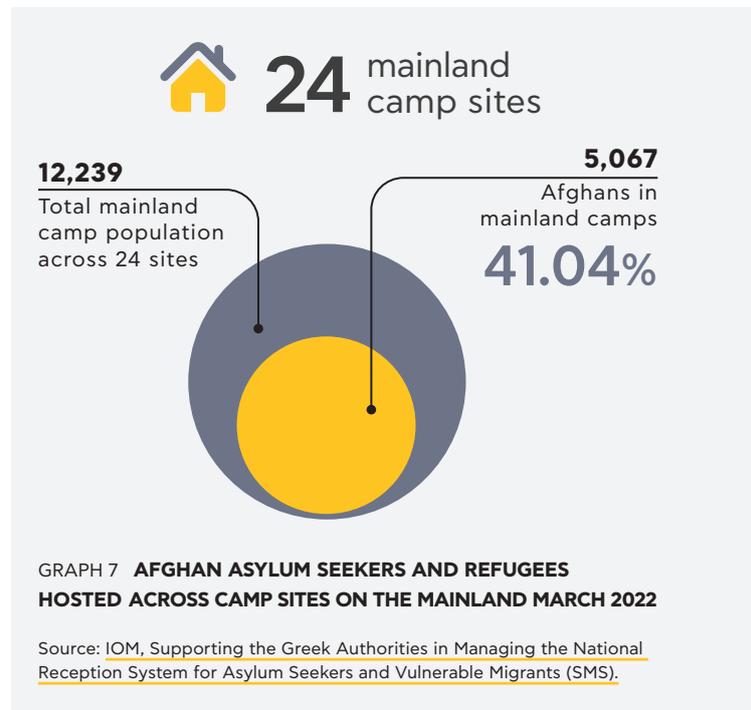
Accommodation in Greece for asylum seekers and refugees is based on containment and exclusion. Asylum seekers, while waiting for their decision on international protection, are provided with accommodation and modest cash assistance by the government, but only if they stay in state-provided accommodation. They are typically housed in camps on islands or on the mainland, which are usually isolated from local communities and with imposed entry-exit restrictions. A smaller number of asylum seekers with vulnerabilities are housed in urban housing, through the [Emergency Support to Integration & Accommodation programme \(ESTIA\)](#).

People who receive a decision on their asylum claim, whether positive or negative, often end up living in situations of precarity. People who receive a positive decision on their asylum claim have their accommodation and cash assistance taken away 30 days after receiving their status. They can apply for a rent subsidy through the [HELIOS programme](#). However, this is quite difficult as refugees need to find and rent a home to receive reimbursements. This often leaves them with no shelter and no income, putting them at risk of poverty and destitution. In principle, recognised refugees have the [right to access social benefits under the national social protection schemes](#) that Greek nationals have access to. However, recognised refugees often [lack the necessary legal documents](#) such as a social security number, a tax number, or a bank account to apply for such benefits and are unaware of their right or the process to do so. People who receive a negative decision on their asylum claim, even those awaiting their appeal or launching a [subsequent request for asylum](#), have no other choice but to live in remote camps for an indefinite time, as they cannot access documents or an income.

[Unaccompanied children](#), one of the most vulnerable categories of displaced persons, are hosted mainly in shelters and some in Supported-Independent Living (SIL) apartments. Once they turn 18, they must leave their accommodation within 30 days. Due to the lack of urban accommodation options, they are forced to leave urban centres and move to remote camps, where they lack access to services and opportunities for integration.

Worryingly, from April 2022, the [ESTIA housing programme](#) reduced its support from 27,000 to 10,000 places, with plans to close the programme completely

by the end of 2022. This would deprive thousands of vulnerable asylum seekers, including many Afghans, of dignified urban housing and force all of them to live in camps.



While urban housing schemes and support for asylum seekers and refugees is being scaled down on the mainland, on the Greek islands, prison-like Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs) are being implemented to replace Reception and Identification Centres (RICs). On the islands of Leros, Kos and Samos such infrastructures are already operational.

**Mehdi arrived on Samos, Greece in October 2019. First, he had to wait nine months for an asylum seeker card, and then another nine months for his first-instance asylum interview on Afghanistan, where his claim was rejected. When he re-applied for asylum, he was interviewed on Turkey, and his case was rejected on the basis that Turkey was a “safe third country” for him to return to. Following the shift in power in Afghanistan, Mehdi was re-interviewed on Afghanistan and received international protection. Such context resulted in Mehdi living in legal limbo in the ‘jungles’ of Vathy camp for almost three years prior to his transfer to the Samos CCAC.**

“ **Living in the camp [Closed Controlled Access Centre, CCAC] is a very difficult experience... They shouldn't even give it the name 'camp'; in my opinion it is a prison – there is no difference...**

**You can only enter or exit between 8AM - 8PM. There is a checkpoint where they check your phone, wallet, pockets and even the small pockets of your clothes they search. Then, when you want to go inside you must pass three, four doors with your fingerprints... We refugees are not guilty criminals, we are human, we came here with hope.** ”

Mehdi, 23-year-old man from Afghanistan, interviewed in Samos, 2022.

### 3. Barriers to integration

While the Greek government has welcomed refugees from Ukraine, by efficiently registering them, issuing legal documents and allowing immediate access to employment, Afghans in Greece, alongside other asylum seekers and refugees, continue to be isolated from the Greek society in which they seek to rebuild their lives. Even after receiving status, refugees have limited integration support.

#### a. Lengthy procedures and obstacles in receiving necessary documents

The approach of the Greek government to refugees from Ukraine arriving in Greece shows there are more efficient ways to reduce the limbo faced by many refugees and asylum seekers. Unlike Afghans and other refugees in Greece, with the application of the Temporary Reception Directive, all refugees from Ukraine received guaranteed one-year temporary protection within 90 days of their arrival, with the issuing of a tax and social security number on their identity card, granting immediate access to the labour market and medical care. By contrast, in January 2022, 49.12% of recognised refugees above the age of 18 living in camps on the Greek mainland still did not have a tax number, which is essential to sign an employment contract or rent a house.

Since 2020, there have been extensive administrative delays in the renewal of residence permits, which have blocked recognised refugees' access to rights they are entitled to, such as opening or managing a bank account, applying for work, and accessing public services and social benefits.

**Ahmad, an interpreter with the IRC Hellas, continues to live in a state of insecurity and instability due to the lengthy and inefficient residency procedures, despite his extensive efforts towards integration. Ahmad arrived on Lesbos, Greece in 2018 where he lived in Moria Reception and Identification Centre, better known as Moria refugee camp for a year, prior to his transfer to the mainland.**

“ **I received my status after three years, but I can't even say I received it since the day I went to pick up my residence permit, the date on it had already expired. I was surprised, they handed it to me and said 'this is your residency but unfortunately it has already expired by two months'... And now it has been eleven months since I applied for the renewal of my residency, and until now nothing. I even got a lawyer and paid him, but the lawyer can't do anything... I am waiting and there is nothing I can do with this expired ID card. I can't even buy a new SIM card... or something like a car or motorbike. For example, I wanted to go take driving lessons, but they said because your ID card has expired you can't partake in the classes. This is frustrating, but not just for me, for many refugees.** ”

Ahmad, 30-year-old man from Afghanistan, interviewed in Athens, 2022.



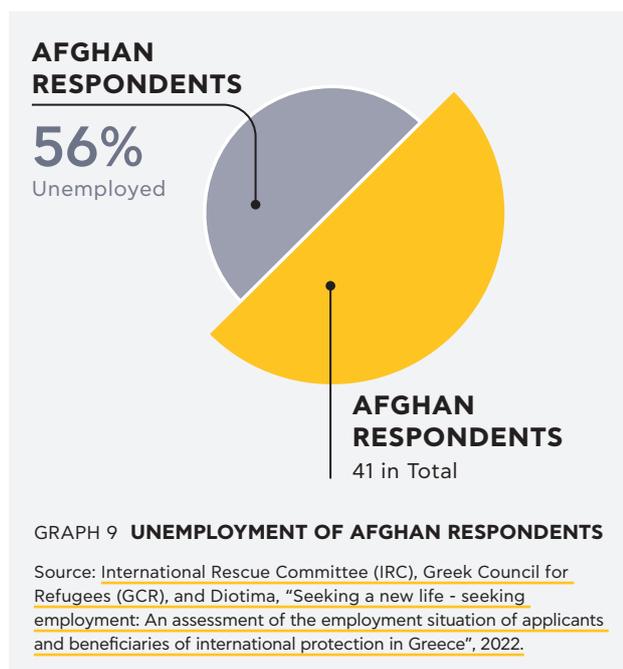
A joint questionnaire on access to employment, accommodation and health services for refugees and asylum seekers by the IRC, the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), and Diotima, conducted between November 2021 – May 2022, illustrated key challenges of asylum seekers and refugees regarding integration in Greece. 41 of 183 respondents (22%) were from Afghanistan.

## b. Limited access to labour market

Although working is the most direct way to integrate into Greek society, asylum seekers are not allowed to work for the first six months from applying for asylum, and have the right to work revoked after a first negative decision.

Of 183 respondents to the above-mentioned joint NGO questionnaire, 72.6% reported that they were unemployed. Of 41 respondents from Afghanistan, over 50% were unemployed.

The respondents from Afghanistan noted some of the key obstacles they faced in accessing the labour market to include: that they don't speak Greek, they lack the necessary documents, they face discrimination by employers, they lack a network in Greece and understanding of Greek bureaucracy, and they lack previous work experience or recognition thereof. Many of these obstacles are the result of the lack of access to full and fair asylum procedures, containment and exclusion, lengthy and inefficient procedures for issuing documents, and the lack of integration support from reception, such as the provision of Greek language courses.



In comparison to sub-Saharan refugees who may speak English or French, for Afghans in Greece, language is a key barrier, as Dari and Pashto, written in the Arabic alphabet, vastly differ from Greek and English, making access to language classes from the first reception stage particularly critical.

“ **With my English I was able to stand on my own feet, maybe if I didn't speak English, I wouldn't even have this ID card. Maybe I would be sleeping in the parks, without a place to go... I saw with my own eyes people who had problems due to the language, they couldn't communicate... The life I have now is because of the language.** ”

Ahmad, 30-year-old man from Afghanistan, interviewed in Athens, 2022.

Access to employment is particularly difficult for women who bear childcare responsibilities, and especially difficult for single mothers without access to day-cares at the workplace and limited personal family networks. Considering that over 50% of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees are children (see graph 4), the impact of lack of childcare options for Afghan mothers seeking employment is obvious.

“ **Living in Greece is a prison. Not that there is a wall in front of me, but my freedom has been stolen from me... Even our monetary support was cut almost in half – how can we support ourselves? Our AFM (tax number) was cut off because our asylum application was rejected, which means I am unable to work. Even if I could work, because of the hours and lack of support for my daughter, I am not able to... Many women go into 'black' jobs. Some women are forced into prostitution just to feed their children...** ”

Mojdeh, 26-year-old woman from Afghanistan, interviewed in Athens, 2022.

## c. Limited access to health care

It is alarming that 49% of the Afghan respondents to the joint questionnaire stated that it was difficult to access health services, and 34% noted that their health had deteriorated since living in Greece. Participants listed an array of issues in accessing and receiving healthcare including: language barriers and lack of interpretation, feeling ignored by health professionals, long waiting times for appointments and care, and the distance to/difficulty of reaching medical services.

**49%** of Afghan respondents found it difficult to access healthcare



GRAPH 10 **ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE**

Source: [International Rescue Committee \(IRC\), Greek Council for Refugees \(GCR\), and Diotima, "Right to health – right to life", 2022.](#)

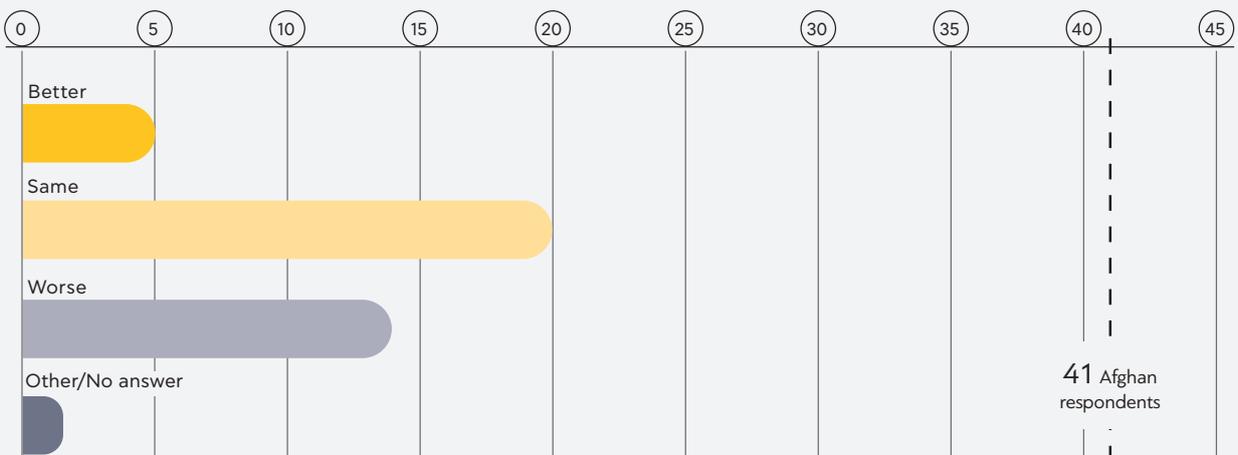
**34%** of Afghan respondents health has deteriorated



**AFGHAN RESPONDENTS**  
41 in total



**AFGHAN RESPONDENTS**  
34 whos health has deteriorated or remained the same



GRAPH 11 **AFGHAN RESPONDENTS HEALTH AFTER ARRIVING IN GREECE**

Source: [International Rescue Committee \(IRC\), Greek Council for Refugees \(GCR\) and Diotima, "Right to health – right to life", 2022.](#)



#### d. Limited access to education for school-aged children

Although the school year of 2021-2022 showed great improvements in the registration of school-aged refugee children with 95% of all refugee children being enrolled, only 75% of those enrolled were attending school in March 2022. Grounds reported for the lack of school attendance in 2021-2022 included: lack of transportation from remote camps, lack of capacity at schools in urban centres, and dropouts due to the precarious living conditions and financial instability. It is also reported that the despair and hopelessness resulting from asylum rejections force families to deprioritise schooling for their children as they focus on survival.

**After four years living as an asylum seeker in Greece in precarious and unstable living conditions, Mojdeh's daughter is one of the thousands of school-aged children who just started going to school in 2022.**

“ **My daughter has only gone to school for two months. We have all fallen behind...** Just in one month we changed houses four times, so my daughter also had to change her school each time.. ”

Mojdeh, 26-year-old woman from Afghanistan, interviewed in Athens, 2022

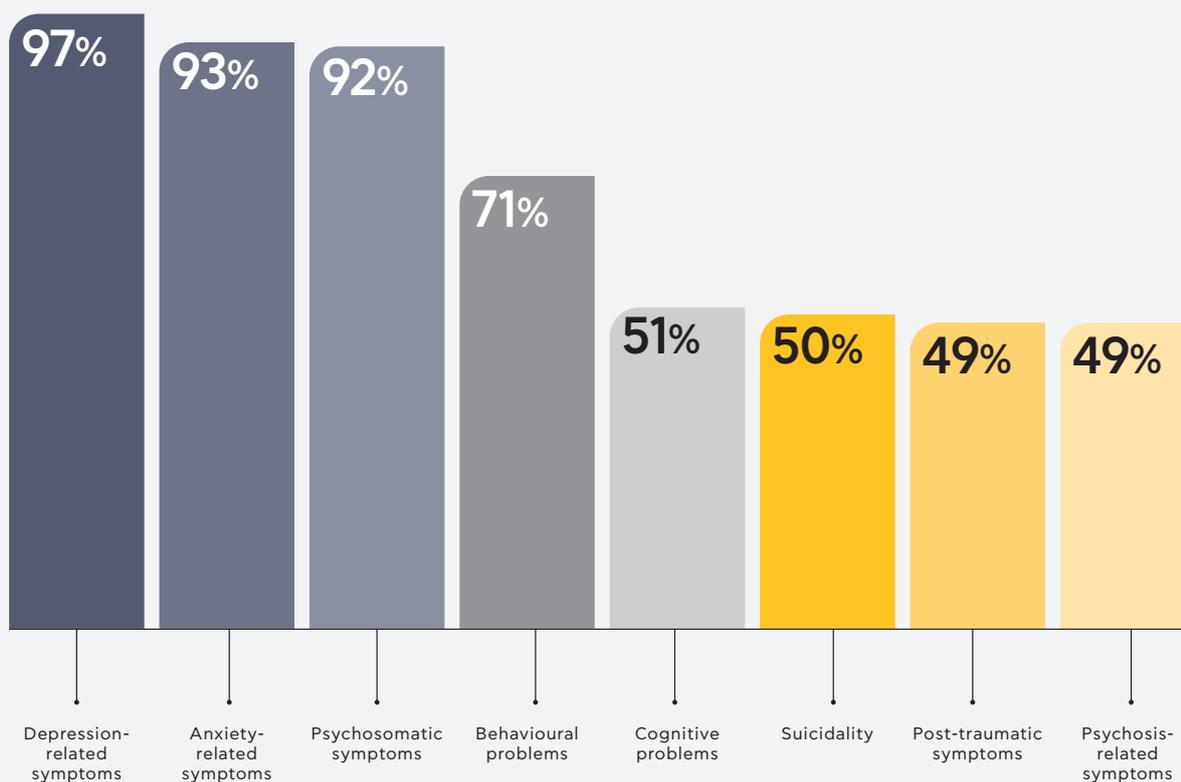
## 4. Impact of exclusion and containment on mental health

The experiences of navigating an asylum system built on deterrence, exclusion and containment gravely impacts the mental health of asylum seekers and refugees in Greece, who report feelings of uncertainty, sadness, and a lack of hope for the future.

“ **Inside the camp, the situation is horrendous. Everyone is inside their container- nobody comes outside, everyone is depressed and sick in some way – from loneliness, from their legal situation, and other problems they have in their lives. Somali, African, Afghan, Arab – it doesn't make a difference, we are all in the same situation.** ”

Mehdi, 23-year-old man from Afghanistan, interviewed in Samos, 2022.

IRC mental health and psychosocial support teams (MHPSS) have been working on the Greek islands since 2018, and have witnessed first-hand the detrimental effects of the EU's containment policies on the people we support. Of the 192 Afghan refugees and asylum seekers supported by the IRC's MHPSS programme from April 2021 to March 2022, 186 people (97%) experienced depression-related symptoms, while a worrying 94 people (50%) showed symptoms of suicidality.



GRAPH 12 SYMPTOMS REPORTED BY AFGHANS SUPPORTED BY THE IRC MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME IN GREECE

Source: IRC, mental health and psychosocial support teams (MHPSS) data.

This mental health crisis is further exacerbated by the lack of meaningful solutions and opportunities in Greece, which leaves families like Mojdeh and her daughter with no way forward.

“ If I saw a future for myself in Greece, I would see myself living here – I want to work, learn the language, and just have a simple house to have a good future for myself and my daughter. This is a good country, here there is no war.

I want to stay, but when I see all these problems I have – I have been here for four years with no documents, I have no decision yet, I have been rejected, the government doesn't protect or support me – if I could, I would stay here and create the best life for myself and give back to the government, but people leave here for a reason.

When you do not see a future for yourself you flee – I fled Afghanistan because I had no future, I fled Iran because I had no future there and I was forced to come here to seek asylum – and if I don't see a future for myself here, I am forced to leave here too and move to another country to start all over again. ”

Mojdeh, 26-year-old woman from Afghanistan, interviewed in Athens, 2022



# RECOMMENDATIONS

**Based on the experience and data from our programmes, the IRC makes the following recommendations to improve the protection of Afghans and other refugees and asylum seekers in Greece:**

The Greek state should:

1. Stop illegal and violent pushbacks and hold those responsible accountable. Commit to assist all people stranded in border regions, evacuate them to safety, and ensure the fair and full access to asylum procedures and protection from refoulement. With pressure from EU institutions Greece must establish an effective, independent, and transparent border monitoring mechanism.
2. Revoke the Joint Ministerial Decision designating Turkey a safe third country and ensure all asylum applications are examined on their individual merits. Deportations of Afghans must be formally suspended, in line with the UNHCR advisory against forced returns renewed in 2022. Deportations should also halt to states where there is a risk of onward deportation to Afghanistan, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement. Alternatives to deportation must be considered, including the provision of legal status and the right to remain. Afghan asylum seekers in EU territory must not be left in limbo.
3. Make every effort to accommodate asylum seekers in small-scale shelters, within urban centres, which will be staffed by qualified personnel, where appropriate. Given the lack of sustainable housing alternatives, refrain from evicting refugees from the reception system where this would reasonably lead to a risk of homelessness and/or precarious living conditions.
4. Support the transition of unaccompanied children into adulthood with suitable accommodation support, access to employment or higher education, and services to support the development of their skills.
5. Make every effort to support the integration of all refugees, including Afghans, from day one, through:
  - a. Integration programmes at the reception stage, such as providing interpretation for access to services, psycho-social support, digital skills, and cultural orientation courses for asylum seekers.
  - b. Free general and professional Greek language courses.
  - c. The timely and uninhibited provision of all documents necessary to access employment, healthcare, and social benefits.
  - d. The adoption of existing tools, such as the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), for the recognition of certifications, diplomas, vocational training, and professional experience before arrival in Greece.
  - e. Unobstructed access to health services by providing interpretation at all medical appointments, improved provision of health services in refugee camps and improved access to public health structures, as well as trainings for health workers and other frontline respondents in cooperation with specialised bodies, in order to promote intercultural awareness and combat racial stereotypes.
  - f. Improved inclusion of school-aged refugee and asylum seeker children, addressing the obstacles they face precluding full access to the right to education.





# Afghans in Greece: a story of strength, resilience and survival

Written by **Tara Ansari Esfahani** and **Pernilla Ekholm**.

With thanks to the support from IRC colleagues Martha Roussou, Melina Kompou, Dimitra Kalogeropoulou, Niamh Nic Carthaigh, Olivia Sundberg, Lidia Giglio, Maria Panagi, and Anastasia Sikiaridi. A special thanks to Ahmad, Mojdeh, and Mehdi for sharing their stories and concerns with us.

## DESIGN

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## DISCLAIMER

Data of refugees and asylum seeker fluctuates as they are a mobile population, numbers depicted may vary at the present moment.





**IRC Hellas**