

Evacuation of Afghan nationals to EU Member States

SUMMARY

At the end of August 2021, the United States and coalition forces completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the Taliban took control of the country after 20 years of conflict. The crisis in Afghanistan has prompted a global response based on humanitarian support on the ground, evacuations and resettlement of those in need of international protection, and support for neighbouring countries hosting refugees.

Afghanistan has long been a priority for the EU, even before the most recent developments regarding migration and forced displacement. Afghan nationals have been among the largest groups of asylum-seekers and refugees hosted on European territory since 2014.

Both the EU institutions and the EU Member States have been following the recent situation in Afghanistan closely. The EU's response has prioritised completing the evacuation of EU citizens, local staff and Afghan citizens. More specifically, the EU institutions have called for extended cooperation on the evacuations from Afghanistan and the setting up of legal pathways for Afghans at risk, while examining the future engagement with Afghanistan and regional partners. At the same time, the European Commission has presented a new 'Afghan support package' and held two high-level EU forums focusing on Afghans at risk and stressing the need for increased resettlement pledges from EU Member States.

In a September 2021 resolution, the European Parliament called for a coordinated response to protect those most vulnerable, reiterating its call to the Commission for a legislative proposal on humanitarian visas, and to Member States to share responsibility for offering protection.



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Background

Since the fall of the Afghan government on 15 August 2021, several EU Member States and non-state actors have advocated EU initiatives to support Afghan citizens at risk. In addition to making the necessary arrangements to evacuate European citizens from Afghan territory on military flights, joint efforts were made to evacuate a number of Afghan nationals and their families. Thousands of Afghans who had worked with Western forces in various ways during the period between 2001 and 2021 wanted to flee abroad, fearing for their safety.

Since the beginning of 2021, some [550 000](#) Afghans have been [internally displaced](#), while 2.9 million Afghans were already internally displaced by the end of 2020. Moreover, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – the UN refugee agency – has [projected](#) that half a million Afghans may seek to leave the country by the end of 2021, while it is estimated that 90 % of Afghan refugees outside the country live in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Both countries also host large numbers of [Afghans](#) who migrated in search of better economic opportunities.

Following the United States (US) withdrawal from, and the Taliban's takeover of, Afghanistan, events unfolded rapidly and precipitated the country into a situation that had been widely unforeseen (see Table 1 for a timeline of the main events between 15 August and 7 October 2021).

Table 1 – Timeline of main events

Date	Main events
15 August 2021	The Afghan government fell and the Taliban took over Kabul.
17 August 2021	EU ministers of foreign affairs discussed the latest developments in Afghanistan at an extraordinary meeting.
18 August 2021	The Spanish authorities set up a European reception centre for people fleeing from Afghanistan at Torrejón Air Base in Madrid. The extraordinary meeting of EU interior ministers focused on the evacuation of both EU staff and citizens and local staff. In accordance with the new pact on migration and asylum, an urgent ' blueprint network ' meeting was held.
21 August 2021	During a joint visit to the Madrid reception centre with European Council President Charles Michel, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, called on Member States having participated in the Afghanistan mission to offer adequate resettlement quotas.
24 August 2021	The G7 leaders' meeting on Afghanistan examined the evacuation processes and discussed targeted and coordinated approaches to humanitarian aid and migration.
30 August 2021	The US armed forces completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan. The EU and its Member States completed evacuating EU citizens and Afghan staff and their families.
31 August 2021	EU interior ministers met to discuss latest developments in Afghanistan, essentially regarding international protection, migration and security, with the evacuation of EU citizens and Afghan nationals remaining a top EU priority.

15 September 2021	In her State of the Union address , Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a 'new, wider Afghan support package '. The Council conclusions on Afghanistan reiterated the commitments made by the EU until this point, and agreed on five core benchmarks for future engagement with Afghanistan.
23 September 2021	The High Representative/Vice President of the Commission, Josep Borrell , chaired the first meeting of the regional platform on Afghanistan between Afghanistan's neighbours and the UN. The platform discussed the situation in the country and the way forward as part of the EU's and Member States' efforts to engage with Afghanistan's neighbours and regional partners.
7 October 2021	European Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, together with High Representative Josep Borrell, convened an EU high-level forum on providing protection for Afghans at risk. The forum aimed at discussing comprehensive sustainable solutions for those Afghans most in need of international protection, including EU resettlement efforts and legal pathways into the EU.

Source: Compiled by EPRS.

Evacuation

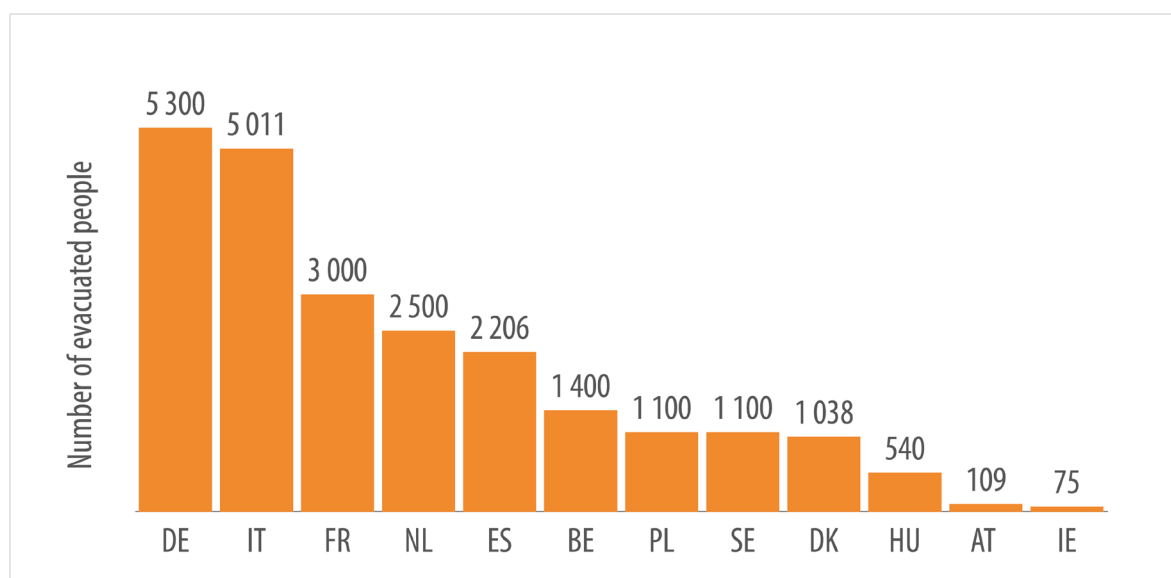
In a [joint statement](#) published by the US Department of State on 15 August 2021, more than 100 countries pledged to accept Afghans fleeing Afghanistan after the US military withdrawal from the country. The statement called for 'all parties to respect and facilitate the safe and orderly departure of foreign nationals and Afghans who wish to leave the country'. In several cases, evacuees were [transferred](#) to temporary transit centres, either to the US or to joint military bases in Germany, Spain, Italy, Kuwait and Qatar for facilitated processing.

The EU's [response](#) to the challenges arising from the situation in Afghanistan focused on evacuating EU citizens and Afghan nationals, while work is still under way to determine solutions for people at risk in Afghanistan. To support evacuation efforts in Afghanistan, the EU put in place a [dedicated crisis cell](#) for the period between 15 and 30 August 2021. The crisis cell consisted of 100 staff from the EU institutions and a support team in Kabul, which also included three military officers from the EU military staff.

During this period, the crisis cell assisted with the [overall evacuation](#) of more than 17 500 people from Kabul, including an estimated 4 100 EU nationals and 13 400 Afghan nationals. According to the [European Commission](#), the EU and its Member States swiftly evacuated all staff from Afghanistan, while EU Member States together evacuated a total of 22 000 Afghans. Evacuations comprised EU citizens and Afghan nationals, military staff, diplomatic staff, and staff locally employed by EU embassies and military missions, including their families (see also Figure 1 on evacuations during August 2021). Close to 520 EU local staff were evacuated from Kabul, including 430 local staff together with their relatives, and 75 contractors at risk. Belgian, German, French and Italian contingents supported the extraction and evacuation of EU personnel. Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands also supported transfers through Islamabad (Pakistan).

Spain set up a processing camp for newly arrived Afghans in Madrid. Evacuated Afghans were to remain in this camp for a maximum of 72 hours before either applying for asylum in Spain or relocating to another EU country. An EEAS team has also been deployed to Torrejón Air Base in Spain to help with the resettlement of Afghan local staff working with the EU.

Figure 1 – Number of people evacuated from Afghanistan



Data source: official national communications or media, BE ([Belgium](#)), DK ([Denmark](#)), DE ([Germany](#)), IE ([Ireland](#)), ES ([Spain](#)), FR ([France](#)), IT ([Italy](#)), HU ([Hungary](#)), NL ([Netherlands](#)), AT ([Austria](#)), PL ([Poland](#)), SE ([Sweden](#)).

Latest EU developments

EU Member States are already hosting Afghans: almost 300 000 Afghan nationals have residence permits and live in Europe. The [Justice and Home Affairs Council](#) of 31 August 2021 concluded that EU Member States could provide support in the form of resettlement on a voluntary basis, while prioritising vulnerable people, such as women and children. At the same time, the Council called for greater cooperation with neighbouring and transit countries in areas that have been hosting increased numbers of migrants and refugees, with a view to reinforcing their capacity to provide refugees and host communities with protection, dignified and safe reception conditions, and sustainable livelihoods.

Some EU Member States have committed to accept refugees from Afghanistan, but without a pledge regarding their number, as the pledging exercise for the coming year is still ongoing. [Ireland](#), for instance, has announced that it has granted 150 Afghans places in the country's refugee protection programme, while Germany and France have announced that some Afghan refugees in need of protection will be accepted, without however giving a specific number. Some Member States, including Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Austria and Poland, have however stated that they will not be accepting additional refugees from Afghanistan. Furthermore, most EU Member States have not yet put forward plans detailing how they intend to facilitate refugee access to the EU through safe and legal pathways. [Germany](#) is said to have stated that Afghan citizens in need of protection would not need to apply for asylum to enter Germany, but would be treated in the same way as German government agencies' local staff and be issued a three-year residence permit. At the same time, as the situation in Afghanistan remains uncertain, certain [EU Member States](#), including Germany, France and the Netherlands have announced the suspension of decisions on returns of Afghan nationals to Afghanistan.

European Parliament position

In a September 2021 [resolution](#) on the situation in Afghanistan, Parliament called on the EU and its Member States to cooperate on the evacuation of EU citizens and Afghans at risk, and establish [humanitarian corridors](#) for Afghan refugees seeking protection in neighbouring countries. The resolution stressed that the European asylum and migration policy should focus on resettling those

most at risk and most vulnerable, while it called for more humanitarian aid and a special visa programme for Afghan women seeking protection from the Taliban regime. Moreover, the resolution called once again on the Commission to present a legislative proposal for humanitarian visas, and on Member States to share responsibility fairly for offering protection.

Resettlement

Following the [commitments](#) made at the high-level forum on resettlement of 9 July 2021, and as part of the Afghan support package announced by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, and High Representative Josep Borrell hosted a [high-level forum](#) on 7 October 2021 on providing protection for Afghans at risk. As an immediate reaction to the situation in Afghanistan, the EU increased humanitarian aid to the country to over €300 million, offered protection to Afghans, and participated in evacuation operations.

At the forum in July 2021, the [Commission](#) had invited Member States to make pledges for the next ad hoc resettlement programme in 2022. During the October high-level forum, EU Member States requested that the Commission coordinate efforts in terms of evacuation and resettlement. Commissioner Johansson meanwhile stressed the need to focus on resettlement from Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, while acknowledging that Member States had stated their aim to increase their pledges to accept larger numbers of Afghans. The need to invest in diverse legal pathways to the EU – such as humanitarian admissions, [community sponsorship](#) and [family reunification](#) – was also highlighted.

During the forum, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, asked EU governments to resettle 42 500 Afghans in need of protection over the next five years. In response to the UNHCR's call, Home Affairs Commissioner, [Ylva Johansson](#), stated that this could be an attainable target, depending on Member States' pledges. She also suggested including broader ways to protect people, beyond resettlement, in the range of solutions. Lastly, the Commissioner proposed to put in place a 'multi-annual support scheme for Afghans at risk'.

Afghan refugees in Europe

According to the European Asylum Support Office ([EASO](#)), since 2014, Afghans have been among the three largest groups of asylum-seekers and refugees in the EU+ countries (i.e. EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland). Approximately 46 300 applications for international protection were lodged in the EU+ in June 2021. Applications submitted by Afghan nationals increased for the fifth consecutive month, to about 7 300 in July, which accounted for 15 % of the total asylum applications submitted in the EU+. This was the highest number of applications by Afghans since October 2016, exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

A further 123 000 Afghan asylum-seekers have arrived in Europe since August 2021. [Half](#) of them have obtained either humanitarian or statutory protection in Europe as refugees under the Geneva Convention. During June 2021, EU+ asylum authorities issued at least 36 900 first instance decisions, slightly more than in May, but were outpaced by the increase in applications. A third of all decisions were issued to Syrians, Afghans and Pakistanis. Overall, Afghan refugees had a [recognition rate](#) of 62 % in the EU in the first quarter of 2021.

The majority of [Afghan refugees](#) are hosted by neighbouring countries Pakistan and Iran, followed by Germany, which was hosting 5.5 % of Afghan refugees at the end of 2020. The population of Afghan nationals on EU territory is not evenly distributed among Member States. In addition to Germany, France, Austria and Sweden are also hosting large numbers of Afghan refugees. The Afghans who were granted legal status in the EU during the first months of 2021 arrived mainly in Germany, Greece, France and Italy. Between January and July 2021, the majority (45 %) of refugees and migrants arriving in [Greece](#) by sea were from Afghanistan.

Data source: [European Asylum Support Office](#).

MAIN REFERENCES

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