

An Integrated Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of Push and Pull Factors in Afghan Irregular Migration: Insights for Sustainable Policy Responses

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Abstract

Irregular migration from Afghanistan persists as a critical socio-political and economic issue affecting both origin and destination countries. Despite extensive empirical studies, the lack of theoretical integration has hindered comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional drivers of Afghan migration. This study employs, mixed-methods approach, grounded in Lee's Push-Pull Theory Dependency Theory, and Functionalism to analyze the factors influencing Afghan irregular migration and returnee reintegration. Data were collected from 150 returnees originating from Iran, Pakistan, and selected European countries through structured surveys and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that economic instability, insecurity, and lack of access to essential services are dominant push factors, while employment prospects, social networks, and legal protections in host countries serve as strong pull factors. Reintegration challenges such as unemployment, social stigmatization, and persistent insecurity significantly contribute to a high propensity for re-migration among returnees. The study underscores the need for inclusive development policies, strengthened regional migration governance, and targeted reintegration strategies. These insights provide valuable direction for policymakers seeking to manage migration sustainably and support returnees effectively.

Keywords: *Afghan Irregular Migration, Push and Pull Factors, Migration Theories, Returnee Reintegration, Migration Policy, Regional Governance.*

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Introduction

Irregular migration has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts such as Afghanistan. Characterized by prolonged political instability, economic underdevelopment, insecurity, and weak governance, Afghanistan has experienced recurrent waves of outward migration over the past four decades (Castles & Miller, 2020; Smith, Brown & Taylor, 2021). According to recent estimates by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), over 5 million Afghans currently reside abroad, with Iran, Pakistan, and several European countries being primary destinations (Wilson, 2024).

The drivers of Afghan irregular migration are complex and multifaceted, typically categorized into “push” factors: such as poverty, violence, and lack of public services—and, “pull” factors: such as better economic opportunities legal protections, and established diasporas in destination countries (Johnson & Lee, 2022; Zarif, Noori & Khoshtakht, 2022). However, much of the existing scholarship has treated these dimensions descriptively or in isolation, without systematically integrating theoretical frameworks to explain the structural, functional, and dependency-based underpinnings of migration processes.

This study addresses these gaps by combining empirical data with robust theoretical analysis. Specifically, it draws upon three foundational migration theories: Lee’s Push-Pull Model (1966), which conceptualizes migration as a response to contrasting conditions between origin and host countries; Dependency Theory (Frank, 2019), which situates migration within global economic hierarchies and structural inequalities; and Functionalism (Parsons, 2017), which views migration as a system-balancing mechanism across labor markets and societies. Through this theoretical lens, the study investigates the motivations behind irregular migration, the lived experiences of Afghan returnees, and the socio-economic and psychological challenges encountered post-return. By employing a mixed-methods approach—including quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with 150 returnees from Iran, Pakistan, and Europe—the study provides a nuanced understanding of Afghan irregular migration and the determinants of re-migration. Moreover, it identifies policy blind spots in migration governance and returnee support systems. The findings contribute to both academic scholarship and practical policymaking, offering a comprehensive foundation for designing interventions that address the root causes of migration and promote sustainable reintegration.

2. Literature Review

The study of migration, particularly in contexts marked by protracted conflict and economic fragility, has evolved significantly over the past two decades. In the case of Afghanistan, migration literature has predominantly focused on descriptive analyses of refugee flows and displacement trends. However, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the structural and contextual factors that influence irregular

migration, including economic inequalities, state fragility, and global policy regimes (Castles, 2020; Khan, Ali & Rahman, 2021).

Several studies have examined the role of **push factors**—economic insecurity, unemployment, violence, and lack of social services—as primary drivers of Afghan migration (Smith et al., 2021; Brown & Taylor, 2023). Concurrently, **pull factors** such as employment opportunities, asylum policies, and the presence of diaspora networks in host countries have been recognized as strong motivators for outward migration (Johnson & Lee, 2022; Zarif et al., 2022).

More recent contributions to migration literature have expanded the analytical lens by considering **environmental drivers** of migration, particularly in the context of rural Afghanistan. Drought, desertification, and resource scarcity have been identified as critical contributors to internal displacement and cross-border migration (Wilson, 2024; Zlotnik, 2021). This has led to a growing recognition of **climate-induced migration** as a major emerging trend in South and Central Asia.

A further dimension of the literature centers on the **reintegration experiences of returnees**, particularly those deported or voluntarily returned from Iran, Pakistan, and Europe. Studies have shown that many returnees face significant social and economic barriers, including unemployment, stigma, and insecurity, which often lead to **circular migration patterns** (Anderson & Clark, 2023; Ahmad & Hussain, 2023). Yet, few studies provide a theoretical grounding to explain why reintegration fails or how migration decisions are formed across different stages of displacement.

Despite these advances, the literature suffers from **limited theoretical integration**. Most studies apply push-pull logic descriptively without systematically engaging with foundational theories of migration. There is also a shortage of comparative empirical analyses that combine qualitative and quantitative data to validate theoretical models. This study addresses these gaps by using an integrated theoretical framework and mixed-methods approach to analyze Afghan irregular migration.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three major theoretical perspectives—**Lee’s Push-Pull Theory**, **Dependency Theory**, and **Functionalism**—to provide a robust conceptual foundation for analyzing the drivers of Afghan irregular migration and returnee experiences.

3.1. Push-Pull Theory: First introduced by Lee (1966), the Push-Pull Theory posits that migration is driven by adverse conditions in the country of origin (push factors) and attractive conditions in the destination country (pull factors). Push factors often include unemployment, conflict, poverty, and lack of public services, whereas pull factors encompass better job prospects, safety, and access to welfare services (Johnson & Lee,

2022). While widely used, critics argue that the theory oversimplifies migration decisions and ignores structural constraints such as immigration policies, social capital limitations, and human trafficking networks (Koser, 2016; De Haas, 2021). In the Afghan context, push factors include prolonged insecurity, political instability, and limited economic opportunities, while pull factors reflect the promise of safety, employment, and established Afghan communities abroad (Zarif et al., 2022; Rahimi & Sadat, 2023). However, migration decisions are not merely the outcome of individual rational choice but are shaped by systemic inequalities and social norms.

3.2. Dependency Theory: Developed by Frank (1969) and later expanded by Amin (2018), Dependency Theory suggests that migration from the Global South to the Global North is a symptom of global structural inequalities. Poor countries, such as Afghanistan, become economically and politically dependent on richer nations, reinforcing cycles of underdevelopment and displacement. Migration, in this context, is both a consequence and a perpetuator of global economic dependency (Frank, 2019). Afghanistan's reliance on remittances, foreign aid, and low-skilled labor export to neighboring countries reflects this dependency pattern. Migrants working in Iran or Pakistan are often exploited in informal labor markets, lacking legal protections and social benefits (Anderson & Clark, 2023). Dependency Theory provides a macro-level lens for understanding why Afghan migration persists despite legal and physical barriers.

3.3. Functionalism: The Functionalist approach, rooted in the works of Parsons (1971), views migration as a social mechanism for balancing inequalities in labor markets and economic systems. From this perspective, migration serves to fill labor shortages in host countries while alleviating demographic or economic pressures in sending countries (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). However, this model assumes successful integration and reintegration, which is often not the case for Afghan returnees. Recent studies demonstrate that Afghan returnees frequently face social marginalization, lack of employment, and continued security threats (Brown & Taylor, 2023). These conditions challenge the functionalist assumption that migration contributes to equilibrium or societal harmony, suggesting that migration may instead exacerbate social fragmentation and cyclical displacement (Sharifi, 2024).

3.4. Integrated Framework: By combining these three perspectives, the current study develops an integrated theoretical model to explain Afghan irregular migration. Push-Pull Theory captures the immediate motivations and decision-making process; Dependency Theory situates migration within global and regional power asymmetries; and Functionalism examines the societal roles and consequences of migration and return. This comprehensive framework enables a multi-level analysis of both migration drivers and reintegration challenges, enhancing the explanatory power of the research.

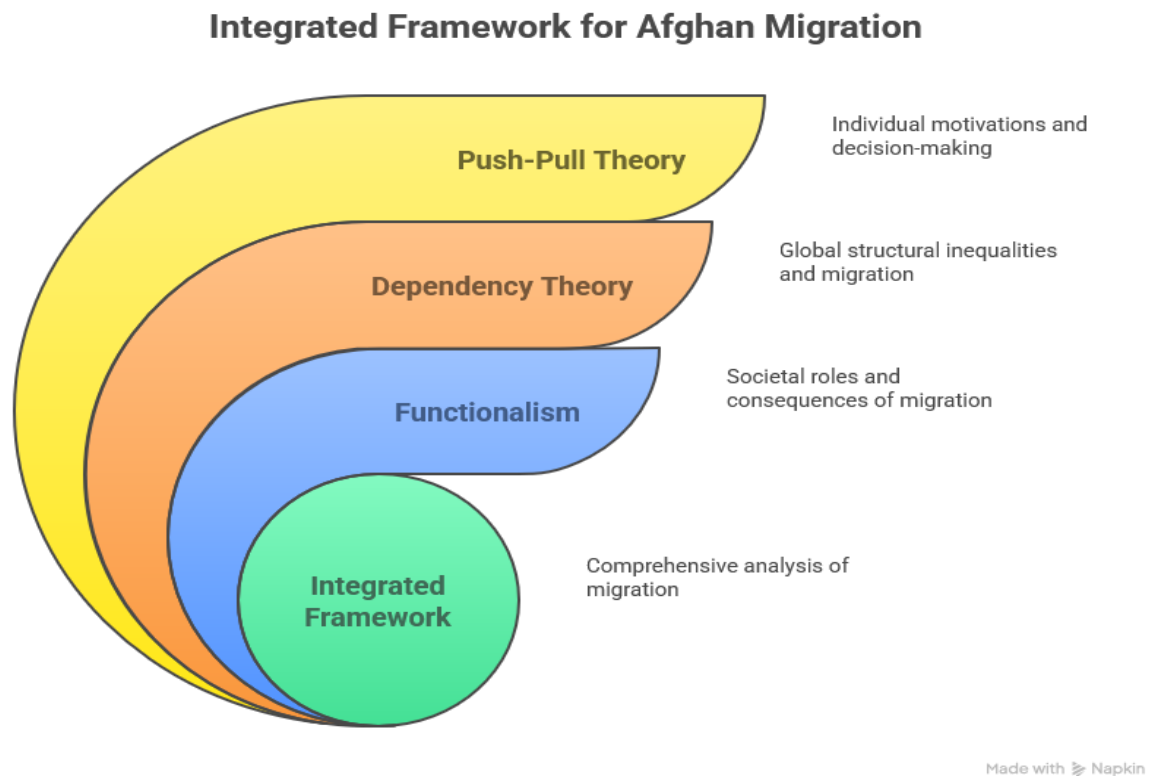


Figure 1: An Integrated Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Afghan Irregular Migration

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design: This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques to explore the drivers of irregular migration from Afghanistan and the reintegration experiences of returnees. A descriptive-analytical approach was adopted to capture the complexity of migration motivations and return dynamics. The integration of survey data and in-depth interviews enhances the internal validity and depth of analysis, allowing triangulation of findings from diverse sources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021). Mixed-methods research is particularly suited for migration studies, where quantitative trends often require contextualization through qualitative narratives (Ivankova, 2020). This design allows the study to balance empirical generalizability with theoretical depth.

4.2. Study Population and Sampling: The target population comprised Afghan returnees who had migrated irregularly to Iran, Pakistan, or selected European countries and had returned to Afghanistan between 2020 and 2024. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure inclusion of participants from diverse geographic, economic, and demographic backgrounds. The final sample included 150 returnees, distributed as follows:

- 60 returnees from Iran
- 60 returnees from Pakistan
- 30 returnees from European countries (e.g., Germany, Austria, Sweden)

Eligibility criteria included:

- At least 6 months of residence in the destination country,
- Irregular migration status during departure,
- Returned to Afghanistan within the past 5 years,
- Informed consent provided.

The sample composition ensured representation across variables such as age, gender, province of origin, education level, and migration history (Bryman, 2021).

4.3. Data Collection Methods: Three complementary data collection techniques were employed to ensure methodological triangulation:

a. Structured Surveys: A structured questionnaire was designed to collect **quantitative data** on migration motivations, demographic characteristics, income differentials, and reintegration outcomes. The instrument was pre-tested for clarity and consistency and translated into *Dari and Pashto*.

b. Semi-Structured Interviews: To gain **qualitative insights**, 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with returnees. Topics included migration decision-making, experiences abroad, coping strategies, and reintegration challenges. Interviews were conducted in participants' native languages, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

c. Document Analysis: Secondary data from relevant organizations such as the *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*, *UNHCR*, *Afghan Ministry of Refugees*, and NGO reports were analyzed to contextualize primary data and support cross-validation (Babbie, 2020).

4.4. Data Analysis Procedures

a. Quantitative Analysis: Survey data were analyzed using *SPSS v26*. The following statistical techniques were applied:

- **Descriptive statistics** (frequencies, means, standard deviations) to summarize demographic and migration-related variables.

- **Inferential statistics**, including **Chi-square tests** and **binary logistic regression**, were used to identify significant predictors of migration and reintegration outcomes.
- **Reliability** of the survey instrument was confirmed using **Cronbach's alpha** ($\alpha = 0.85$).

b. Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts were analyzed using *NVivo 12*. A *thematic coding* framework was developed inductively and deductively based on the theoretical framework. Key themes included:

- Motivations for migration,
- Host country experiences,
- Reintegration barriers,
- Intentions for re-migration.

Data triangulation between interview, survey, and documentary sources strengthened analytical robustness (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2020).

4.5. **Validity and Reliability:** To ensure content and construct validity, all data collection instruments were reviewed by migration and development experts prior to field deployment. Pre-tests with 15 participants were conducted to refine clarity and relevance.

- **Reliability:** Cronbach's alpha scores > 0.8 confirmed internal consistency across key survey scales.
- **Triangulation:** The integration of qualitative, quantitative, and secondary data allowed for multi-source validation, enhancing credibility and minimizing bias (Maxwell, 2021).
- **Member Checking:** A subset of interview participants was consulted post-analysis to verify the interpretation of their responses.

4.6. **Ethical Considerations:** This study adhered strictly to international ethical standards in social research:

- **Ethical approval** was secured from an accredited institutional review board.
- **Informed consent** was obtained verbally and in writing from all participants.
- **Anonymity and confidentiality** were guaranteed by using pseudonyms and securing data in encrypted formats.
- **Voluntary participation** was ensured, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

- Particular care was taken with vulnerable participants, including women and individuals with traumatic migration experiences, in line with **IOM ethical guidelines (2021)**.

4.7. Study Limitations: Despite its rigorous design, this study is subject to several limitations:

- **Geographic access constraints** limited sampling to relatively stable provinces, potentially excluding returnees from high-conflict areas.
- **Self-reporting bias** may have influenced responses, especially regarding sensitive experiences such as deportation or exploitation.
- The **cross-sectional nature** of the study prevents long-term tracking of reintegration outcomes and future migration behavior.
- **Gender imbalance** in the returnee population (majority male) restricted insights into female migration experiences.

Future research should adopt **longitudinal** and **gender-focused** designs to deepen understanding of Afghan migration dynamics.

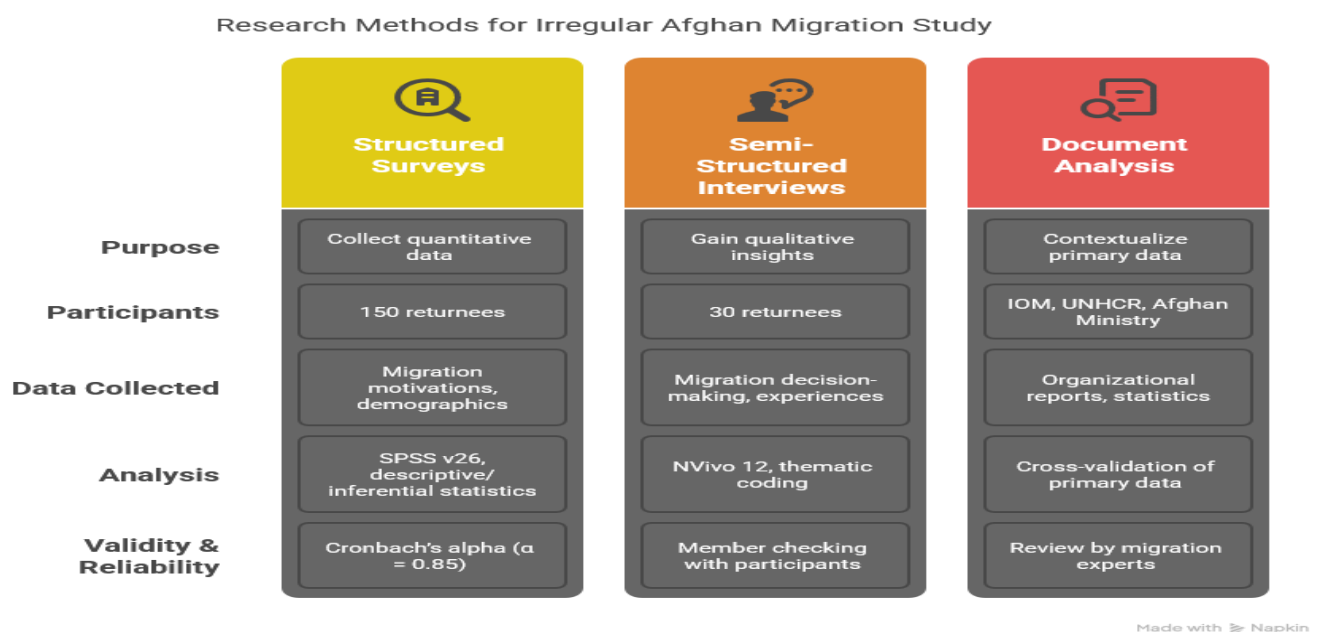


Figure 2: Research Design and Methodology for Studying Irregular Migration from Afghanistan

5. Findings and Data Analysis

This section presents the results of both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Key themes include demographic profiles of returnees, migration drivers, reintegration challenges, and patterns of potential re-migration. Tables and graphs are integrated to enhance clarity and support evidence-based interpretation.

5.1. Demographic Profile of Returnees: The sample consisted of 150 Afghan returnees. Table 1 presents the demographic breakdown.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Afghan Returnees (N = 150)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18–35	87	58.0
	36–50	51	34.0
	>50	12	8.0
Gender	Male	117	78.0
	Female	33	22.0
Education Level	No formal education	68	45.0
	Primary	48	32.0
	Secondary	27	18.0
	University	7	5.0
Marital Status	Married	101	67.3
	Single	49	32.7

Majority of respondents were young, male, and from provinces with high migration rates (Herat, Nangarhar, Nimroz). Education levels were generally low, indicating limited human capital prior to migration.

5.2. Key Push and Pull Factors: Respondents identified a combination of economic, political, and environmental push factors, and socio-economic pull factors.

Table 2. Push and Pull Factors Reported by Returnees

Factor Type	Specific Factor	Percentage (%)
Push	Economic Hardship	72.0
	Insecurity & Conflict	53.0
	Lack of Social Services	38.0
	Environmental Stress	12.0
Pull	Job Opportunities	65.0
	Better Living Conditions	48.0
	Family in Host Country	32.0
	Asylum/Legal Protection	22.0

5.3. Economic Incentives for Migration: A primary motivator was income disparity. Figure 3 illustrates average monthly income of Afghan migrants by destination country.

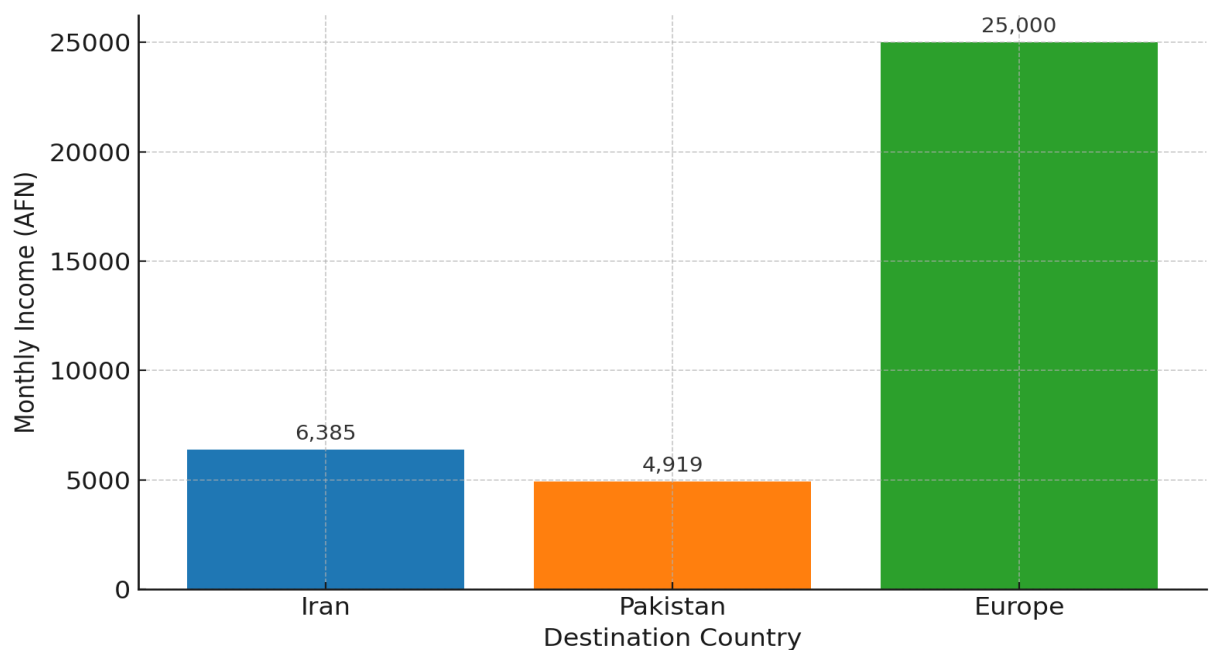


Figure 3. *Migrants in Europe earned nearly four times more than those in Iran and Pakistan, reinforcing the strong pull factor of economic opportunity (Dustmann & Frattini, 2014; Johnson & Lee, 2022).*

5.4. Reintegration Challenges: Returnees reported significant difficulties reintegrating into Afghan society:

Table 3. Reintegration Barriers among Returnees

Reintegration Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Difficulty Finding Employment	102	68.0
Social Stigma and Isolation	63	42.0
Persistent Insecurity	56	37.3
Lack of Government Support	42	28.0

These findings align with Functionalist critiques indicating failed reintegration weakens the equilibrium functions of migration (Parsons, 2017; Brown & Taylor, 2023).

5.5. Statistical Analysis: To assess significant predictors of migration, a regression model was applied:

Table 4. Regression Coefficients Predicting Likelihood of Migration

Predictor	β Coefficient	p-value
Economic Hardship	0.62	<0.01
Insecurity	0.48	<0.05
Social Networks Abroad	0.39	<0.05
Education Level	-0.31	<0.05

Interpretation: Economic hardship is the strongest predictor of migration. Notably, higher education negatively correlates with irregular migration, suggesting educated individuals are more risk-averse or seek formal migration channels (Borjas, 2017; De Haas, 2021).

5.6. Intentions to Re-Migrate: Despite adverse experiences abroad, a significant portion of returnees considered migrating again:

Table 5. Willingness to Re-Migrate

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Will re-migrate	68	45.3
Undecided	48	32.0

Will not re-migrate

34

22.7

This reflects a **cyclical migration pattern**, which contradicts the assumption of permanent reintegration and supports findings from Dependency Theory (Frank, 2019; Sharifi, 2024).

5.7. Summary of Key Findings

- **Economic and security factors** are the most significant push drivers.
- **Employment and protection opportunities** in host countries remain major pull factors.
- **Returnees struggle to reintegrate**, especially economically and socially.
- **Many returnees intend to migrate again**, indicating persistent structural issues in Afghanistan.

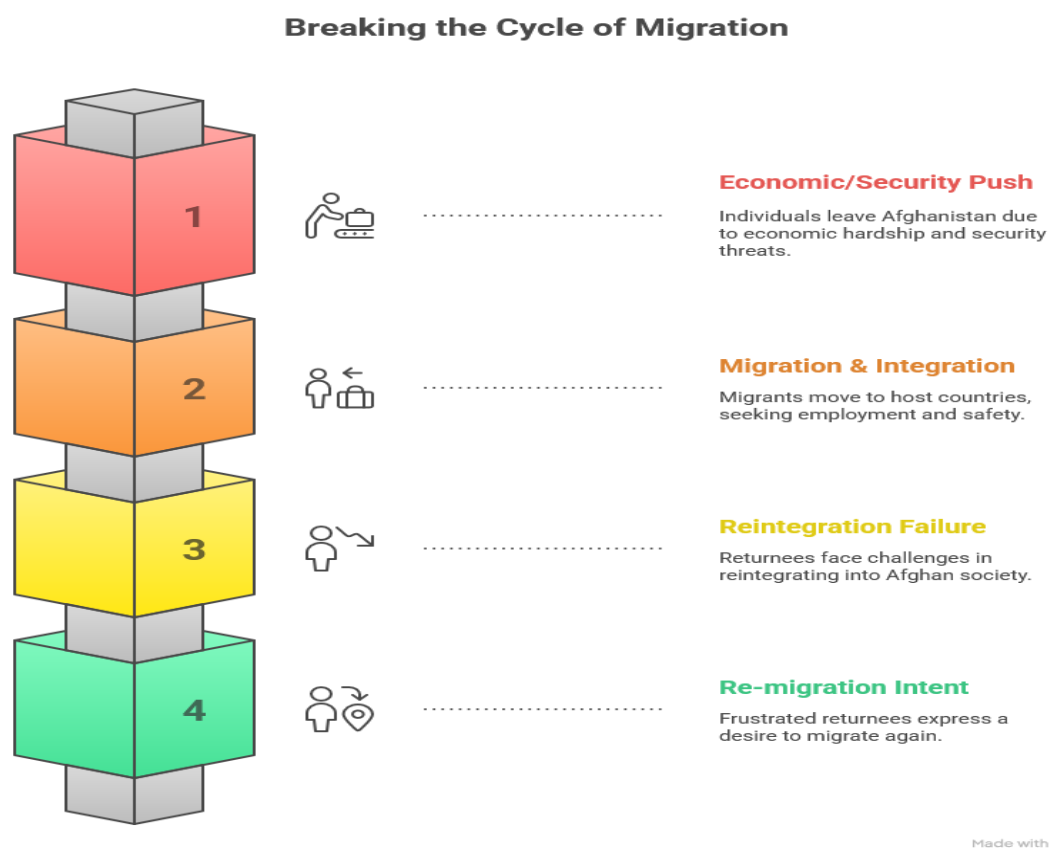


Figure 4. *The Dynamics of Afghan Irregular Migration: A Cyclical Model*

6. Discussion

6.1. Interpretation of Key Findings in Relation to Research Objectives: This study sought to identify the structural and personal drivers of Afghan irregular migration, evaluate the reintegration experiences of returnees, and assess the likelihood of re-migration. The results strongly align with all three objectives. Firstly, the finding that economic hardship is the most significant push factor (72%) is consistent with long-standing theories on migration and poverty (Borjas, 2017; Castles & Miller, 2020). The regression model confirms this, with economic hardship showing the highest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.62, p < 0.01$), reinforcing the centrality of poverty in irregular migration decision-making. Secondly, the reintegration challenges reported—including unemployment (68%), social stigma (42%), and security concerns (37%)—demonstrate the inadequacy of current reintegration frameworks. These findings directly relate to Functionalist critiques, which argue that migration does not inherently produce balance or societal benefit unless reintegration mechanisms are functional and inclusive (Parsons, 2017; Brown & Taylor, 2023). Thirdly, the willingness of 45% of returnees to re-migrate due to ongoing instability and economic desperation reveals the presence of a cyclical migration pattern, indicating that migration is not a single linear event but a recurring strategy in response to systemic failure (Anderson & Clark, 2023).

6.2. Comparative Analysis with Existing Literature: The findings support, extend, and challenge several strands of recent scholarship:

- **Economic Drivers:** Consistent with Dustmann and Frattini (2014) and Johnson and Lee (2022), the study reaffirms that wage differentials between Afghanistan and host countries—especially Europe—play a critical role. Figure 3 illustrates this disparity clearly.
- **Security and Conflict:** The role of violence and persecution as migration triggers echoes prior work by Smith et al. (2021) and aligns with IOM regional reports. The study adds granularity by highlighting that **returnee continue to face security threats**, especially in areas under Islamic Emirate governance or border provinces.
- **Climate-Induced Migration:** Although less frequently cited (12%), environmental degradation such as drought and water scarcity remain an emerging factor in migration discourse (Wilson, 2024). Future research should explore this further with spatial and longitudinal data.
- **Diaspora Networks:** The influence of social networks abroad, which increased migration likelihood ($\beta = 0.39, p < 0.05$), corroborates findings by Zarif et al. (2022) and Waldinger (2015) on the facilitative role of established communities.

- **Failed Reintegration:** The recurrence of migration intent among returnees aligns with findings by Ahmad and Hussain (2023), who argue that without effective reintegration support, many returnees become trapped in a cycle of displacement.

6.3. Theoretical Contributions: The integrated theoretical model—comprising Push-Pull Theory, Dependency Theory, and Functionalism—provided a multidimensional lens for interpreting the findings:

- **Push-Pull Theory** is validated but expanded: While push and pull factors remain central, this study reveals the **limitations of the model** in contexts where structural constraints (e.g., border policing, trafficking networks, discrimination) disrupt simple cost-benefit decision-making (Lee, 1966; De Haas, 2021).
- **Dependency Theory** is powerfully supported: The continuous flow of Afghan labor to neighboring and European economies, combined with Afghanistan's dependence on remittances, illustrates how **global asymmetries perpetuate displacement** (Frank, 2019; Amin, 2018).
- **Functionalism**, though applicable in theory, is challenged in practice: Instead of resolving systemic imbalances, migration in the Afghan context has led to **temporary relief and long-term vulnerability**, especially due to inadequate reintegration mechanisms (Parsons, 2017; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014).

Figure 4 The Dynamics of Afghan Irregular Migration: A Cyclical Model

- Stage 1: Economic/Security Push
- Stage 2: Migration & Initial Integration
- Stage 3: Return & Reintegration Failure
- Stage 4: Re-migration Intent
- → This loop continues unless broken by policy and structural reform.

6.4. Policy Implications: The findings have several implications for migration management and development planning:

1. **Redefining Reintegration:** Reintegration must extend beyond physical return. It should include **economic inclusion, social acceptance, and psychosocial support** (IOM, 2021).
2. **Targeted Development Initiatives:** Programs that address root causes—such as job creation in rural areas, vocational training, and microfinance for returnees—are essential (Sharifi, 2024).

3. **Gender-Sensitive Support:** While this study had a male-dominant sample, evidence suggests that **female returnees face heightened marginalization**. Reintegration frameworks must be gender-sensitive and trauma-informed (Zlotnik, 2021).
4. **Regional and Bilateral Agreements:** Cooperation with Iran, Pakistan, and EU countries is needed to regulate labor migration, protect migrants' rights, and support return pathways (Wilson, 2024).
5. **Information Campaigns:** Communities need to be informed of the **risks of irregular migration**, including trafficking and labor exploitation. Awareness-building can reduce migration rooted in misinformation (Sassen, 2018).

6.5. **Limitations and Future Research Directions:** While the findings are robust, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Sample Size and Geographic Limitations:** Due to access and security constraints, the study was limited to relatively stable provinces. Broader national sampling would improve generalizability.
- **Gender Imbalance:** Women were underrepresented, limiting gendered insights. Future studies should focus specifically on **female migrants and returnees**.
- **Cross-Sectional Design:** The absence of longitudinal tracking limits understanding of long-term reintegration. Follow-up studies over 2–5 years are recommended.
- **Policy Analysis Gap:** While this study includes policy implications, future research should conduct **institutional analysis** of government and international agency programs for returnees.

7. Conclusion

This study provided a comprehensive, theoretically informed, and empirically grounded analysis of the drivers, experiences, and consequences of Afghan irregular migration. By integrating Lee's Push-Pull Theory, Dependency Theory, and Functionalism into a mixed-methods framework, the study contributes novel insights into both the structural causes and individual-level experiences of migration and return. The findings confirm that **economic hardship, insecurity, and lack of access to essential services** remain the most influential push factors, while **job opportunities, diaspora networks, and legal protections** constitute primary pull factors. Despite initial motivations rooted in survival or advancement, returnees often face **failed reintegration**, characterized by unemployment, social exclusion, and continued insecurity. These failures perpetuate a **cyclical pattern of migration**, undermining efforts to build stability and resilience within Afghanistan. The theoretical integration allowed the study to challenge simplistic push-pull narratives and highlight how global and regional inequalities—exacerbated by weak national governance—sustain and

reproduce displacement. Without targeted, sustainable, and rights-based policy interventions, Afghan migration will continue not as an anomaly but as a structural feature of the country's developmental and geopolitical condition.

8. Policy and Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings and international best practices, the following multi-level, actionable recommendations are proposed:

8.1. Economic Empowerment and Livelihoods Development

- **Rural Job Creation:** Launch public-private employment schemes targeting high-migration provinces (e.g., Herat, Nangarhar, Nimroz), especially in agriculture, infrastructure, and renewable energy sectors.
- **Returnee Entrepreneurship Funds:** Establish microfinance and grant programs to support small-scale business development among returnees, with mentorship and market access support.
- **Skills-Based Vocational Training:** Design tailored programs aligned with domestic labor needs (e.g., construction, ICT, agriculture), particularly for youth and low-literacy populations.

8.2. Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Reintegration

- **Holistic Reintegration Frameworks:** Develop integrated reintegration packages including housing, mental health services, community reintegration sessions, and employment counseling.
- **Support for Female Returnees:** Provide safe spaces, targeted psychosocial services, and livelihood training for women, particularly those who migrated alone or experienced trauma abroad.
- **Anti-Stigma Campaigns:** Run nationwide public awareness campaigns to promote the dignity of returnees and counter discrimination and social marginalization.

8.3. Security and Legal Protection

- **Local Protection Programs:** Strengthen provincial-level safety mechanisms, including protection for returnees facing local conflict, land disputes, or political retaliation.
- **Legal Aid Services:** Establish legal assistance centers for returnees to access justice, secure property rights, and recover lost documentation.

8.4. Regional and International Migration Governance

- **Bilateral Labor Agreements:** Negotiate formal labor migration channels with Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and EU states, with rights-based protections and monitoring mechanisms.
- **Anti-Smuggling Cooperation:** Work with regional partners to dismantle trafficking networks and strengthen legal alternatives to irregular migration.
- **Data Sharing Platforms:** Create migration observatories in collaboration with IOM, UNHCR, and neighboring countries to track movements, monitor trends, and inform policy responses.

8.5. National Migration Strategy Reform

- **Integrated National Migration Policy (INMP):** Update Afghanistan's migration strategy to align with the **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)**, incorporating returnee support, diaspora engagement, and labor mobility.
- **Inter-Ministerial Coordination:** Establish a national taskforce comprising the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MoRR), Ministry of Labor, civil society, and donor agencies for coordinated policy implementation.

8.6. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research

- **Longitudinal Returnee Tracking:** Launch national tracking studies to assess long-term outcomes of returnees and adjust policies accordingly.
- **Migration Research Hubs:** Fund university-based research centers to conduct policy-relevant migration research and train local experts.
- **Participatory Policy Design:** Involve returnees, migrant families, and community leaders in designing and evaluating reintegration programs to ensure cultural and contextual appropriateness.

Closing Note: Afghan irregular migration is not a temporary crisis but a symptom of structural vulnerabilities and global asymmetries. Addressing it requires coordinated, multi-sectoral action grounded in evidence, human rights, and sustainable development principles. Only through a comprehensive, inclusive, and forward-looking migration strategy can Afghanistan hope to interrupt the cycle of displacement and foster conditions for returnees to thrive at home.

Limitations and Future Research: While this study provides comprehensive insights into the dynamics of Afghan irregular migration, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was limited due to accessibility and security challenges in certain regions of Afghanistan, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the qualitative nature of the study, although rich in depth, restricts

statistical inference and broad comparisons. Third, migration is a dynamic and context-dependent process, and the rapidly changing political and economic environment in Afghanistan may render some findings temporally sensitive.

Future research could benefit from longitudinal designs that follow returnees over time to assess reintegration outcomes and their impact on re-migration decisions. Additionally, comparative studies involving Afghan migrants in different regional contexts (e.g., Turkey, Gulf countries) could offer broader perspectives. Employing mixed-methods approaches that integrate qualitative insights with quantitative metrics may also strengthen the evidence base and support more nuanced policy interventions.

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Note on Language Editing and Integrity: This study did not employ artificial intelligence tools for generating original content or academic arguments. However, AI-assisted tools were used selectively to support grammar correction, sentence structuring, and formatting improvements. All core findings, theoretical interpretations, and empirical analyses were developed through independent scholarly research and validated sources to ensure academic integrity and originality.