

Young Afghans Leaving in Droves

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Best and brightest emigrate from Herat province to escape worsening prospects.

Young educated Afghans in the western province of Herat, once regarded as a stable, increasingly prosperous part of the country, are leaving to make better lives for themselves abroad as they see no future for people like them in a deteriorating security climate.

Analysts say the brain drain will have a hugely negative impact on Afghanistan's chances of recovery and development.

Medical graduate Farid, 27, is about to travel to Europe illegally through a network of human traffickers. He says he will be sorry to leave Afghanistan and his family behind, but sees little other option.

"The future of this country looks very dark to me. The international community is not being honest; it's pursuing its own ends. The government is mired in corruption. There is war, killing, suicide and sorrow, sorrow, sorrow every day. How long can it go on?" he said, explaining his reasons for leaving. "I want to go somewhere where I won't hear about death and killing, where at least I'll find mental peace."

The exodus of people like Farid is the reverse of what happened after the United States-led invasion of late 2001. At that time, large numbers of refugees who had been in Pakistan and Iran, in many cases since the Soviet occupation of the 1980s, began coming back in hope of being part of a new post-Taliban era of stability and prosperity.

Instead, conflict resumed and spread across much of Afghanistan, with the Taliban now present even in formerly secure provinces like Herat. At the same time, the western-backed Afghan administration is widely perceived as corrupt and inept, and incapable of delivering basic governance, services and rule of law.

White-collar emigration is a particular indictment of the situation since, as Farid himself points out, he is fairly secure financially.

Ramez, a 28-year-old economics graduate from Herat university, is in a similar position – far better off than the average Afghan as he has a company job and an income. But he too plans to leave as soon as possible, again because of rising violence and failed political systems.

"I hear nothing but bad news – arbitrary behaviour, violation of the law, intimidation, embezzlement, looting and killing," he said.

Basira Mohammadi, the head of Herat province's department for labour and social affairs, agreed that war and the lack of good governance were the primary factors motivating young people – above all those with an education – to get out of Afghanistan.

"If national officials don't make an effort to ensure security and create an atmosphere of confidence for the future, Afghanistan will lose its greatest asset," she warned.

Abdol Sami Wafa, head of the provincial youth affairs department, said poor employment prospects were an additional factor. While there are no precise figures, in part because so many go as illegal immigrants, Wafa said there had been a ten per cent rise in the exodus of educated young people recently.

"Most of my own relatives have left the country," he added.

Wafa said the information and culture ministry, under which his youth affairs department comes, has been running programmes to recruit young people to government and other agencies.

What sets the current brain drain apart from earlier refugee movements is that these educated emigrants are opting to head for the West instead of neighbouring states.

Wali Mohammad Hadid, a journalist in Herat province, said the change was a result of increased exposure to life in western countries, often acquired through the internet.

"Educated people and specialists who have studied abroad, and whose knowledge our country needs, will tend not to return once they complete their education. This will do irreparable damage to academia in this country," he predicted.

Abdol Zaer Mohtasebzada, deputy chancellor of Herat University, confirmed that some of the 500 students

and lecturers who had gone abroad to study had simply not returned.

Mohtasebzada spoke of an entire generation frustrated by institutional corruption and the collapse of security, rule of law, and democracy given “massive fraud” in recent presidential and parliamentary elections

A student who asked not to be identified told IWPR he was in Herat visiting his family during the vacation, and said the only reason he might come back permanently once he graduated was that he and others had given the higher education ministry guarantees that they would do so.

“Nevertheless, I am still looking for a way to stay there [abroad],” he said. “The only people who enjoy respect in this country are warlords and the leaders of armed groups. The lives of powerful individuals are secure, and so is their future. The country has no need for knowledge or reconstruction; it’s a bull-ring for other countries that have interests here. Peace will never be secured here.”

Shahpoor Saber is an IWPR-trained reporter in Herat province.

Location: [Afghanistan](#)

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