NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

NRC Briefing: Tackling the Tazkira (National ID) Documentation Gap Among Afghan Returnees

Photo: Maisam Shafiey/ NRC staff members providing information session on the importance of legal identity documentations to a group of female returnees at Torkham border, Nangarhar

Overview

Afghanistan, a country deeply impacted by decades of conflict, has seen widespread displacement, affecting millions of its citizens. The ongoing instability and economic hardships have led to internal displacement and the mass return of Afghan nationals from neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan has further strained the situation. Alongside this, Afghanistan is grappling with the adverse effects of climate change, which has compounded the hardships faced by vulnerable communities. Over 2 million Afghans have returned from neighbouring countries in 2025 alone,[1] adding to an estimated 3.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and leaving over 22 million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. At the heart of this multifaceted crisis lies a critical civil documentation gap, particularly

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[1] UNHCR Afghanistan Situation - Afghan Returns from Iran and Pakistan Emergency Update #2.pdf

concerning the Tazkira (national identity card), which severely impedes protection and reintegration efforts. The Tazkira is critical for accessing fundamental rights and essential services such as healthcare, education, employment, and legal protection. However, the complex, and costly processes, creates formidable barriers, thus exposing individuals to exploitation, discrimination, and the long-term risk of statelessness.

While Afghanistan's National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) have robust infrastructure, issuing over 15 million e-Tazkira's since May 2018, humanitarian efforts remain severely under-resourced. Despite the urgent need, demand often remains low due to affordability issues and limited awareness, preventing millions from securing their identity documentation.

This briefing document aims to highlight the importance of the Tazkira, its role in facilitating access to vital services, and the role NRC plays in obtaining the Tazkira. By focusing on the context of mass returns and displacement, this document will outline how obtaining a Tazkira is a fundamental requirement for the legal, social, and economic reintegration of returnees, and how addressing this gap is crucial to Afghanistan's recovery and stability.

Why the Tazkira Matters

Currently, there are two types of Tazkira available in Afghanistan, both of which act as a gateway for Afghans to access crucial services.

- **Paper Tazkira:** Traditionally issued as a one-page paper document, containing essential personal information such as demographic info, residence, ethnicity etc.). To obtain a paper Tazkira, the applicant must first complete an application form, either online or from a Civil Registration Office, using valid identity document such as a birth certificate. After which, they gather required documents including photos, a relative's Tazkira copy, local council confirmation, and two witnesses. Once these steps are completed, the applicant submits everything to the relevant Civil Registry Office, pays a 200 AFN fee, and receives a receipt. Finally, after processing, the stamped and signed Tazkira will be collected on the date allocated.

- **Electronic Tazkira (e-Tazkira):** Introduced in 2018, this modern polycarbonate biometric card meets international standards and contains personal data including demographic information, religion, ethnicity, and a signature in Dari, Pashto on one side, and English on the other. To obtain an e-Tazkira, applicants must first fill out a form (from NSIA offices, website, or photo shops), attach a photo and their paper Tazkira or guardian's documents if they don't have one. Then, they visit an e-Tazkira center, pay 500 AFN[2], and complete biometric registration which includes a photo along with fingerprints and iris scan. After verification and processing, applicants return on the

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[2] At the time of writing, 500 Afghanis (AFN) is approximately equal to 7.5 United States Dollars (USD)

specified date, verify their fingerprint, and receive the e-Tazkira.The e-Tazkira is valid for up to ten years.

The process for reobtaining a Tazkira due to loss, damage (e.g., burning), correction of age or name, or issuance for absentees is largely the same, with some minor procedural differences.

Afghan citizens are eligible to apply for a Tazkira from birth. Both versions are issued by the National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) through its centres in Kabul and provincial offices, following largely similar procedures.

Possession of a Tazkira is not merely a legal requirement under the 2014 Law on Registration of Population Records; it is also indispensable for accessing a wide range of civil, economic, and social rights. Travel, access to public and private services, and eligibility for humanitarian aid are among the primary reasons motivating Afghans to obtain documentation under the current authorities. The Tazkira also enables access to employment, education, banking, passport issuance, mobile SIM registration, property transactions, and critical relief services.

However, certain groups – including undocumented returnees, nomadic populations (Kuchis), stateless persons, women, and children – face significant obstacles in obtaining a Tazkira. This is due to the process often requiring returning to one's birthplace or family homeland, which many displaced persons cannot afford or safely undertake. Alternatively, the community leader's approval may substitute for in-person presence, though such approval can be withheld due to absence or political or social bias. Women and girls encounter additional barriers, such as the requirement for a male guardian's authorization and constraints on mobility, deepening their vulnerability and exclusion.

Photo: Maisam Shafiey/ NRC, Nangarhar

"We have seen heartbreaking cases where returnee families, after years of displacement, return to their place of origin only to find their inherited land taken. Without a Tazkira, they cannot prove their identity – nor their rightful claim. In one case, a usurper denied a son's identity, rejecting his right to his father's land simply because the family lacked documentation. This is more than a piece of paper; a Tazkira is the key to dignity, justice, and reclaiming what is rightfully theirs." - Male NRC Staff, Spin Boldak Border, Kandahar

The lack of civil documentation has profound consequences. It restricts freedom of movement, limits access to basic services and humanitarian aid, undermines property rights, complicates family reunification, increases the risk of statelessness, and even can put individuals at the risk of detention in some cases. The Tazkira, especially in its electronic form, is thus far more than an administrative record, it is the legal foundation upon which Afghan citizens assert their rights and access protection and services. Ensuring inclusive and equitable access to civil documentation remains essential to safeguarding rights and supporting durable solutions for displaced and vulnerable populations in Afghanistan.

Current Capacity in the Humanitarian Response

Addressing the extensive Tazkira documentation gap requires significant institutional capacity and humanitarian support. Afghanistan's NSIA is the primary governmental body responsible for issuing identity documents.
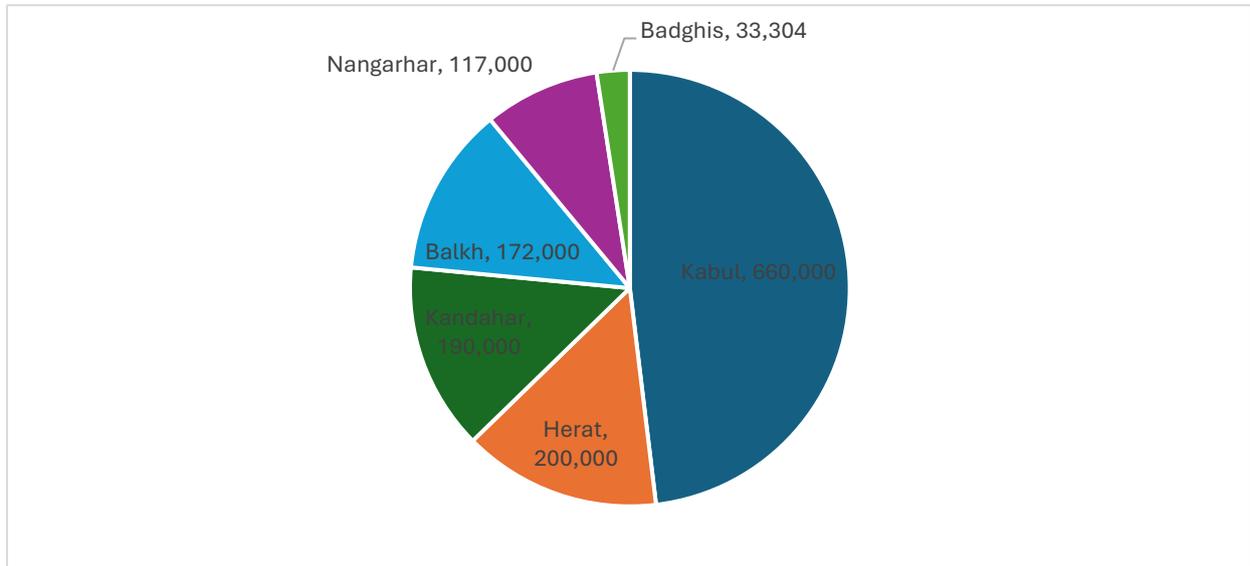
As of early 2025, NSIA maintains substantial infrastructure for Tazkira distribution, with 78 active e-Tazkira distribution centers across Afghanistan. This network is complemented by six "Asan Khedmat" ("Easy Service") centers in Kabul, and one center each in Kandahar, Khost, Balkh, Nangarhar and now in Helmand and Herat as well along with one mobile team operating in Kabul. These centers provide daily services to both male and female applicants. Through this streamlined process, important documents such as passports, marriage certificates, driver's licenses, travel permits, vehicle number plates, birth certificates, death certificates, educational documents can be obtained quickly and efficiently under one unified system.

NSIA has made considerable progress in digitizing identity documentation. Since the official launch of the e-Tazkira program in May 2018, over 15 million electronic national ID cards have been issued nationwide more that 9 million has been issued under the current authorities' management. This includes efforts to decentralize services, with NSIA focusing on establishing centers at the district level equipped with the necessary facilities for efficient digital ID distribution. Furthermore, dedicated service centers also operate internationally, including one in the United Arab Emirates, and preparations are underway to establish a similar team in Iran to serve Afghan nationals abroad. Statistics announced by the NSIA illustrate that over 2.6 million (1.93 M and 705,000 F) e-Tazkiras were distributed over the past year (21 March 2024 to 19 March 2025).[3]

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[3] https://www.facebook.com/NSIA.GOV.AF/posts

In parallel with the modern e-Tazkira system, paper Tazkiras continue to be issued regularly to meet ongoing and increasing demand, particularly in light of the influx of returns from neighbouring host countries. NSIA announced that it issued 34,592 paper Tazkiras solely for individuals living outside the country.[4]

The below pie chart presents the distribution of Tazkiras issued across selected provinces in Afghanistan, based on data from the National Statistics and Information Authority (NSIA) official website and Facebook page, as referenced in the footnote.

Despite this governmental capacity, the scale of humanitarian needs means that support from external actors remains crucial. Notably, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and some of UNHCR's implementing partners stand out as key humanitarian organizations providing direct assistance to individuals seeking Tazkiras. This support primarily takes the form of counselling, information dissemination, legal assistance, and crucial cash support for individuals who need to travel to other provinces or to return to their areas of origin to complete the documentation process. NRC also uses initiatives such as using the power of radio to raise awareness about legal documents such as Tazkiras to reach and support more people.[5]

However, these vital efforts by humanitarian organizations are significantly under-resourced. As highlighted by NRC staff, the high costs associated with obtaining documents like e-Tazkiras, which can be 500 AFN (7.5 USD), or even 700 AFN (10 USD)[6] through some "easy service" channels, and up to 1,000 AFN(15 USD) for renewals, plus additional fees such as charges for taking photos, photocopying documents, payments to photographers for filling out forms,

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[4] https://nsia.gov.af/media-room/media/21992

[5] The NRC–ICLA team distributes a brochure at the border that contains the phone numbers of our provincial office colleagues who assist returnees.

[6] On 13 April 2023, the Taliban cabinet announced new fees for identity documents. The cost of an E-Tazkira increased from 100 Afghanis (US$1.3) under the previous government to 500 Afghanis (US$7.5). The fee for a paper Tazkira also rose from 10 Afghanis (US$0.14) to 200 Afghanis (US$3). In addition, a service charge of US$200 was set for the distribution of paper Tazkiras or birth certificates to applicants residing abroad or applying in absentia.

transportation costs, and other related expenses.) can create significant financial and administrative barriers. The added complexities in the process including the requirement for returnees to first obtain a paper Tazkira before an e-Tazkira adds additional challenges and delays for the population, particularly when accessing key services. This often means that even with NSIA's capacity, demand remains "alarmingly low" in some centers due to affordability issues and lack of awareness, forcing families to prioritize documentation for only a few members while others remain undocumented. Many returnees, especially those without prior documentation, face a burdensome two-stage process, requiring travel to their place of origin and reliance on often-unreliable community verification. Prohibitive fees and pervasive gender-specific barriers, including mahram (male guardian) requirements, disproportionately exclude vulnerable groups, particularly women and children.

With funding for humanitarian programming on the ground significantly decreasing, meeting the growing needs of millions of returnees and IDPs by humanitarian organisations has become both increasingly critical and challenging. The absence of substantial donor-scale investment continues to leave many Afghans without a Tazkira, thereby preventing them from accessing critical services and support.

"Despite the high need for e-Tazkiras – especially among returnees – and the authorities' ability to issue them nationwide, demand remains alarmingly low. Some centers are even considering closure due to minimal requests. This gap likely stems from financial constraints and limited awareness. In many cases, only one out of ten family members applies, simply because the rest cannot afford it. This is not just a service gap; it's a pressing issue of access and equity that must be urgently addressed."

Male NRC Staff from Islam Qala Border, Herat

Photo: Maisam Shafiey/ NRC, Nangarhar

Key Gaps in Response

Accessing identity documentation in Afghanistan is hindered by legal, administrative, geographical, and financial challenges. Returnees, especially those coming from Pakistan, have often lived for nearly two generations abroad and lack prior knowledge of the Tazkira and its importance. On the other hand, the government's policy aims to gradually transition from paper Tazkiras to electronic ones, progressively limiting the range of services accessible through the paper version while expanding those exclusively available through the e-Tazkira such as accessing simcards, land plots, governmental salaries and many more. Although a paper Tazkira still provides access to some very basic services – such as school enrolment or jobs – it is primarily required as a prerequisite for obtaining an e-Tazkira. Thus, to obtain an e-Tazkira, one must first obtain a paper Tazkira.

This doubles the cost and also indicates a complicated process to claim Tazkiras. Women and girls have legal and procedural requirements for a male guardian's authorization or presence during application or verification, as well as cultural restrictions on their mobility due to prevailing gender norms or security concerns, making the process even more challenging. In addition, rising fees for documents such as e-Tazkiras and passports make them unaffordable for many, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and further limiting access to services and freedom of movement for many, especially women.

Recommendations

- **Donors** must scale up funding to support organisations on the ground in responding to the increasing number of returns, enabling the expansion of legal aid services. This helps organisations in strengthening staffing at border points, deployment of mobile legal teams to return areas, and targeted case management and financial support to assist returnees and undocumented families in obtaining their Tazkiras. Enhanced legal assistance is critical in ensuring access to identity documentation, protection of rights, and reintegration into society.

- **International community** should integrate Tazkira support into durable solutions, shelter, and livelihoods programming to ensure returnees and IDPs can access essential services, employment, and legal entitlements. Addressing documentation needs within these sectors will significantly improve the effectiveness and inclusivity of assistance in Afghanistan.

- **Humanitarian actors** working in the field of documentation must conduct a new comprehensive assessment of civil registration systems, the challenges it encompasses and explore potential solutions to enhance understanding of the current situation in Afghanistan, particularly considering the influx of returnees. Through this, organisations on the ground can inform program design, fundraising efforts, and advocacy initiatives accordingly.

- **Authorities** should establish women-centered documentation initiatives that overcome gender-based access barriers for returnee women who face heightened vulnerabilities upon their return and during the displacement cycle.

- **Authorities should work on facilitating** a decentralized, and simplified policies on Tazkira obtainment, enabling individuals to obtain their national ID locally without requiring travel to other provinces. This reform is essential to improve access to civil documentation and promote inclusive service delivery.

- **Authorities, in collaboration with humanitarian organizations,** should conduct comprehensive information sessions in areas of return not zero-border points to raise awareness among returnees about the importance, benefits, and procedures of obtaining a Tazkira. Clear and accessible communication is essential to ensure that individuals understand how this document can protect their rights and enable access to services.