



Modus Operandi on Repatriation of Afghan Refugees: A New Wave Towards Peace in Pakistan

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Abstract: Pakistan had a long historical background as a host country for Afghan refugees from the 1970s Soviet-Afghan to after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan has been a host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world, with millions of Afghan refugees living in the country for decades. With the passage of time, Pakistan is facing security threats internal as well as external. So, the presence of millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has been questioned by a number of Pakistanis. They are considered a huge burden on the economy, environment and infrastructure of the country. At the time of NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, several countries and international organizations were involved in efforts to evacuate Afghan refugees and provide them with safe haven. Pakistan has also provided them shelter. Now the government of Pakistan warned and ordered forced repatriation to Afghanistan by October 2023. It planned for 1.73 million illegal Afghan people who are living without any documents. The study finds the problem of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is a social, economic and political threat to the country. However, a great deal of repatriation is another wave towards peace after the decision.

Key Words: Repatriation, Afghan Refugees, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Security

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a landlocked country located in South Asia and Central Asia, sharing borders with several neighbouring countries. Its geography is diverse, with a combination of mountains, plateaus, deserts, and fertile valleys. Afghanistan's geography has been a defining factor in its history and development, and it continues to influence the country's political, economic, and social dynamics. The topographical diversity, combined with its strategic location at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, makes Afghanistan a unique

and geopolitically important nation (Barfield, 2022). Afghanistan is often considered part of South Asia due to its location, as it shares borders with Pakistan to the east and south. These connections with South Asian countries, along with its proximity to the Indian subcontinent, have led to its inclusion in the broader South Asian region. It has historical, linguistic, and cultural links with various South Asian countries, particularly India. The Pashto and Dari languages spoken in Afghanistan are Indo-European languages and share linguistic roots with languages spoken in India. Afghanistan is a diverse and complex country,

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and it is equally linked to the broader Central Asian region due to its proximity to Central Asian countries to the north. Afghanistan's rugged mountainous terrain and historical connections to Central Asian trade routes and empires also contribute to its identification as part of Central Asia. In terms of regional organizations and geopolitics, Afghanistan has been historically associated with both South Asia and Central Asia. For example, Afghanistan was a founding member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an organization that primarily encompasses South Asian countries. It has also been involved in regional initiatives that connect it with Central Asian countries (Greene [2016](#)).

Background of Study

Refugee Crises 1979 to 1989

The refugee crisis in Pakistan from 1979 to 1989 was primarily a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent Afghan-Soviet War. This conflict led to a massive influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan, which became one of the largest and most protracted refugee crises in history. The Pakistani government, along with international humanitarian organizations, set up refugee camps in the border regions of Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Baha, [1986](#)). These camps provided shelter, food, and medical aid to the Afghan refugees. The international community, including the United Nations, played a crucial role in providing support and assistance to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Many countries and humanitarian organizations contributed to relief efforts. Decades later, Afghanistan continues to face displacement and refugee issues due to ongoing conflict, insecurity, and political instability. Many Afghan refugees who had returned to Afghanistan during periods of relative calm later became displaced once again. The Afghan refugee crisis in Pakistan was a significant humanitarian challenge that demonstrated the resilience and hospitality of the Pakistani people while highlighting the need for international cooperation and assistance in addressing such protracted

refugee situations (Bakhsh & Safdar, [2020](#)). "Since the Soviet invasion, the flow of refugees into Pakistan has been linked to the intensity of fighting and economic disruption. The peak flow was reached in early 1981 when an estimated 4700 refugees crossed daily; by 1987 the flow had slowed to several hundred a day (Dupree, [2004](#)). Although Afghan refugees crossed an international boundary in their journey to refugee camps in Pakistan, most have stayed within the cultural region of Pushtunistan"(Edwards [1986](#); Rogers [1987](#)).

Post 9/11 Refugee Influx in PAKISTAN

When air strikes on Afghanistan became imminent after the 11 September terrorist attacks in the US, Afghans started fleeing their abodes and headed towards the neighbouring countries. The initial response of the Pakistani government was to keep its border closed with Afghanistan and tighten security along the border crossings to obstruct new arrivals. For many days displaced Afghans, mostly women and children, waited in the border areas for entry into Pakistan. After the air strikes, Pakistan started allowing vulnerable people to enter its territory. Besides entry through checkpoints, there were thousands who made their way into Pakistan through unfrequented, unregistered and mostly mined mountainous routes (Bjelica, [2016](#)).

Additional Refugee Flow 2001

After, September 2021, the situation in Afghanistan was rapidly changing, and many Afghan nationals were seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, including Pakistan, due to security concerns, political instability, and the Taliban's return to power. September 2021, the situation regarding Afghan refugees was rapidly evolving due to the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan and the takeover of the country by the Taliban. The withdrawal led to a significant humanitarian crisis, and many Afghans were trying to flee the country to escape potential persecution and violence. The situation has changed since then regarding the Afghan refugee policies and actions regarding repatriation. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed

in August 2021, and this withdrawal had significant implications for the region, particularly in terms of the security and humanitarian situation.

Resettlement Programs for Afghan Refugees after NATO Withdrawal

In August 2021, the United States and its allies withdrew their military forces from Afghanistan, leading to the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the return to power of the Taliban, a militant group that had ruled

Afghanistan before the U.S. invasion in 2001. This development created a humanitarian crisis, with many Afghans fearing for their safety and seeking to leave the country. Many countries, including the United States, Canada, and several European nations, launched resettlement programs for Afghan refugees. These programs aimed to provide humanitarian assistance and refuge to Afghan individuals and families who were at risk in Afghanistan. These refugees were not "withdrawn" but rather provided with asylum and protection in other countries.

Table 1

Major concerns of the host countries

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- Security problems associated with border crossing violations, infiltration of unfavourable elements in the garb of refugees, militant nature of Afghans.
 - Economic problems relating to the burden on the economy, unemployment, diversion of developmental funds
 - Environmental concerns as a result of cattle bearing by refugees, consumption of wood, absence of cleanliness, and spread of diseases
 - Social/cultural concerns; introduction of strict code of culture and violence against women, increase in child labor
 - Drug trafficking and small arms smuggling, militarization of society
 - Changing demographic patterns, the transformation of the majority indigenous population into a minority
 - Possibility of rift between different ethnic groups as a result of resentment
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Security Threats

Security in the 'neglected' region of South Asia can be described overall as a complicated game with multiple players which began with the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and reached its height during the Afghan war. Nevertheless, one country (Afghanistan) and one movement (the Taliban) have been singled out as seemingly affecting the balance of an entire region and, as the reactions to the 11 September 2001 attack on the USA show, the entire world. The name of the threat is 'Talibanisation' and it appears that the fears are similar to those felt during the Soviet expansion in the Cold War. Today, it is feared that 'Islamic extremism' (with its radical and terrorist tendencies) is spreading across South and Central Asia (Ghufran, [2006](#)).

As security inside Pakistan may be more affected by Afghan refugees, security

elsewhere in the region began to be affected by the fact that the Taliban in Afghanistan began to grant refuge to various groups ranging from separatists and resistance fighters to terrorists such as bin Laden (Ghufran, [2008](#)). Pakistan has had longstanding security concerns related to hosting Afghan refugees, and these concerns have been a significant factor in shaping the country's refugee policies. Here are some of the key security concerns associated with hosting Afghan refugees in Pakistan (Yaseen, Jathol & Muzaffar, [2020](#)). In this situation, "Pakistan faces a variety of security threats; an internal threat, an Indian threat, and the threat from Afghanistan. In addition, a coordinated Indian, Soviet, and Afghan attack designed to fragment Pakistan along ethnic lines is also lurking in the minds of security planners. The threat scenario is indeed overwhelming. For the first time Pakistan finds itself in a three-front threat scenario which no

other South Asian state has ever experienced” (Cheema, [1983](#)) the following problems:

Militant Infiltration: One of the primary security concerns has been the potential for militants and armed groups to infiltrate Afghan refugee populations. Pakistan has experienced incidents where militants have hidden among refugees, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine refugees and those with malicious intentions.

Terrorism: The presence of Afghan refugees has been associated with an increased risk of terrorism and insurgency in Pakistan. Some Afghan refugees have been linked to terrorist attacks or have been accused of providing support to extremist groups (Jathol, [2023](#)).

Border Security: The porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been challenging to control effectively, allowing for the illegal movement of people, goods, and weapons. This lack of border control has exacerbated security concerns

Strain on Resources: Hosting a large refugee population can strain the resources of a host country. This includes issues such as pressure on public services, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, which can create tensions and contribute to security challenges

Ethnic and Sectarian Tensions: Afghanistan's diverse ethnic and sectarian landscape is reflected in its refugee population in Pakistan. These differences have sometimes led to ethnic and sectarian tensions among Afghan refugees, which can spill over into violence

Human Trafficking and Criminal Networks

The presence of a vulnerable refugee population has sometimes attracted criminal networks engaged in human trafficking, smuggling, and other illegal activities, which can also pose security risks.

Socioeconomic Implications

The socioeconomic implications of this large community of over 3 million Afghan refugees are serious and complex. Pakistan is a poor and underdeveloped country and this problem has caused and is causing serious strains on its economy. The sacrifices the people of Pakistan

are making are primarily due to humanitarian and religious compulsions. The magnitude of the tasks and the colossal problem of the Afghan refugees which Pakistan was facing and handling all alone by itself, was appreciated by the world community and consequently, a number of friendly countries including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates came forward with much-needed assistance. To help meet the humanitarian relief, some national and international voluntary organizations stepped in with their most valuable aid items. The consequences for Pakistan of the situation within Afghanistan pose not only socioeconomic but political and security problems also the influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan has had significant socio-economic implications for the country. Pakistan has been hosting Afghan refugees intermittently since the late 1970s, and these implications have evolved over time as the refugee population has grown and become more entrenched in Pakistani society. Hosting a large refugee population places a significant economic burden on the host country. The Pakistani government, as well as local communities, has had to allocate resources for refugee camps, education, healthcare, and other essential services. The presence of Afghan refugees has led to increased competition for jobs, particularly in low-skilled and informal sectors. This can affect wage levels and employment opportunities for both refugees and the local population (Hatam, [2018b](#)).

It's important to note that not all Afghan refugees pose security threats, and many are innocent civilians fleeing conflict and seeking safety. Balancing humanitarian considerations with security concerns has been a complex challenge for Pakistan and other countries hosting large refugee populations (Ashraf, Begum & Jathol, [2016](#)).

Ownership and Property in Pakistan

Another problem is that the more affluent and wealthier Afghan refugees have not only invested their wealth in various types of businesses but have also bought homes and commercial properties. Their willingness and

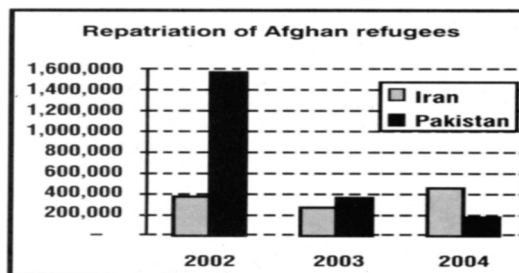
ability to pay higher rents and rates has resulted in a real estate boom on the one hand but has generated tension on the other, mainly because rents have been pushed beyond the reach of many locals. Although the Afghan refugees are not allowed to purchase immovable properties, the wealthy Afghans have been able to evade the operative rules and regulations either through utilizing loopholes within the existing rules or through employing illegal means. In addition, many Afghans have invested rather heavily in the transport business, causing a state of intense competition with the local transport interests. These developments have given birth to social tensions and frictions. Periodic clashes, though on a minor scale, have taken place between the locals and the refugees, primarily because of the high-handedness of some of the refugees. (Schmeidl, [2002](#)).

Repatriation Process 2002 and Challenges

After the end of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the prospects for repatriation of Afghan refugees increased, although the majority of Afghans seemed reluctant to go back to their homeland. Despite the apprehensions of the refugees, in 2002 a massive repatriation took place and nearly 1.6 million Afghans returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan. That, however, created more problems as the returnees faced difficult conditions in Afghanistan because of lawlessness and the effects of destruction. In addition, the arrival of a large number of uprooted people put a strain on aid agencies working in the war-ravaged country. Consequently, a considerable number of returnees went back to Pakistan. The UNHCR "realized that hasty repatriation was not a viable solution. In 2003, the agency announced a 'shift in focus on return from one of maximizing the number of returnees' to one of 'ensuring the sustainability of return'" (Hiegemann, [2014](#)). There were changes in official policies and public attitudes towards the protracted presence of Afghans in the asylum countries, making their continued stay less attractive. Thirdly, there was a relative decline in employment opportunities and

economic circumstances in Iran and Pakistan (Noor, [2006](#))

Figure 1



Source: *The UNHCR* www.unhcr.ch

Positive and Negative Consequences

Scores of people have fled Afghanistan; the bulk of refugees were received by Iran and Pakistan, as well as other parts of the world (Tober, [2007](#)) "Those who fled left behind their homes, land, possessions, and family in search of safety and a better life for themselves and their children. Most have faced the death of loved ones, poverty, and a loss of social stability, as well as resentment, blame, and discrimination in their host countries. As they attempt to rebuild their lives in other locales, their own cultural traditions are challenged and identities are re-negotiated within new religious and cultural settings. Still, others struggle to maintain the traditions and values of the Afghan culture. The complex negotiation between the struggle for maintaining cultural identity and assimilating to the host culture has a dramatic impact on cultural continuity in the face of refugees, with both positive and negative consequences" (Khan, [1982](#)). Afghan political development in Pakistan primarily refers to the presence and activities of Afghan political figures, parties, and movements within Pakistan. Afghanistan's long history of political turmoil, conflict, and instability has led to the presence of Afghan political actors and groups in neighbouring countries, including Pakistan. These actors have various goals, including advocating for their interests and participating in efforts to stabilize or resolve political conflicts in Afghanistan. Afghan political and cultural centres exist in Pakistan, which serve as hubs for Afghan

communities to engage in political and cultural activities. These centres facilitate connections with Afghan diaspora communities and domestic political developments.

Law Act and Refugee

Pakistan has dealt with refugees and asylum seekers through a combination of policies, legal frameworks, and international agreements (Schmeidl, [2002](#)). The government of Pakistan, through the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), registers refugees and provides identity documents, such as Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, to Afghan refugees. This documentation helps provide some legal protection to refugees. Afghan refugees in Pakistan have been allowed to live and work in the country under a "temporary stay" arrangement. This arrangement has been extended over the years to allow for the continued presence of Afghan refugees. After September 2021, there may have been developments in refugee policy and law in Pakistan since then. Pakistan has allowed refugees not on legal grounds but on humanitarian grounds. U.S. Invasion and War on Terror: After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the U.S. and its allies launched the War on Terror. In October 2001, they invaded Afghanistan to oust the Taliban regime and dismantle al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the 9/11 attacks. This conflict continued for nearly two decades (Khan, [2017](#)) and Pakistan has faced refugee crises since then.

Conclusion

However, After the invasions of the Soviets and the US, the influx of Afghan refugees entered neighbouring countries, Pakistan, Iran, India and other European countries. It resulted in the recommencement of repatriation of not only 'new refugees' but also the 'long stayer' refugees living there since the 1980s who had been unable to return due to constant chaos in Afghanistan on the one hand and the lack of economic resources on the other. The UNHCR played an important role in solving the problem and it was with the help of the agency that massive repatriation became possible. The

crisis also serves as a lesson for the international community that such issues, if left unattended, can create not only humanitarian problems but political, economic and social ones as well. They posed a serious security challenge to the host countries. After a long war, some Afghan refugees have returned but some are still living in above mentioned countries.

In sum, as in many political settings, migration streams can be exploited by elements from among the migrants themselves, as well as by the host society and the international community. The interesting issue in the South Asian case is that ultimately some of the players have lost control of their manipulation, to the cost of the people citizens and migrants (Ahmadi, [2016](#)).

A Modus Operandi in Author's Opinion

Even the end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989 did not result in a successful return of all Afghan refugees, although the 1990s were hailed as the "decade of repatriation" throughout the world. In order to take a comprehensive view of the refugee problem: now at the time of their departure, Pakistan and the international community will have to address these questions at this critical moment. These questions underscore the critical need for a political settlement in Afghanistan, because the internal conflict in Afghanistan continues to persist, and an intolerable and gnawing sense of uncertainty hangs over them.

Key Challenges for Afghanistan

Afghans, who have been in Pakistan for over four decades, have found ways of earning their livelihood, but being refugees they face pressures from officials and the local people in carrying out their economic activities. They all want an end to their protracted refugee situation, but the conditions back home deter their return.

- Political instability, lawlessness in Afghanistan

- The prominence of controversial political figures in Afghanistan's new governmental set-up
- Threat of Taliban in south, south-east and eastern provinces
- Lack of economic opportunities and poverty in Afghanistan
- Lack of access to land for farming
- Destruction of basic infrastructure in the country
- Access to food and drinking water in many areas
- Reports of human rights violations by coalition forces

For refugees: Once they return to their homeland, Afghans should initiate a process of reconciliation, as this alone will help them to integrate better. While reconciliation is a complicated issue and it involves the will of the government and power shareholders, returnees can play a very important role in bridging the divisions that have been created by displacement and political persecution. They should try to forgive and refrain from taking revenge against those who have been responsible for their suffering and displacement. The government should take measures to involve them in the reconstruction process so that reconciliation accelerates and peace initiatives increase.

Recommendation

Comprehensive and durable repatriation of refugees can only take place if Pakistan formulates a comprehensive policy for its own end. In the absence of such a policy, the objective of voluntary repatriation would not be achieved. It should make its stand clear so

that refugees are not left in the dark about the country's future plan

Repatriation occurs when a situation improves in the home country; unless the refugees themselves perceive an improvement in ground realities, they do not opt for return. In the case of Afghans, the political and economic situation has still not improved to the extent that all refugees would want to return. Therefore, alternative strategies need to be worked out to manage the remaining refugee population.

1. In Afghanistan, the main concerns should be regarding shelter and employment to attract them to return to their homeland in this way given priority to attract them.
2. The Afghan government should adopt a secure and integrated approach to complete repatriation durable and supportable
3. To media of the two states, should play an active role in the prominence of the difficulties regarding refugees and returnees and bringing awareness amongst the people.
4. Making the assistance situation for the departure of Afghan refugees cannot be rested only on the Pakistan government as well as Afghanistan.
5. The International community must come forward and assist the process in letter and spirit
6. Once, the repatriation is finalised, the Afghan govt. should take steps to provide them shelter in the restoration process of peace.

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