



RESEARCH PAPER

Quest to Resolve the Conundrum of Afghan Diaspora: Analyzing Problems and Exploring Viable Means of Repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

For one reason or the other, Afghanistan has been the focus of attention of international community since the last quarter of the 20th century. The Soviet occupation, Taliban takeover, the post-2001 War on Terror, and the return of the Taliban into power were the important events that turned the course of events in that most unfortunate, war-torn country. In that background, somewhat complex and dynamic patterns of migration of Afghan populace had also been observed by the neighboring countries of Iran, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Some major global organizations and donor agencies worked hard in collaboration with the relevant governments and under the patronage of United Nations for the socio-political assimilation of Afghan refugees in these countries. Pakistan, too, had to accommodate and host millions of Afghan refugees right from the Soviet invasion till the installation of current Taliban regime of 21st century but now the Government of Pakistan is trying hard to repatriate these migrants and refugees. While trying to grasp thoroughly the difficulties this challenge has posed to both the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the instant study recommends some viable means and steps for their effective and prompt repatriation to avoid any possible humanitarian crisis in the region. It finds that any forceful, hasty measure undertaken to push these refugees back into their native territory would further create instability, turmoil and chaos. This can be avoided by initiating dialogue between the governments to design a proper mechanism and timeframe for the step by step return of this huge chunk of people.

KEYWORDS Afghan Refugees, Repatriation Crisis, Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

Introduction

Due to the country's internal instability and geopolitical location, which have made it a focal point for international interventions and conflict, millions of Afghans had been forced to leave their homeland since the past forty years. The migration journey has been marked by several distinct phases, each shaped by different political and military events that continue to have lasting effects on Afghanistan and neighboring nations, especially Pakistan. In 1979, the first major influx of Afghan refugees came when the USSR attacked Afghanistan. The deadly conflict that followed the invasion forced millions of Afghans to flee, primarily to Iran and Pakistan, however, the main destination for Afghan refugees was Pakistan, which shared a lengthy border with Afghanistan. Plenty of Afghans fled to Pakistan to avoid oppressor's suppression and brutality. This refugee migration put Pakistan under extreme social, economic, and political strain the country tried to manage the unanticipated population rise while juggling its own internal problems.

After the Soviet exit in 1989, Afghanistan descended into civil war, which made the refugee issue worse. In the middle of the 1990s, when the Taliban started to take control, another wave of forced displacement began. More Afghans were forced to flee to nearby nations as a result of the Taliban's strict rule and continuously undergoing internal strife. Thousands of refugees had arrived in Pakistan by the late 1990s, the most of whom were living in appalling conditions in small shelters. When the Taliban government was overthrown in 2001 and the United States invaded Afghanistan, more attention had been paid to repatriating Afghan refugees. Although international organizations, especially the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), started extensive repatriation programs, the scenario in Afghanistan was still insecure, and the operation of returning people was extremely slow. The ongoing violence in Afghanistan made it difficult for many refugees to integrate into Afghan society.

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 marked another dramatic change in the course of events. This incident sparked a new phase in the Afghan refugee crisis since the Taliban's comeback caused a massive exodus of people and the collapse of the Afghan government in a matter of weeks. As Afghan migrants flooded across the border seeking asylum, Pakistan found itself at the center of this humanitarian disaster once more. It is worth-remembering that Pakistan had long been affected politically, socially, and economically by Afghan refugees. Under the current Taliban regime in Afghanistan, one of the biggest problems faced by both the governments i.e. Afghanistan and Pakistan is the repatriation of refugees.

Literature Review

The first mass migration was observed during the Soviet Union's occupation, while the Afghan migration movement already emerged in the middle of the 19th century. Nonetheless, records suggest that the initial wave of Afghan immigration occurred around the mid-1800s, during the then ongoing rivalry between Russia and Britain intended for regional hegemony. More than seventy Afghan families from Ghazni and Kabul migrated to Australia in 1860 with assistance from the British authorities. It took months for the Afghans to make the trek with their own camels and mules. Long travels and thirst claimed the lives of numerous families. Thus, the first Afghan population nucleus was built in Australia with British assistance (İrfani, 2018). Approximately 5,000 Hazara households moved to Iran during that time. Furthermore, the ethnic cleansing program against the Hazara ethnic group forced thousands of Hazaras to migrate to Iran under the rule of Abdurahman Khan (1880–1903), also known as the Iron-Fisted Amir (Abbasi, 2005). Afghans' propensity towards Pakistan was impacted by economic and famine-related destitution in the early 1970s. This situation demonstrated that seasonal migration into Pakistan had occurred as a result of the issues brought on by Afghanistan's dire economic circumstances. But on April 27, 1978, violence broke out in Afghanistan between the left and the right factions following the brutal takeover of the Soviet-backed Afghan Democratic People's Party, which resulted in the fall of Daoud Khan's government and the installation of a communist government. As a consequence, Pakistan became a haven for right-wing groups that the communist government was targeting during this time. By June 1979, there were 109,000 Afghan migrants living in Pakistan (Grare, 2011).

Following the groups that first arrived in Pakistan as refugees from the oppression of the communist government and their families, there was a subsequent wave of migration during the Soviet occupation and civil war. It is evident that migration has always had a role in Afghan society. In particular, since 1978, the number of Afghan migrants living overseas had significantly increased. The Cold War intensified into a fierce battle in 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The Washington government

armed Mujahideen groups fighting against the Soviet Union throughout the said occupation in order to exact revenge for the Vietnam War and stop the Soviet Union from advancing further into south. Afghanistan had thus once again been the site of the major powers' quest for dominance in the latter half of the 20th century. In Afghanistan, the nearly ten-year occupation of the Soviets had yet unseen catastrophic effects. More than a million civilians died (Sajjadi, 2018). Landmines were the reason for the loss of lives of 25,000 Afghans during the occupation. Furthermore, Afghanistan, a country whose whole economy depended on agriculture, had been forced into a cocoon due to a precipitous decline in agricultural output. Two million people had to flee the nation as a result of rising violence (Jackson, 2009).

By the end of 1979, 200,000 Afghans had gone to Iran and 400,000 had moved to Pakistan, according to United Nations (UN) estimates. The number of Afghan refugees increased to 1.9 million by the end of 1980. Afghan refugees made up the largest group of refugees worldwide with this number. The number of Afghan migrants kept rising during the occupation. It increased dramatically between 1985 and 1990, peaking at 6.2 million in both Iran and Pakistan (Colville, 1997).

Material and Methods

The qualitative research methodology will be used for this study, which draws from secondary data from historical documents, academic research articles, government reports, and case studies, to explore the patterns of migration and repatriation processes of Afghan refugees. Historically, the movement of Afghan refugees during key political periods such as the Soviet invasion, the Taliban period, and the post-9/11 era was traced. Thematic analysis is used to establish the socio-economic and political impacts of refugees on host countries like Pakistan and the after-effects of their forced repatriation. Comparative analysis is also done to estimate the effectiveness of international policies and programs in managing crises of refugees and repatriation efforts. Reports by organizations such as the UNHCR has been integrated so that the humanitarian aspects in the return of Afghan refugees can be estimated. Lastly, policy recommendations have been articulated to address challenges in a sustainable and peaceful repatriation process.

Taliban Period and Civil War

Following the start of the civil war in 1989, Afghanistan had the second-largest wave of mass migration. Afghanistan's poverty rate had risen due to the war's catastrophic aftermath. Afghans were forced to move during the civil war, when they suffered the most from poverty and brutality in their daily lives. After the Soviet occupation ended, around 1.5 million refugees came back to their homeland. Roughly 4 million Afghans had returned from Iran and Pakistan by 1997. At the same time, as the conflict spread throughout Afghanistan, the level of violence increased and more people left the country (Houte, 2016). The Taliban first appeared in Kandahar in 1994, as the civil conflict in Afghanistan threw the country into anarchy (Mujda, 2003). The Taliban punished suspected offenders harshly and removed the checkpoints that the Mujahideen commanders had set up, keeping their vow to put an end to the carnage and restore order. The majority of the eastern, western, and southern provinces were under the Taliban's authority by September 1995, and they eventually overran Kabul, the nation's capital, in 1996. The "Islami Emarat," which the Taliban imposed after quickly seizing the majority of Afghanistan, lasted for five years (Jackson, 2009). Under the Taliban, it was forbidden to watch television or listen to music. Similarly, women were not allowed to work outside of the healthcare industry and girls were not allowed to attend school. The civil war-related surge of mass migration was also sparked by the Taliban's invasion of the nation (Oğuz., 1999). In order to save their lives,

the UN Security Council temporarily removed its officials from Afghanistan after enforcing sanctions on the Taliban government. The nation's economy crashed during this time, leaving it totally reliant on foreign assistance. Afghanistan had been reduced to a wasteland, practically roasted in its own grease, under the Taliban regime. People were condemned under the Taliban government, which barred all foreigners from entering the country. Thousands of people only departed Afghanistan in 2000 as a result of the harsh wars in the country's north and the drought-related poverty (Dashti, 2022). According to UNHCR estimates, around 172,000 Afghans moved to Pakistan in 2000 alone. However, the majority of Kabul's educated elite—including government workers, doctors, and educators—flew to Pakistan once the Taliban took control of the city. During this time, the brain-drain that begun during the Soviet takeover persisted. But in December 2000, the UN Security Council decided to put more sanctions on the Taliban as a result of the US and Russia's actions, while the UN's donor nations, and other assistance organizations were having difficulty reaching out to the civilians in Afghanistan who were in need of humanitarian supplies (Ruiz, 2004).

The Hazara minority, who were Shia Muslims, were the group most impacted by the severe policies of the Taliban. However, when pressure mounted during the Taliban era, hundreds of thousands of educated and urbanized middle-class Afghans were forced to flee their homeland particularly Hazaras and other members of the Shia faith, experienced severe prejudice during this time (Jackson, 2009). Due to security concerns, many Hazara families were compelled to migrate inside the country during this time, while many others were forced to leave. In addition, a significant influx of ethnic Uzbeks migrated when the Taliban came to power in 1996. For fear of persecution, a large number of young people—including numerous government leaders and their families in the northern region—were forced to migrate to Iran. Over time, the presence of some family members in Iran also inspired other people to go there. A large number of Afghans went to neighboring countries during this time, while a smaller number migrated to western nations. Fifteen thousand Afghans applied for refuge in EU countries between 1990 and 2000 (Monsutti, 2006). A new wave of outbound movement occurred until 2000 as a result of the drought that occurred between 1998 and 2001 and the continuous unrest in the nation. One million individuals were internally displaced during these years, while the number of refugees abroad increased to six million once again (IDPs). However, the international community had kept cutting back on its support for Afghan refugees moved into neighboring countries, even as the number of Afghan migrants rises. Without the support of the international community, Pakistan and Iran adopted harsher policies against migrants from Afghanistan (Houte, 2016). Famine and drought, in addition to hostilities and bloodshed, significantly contributed to increase migration rate. It is pertinent to recall that Afghanistan is a landlocked country with very little precipitation and a completely arid environment. Afghanistan had a total of 7.3 million hectares of arable land that could be farmed, both irrigated and dry. Only 3.4 million hectares of the total area had been put to use for farming, though. Of the total cultivated area, 2.3 million hectares were irrigated, while about a million were fed by rainfall (Persian, 2021). The agricultural and livestock sectors accounted for more than 80% of Afghanistan's GDP, yet the country experienced hunger and drought every year. Families' livelihoods were threatened by drought, particularly those whose primary source of income was agriculture and who typically resided in rural areas. As a result, there was a rise in poverty throughout the country. Between 1999 and 2010, Afghanistan experienced one of the worst droughts in its history, having disastrous effects on the populace (Dashti, 2021). As a result, in Afghanistan, drought had a big impact on the rise in both internal and foreign migration. More than 2 million people fled due to the country's most recent severe droughts and moved into neighboring provinces (Dashti, 2022).

Issues after War on Terror

After it was discovered that the people responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks were in Afghanistan, the US attacked the country and overthrew the Taliban regime, which had been ruling over there for around five years. The US military engagement in Afghanistan in 2001 resulted in the departure of nearly 300,000 civilians. On the other hand, between 2002 and 2008, 4.3 million Afghan migrants—mostly from Pakistan and Iran—returned to their homeland under the terms of the Voluntary Return Program offered by the then Afghan government. In UNHCR's history, it constituted the greatest number of refugee return movements. But security issues and the Taliban's later comeback halted the trend of repatriation (Verduijn, 2020).

UNHCR's capacity in Afghanistan had been severely impaired by the unanticipated mass return of Afghans in the new age. During this time, UNHCR was forced to stop providing aid to families of refugees who were returning home. Western nations, who donated billions of dollars in aid during the invasion of Afghanistan, were now hesitant to assign the money required for repatriation of Afghan refugees. Nevertheless, Australia, England, and other western nations preferred to send refugees to Afghanistan even though the country was unable to completely guarantee peace and stability (Scalettari, 2023). Nonetheless, the post-2001 administration in Afghanistan was unable to come up with sensible measures to stop the increasing rates of unemployment and poverty within the country due to return of refugees and migrants. Due to pervasive corruption in government institutions, millions of dollars in foreign aid provided by the international community in the new era did not reach the general populace. The nation was experiencing the worst economic and social crises as a result of underdevelopment and years of turmoil and war. This circumstance greatly accelerated emigration (Sajjadi, 2018). After the effective transfer of security responsibilities from the United States and NATO to the Afghan security forces, there was a notable surge of refugees moving back to Afghanistan. Afghanistan was the second-most immigration-bound country in the world in 2011 with 2.6 million registered refugees; in 2014, the country's escalating conflict and security concerns again led to a spike in migration from Afghanistan (Garrote, 2017). Around 300,000 Afghans were resettling in the US in 2014; at least 150,00 went to the UAE; while a smaller number went to Canada, Australia, and other European nations (Houte, 2016). Five million individuals in Afghanistan were forced to leave their homes over the course of the last two years owing to continued violence, according to the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations' (MORR) 2020 report. On the other hand, in 2020 alone, over a million Afghan migrants made their way back to their homeland. The number of returns had been increased as a result of inadequate health care facilities and the inability to access health care system during the Covid-19 outbreak in countries like Iran and Pakistan. In the case of Iran, the situation was worse where issues like excessive compensation, unregistered Afghan patients, and failure to access healthcare facilities by the sick migrants, coupled with economic sanctions towards Iran or the recent decline in the value of the Iranian currency as compared to other foreign currencies, led to a surge in Afghan migration from Iran to Turkey. Moreover, the year 2020 marked a return of 831,696 Afghan migrants from the Islamic Republic of Iran, 8,223 from Pakistan, and 11,929 from Turkey to Afghanistan. One million people had made their way back to the nation by 2020 (Loft, 2021).

The Case of Second Taliban Term

After the US announced its full withdrawal from Afghanistan on July 22, 2021, the Kabul government crumbled and was overthrown by the Taliban. The USA was only able to fend off the Taliban for three weeks, despite its declaration that they could keep the Kabul government in place for at least three months. Former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani left the country on August 15, the day the Taliban reached Kabul's gates. This made it possible for the Taliban to take over in Afghanistan for the second period in their long history after 20 years. Thousands more Afghans left their country of origin for political, economic, and security reasons after the Taliban assumed control of it, reviving the country's migratory crisis (Dashti, 2022). After 20 years, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, which led to another wave of migration from the country. The country's already-existing economic crisis worsened and poverty rose after the Taliban arrived. These events compelled Afghans who were suffering from starvation and poverty to relocate hence there had been a notable surge in the number of migrants heading to neighboring countries like Pakistan and Iran from Afghanistan. In spite of the UN's appeal for neighboring countries of Afghanistan to remain open to Afghan refugees in the wake of these developments, countries like Iran, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan maintained border closures to keep out migrants. According to Uzbekistan, Afghanistan's northern neighbor, the key transit point was closed "to ensure security" and was not expected to reopen. Similar declarations were made by Pakistan and Iran that they were unable to handle the increasing number of Afghan refugees. Both nations' officials advised newly arrived migrants to remain in camps closer to the border until they could return to Afghanistan. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, stated that it will only temporarily house refugees and assist in transferring Afghans to third countries. Although Tajikistan's administration had previously stated that it will take in up to 100,000 refugees, it was unclear if any had really been let entry (BBC, 2021).

The Repatriation Process: Implications for Pakistan

The forced return of an estimated 317,000 Afghan refugees to their homeland in 2023 represented a dramatic shift in Pakistan's ties with the Afghan diaspora. This difficult trip had many important ramifications for Pakistan and Afghanistan, including changes in the economy, in social and cultural norms, and worries about the stability of the area (Tribune, 2023). Undoubtedly, some of Pakistan's resource constraints would be lessened with the departure of a sizable refugee population. It also begged concerns about the economic vacuum that would be left behind and how it might affect Pakistan's standing and power in Afghanistan. Trade, agriculture, and small companies might also have to be impacted by major changes in labor dynamics in the informal economy, where a large number of Afghan refugees worked. A seamless economic transition depended on strategic planning and coordination, which called for measures that assisted the impacted industries. The integration of Afghan refugees into Pakistani communities over time had enhanced and enriched the cultural fabric of the country. Both the receiving communities and the returning refugees faced difficulties as a result of their abrupt return. In order to resolve any potential conflicts and enable a seamless repatriation of returnees into Afghan society, social integration initiatives were crucial (Khan, 2016). Important steps in this process included acknowledging the cultural aspects of refugee situations and implementing inclusive policies that would promote social cohesion. Although security concerns were the primary driving force behind the compelled return, the stability of the entire region might also be impacted. Massive operations of population movements had the potential to upset the delicate power balance in South Asia due to its complex geopolitical landscape.

Concerns were expressed about the potential impact of the compelled repatriation on local security and overseas relations. The use of negotiation tactics and international

collaboration would be necessary to navigate these worries about safety and ensure that the repatriation process promoted rather than undermined regional stability. Beneficial reintegration of returnees into Afghan society was essential. Afghanistan had the difficult task of providing homes for a sizable population that had been uprooted for several years. Initiatives for social and financial rehabilitation needed a lot of money, outside help, and collaborative efforts. Pakistan's role was to facilitate a smooth transition and collaborate with Afghanistan to ensure the well-being of the individuals that had showed up (Ahmadi, 2016).

The compelled departure of Afghan refugees raised ethical issues regarding their rights and welfare. International organizations like the United Nations emphasized the importance of voluntary and honorable return, monitoring closely for violations of human rights, such as the freedom to request asylum and protection from expulsion. Rules and measures related to repatriation should be guided by a human-centric approach to situations involving displacement, while ensuring that the process conformed with international charitable requirements. The extradition process emphasized how important it was for Pakistan and Afghanistan to cooperate professionally. Addressing the intricate ramifications required cooperation, direct interaction, and accountability together (Kurnia, 2022).

Reasons and Impacts of Forced Repatriation

While countries welcomed refugees when they were in need, they would neither expel them or discontinue providing asylum and force them to return residence until the refugees would commit anti-state crimes or cause issues for the host state. The forced return of Afghan refugees in 2023 marked a significant shift from Pakistan's long-standing open-door policy. This policy change was influenced by shifting political dynamics, economic pressures, and security concerns. The deteriorating safety situation and the potential for radical groups within the refugee population caused the Pakistani government to reassess its position. The fear that refugee camps would become hotbeds of instability and radicalization led to the decision to forcibly repatriate Afghan migrants (Mulk, 2020). Moreover, Pakistan's monetary resources were under strain due to the prolonged inflow of Afghan migrants. The price-tag of housing a large refugee population played a major role in the decision to go back home. The rivalry for jobs and resources between Afghan refugees and the settled population increased communal conflicts. The idea of forced return was intended to address the financial challenges brought on by the refugees' prolonged stay (Roehrs, 2015). The policy of forced repatriation had been influenced by changes in politics in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Domestically, perceptions of Afghan refugees as a potential security threat and an economic burden shaped political decisions as well as public mood. Internationally, shifting ties between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the larger world community influenced the political dynamics of the region. Forcible return of Afghan refugees was decided upon after taking into account geopolitical alignments, diplomatic considerations, and worries about regional stability (Haque, 2024). Now that they had abandoned their jobs and homes, they became an anti-Pakistan force in Afghanistan when they went home. Pakistan must set up a suitable system for their full return (Bahiss, 2023).

Policy Suggestions for Peaceful Return

- A comprehensive set of policies is necessary to address the difficult issue of the forced return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. The Government of Pakistan must address the economic, social, and humanitarian aspects in order to guarantee a peaceful and long-lasting repatriation process. The purpose of the following

suggestions is to help policymakers create an atmosphere that would benefit for the welfare of Afghan returnees as well as host countries, particularly Pakistan.

- In Afghanistan, desire of socioeconomic development, must be promoted. Efforts to enhance economic opportunities, reduce poverty, and resolving the problem of marginalization need to be supported by several communities.
- Friendly engagement and cooperation are needed between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Cooperative projects, dialogue forums, and collective efforts can promote regional stability. International and regional bodies can assist in the resolution of cross-border conflicts, foster mutual understanding between parties involved and allow for a well-coordinated plan for their repatriation. Human rights need to be treated on par.
- The proper and willing return of Afghan refugees need to comply with international ethical standards. Collaboration with civil society groups and the UN in tracking and defending the freedoms of individuals can prevent any form of abuse through the repatriation process. The reintegration of Afghan returnees depends on socioeconomic assistance programs.
- International agencies must set up sound monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of repatriation policies. The socioeconomic conditions of returnees regularly need to be assessed, their problems identified and policy adjusted by responding to comments from these groups and regional as well as international organizations.
- Developing cross-border economics through programs designed to enhance trade, build infrastructures, and create employment between Afghanistan and Pakistan may be taken into consideration to encourage cooperation and mutual respect by the two sides. Initiatives to raise public awareness can dispel misconceptions, inform local populations about the repatriation procedure, and promote social cohesion. Involving local leaders, neighborhood bloggers, and media outlets in the communication of information can help foster understanding between host communities.
- Establishing legal protection to citizenship, rights over property, and public services must be enacted for returnees. International support and collaboration should be demanded for repatriation purposes. A lot of coordination with donor countries and international organizations and NGOs is necessary in order to build funds for all the reintegration programs that are going on, humanitarian aid, and the infrastructure development.
- Through these policy recommendations, we would be able to create an environment that is conducive to efficient return and successful reintegration of Afghan refugees, thus enhancing stability and prosperity, but most importantly, upholding human dignity.

Conclusion

The management of the refugee crisis in Pakistan has been greatly aided by government measures, which ranged from offering humanitarian aid to trying to integrate refugees through programs for work and education. But because of the size of the refugee population and the scarcity of resources available in Pakistan, the efficacy of these

measures could not be fully availed. It requires a multifaceted and multidimensional approach to permanently resolve the perennial problem of refugees. Furthermore, in order to reduce social tensions, it is crucial to involve international organizations in this repatriation process which would provide financial and logistical help as well as increase communication between host populations and refugee communities. In order to handle immediate humanitarian needs and long-term socioeconomic integration, policy frameworks must be flexible. The abovementioned recommendations are required to be implemented thoroughly.

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