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Abstract

Afghan refugees in Pakistan especially in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan have long been a source of security concern. After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, millions of Afghanistan refugees were seeking refuge in Pakistan. The reaction at first was sympathetic, but in the long run, the sustainability of these immigrants changed into manifold security problem. This research paper looks at the security concerns that are connected to the presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan with regard to the military and non-military dimensions of security. Some of the issues that were discussed include the rise of insurgency in the refugee camps, how the refugees groups may become a breeding pool of extremists, and how the Afghan refugees have contributed to the rise in cross-border militancy.

Keywords: Afghan Refugees, Security Concerns, Insurgency, Cross-Border Militancy

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Return of Refugees as a Security Strategy: Afghan Refugees and Border Politics in Pakistan



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Abstract

Afghan refugees in Pakistan especially in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan have long been a source of security concern. After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, millions of Afghanistan refugees were seeking refuge in Pakistan. The reaction at first was sympathetic, but in the long run, the sustainability of these immigrants changed into manifold security problem.

This research paper looks at the security concerns that are connected to the presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan with regard to the military and non-military dimensions of security. Some of the issues that were discussed include the rise of insurgency in the refugee camps, how the refugees groups may become a breeding pool of extremists, and how the Afghan refugees have contributed to the rise in cross-border militancy.

Keywords: *Afghan Refugees, Security Concerns, Insurgency, Cross-Border Militancy*

Introduction

The issue of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan represents one of the longest rumbling and most rather complex refugee crises in modern history. Since the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, Pakistan has been receiving hundreds of thousands of refugees from Afghanistan, with peak numbers reaching over three million in the 1980s. Today, although the refugee population is lower, Pakistan continues to host more than one and a half million registered Afghan refugees, with an additional number of unregistered Afghans estimated to be residing in the country, as well (Hussain, 2024).

This long-standing crisis is not a matter of humanitarian concern alone but has become a full-fledged part of Pakistan's national security strategy and a broader geopolitical dynamics of South-Asian region. The repatriation of the Afghan refugees has become a dominant issue in the border politics in Pakistan. The refugee camps along Pakistan's border areas - especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan - are now recognized as not only temporary settlements, but as political and military sites where different Afghan groups [the Taliban and other insurgents] sought sanctuary and aid (Begum, 2022). From the outset, the complex interplay of humanitarian obligations, security concerns, and regional power politics has been integral to the Pakistani government's approach to Afghans in need. As the Pakistani government has struggled to balance the considerations of providing for a large refugee population and its own national security concerns, it has frequently used the repatriation of the Afghan refugees as a tool in political and security maneuvering, both at home and abroad.



In post-9/11 scenario the return of Afghan refugees has taken on even greater importance to the national security and border policy of Pakistan. The presence of a large, long-term refugee population, combined with a volatile Afghan border, led Pakistan to re-evaluate its open-door policy (Sohail Anwar, 2021). While the repatriation of refugees has always been framed as a humanitarian issue, it has become increasingly clear that the process of repatriation is heavily enmeshed in security concerns. Pakistan has advocated the repatriation of the Afghan refugees, both because it believes repatriation would decrease the security threat posed by militants among the refugee communities and because it wants to show the international community that it is committed to the post-conflict reconstruction of Afghanistan. The Pakistani government has maintained that the presence of refugees in its territory is responsible for instability and is spoiling national and regional security (Khan, 2014).

Along with this, there are far-reaching political implications of the refugee repatriation. Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have never been cordial at all, particularly concerning the question of the Durand Line, the colonial-level border between the two nations (Siân Herbert, 2024). It is in this complex political context that the return of Afghan refugees has not only become a domestic concern, it is also an integral aspect of Pakistan's foreign policy and plays a significant role in its relations with Afghanistan and with the international community.

From the point of view of the Afghan refugees themselves the repatriation process offers many challenges. Refugees who have lived in Pakistan for decades have built livelihoods, businesses and social connections. Many refugees have married and begun families and become part of the local community. In 2024, 65 petitions were filed in Peshawar High Court to get Pakistani citizenship on the basis of marriage to Pakistani citizens (Shah, 2024). For those who remain in Afghanistan, it is returning to the realities of a post-conflict society still struggling to deal with political instability, poor infrastructure, and a lack of basic services. Many of these refugees are now returning to Afghanistan, however the Afghan government, with the support of international aid, has been unable to adequately provide the resources needed to house and integrate returning refugees. This has resulted in a situation where many refugees are not willing to repatriate and rather prefer to continue living in Pakistan where they are at least guaranteed the basic survival needs.

The issue of repatriation of refugees is then a delicate balancing act. Pakistan's government sees the return of the refugees as a means of improving its national security, reducing the influence of the militant groups. However, the repatriation process has not been entirely successful, mainly because of the continuing insecurity in Afghanistan, as well as the reluctance to return home to an unstable environment by refugees. The Pakistani government has been criticized, both from domestic and international sources, for not doing enough to satisfy the humanitarian needs of refugees and at the same time it seeks to use their return as a tool in securing political and security interests (Zaheer Abbas Chohan, 2021).

The complexity of refugee repatriation as a security measure is additionally threatened by international participants. The United Nations and other international agencies have played a pivotal role in assisting in the repatriation, economic support and reintegration efforts in Afghanistan. However, these efforts have often been impeded by the absence of adequate coordination between the Afghan government, Pakistan and the international community (Popalzay, 2024). The slow pace of repatriation has left Pakistan in a position where it has been trying to balance its security concerns with its humanitarian obligations.

This paper aims to discuss the role of return of Afghan refugees as security measure for Pakistan. It will discuss the political, social and economic implications of repatriation for Pakistan and Afghanistan, and critically evaluate the security approaches being adopted by the Pakistani government and the regional politics behind it. Through an analysis of the refugee policies of

Pakistan, this paper will offer some insight into how refugee repatriation has come to be a central issue for Pakistan's national security strategy and border politics.

Security Concerns Linked to Afghan Refugee Presence in Pakistan

The issue of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is not a new one and has had implications on national/regional security. At least millions of Afghanistan refugees have been seeking shelter in Pakistan since the Soviet Union invaded the country in 1979, particularly in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. Although the initial response to the refugee crisis has always been the reaction of sympathy and support, as decades have passed by, the continued arrival of Afghani refugees has become a multipronged security problem to Pakistan. The strategic location of the country in the intersection of the Central Asian region and the South Asian region, and the framed relationship it has had with Afghanistan has made it a key contributing factor to the security situation in the region.

This section will discuss the security concerns regarding the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan but will focus on the military and non-military components of security. Among the issues that have been analysed includes the emergence of insurgent activities in the refugee camps, how the refugee population can turn out to be a reservoir of extremism, and the involvement of the Afghan refugees in cross-border militancy. The paper will also discuss how these security issues have impacted the domestic policy of Pakistan, its relation with Afghanistan and how it has affected its geopolitical standing in the region at large.

Militarization of Refugee Camps

The militarization of Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan is a complex problem that has far-reaching consequences in regards to the security not only of the region but also of human rights and humanitarian challenges related to the refugee crisis. Since the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, millions of Afghan refugees have crossed into Pakistan to take refuge, especially in Pakistan's border areas (Amdadullah Baloch, 2017). Initially, these camps were designed for people fleeing conflict to safely and efficiently have a place to live. However, over the decades, many of these refugee camps have become militarized and turned into breeding grounds for insurgent activity and are a source of instability in the region (Senior Pak Official Claims Afghan Refugee Camps are 'Safe Havens For Terrorists', 2016). The transformation of refugee camps from areas of humanitarian aid to areas of conflict and militarization has been driven by a variety of factors, including the geopolitical interests of various actors, the continuation of the Afghanistan conflict, and the porous nature of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

The first large-scale period of militarization was the period of the Russian-Soviet war in Afghanistan in 1979-1989 when Pakistan played an important role to support Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet occupation. Pakistan's support for these resistance groups that were often trained and equipped with the help of the United States and other international allies resulted in the proliferation of weapons and military activities in the refugee camps. Many of the refugees who had fled Afghanistan were placed in camps along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, where they were not only given the shelter and humanitarian assistance they needed, but also made victims of the political and military actions of insurgent refugees. As the war in Afghanistan escalated, various Afghan factions including the mujahideen used the refugee camps as bases for recruitment, training and launching cross-border attacks.

The military dynamics of these camps were intensified with the growth of the Taliban in the 1990s. During this period, many refugee camps had become hotspots for recruitment and radicalization of young Afghan men who were either born in the camps or arrived there at a young age. The camps,

especially those in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, formed a rich base for the insurgent groups to radicalize refugees, many of whom had grown up in the camps in the face of the hardships of war, poverty and insecurity. In this environment, militant groups such as the Taliban had comparatively little difficulty recruiting adherents from among the refugee populations, and gave them a sense of themselves, their purpose, and the promise that they would be part of the fight to liberate Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the porosity of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan played a large role in how much the refugee camps became militarized. The border, commonly known as the Durand Line, is a disputed border, with lax border enforcement, and refugees and militants are able to enter and cross freely between the two countries. This absence of border control has given insurgents relative freedom of movement, and has allowed them to operate from the camps as safe areas, supply depots and logistical support zones. Militants from the various Afghan factions used the refugee camps to launch attacks into Afghanistan or Pakistan, and in some cases even to move weapons and fighters across the border.

Gradually, the military heightening of the camps occurred when the war in Afghanistan turned out to be even less resolvable and the role of Pakistan in the region became even more problematic. The Pakistan security forces became increasingly engaged in infiltrating and monitoring the refugee communities, particularly in those locations where militant groups were known to thrive. This had generated security concerns in the Pakistani government, as such, the government implemented measures to restrict the strength of insurgent groups. These involved military missions to overturn the camps of the militant groups, increased surveillance missions and strategies to avert the propagation of the extremism among the refugee people. Nevertheless, such measures usually did not achieve success and the camps were highly politicized, and the insurgents still worked out of these communities.

Another most salient fact pertaining to the militarization of the refugee camps was that such spaces were zones of political struggle. The camps, which were supposed to provide protection to refugees, turned out to be the battlefields on ideological matters. This was particularly the case in the emergence of the Taliban during the 1990s, who hoped to win over Afghan refugees in Pakistan by giving them an alternative vision of governance and justice. The Taliban's success in mobilization among the refugees was not merely an expression of the Taliban's skill to tap into the grievances of the refugee population but also an expression of the failure of the Pakistani government and the international community in providing a long term solution to the refugee crisis.

In recent years, some efforts have been made by the Pakistani government to address the militarization of the refugee camps by promoting the repatriation of Afghan refugees voluntarily to Afghanistan. The Pakistani government has defended the repatriation of refugees on the grounds that it is needed to lessen the threat to the country's security from militant groups operating in the camps and to advance regional stability. However, the process of repatriation has been slow and many refugees are reluctant to return to Afghanistan due to the ongoing violence, instability, and lack of basic services in their home country. Moreover, the repatriation process has also been complicated by political tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the countries having different views about how to treat and repatriate refugees.

Cross-Border Militancy and the Role of Refugees in Security Threats

In Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, transnational insurgency has been among the most dire security issue in the two countries and the refugees in Afghanistan have been prominent in the springing of such concerns. Both the states have been struggling to possess the respective space as a result of the permeability of the boundary and the long history of the presence of millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Although the formative location of the conflict traces back to the

Soviet invasion (although downplayed later) in Afghanistan, the fact that these refugees have resided in their Pakistani homeland throughout the decades has made the security issue in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and FATA problematic. It is added to this is the presence of insurgent factions such as the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other militant groups who have in the past used the border region to give a foothold of operation.

Being oftentimes in camps, or in towns established around the border, the Afghan refugees have been susceptible to exploitation by the militant groups who view them as either a base of operations, or as a source of recruiting new members. The insurgency activities of some groups of refugees have been co-opted, and others have been radicalized in the camps due to harsh socio-political and economic situations in the camps. As an example, young people, especially young refugees, are a popular phenomenon in which the frustration experienced in life in the host country has made access to education and economic opportunities coupled with insecurity become a channel to relieve all these risks. The insurgent groups have taken advantage of these weaknesses to recruit fighters among the refugees and deploy them in cross-border militancy, which consequently continues the vicious cycle of violence.

Refugee camps are intended to be temporary refugee settlements, they have also been turned into strongholds for insurgent forces who can spread in the enviable cheap inactivity around these camps. Most of the refugee population was unaware that they were living in close proximity to militant groups or insurgent fighters who were actively operating inside these camps, posing further challenges in meeting Pakistan's security challenges. This situation created a security dilemma for the Pakistani state who tried to manage the movements of the refugee populations, while at the same time preventing militant groups from using these populations as a bridgehead for conducting cross-border operations.

In addition to mobilizing fighters, insurgent groups recruited among refugee populations, who could function as a logistical base for the insurgent groups to organize operations and transport weapons, fighters, and materials across the border. The closeness of these Afghan refugee camps to insurgent sanctuaries inside of Afghanistan meant that militants could pass into Pakistan easily, with either the complicity of local informants, or sympathetic populations within the refugee communities. Recurring to refugees as a result of their first-hand knowledge of war's cruelty, it is said that refugees sometimes supported would-be terrorists (whether voluntarily, or involuntarily), pushing the tides of violence across borders.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan border, or the Durand Line as it is known, has been a subject of dispute between the two countries for a long time. The absence of any kind of strong border infrastructure and hilly mountainous topography has facilitated the easy passage of insurgent groups and militants across the border. This mobility is of overriding concern to Pakistan who are concerned that the insurgent groups can now slip into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan areas that are already prone to sectarian violence, ethnic strife and political unrest. The presence of Afghan refugees on this border has made securing these areas more difficult as it becomes difficult to argue the difference between refugees and insurgents. Many militants were already well infiltrated into the refugee population and Pakistani security forces were afraid that pushing to drive them out would provoke the alienation of all the refugees.

For Pakistan, the influx of militants from Afghanistan, hinged on the presence of refugees inside its borders, has proven to be of great significance in destabilizing her internal security. The emergence of Taliban and then other militant groups following the US-led intervention in Afghanistan created a volatile situation during which the militants were able to use the situation for their own purposes. The border area became a theater of conflict for many groups, with both Afghan and Pakistani forces trying to determine the flow of militants. The Pakistani military in the face of the seriousness of the security threat has undertaken repeated operations in these border

areas in order to rid them of insurgent elements and this, in turn, has led to confrontations with the militants who utilize the refugee camps as sanctuaries.

Such cross-border militancy has also resulted in political friction between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Afghanistan has for long levelled the allegations that Pakistan is abetting the Taliban and other insurgent elements operating across its border region. Pakistan in turn has accused Afghanistan of not taking sufficient action to prevent militants crossing into Pakistan. The refugee population, particularly in the border region, has become a cause of diplomatic tension, as both sides accuse the other of failing to control the activities of militant groups. The problem of Afghan refugees has been politicized because both states see the refugee problem within a wider security system in the region: many times, they use the presence of refugees as a bargaining chip in their bilateral relations.

In conclusion, Afghan refugees in cross-border militia formation is a complex security problem for Pakistan. The close proximity of refugees to insurgent groups and their direct or indirect participation in militancy has resulted in a volatile security situation in the bordering areas of Pakistan. While initially conceived as places of respite, the refugee camps have been sites of radicalization and mobilization as radicals used the refugee camps to pursue their agenda. Afghan refugees, particularly in the border areas, have facilitated the activities of the insurgent groups and so the militancy, instability and insecurity has further increased. Cross-border militancy and its connection with Afghan refugees can be dealt with through not only strict border security measures and vigilance along refugee camps but also a comprehensive regional approach to border security that deals with the root causes of the conflict in Afghanistan and security issues in Pakistan.

Refugee Repatriation: A Security Imperative

The return of the Afghan refugees has been made a national security priority by the Pakistani government. Repatriation has been promoted as a means of clearing the border areas of Afghan refugees, and in the process reducing the possibility of militant groups exploiting refugee populations in order to logistically support them, recruit from them or train them. Pakistan's security approach has been to gradually repatriate the refugees, though the process has been complicated by the instability in Afghanistan and the unwillingness of refugees to return.

The government of Pakistan has frequently tried to use the repatriation process for two security goals. First, the government wants to thin the ranks of the refugees in the border areas so as to remove what it considers would be a potential hotbed of militancy. Second, Pakistan has been using refugee repatriation as a means of helping to reinforce its political and diplomatic stance in regional security matters. By supporting the repatriation of Afghan refugees, Pakistan has sought to show that it is invested in Afghanistan's recovery in its aftermath and also to ease the burden of having such a large population of refugees to its own security.

The international community, as manifest through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 1999), has contributed a great deal in making the return of refugees a reality. However, the main issue from Pakistan's point of view continues to be the security ramifications of the presence of refugees, and much of Pakistan's endeavors has been focused around addressing the issues. Pakistan has justified the repatriation as a required step in ensuring the safety and stability of its own borders as the continued presence of refugees within Pakistan's borders could give militants the belief and support they need to operate.

The Political Dimensions of Refugee Return

The repatriation of Afghan refugees has been an extremely politically sensitive issue which not only has international importance, but it also openly disturbed the Afghan government and Pakistan's

government. The geopolitics of the return is affected by a number of factors, from the changing security in Afghanistan to the diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Repatriation does not merely entail the return of people to their country of origin, but also involves the interplay of larger political, social, and economic factors that have an overwhelming influence on the results of this return.

One of the main political considerations regarding the return of Afghan refugees is that of instability when it comes to Afghanistan itself. Although the number of refugees has gradually gone down during the years, a large amount of refugee population still reluctant to go back due to security and economic challenges in Afghanistan and the ongoing conflict. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, the government's collapse not only drastically changed the political situation, but it also brought up issues regarding the possibility and the security of repatriation movements. On the other hand, the fear of the persecution, insecurity, and unclear future prospects in Afghanistan are also some of the main reasons why many refugees are not willing to go back. These issues have resulted in a delicate political situation, in which the security and well-being of retreating refugees have proved difficult to achieve for both Afghanistan's interim government and international organizations such as the United Nations (UN).

Pakistan as host of the largest number of Afghan refugees for decades is a vital political player in the refugee return equation. In most cases, the problem of Afghan refugees has been used as a political bargaining tool in the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. While Pakistan has been a shelter to millions of refugees since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the political discourse led about Afghan refugees has varied in accordance with the nature of bilateral ties. At other times refugees have been viewed as a drain on Pakistan's resources, especially when the government has been mired in internal political and economic crises.

Additionally, there cannot be doubt that the economic and social effect of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan is drastic toward the host communities. Many Pakistani citizens are looking at an increasing number of refugees as a strain on the local facilities, namely employment, healthcare, and education. The question of refugees is among those that raise such concerns- that, some of the political groups tend to reference the availability of Afghan refugees to argue that it would be pushing Pakistan to its constraint resources. This phrase has been used in the past to gain popular political endorsement for these policies, especially when relations between the two countries are becoming more strained. However, as well, there is acknowledgement within Pakistan that the refugees have added to local economies, especially in the border regions, through trade and work. Nevertheless, the narrative behind the topic of refugees has the tendency to fluctuate around the general state of politics of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

International actors are also influential in the political nature of Afghan refugee return. Organizations such as the UNHCR have worked in conjunction with the governments of both countries to organize voluntary repatriation programs, but their efforts have been of mixed success. While the international community has attempted to financially and logistically support the promotion of the returns, it has also been criticized for not providing the security and stability necessary for safe returns. Third, the political interests of international actors, particularly those interested in the Afghan conflict, also have impacted on the cause of the Afghan refugee return discourse. For the western countries that have been closely involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the return of refugees has sometimes been seen as part of the process of reconstructing the country. However, this has been quite often in contradiction with realities on the ground, where the lack of infrastructure and security conditions in Afghanistan makes the reintegration of refugees very challenging.

The Afghan refugee return also has its political aspects, the issue of reintegration into Afghan society. Many of the refugees have been displaced for decades, which means they have lost contact

with their homeland's customs, language and economy. Politically the challenge for the Afghan government and for the international community lies in how to reintegrate them back into Afghan society. Return by refugees is compounded by the fact that most refugees are not returning to their native lands, but to other underdeveloped regions or war-torn countries. The political task is, therefore, how to provide a stable and safe space for the return of the displaced, which will allow them to reconstruct their lives, yet to address the underlying political issues which created their displacement in the first place.

To sum up, the political dimensions of the Afghan refugee return are versatile, complicated and closely united with the tension of the wider geopolitical, economic and security issues. Nonetheless, this is not a straightforward action of the refugees returning to their homelands but more of a complex of interactions between the host nations, the Afghan government, the international organizations, and the refugees themselves. The political concerns surrounding the Afghan refugee returning make it important to have coordinated international response to allow the safe, dignified, and sustainable reintegration of the returning refugees. Nevertheless, since the political and security context in Afghanistan is not yet stable, the political context of the refugee return will remain dynamic with significant implications, both to Afghanistan and the region at large.

Conclusion

To sum it up, the issue of the repatriation of Afghan refugees to Pakistan is a triple-layered phenomenon, which symbolizes the humanitarian, the security, and the political. Repatriation of refugees, however, is not merely an item of sending displaced individuals back to their native countries, but it is closely intertwined with the national security policies, the geopolitical situation of South Asian region in general. It has also been a far reaching global impact on both the host nation and Afghanistan due to the long duration that the Afghan refugees have been present in Pakistan affecting their diplomacy, security and their socio-economic lives.

To Pakistan the refugee problem has always been a game of balancing in the course of considering the humanitarian responsibility and national security factors. The political aspects of the Afghan refugees returning are influenced by the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan and also security conditions in Afghanistan. Although the repatriation process has been considered as the manner in which the refugee crisis can be handled, the security threats involved in the process of repatriation such as the potentiality of cross-border militancy and unrest complicate the strategy.

Moreover, the resettlement of Afghanistan refugees points to the necessity of a comprehensive and combined international action. The international community, courtesy of UNHCR, is dominant in offering a safe and voluntary solution to refugees that is sustainable in nature. But, due to the complicated political relationships and the security questions, the process of repatriation cannot be defined as an isolated process. At least, it must be involved in a larger entity which addresses the actual causes of displacement, which offers security and economic and social reintegration of returning refugees.

Repatriation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is not just a matter of addressing a refugee crisis as it is a continuation of a political and security policy, and it determines the destiny of the region. A sophisticated comprehension of the challenges of political, social and security on the table will inform the usefulness of any repatriation process and the process will be based on the concern of the safety and dignity of refugees. This emerging reality demands long-term collaboration between the Afghanistan nation and that of Pakistan and the global community to provide a sustainable solution to this long-term crisis.

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