

The impact of forced migration on Afghanistan's domestic politics and foreign relations

Admir Skodo

Key points

- By supporting militant groups such as the Taliban and allowing them to find recruits among refugees, Pakistan is able to keep Afghanistan weak. Such a policy, however, has backfired by angering the US (Afghanistan's key ally) and driving Afghanistan to other regional powers, such as India and China.
- This might in the long run strengthen the Afghan state, while weakening Pakistan's role as a regional power. Moreover, Afghanistan and Pakistan are major trading partners. Undermining the Afghan state has already proved detrimental to Pakistan's trade with Afghanistan.
- Most deported Afghans do not receive adequate state support to lead a life that offers safety and economic opportunity. They remain both vulnerable and susceptible to militant groups, while overburdening an already overburdened system of social services.
- Many Afghans who are deported flee again and make their way back abroad because of grave safety concerns, as well as the lack of economic opportunities and social services. As they return to Sweden and other EU countries in a climate of tougher asylum laws, they risk either being deported for the second time to Afghanistan or staying on as undocumented immigrants.



Migration in Afghanistan's history

Afghans are one of the largest refugee groups in the world since the 1980s. But for centuries Afghans have been migrating back and forth between Afghanistan and what are now its neighboring countries – and further afar still. Afghans would make pilgrimages to holy sites; migrate for purposes of education, trade or work; move as pastoral nomads (so-called Kuchis) in the fluid Pashtun borderland between Pakistan and Afghanistan; or be forced to flee, as in the example of the mass flight of Hazaras induced by the brutal state-building policies of Amir Abdur Rahman in the late nineteenth century.

Mass *forced* migration, however, was not the rule until the Soviet invasion in 1979. Afghans were between 1979 and 2012 the largest group of refugees in the world. A massive repatriation scheme led to the return of 5.7 million Afghans between 2002 and 2012 from Pakistan. Over a million were repatriated from Iran between 2002 and 2005. Nevertheless, the continued high risk of being exposed to violence and the fact that Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world has ensured the persistence of mass flight from Afghanistan. In 2016, well over 3 million Afghan refugees lived outside of Afghanistan (among which we find over 2 million in Pakistan, around one million in Iran, and 178,000 recent arrivals in EU countries), making them the second-largest refugee group in the world.

Afghan refugees and the Pakistan-India rivalry

Since the 1980s, Afghan refugees in Pakistan have routinely been used as pawns

furthering Pakistani interests in Afghanistan, whether as “warrior refugees” against the communists, or more recently as “Sons of Hindus” who symbolize Afghanistan’s turn to Pakistan’s archrival India for development aid. In response to the closer relationship between Afghanistan and India, Pakistan deported over 500,000 Afghans in the second half of 2016. In January 2018 Pakistan considered another mass deportation, which never materialized.

One take on Pakistan’s foreign policy toward Afghanistan states that Pakistan wants to keep Afghanistan politically weak. Underlying this policy is the fear that a strong Afghanistan would support the creation of a new Pashtun-dominated state (“Pashtunistan”) carved out of Pakistan’s northwestern territory. Pakistan is home to over 30 million Pashtuns. During the 1980s, Pakistan welcomed over 6 million Afghan refugees with the aid of the UNHCR and its major donor countries, especially the US. General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq (Pakistan’s President 1978–1988) presented this policy as fulfilling an Islamic duty. Afghan refugees were largely valorized as mujahideen or would-be mujahideen fighting an anti-communist jihad. But beneath this rhetoric lies a systematic foreign policy to support, with American and Saudi aid, the Afghan resistance against the Soviet Union by allowing the mujahideen parties to be based in refugee camps. Among other things, this meant that Pakistan turned a blind eye when these mujahideen parties cracked down on dissenting voices in the camps.

Pakistan’s refugee policy from the 1980s carried over into the post-9/11 era in that, as late as 2009, Pakistani authorities tacitly



allowed Taliban recruitment in refugee camps.¹ Currently, Pakistan has to walk a fine line between supporting the Taliban, managing a soured relationship with the US, and using its Afghan refugee population in its policy toward Afghanistan. This problematic attitude found an expression in January 2018, when Pakistan claimed that a US drone strike on a UNHCR refugee camp had killed a Taliban-affiliated commander from the Haqqani network. The US Embassy in Islamabad has denied the veracity of this claim. Pakistani officials said that the strike was carried out not against a terrorist organization but an “individual target who had morphed into Afghan Refugees.”² This statement carries three significant meanings. First, it is further proof of a soured relationship with the US. Second, it is an attempt to deflect speaking about the Taliban as a terrorist organization and any hold it may have in refugee camps. And third, the statement justifies the deportation of Afghan refugees, since, according to one official, “refugee communities could be infiltrated by militants and therefore refugees needed to be repatriated to Afghanistan.”³

Between the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and the onslaught of the Taliban in 1994, over a million refugees from Pakistan and Iran were returned through repatriation schemes. Yet Afghans continued to flee the violence and insecurity wrought first by the civil war, and then by the Taliban rule.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001 the new US-backed government of Hamid Karzai was in need of legitimacy. The ensuing repatriation program from Pakistan facilitated by the UNHCR and supported by the US was designed to fulfill that role by showing that Afghanistan was finally safe

enough for repatriation; that the Afghan government was capable of such an undertaking; and that it could offer returnees economic opportunities. Nonetheless, a persistent instability in Afghanistan on all these fronts has ensured a continued stream of refugees both in and outside of the country since 2001.

In recent years, India has exploited the tense relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The relations between India and Afghanistan were solid during President Hamid Karzai’s in power 2001–2014, but they have improved dramatically during Karzai’s successor Ashraf Ghani. Ghani has sought the aid of India to further his development agenda and break the reliance of Afghanistan on the Pakistani port of Karachi. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Kabul for the first time in 2015 to inaugurate the new parliament and deliver four Mi-25 attack helicopters to the Afghan Air Force. These and a series of other events triggered the mass deportation in 2016.

One of these events occurred in May 2016 in Teheran where Modi, in the presence of Ghani, unveiled a \$500 million aid package to help develop Chabahar port in Iran, which is close to Pakistan’s Chinese-built port of Gwadar. The package is important for Afghanistan because it includes the development of road and rail infrastructure from Chabahar to Afghanistan. According to one analyst, this will “significantly lessen land-locked Afghanistan’s decades-long dependence on transit routes through Pakistan. In particular, reliance on the port of Karachi should be diminished.”⁴ In response to these developments, Pakistani authorities engaged in abusive behavior toward Afghans and locals began to refer to

them as “Sons of Hindus.” Then, with the aid of the UNHCR, Pakistan deported over 500,000 Afghans in the second half of 2016, which is one of the largest mass deportations in contemporary history.

Sweden’s and the EU’s response to the entry of Afghan asylum seekers

Pakistan’s and Iran’s hardened attitude toward its Afghan refugee population in recent years has forced Afghans to increasingly venture to the EU, where Sweden is a major receiving country. The arrival of 178,200 Afghan asylum seekers to EU countries in 2015 led to an agreement between the EU and Afghanistan on the return of rejected asylum seekers, and an agreement between the EU and Turkey which aimed to halt the transit of Afghans to Europe. In one leaked draft of the EU-Afghanistan agreement, the EU threatened to withdraw aid in the case of non-compliance. Sweden sees the majority of Afghan asylum applications as unfounded and has attempted to sign a similar bilateral agreement with Afghanistan, which fell through in the Afghan parliament. However, in virtue of being a EU member state, Sweden can fall back on the EU agreement. Yet the status of the Afghans in Sweden nearly caused a crisis between Sweden’s two governing parties.

In the last 25 years or so, European countries and the EU have sought to intertwine their migration and development policies. Most recently this new approach has come to include asylum seekers. A driving, but highly questionable, assumption behind this policy turn is that return migration will be conducive to peacebuilding and counter a “brain drain” in developing countries. During the “refugee

crisis” of 2015, as Iran and Pakistan proved too inhospitable, around 178,000 Afghans sought asylum in EU countries. Although there are no reliable statistics on the demographic profiles of these asylum seekers, studies and reports suggest that many are Hazaras, and that many are unaccompanied minors. The Hazaras are Shi’a Muslims, a group which has been systematically persecuted by the predominantly Pashtun and Sunni Taliban as well as al-Qaeda. Moreover, as a minority ethnic and religious group, Hazaras face structural discrimination by the Afghan state.

A large number of these minors have spent most of their life in Iran, working in the informal construction economy. The fall in demand for labor in this sector, which dovetails a major economic downturn in Iran, coupled with increased deportations of undocumented Afghans, has contributed to pushing Hazaras to venture beyond Iran in search of safety and stability. However, it is not uncommon to also find Pashtuns, Arabs, and Tajiks who fled directly from Afghanistan. In my interviews with Afghan asylum seekers in Sweden, among the most expressed reasons for fleeing are life-threatening persecution by the Taliban or a close family member, and desertion from the Afghan National Army.

The EU clearly did not anticipate nor want this many Afghan asylum seekers to enter. The aforementioned policy shift, an electorate that is increasingly anti-immigrant, and a growing belief that European welfare systems will suffer from overload from too many asylum seekers underlie this attitude.

Consequently, in 2016 EU leaders began negotiations with their Afghan counterparts on an agreement through which Afghanistan would agree to accept rejected Afghan asylum seekers. The timing of these negotiations is indicative of the stick the EU was threatening to use should Afghanistan cause trouble: the negotiations ended just before the donor-hosted conference in Brussels, which established the level of aid for Afghanistan for the coming years. In a leaked memo, EU negotiators suggested stripping Afghanistan of aid if the Afghan government failed to cooperate. The “Joint Way Forward” agreement was signed in October 2016 and commits Afghanistan to accepting unlimited numbers of rejected Afghan nationals.

For Afghanistan, where less than 50% of the state budget derives from internal revenue, the importance of foreign aid is vital. Some Afghan officials who participated in the negotiations felt pressed to accept the EU’s terms. As a symbolic protest Sayed Hussain Alemi Balkhi, the Afghan minister for refugees and repatriation, refused to sign the document, leaving the duty to a lower official.

The agreement struck with Afghanistan, and the entanglement between migration and development policy, is not merely a rhetorical ploy intended to appease popular opinion. Between 2015 and 2016, the number of Afghans returned by European countries to Afghanistan nearly tripled: from 3,290 to 9,460. These returns dovetail a marked fall in recognition of asylum applications, from 68% in September 2015 to 33% in December 2016.

45,600 Afghans, mostly unaccompanied male minors, sought asylum in Sweden in

2015. Their status quickly became a much-debated topic in Swedish domestic politics. Sweden grants most Syrian applications for asylum, since it views the situation in Syria as one of generalized persecution. Afghan asylum claims, in contrast, are presumed to be unfounded, because the Swedish Migration Agency believes there is an internal flight alternative. This assessment justifies the rejection of Afghan asylum seekers, since internal migration to “safe provinces” removes the threat of violence or persecution.

The long processing times of asylum applications has meant that most of the Afghan minors have turned adult before receiving a decision on their applications. As such, their claims are now assessed under adult standards, which means that they are believed to be less exposed to persecution. Moreover, those minors who cannot document their age must undergo a highly criticized medical exam of their teeth and knee joints, which is claimed to determine whether the examined person is an adult or child.

The status of the many unaccompanied minors nearly caused a crisis between the two governing parties, the Social Democrats and the Green Party. Although the Green Party has been willing to accept the restrictive measures and laws introduced in 2015 and 2016, it has been unable to go along with the Social Democrat’s restrictive attitude toward the unaccompanied minors. Recently the potential crisis was averted after the two parties struck a deal, which allows some minors to obtain permanent residency if they meet certain criteria.

Afghanistan is unable to reintegrate the deportees

The reality of mass return has prompted the Afghan state to develop reintegration policies, nationally administered by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation. However, Afghanistan lacks sufficient funding and capacity to enact any of the promised large re-integration initiatives regarding land distribution, housing, and the provision of health care. In September 2016, the UN asked for additional funding to the tune of \$153 million to avert a humanitarian crisis but managed to raise only \$82 million. Long-standing internal divisions and rivalries in Afghan politics further compound reintegration challenges. Studies of returnees in various provinces – including Kabul, Herat, and Nangarhar – in both urban and rural settings, show that a majority of respondents believe that their situation had deteriorated since before they left Afghanistan. They also show that at least half of returnees expect or hope to leave the country again in the short term.

In 2014, the US withdrew most of its forces from Afghanistan. The military economy worth hundreds of billions of dollars directly supported almost half the population through financing construction, logistics, transport, and other services for some 850 military bases. The severing of this major financial vein plunged Afghanistan into an economic crisis, which has resulted in the mass loss of both skilled and unskilled jobs, an increase in opium production and corruption, and a worsened security situation for civilians.

So far Ghani's attempt to make Afghanistan economically self-reliant through mineral exports remains far-fetched. 60% of the

Afghan state budget comes from international aid, while 40% comes from domestic resources. Remittances are equivalent to 15-18% of GDP (some estimates are as high as 30%) while opium production amounts to around 7%. This economic situation is unlikely to change in the near future. Remittances have been and remain an important push-factor for out-migration. Among the Hazaras, in particular, circular migration between Afghanistan-Iran and Afghanistan-Pakistan is an established economic strategy, which centers on remittances through the *hawala* transfer system.

Another element that has to be considered when trying to understand the severe challenges to reintegration is the fact that the ethnic and other alliances that hark back to the complicated politics of the anti-communist resistance cut through the Afghan government.⁵ This helps explain two very different ways in which the government has responded to the refugee problem.

On the one hand, there is Ghani and his allies, who encourage the return of refugees, in particular those from Pakistan. Ghani has pledged that he would “ensure that returning Afghans could obtain land and housing, invest in small businesses, send children to school, have access to basic services and settle in any part of the country.”⁶ But there is no evidence to point that any of these initiatives have been, or can be, implemented. On the other hand, the refugee minister Balkhi has stated that the security situation for civilians in Afghanistan has been deteriorating and that: “We do not have any resources to help any potential deportees from Germany or any other European country.”⁷ The Chief

Executive Abdullah Abdullah, who assumed the new role of Chief Executive as a compromise following a disputed election in which Abdullah contended with Ghani, was willing to negotiate with Pakistan in 2016 to at least slow down the pace of the mass deportations, but such negotiations did not take off because of Abdullah's tense relationship with Ghani. Such tensions make the development of a coherent Afghan refugee policy nearly impossible.

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¹ Witte, Griff (2009) “Pakistani Refugee Camps Seen as Recruiting Grounds for Extremists.” *Washington Post*. May 25. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/24/AR2009052402963.html> (accessed January 20, 2018).

² “US Denies Hitting Afghan Refugee Camp in Pakistan Drone Strike Fatal to Taliban Affiliate Chief” (2018) *The Japan Times*. January 26, 2018. Available at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/26/world/u-s-denies-hitting-afghan-refugee-camp-pakistan-drone-strike-seen-fatal-taliban-affiliate-chief/#.WnRbo46jJYg> (accessed February 2, 2018).

³ “US Denies Hitting Afghan Refugee Camp in Pakistan Drone Strike Fatal to Taliban Affiliate Chief” (2018) *The Japan Times*. January 26, 2018. Available at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/26/world/u-s-denies-hitting-afghan-refugee-camp-pakistan-drone-strike-seen-fatal-taliban-affiliate-chief/#.WnRbo46jJYg> (accessed February 2, 2018).

⁴ Bjelica, Jelena (2016) “Caught Up in Regional Tensions? The Mass Return of

Afghan Refugees from Pakistan.” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. December. Available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/caught-up-in-regional-tensions-the-mass-return-of-afghan-refugees-from-pakistan/> (accessed January 13, 2018).

⁵ Skodo, Admir (2017) “Afghanistan: Permanent Crisis of Legitimacy.” *The Times Literary Supplement*, October 20.

⁶ Bjelica, Jelena (2016) “Caught Up in Regional Tensions? The Mass Return of Afghan Refugees from Pakistan.” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. December. Available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/caught-up-in-regional-tensions-the-mass-return-of-afghan-refugees-from-pakistan/> (accessed January 13, 2018).

⁷ “Afghan Refugee Minister: Afghans Should Be Treated on Par with Syrians” (2015) *Deutsche Welle*. November 26. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/en/afghan-refugee-minister-afghans-should-be-treated-on-par-with-syrians/a-18806357> (accessed January 24, 2018).

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