

Pakistan Counter-terrorism (CT) - Afghan Refugee Question

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ABSTRACT

A refugee is a person who has been displaced and forced to cross the border because of the situation of conflict or war in the country. After the World War II the UN adopted a legal definition of refugee.

In the light of this convention, refugees have got some rights that includes right to return, right to family unification, right to travel and restriction to forward movement.

There are two main perspectives on refugee influx. The first is humanitarian perspective and the second is political and military. Pakistan has remained a home for more than a million of Afghan population, i.e. among the world's largest refugee population, for past 40 years. The issue of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is the protracted one because of long conflict in Afghanistan by the major powers in the past, and now the terrorist organizations, violence and political and economic turmoil has kept the refugee influx alive in Afghanistan. The presence of the huge mass of Afghan refugees residing (or having lived) in Pakistan is testament of the international community, regional stakeholders, and Afghan national regimes inability to solve the root causes of massive human displacement – conflict, disaster, oppression, and chaos.

Over the years, the Afghan refugee crisis has greatly caused a stern in Pakistan-Afghan relations. This is primarily due to war on terror, domestic threat posed by refugees, fragile Pakistan economy and declining donor assistance. In total there are three million registered and unregistered Afghan refugees exist in Pakistan (Nation, 2016). Making Pakistan vulnerable to security issues, mass movements and illegal trade of drugs and arms from Afghanistan.

The Afghan refugees in Pakistan are given a legal status until the end of 2017 (UNHCR, 2017). UNHCR takes care of the refugees by providing assistance but for only registered number of refugees. It also provides assistance to return to their homeland through Voluntary Repatriation Program. But most of the Afghan families are hesitant to return back to the country due to fragile conditions in Afghanistan.

The paper proposes an integrated counter-terrorism policy response wherein national security and humanitarian interests are inevitably inter-linked.

Key Words: Refugees, UNHCR, Afghanistan, Pakistan Security Issues.

Introduction

The Afghan migration to Pakistan can be divided into three phases. After the inception of Pakistan, Afghanis moved and settled to the country for trade and business purposes. The first phase of Afghan refugee started in 1978 when the

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USSR attacked the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). By the end of 1979, 193,000 Afghans were recorded seeking asylum. The second refugee influx increased after the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. The exact amount of refugees cannot be calculated since the conflict, there have been many attempts of repatriation that have seen the refugees returning but renewed conflict has kept them coming back. They first settled in the border areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) former North West Frontier Province, Federal Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) and Baluchistan. But then they spread to the cities and towns. In nearly three decades of stay for the refugees, many Afghans have been born here, many have acquired national identity cards, even married into local population and are now well integrated locally. The third phase happened after the incident of 9/11 and U.S intervention in Afghanistan.

Upon the representation of tribal, ethnic, and linguistic diversifications, the Afghan refugees are divided into almost 30 tribal, sub-tribal and family groupings. These migrants have come from almost all parts of Afghanistan.

In 1992 approximately 1.2 million of Afghan refugees left for Afghanistan under the rule of Mujahidin. It was estimated by the start of 1994, the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan had drastically decreased from 3.2 million to 1.47 million (Marsden, 1998). Moreover, in 2001 after the US attack on Afghanistan almost 200,000 to 300,000 refugees left Afghanistan and migrated to Pakistan. A mass repatriation was seen in 2002 by the assistance of United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) under the tripartite agreements between Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. After the defeat of Taliban in Afghanistan, the Pakistani Government started advocating the return of all refugees to Afghanistan. But they keep on coming back due to their relatives and businesses in Pakistan. It is predicted that in 2011, almost 160, 000 Afghanis fled to Pakistan (Hiegemann, 2014).

Majority of the Afghan refugees who migrated to Pakistan were ethnically Pashtun, in addition to including a small portion of Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. Hence, due to commonalities in cultural, ethnic, language and religion, Afghan refugees easily integrated into the Pakistani society framework. This has created resentment among the local population. Many believe that Afghans will not return to their homeland. Afghans on the other hand denied the statement. They wish to return but could not endangered lives of their families. The disputed border has also made it difficult to check the movements.

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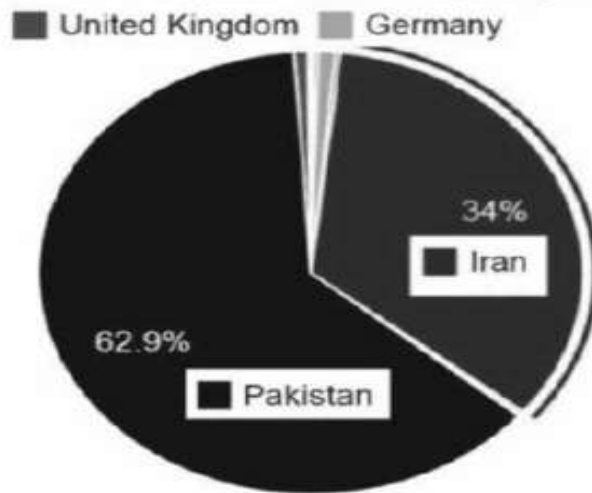


Fig.1 Percentage of Afghan Refugees in host states (Valentina Hiegemann, 2014)

However, over the years Afghan refugees have become a security concern and the Pakistani government has raised the issue of their repatriation. Pakistani government has started closing the refugee's camps and operating against the illegal Afghanis camps after the wave of terrorism in the country. Most of the people believe that Afghanis are responsible for cross-border smuggling and keeping the terrorists in their camps. This has raised a question mark on the security of Pakistan.

Socio-economic impacts of afghan refugees on Pakistan

The Afghan refugees can be divided into four groups. First, some relatively well-off Afghans that managed to bring their assets like trucks, cars and busses etc. to Pakistan. They indulge in transportation businesses. They do not live in camps but managed to rent some places in cities and big towns of the country. The second category is educated Afghans who were part of the educational sector in Afghanistan. These people are given the jobs of teachings in camp schools or some have managed to take teaching jobs in local schools. And some appointed to the management affairs of the camps. The third category, are those who fled with little household goods and small herds of domestic animals. They belong to agriculture. They are residing in the camps and some of them are working in the refugee related projects such as reforestation and regeneration of vegetation. Lastly, the largest number of Afghan refugees are just the common folk, and mostly old aged men, women and children who had barely managed to escape the war. They are living in camps and dependent on the government of Pakistan. The position of Pakistan, from social and economic point of view, is not very strong. These

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refugees are believed to be a burden on the economy of Pakistan. Most of them started working in the country which helped in generating the revenue but that was not much.

The presence of five million Afghan refugees has strained Pakistan's socio-political milieu, economy and public resources for example schools and hospitals (Grare & Maley, 2011). Also "refugee villages" have been established on the private land of locals which has led to voluntary retrieval of locals out of that land (Chattha, 2013).

In 2005 a proper survey was conducted to verify the number of Afghanis residing in Pakistan. The task was very difficult to conclude because most of the refugees have acquired fake identity cards, fake domiciles and documentation. The elongated stay of refugees in the country has increased the security concerns of the locals, in terms of drug trafficking, food security, economic security, human security, environmental security and national security etc. Ever since the migration happened, the population of the bordering provinces has increased from 10%-15%. This has caused human security. In Baluchistan, the Pashtun refugees outnumbered the local Blochis and eroded the Baloch predominance. Some refugees have indulged in easy business like smuggling goods and drugs. This has increased the usage of drugs in Pakistan. The immediate increase in population by 3-5 million makes it considerable difficult to meet food needs. But the bigger problem is the smuggling of food cross border which has caused food scarcity in the country.

The massive influx of the Afghan refugee migration has simultaneously resulted in damaging Pakistan's environment, which is quite irreversible. The impact of this crisis is posit to have long-term effect on not only on Pakistan's economy but environment too. For example, trees are cut down to make refugee camps, and provide them with shelter while firewood is used for cooking and heating purposes. Foliage is cut to feed livestock. Ground vegetation is cleared to make way for farming. Having an overall negative impact on Pakistan's environment. The uncontrolled deforestation near Afghan refugees' camp since the 1980s has left the area with only about 12% of its original forest cover coupled with an all-time low water reserves hence, disturbing the ecological balance (Aslam, 2002).

Repatriation

Refugee is not a permanent phenomenon but refugees have to return their homeland once the situation becomes normal. Due to the security concerns the Pakistani government decided repatriation of the refugees. Attempts of repatriation occurred many times but the largest is recorded in 2002, almost 400,000 refugees were left for their homeland (UNHRC, 2009). The massive repatriation occurred when the Pakistani government announced the closure of the camps in KP and Baluchistan due to security concerns. The camps are considered providing safe

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havens for the terrorists who fled Afghanistan. To devise sustainable solution for the protracted refugees' population Pakistan in 2010 adopted the Afghan Management and Repatriation Strategy (AMRS). In December 2012, due to troublesome security situation in Afghanistan, refugees stay in Pakistan was extended until June 30, 2013. Moreover, in 2013, the policy of Tripartite Agreement on Voluntary Repatriation and of the Proof of Registration (PoR) cards was implemented.

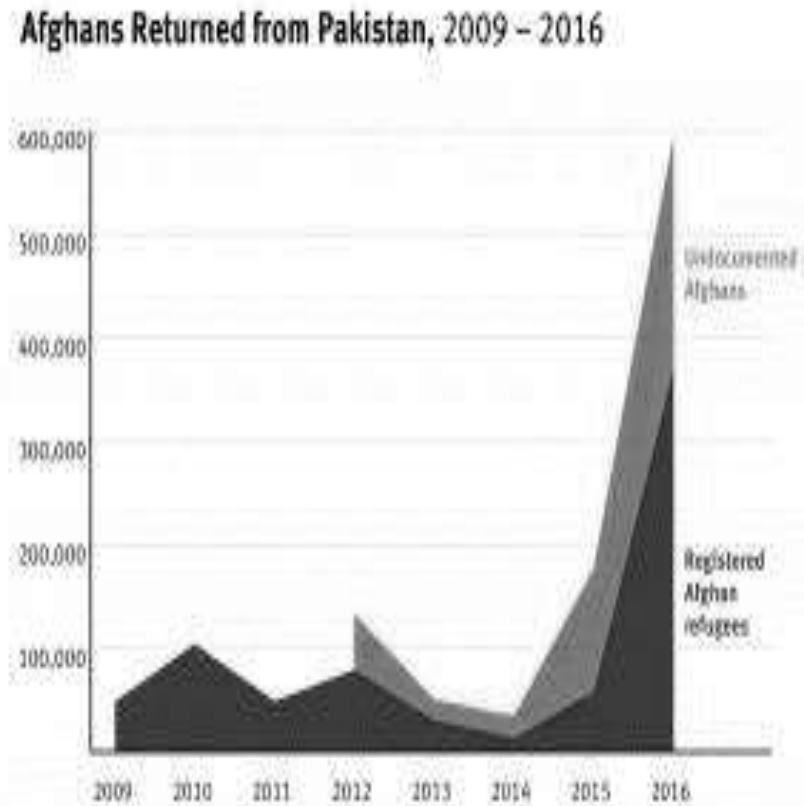


Fig. 2 (Pakistan Coercion, UN Complicity, 2016)

The repatriation resumes in 2016 and 2017. Almost 600,000 people were recorded that left for their homes including majority of unregistered refugees. The former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif cabinet approved a policy pertaining to the repatriation of Afghan refugees and took strict measures to curb Afghan entrance in Pakistan without valid visas. Making the border control strict within this policy. Additionally, this policy also granted permission to extend the stay of registered refugees in Pakistan till December 31, 2017 (Dawn, 2017).

The transnational community has failed to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan, the refugees are reluctant to go back. They presumed the Afghan government as not credible. Afghanistan's current state of affairs, is eschewed with security concerns, poor economy and poverty, hence making the repatriation of refugees difficult. Afghanis returning back to their country state the Afghan government hasn't provided any support to them (Shams & Riaz, 2016). Moreover, it is also debated that the UNHCR provided financial support package to the refugees is inadequate.

Threat to national security

Security is an overriding priority for all nations. Security not only encompasses military, but has political, socio-economic and ecological aspects. Most of the refugees have brought illegal arms, without any license with them, which has resulted in easy of access of arms in Pakistan.

After the event of 9/11, the U.S invasion increased the refugee influx in Pakistan. In which many terrorists fled from the war and hid themselves in the camps. After the influx the terrorists' activities got increased in Pakistan. The deadly attacks of APS and Bacha Khan University resulted in increased repatriation and closure of the refugee camps from KPK, Baluchistan and even from Islamabad.

The presence of large number of Afghan refugees further fueled terrorism in Pakistan, and resulted in diverse opinions among the political parties regarding the Afghan refugees' eventual return. KP has suffered greatly at the hands of terrorism. As a matter of fact it is a common perception in Pakistan that many extremists entered Pakistan under the mask of refugees with the prime purpose of creating tensions between the refugees and the locals.



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To strengthen the national security, Islamabad instrumented some policies. National Action Plan (NAP) was implemented after the deadly attack of Army Public School. NAP included 20 points in which NACTA (National Counter-Terrorism Authority) is directed to establish a counter-terrorism force and to formulate a comprehensive policy to deal with the issue of Afghan refugees, beginning with registration of all refugees and to deal with their issues. In 2014, NACTA presented its National Internal Security Plan (NISP) 2014-2018. It entailed capacity building of security forces, development of an anti-terrorist force at a national level, cooperation and coordination, and curbing terrorist financing; as well as the repatriation and registration of Afghan refugees (Zahid, 2016). The NISP venture failed to succumb the desired results however, mainly because the civilian government and the military establishment were unable to reach an agreement as to how to execute the policy. After so many years of war on terror, now many Afghan refugees hold Pakistani nationality and earn their living here. Ihsan Ghani, former national coordinator of the National Counterterrorism Authority (NACTA), said Pakistan continues hosting the world's largest refugee population with most of it being undocumented. "No short-term fixes can resolve the situation. There is a need to break the myths and misperceptions about the Afghan refugees. No refugee is above the law of the host country. Confidence-building measures are crucial to continuing long-term relations between the two countries. Ultimate solution lies in Afghanistan through sustainable reintegration of refugees with dignity."

Due to the unregulated Afghan refugee camps they have become "safe havens for terrorists". Adviser to the former Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz expressed security concerns over the refugee camps within Pakistan (Dawn, 2016).

Post-terrorist attack investigations have shown proof of Afghan refugee camps being used as 'safe havens' and breeding grounds for extremism. Making it compulsory for the state to enact strict border controls, verification of the identity documents and SIM cards verification, in addition to strict visa policy (Jamil, 2016).

About the recent tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the officials are of the view that Pakistan is paying for the policies that it adopted during the USSR invasion in Afghanistan. The refugees came here with illegal weapons and arms and drugs that brought instability to Pakistan. The Islamabad's decision regarding counter terrorism, is to pursue the policy of non-interference meaning Pakistan will not fight someone else's wars.

Future scenario

Pakistan is now trying to curtail the Afghan migration, however, the porous border makes it difficult. It has been widely reported Taliban and Al-Qaeda have used the porous border for their own advantage and have seek refuge in the tribal areas. Since 9/11, Pakistan has been in alliance with the United States and has fought tirelessly to put an end to this menace.

In March 2017, the adviser to the former Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, presided over Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Committee delegation. According to a foreign office announcement, the advisor stressed on the role of Pakistan in ensuring stability of Afghanistan for the wider benefit of the region. He emphasized on the need of collaboration and trust to address the issues of security, counter-terrorism, border management and to work towards peace. The Joint Committee delegation thanked Pakistan's support in the Afghan refugee crisis and stressed the need for continuous people-to-people contact in order to strengthen ties between the two countries.

Border management is extremely important. The Pak-Afghan border is porous and unprotected that is why it is difficult to control the cross-border movement. One cannot bring stability to the country until the border is not secured. Some reports contends that number of the RAW agents have also entered the premises of Pakistan through that border. However, it is suggested that Islamabad should show some leniency in repatriation. Those who are legally registered, and those who are free from any kind of criminal record and those have spouses over here; they should be compensated by the Pakistani government so that it may create a positive and softer image of the country.

The Afghan state needs to address the issue of refugees and accommodate them. Rustom Shah Mohmand, former Ambassador to Afghanistan, said that no law would give Afghan refugees the authority or citizenship to live in Pakistan so refugee law should be framed. He emphasized that Pakistan should stop the harassment of refugees, create safer enclaves in Afghanistan, stabilize the border with the help of international community and should make a vigorous political intervention in Afghanistan to deal with the situation in a proper manner. For sustainable and long-term repatriation it is imperative to have a sense of security in Afghanistan. Afghan authorities have to move beyond shifting the blame, and need to devise contingent strategies to address Afghan refugee crisis.

Conclusion

From the overleaf discussion one can conclude the criticality of the Afghan Refugees in the Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy matrix. The continued instability, civil war in Afghanistan has led to the largest humanitarian refugee crisis in the world. Pakistan being geographically allied, ethnically, culturally and religiously alike continue to remain the favorite destination for the Afghans. This has put strain on the Pakistan's economy and sharpened the internal security fault lines.

However, one should be careful in not exaggerating the magnitude of the Afghan refugee impact on the terrorism situation in the country. The fact is, terrorism is a complex phenomenon and host of domestic, bilateral, regional and international factors aid its sustenance. Thus an effective counter-terrorism must

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be preventative and holistic in nature. Wherein, humanitarian aspects must be registered while devising a sustainable counter-terror regime.

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