



Socio-Economic Analysis of Afghan Refugees Repatriation from Pakistan: A 2023 Case Study

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ABSTRACT

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This research paper delves into the complex journey of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, tracing their experiences from the Soviet-Afghan War to their forced repatriation in 2023. The paper analyzes crucial factors such as this paradigm shift's socio-economic impact, security concerns, and regional implications. Additionally, it investigates Afghan refugees' economic contributions, social integration challenges, and potential adjustments following repatriation. The study concludes with policy recommendations highlighting the importance of diplomatic collaboration, human rights, and international aid towards achieving peaceful repatriation. By examining the intricate interplay of geopolitics, humanitarian considerations, and regional stability, this research provides a comprehensive guide for policymakers to navigate the critical juncture of forced repatriation. Policymakers must consider the complexities and nuances of the situation to ensure a safe, dignified, and humane repatriation process. This research underscores the significance of international cooperation, equitable distribution of resources, and protection of human rights in bringing about a peaceful resolution to this humanitarian crisis.

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1. Introduction

For several decades, Pakistan has been a safe haven for Afghan migrants, hosting one of the world's largest and most enduring displaced populations. The influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan began during the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, with subsequent waves due to conflict, political instability, and economic hardships in Afghanistan. Initially, Pakistan welcomed these displaced individuals and extended its open-door policy, offering asylum to millions seeking sanctuary from the turmoil next door. Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, a new wave of Afghan refugees sought shelter in neighboring countries; Iran and Pakistan. Over the years, Pakistan has provided a refuge for millions of Afghan refugees, granting them asylum and some semblance of stability amid their homeland's upheavals (Khan, 2024). However, in 2023, the Pakistani government introduced a policy of mandatory repatriation, aiming to send unregistered Afghan refugees back to their war-torn country. This decision faced widespread criticism from international organizations and human rights groups, significantly impacting the lives of Afghan refugees and exacerbating their vulnerabilities. This paper explores the socio-economic repercussions of this policy, delving into the intricate dynamics between asylum, repatriation, and the well-being of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

The origins of the Afghan refugee crisis in Pakistan can be traced back to the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s, a conflict that prompted a massive exodus of Afghans seeking refuge from violence and instability (R. Schöch, 2008). As the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, millions of Afghans fled to Pakistan for safety and shelter. Driven by Islamic principles

and historical ties, Pakistan responded with open arms, providing a haven for those displaced by the ravages of war. The Soviet invasion triggered one of the largest forced migrations of the 20th century. With support from the West and neighboring countries, including Pakistan, the Afghan resistance fought against Soviet forces, displacing millions who sought refuge in Pakistan. The refugee influx was not solely a consequence of war but also a testament to shared cultural, ethnic, and historical connections between the two nations. Pakistan's response to the crisis was characterized by a sense of Islamic brotherhood and solidarity. The Pakistani government, with international support, established refugee camps along the border, offering shelter, food, and basic amenities. The open-door policy reflected both humanitarian concerns and the recognition of historical and cultural ties binding the two nations (Pentz, 1988). The Afghan refugee's presence in Pakistan persisted long after the Soviet-Afghan War, evolving into one of the most enduring refugee situations globally. Over the years, the Afghan diaspora in Pakistan integrated into the country's socio-economic fabric, contributing significantly to various sectors such as agriculture, trade, and entrepreneurship. These contributions underscored the resilience and adaptability of the refugee community.

1.1. Research Problem

The Afghan refugees' community has had a significant impact on Pakistan's socio-economic landscape. According to studies, they have made positive contributions in sectors such as labor, trade, and entrepreneurship. The adaptability and resilience of Afghan refugees have enabled them to establish businesses, participate in the job market, and enrich the informal economy. However, challenges have arisen due to their prolonged presence, such as strained resources, heightened job competition, and difficulties in social integration. These challenges have led to a reassessment of Pakistan's once-welcoming open-door policy towards Afghan refugees. In 2023, Pakistan underwent a significant shift in its approach to Afghan refugees. The government changed its hospitable stance and opted for repatriation. The decision was driven by a combination of factors, including security concerns, economic pressures, and shifts in political dynamics. This change raises critical questions about the motivations driving this policy shift and the potential implications for both nations involved.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The aim of this research is to analyze the various aspects of Afghan refugee presence in Pakistan. The objectives include understanding the reasons why Pakistan initially welcomed Afghan refugees, evaluating their impact on the host nation's socio-economic conditions, investigating the reasons behind the forced repatriation policy of 2023, examining the potential implications of this repatriation for Pakistan, and providing policy recommendations for ensuring a peaceful return.

2. Literature Review

The situation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has been the subject of significant scholarly research, which has explored various aspects of this long-standing displacement. In this literature review, the authors summarize key findings from studies investigating the historical context, socio-economic impact, and policy dynamics surrounding Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Khalid Koser's work, "International Migration: A Very Short Introduction," provides insights into the complexities of international migration, laying a theoretical foundation for understanding the broader implications of forced repatriation policies (Koser, 2007). *Socio-economic Inclusion of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan* (2020) work provides a nuanced analysis of the scale of the refugee problem in Pakistan and suggests strategies for solutions. The study highlights the multifaceted nature of the Afghan refugee presence, exploring issues related to education, healthcare, and economic participation. Karolína and Hameed (2021) examine the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan provides insights into the complex political landscape that influenced migration patterns. The Taliban's control and subsequent conflicts further fueled the displacement of Afghans, contributing to the prolonged nature of the refugee crisis. Studies have focused on understanding the socio-economic impacts of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The authors have investigated that the how Afghan refugees have participated in various sectors of the Pakistani economy. The study underscores the adaptive capabilities of the refugee community and their role in shaping local economies. Furthermore, if they belongs to same group they play a positive role in the society without creating any problem (Afghan Refugees: Implications on Pakistan, 2021). Researchers have extensively studied the historical reasons behind Afghan migration to Pakistan, especially during the Soviet-Afghan War. Aqsa (2023)

have emphasized the role of geopolitical factors and the ideological alignment between Pakistan and Afghan resistance groups during the conflict. This alignment was based on shared cultural and religious ties, and it laid the groundwork for Pakistan's open-door policy towards Afghan refugees.

3. Pakistan's Open-Door Policy: A Historical Analysis

The history of Afghan refugees seeking refuge in Pakistan is closely tied to geopolitical events, cultural bonds, and the complex dynamics of South Asia. It all began during the Soviet-Afghan War, when millions of Afghans fled their country due to the conflict. Many of them crossed into Pakistan, where General Zia-ul-Haq's leadership responded with an open-door policy, guided by principles of Islamic brotherhood, historical ties, and a commitment to extend solace to those in need. This humanitarian response was not only a geopolitical maneuver, but also a manifestation of cultural, religious and ethnic affinities. Pakistan and Afghan resistance groups shared Islamic values, which influenced the open-door policy and established a lasting humanitarian commitment (Muhammad, Tariq, & Javid, 2023). To accommodate the influx of Afghan refugees, the Pakistani government established refugee camps along the border with support from international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The primary goal of these camps was to provide essential services and protection to refugees. However, over the years, the prolonged refugee situation in Afghanistan created challenges and complexities that needed to be addressed. As the Afghan refugee population settled in Pakistan, a process of socio-cultural integration unfolded. The integration involved education, healthcare, and economic participation, and helped to challenge stereotypes associated with displacement (R. Schöch, 2008).

While Pakistan's open-door policy initially offered refuge to Afghans fleeing conflict, it faced challenges over time. The prolonged presence of a large refugee population strained resources, leading to competition for jobs, education, and healthcare. The management of refugees proved complex due to factors such as irregular documentation and mobility. Many settled in various regions, while others moved between locations, often seeking economic opportunities or social connections. The Pakistani government's efforts to establish effective registration and support mechanisms faced difficulties, particularly amidst ongoing conflicts and political instability in Afghanistan (Siddikoglu, 2016). Security concerns also arose, with some individuals linked to violence and criminal activities. However, it's crucial to avoid generalizations about entire refugee communities. Research highlights the complex interplay of factors that contribute to terrorism and unrest, including poverty, political marginalization, and regional (Margesson, 2007). In response to these evolving challenges, Pakistan's refugee policy shifted, prioritizing documentation, registration, and voluntary repatriation efforts. The goal was to balance humanitarian concerns with security considerations and resource management. In 2023, Pakistan's approach to Afghan refugees changed significantly due to security concerns, economic strain, and changing political dynamics. The long-standing open-door policy was replaced with forced repatriation, raising critical questions about the motivations behind the policy change. To understand the drivers behind the forced repatriation policy of 2023, it is important to explore the historical insights of the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the political landscape at that time.

4. Forced Repatriation: Causes and Implications

States open their doors for foreign people when they are in trouble due to humanity but when these people (refugees) are involved in state against activities or create trouble for the hosting states then these states expel or change policies from asylum to forced repatriation. Similarly, the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees in 2023 marked a significant change from Pakistan's longstanding open-door policy. This policy change was driven by a combination of security concerns, economic strain, and evolving political dynamics. It raises critical questions about the motivations behind this policy change and the implications for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. One of the primary drivers behind the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees was heightened security concerns. The regional geopolitical landscape has undergone significant changes, with internal conflicts and the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The deteriorating security situation, coupled with the potential for extremist elements among the refugee population, led the Pakistani government to reassess its policy. The fear of refugee camps becoming breeding grounds for radicalization and instability influenced the decision to forcibly repatriate Afghan refugees (Mulk, Ali, & Ullah, 2020).

The prolonged presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has strained the country's economic resources. The economic burden of hosting a large refugee population became a significant factor in the decision to repatriate. The competition for jobs and resources between Afghan refugees and the host community contributed to social tensions. The forced repatriation policy addresses the economic challenges posed by the prolonged presence of a large refugee population (Aslam, 2001; Roehrs, 2015).

Political shifts in both Pakistan and Afghanistan have played a role in shaping the forced repatriation policy. Domestically, political considerations and public sentiment, driven by the perception of Afghan refugees as an economic burden and potential security risk, influenced decisions. Internationally, changing relationships between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the broader global community, contributed to evolving political dynamics. Diplomatic considerations, regional stability concerns, and geopolitical alignments influenced the decision to repatriate Afghan refugees forcibly (Haque, 2024, January 7). The forced repatriation carries profound implications for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. It involves addressing immediate challenges associated with the return of a large refugee population, including reintegration into Afghan society, reconstruction efforts, and ensuring their well-being. Economically, while it may alleviate strains on resources in Pakistan, it places a burden on Afghanistan's capacity to absorb and provide for the returning population. Human rights and humanitarian concerns, including the right to seek asylum and access to essential services, are raised by the abrupt nature of forced repatriation. When these refugees go back forcefully, they will become anti-Pakistan because they have been living for decades in Pakistan.

Now they left their properties and jobs, and when they returned to their homeland with empty hands or without resources and sold their properties at fair prices, it made them an anti-Pakistan force in Afghanistan. Pakistan needs to establish a proper mechanism for their repatriation (Bahiss, 2023). The rising tide of anti-refugee sentiment in Pakistan, coupled with the government's policy shift prioritizing citizens, has intensified pressure on Afghan refugees to return home. The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has further fueled insecurity, complicating resettlement for Afghan refugees. Denied a pathway to permanent residency or citizenship in Pakistan, Afghan refugees face an uncertain future. Hosting millions for decades has undoubtedly strained Pakistan's economic and infrastructural resources, contributing to resentment among some Pakistani citizens. Competition for limited resources has led to tensions, leaving Afghan refugees struggling for employment and facing social and cultural challenges. Anti-refugee sentiment is further exacerbated by unfounded perceptions that some refugees may harbor sympathies for militant groups, adding pressure for repatriation (Butt, 2023, November). This precarious situation has left Afghan refugees vulnerable, lacking access to essential services like education, healthcare, and social support, and has been linked to a rise in terrorist activity in both countries. It is crucial to remember that not all refugees are involved in extremism, and forced repatriation may inadvertently create conditions conducive to its spread (HRW, 2023, November).

5. Socio-Economic Impact Assessment

The presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has significantly and enduringly impacted the country's socio-economic fabric. This impact is multifaceted, with refugees both integrating and contributing to the economy while also presenting challenges. A comprehensive assessment of their socio-economic impact requires nuanced analysis beyond simplistic narratives. One key aspect is the undeniable economic contribution of Afghan refugees. Studies highlight their adaptability and resilience in engaging with diverse sectors. The entrepreneurial spirit within the Afghan diaspora has led to the establishment of countless businesses, generating employment opportunities and contributing to the informal economy. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the complexities and challenges. Competition for jobs, particularly in low-wage sectors, can strain local communities and create tension. Additionally, the informal nature of much of their work often means limited access to social security and protection (DRC, 2013). Beyond the economic sphere, the impact extends to education, healthcare, and social services. While Afghan refugees contribute to these sectors with skilled professionals, the sheer size of the refugee population can strain resources and infrastructure. Furthermore, security concerns regarding undocumented refugees and potential links to criminal activities cannot be ignored. However, generalizations about entire communities are harmful and hinder constructive dialogue.

Despite these economic contributions, the extended presence of a large refugee population has introduced challenges related to social and cultural integration. Social integration challenges are evident in education and healthcare, where strain on resources has at times limited access to these services for both the refugee population and the host community. Integrating Afghan children into the Pakistani education system, for instance, has encountered obstacles related to language barriers and capacity limitations. The socio-economic impact assessment must also consider the ramifications for education and healthcare. Strains on resources and competition for services have impacted the accessibility and quality of education and healthcare for both Afghan refugees and the local population. Refugees International's report delves into the educational challenges faced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, highlighting that the demand for educational services often outstrips available resources, creating difficulties in providing adequate schooling for both Afghan and Pakistani children. Similarly, healthcare services have been stretched due to increased demand from the refugee population, raising concerns about access to quality medical services for both refugees and the host community (Devon & Khan, 2023). Acknowledging the role of Afghan refugees in the informal economy is crucial for a comprehensive impact assessment. Many refugees have found employment in informal sectors, contributing to economic activities often not captured by formal assessments. This dynamic has implications for labor market dynamics and the overall economic resilience of both the refugee population and the host country. While the informal economy provides flexibility for refugees to engage in various economic activities, it also poses challenges related to job security, legal protections, and social benefits. Understanding the dynamics of the informal economy is imperative for crafting policies that support the economic well-being of Afghan refugees and address potential vulnerabilities (Subohi, 2023, November).

A critical aspect of the socio-economic impact assessment involves anticipating the economic adjustments that will follow post-repatriation. The forced repatriation in 2023 signifies a substantial change in the economic landscape, with potential consequences for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The return of Afghan refugees to their home country is expected to lead to a redistribution of labor and economic activities. While this may alleviate some strains on resources in Pakistan, it presents challenges for Afghanistan in absorbing the returning population and reintegrating them into the economy. The economic adjustments post-repatriation will necessitate coordinated efforts to ensure sustainable development and livelihood opportunities. To sum up, the presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has left an undeniable and enduring mark on the nation's socio-economic tapestry. While their economic contributions are substantial, integrating them socially and culturally, addressing educational and healthcare needs, and regulating the informal economy remain pressing challenges. Moreover, the 2023 forced repatriation will significantly reshape the economic landscapes of both Pakistan and Afghanistan, demanding synchronized efforts for sustainable development and secure livelihoods. In essence, the socio-economic impact of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is intricate and multifaceted. We must move beyond reductive narratives and delve into the complexities of their contributions, challenges, and integration within the host society. Only through rigorous analysis and open dialogue can we find sustainable solutions that benefit both the refugees and Pakistan.

6. The Road to Repatriation: Implications for Pakistan

The year 2023 marked a significant turning point in Pakistan's relationship with the Afghan diaspora, as the forced repatriation of an estimated 317,000 Afghan refugees took place. This challenging journey poses several crucial implications for both Pakistan and Afghanistan, encompassing economic adjustments, social and cultural shifts, and concerns about regional stability (Tribune, 2023, November). The departure of a large refugee population will undoubtedly alleviate some resource strains in Pakistan. However, it also raises questions about the economic void left behind and the potential impact on Pakistan's image and influence in Afghanistan. The informal economy, where many Afghan refugees were employed, may experience significant shifts in labor dynamics, impacting sectors like trade, agriculture, and small businesses. Strategic planning and coordination are crucial to ensure a smooth economic transition, requiring policies that support affected sectors. Over the years, Afghan refugees have become integrated into Pakistani communities, enriching the nation's cultural tapestry. Their sudden repatriation creates challenges for both host communities and returning refugees. Social integration efforts are essential to address potential tensions and facilitate a smooth reintegration of returnees into Afghan society. Understanding the cultural aspects of refugee situations and implementing inclusive policies that promote social harmony

are vital steps in this process. While security concerns primarily drive the forced repatriation, it also has potential implications for broader regional stability. South Asia's geopolitical landscape is complex, and the movement of large populations can influence the delicate balance of power. Regional stability is a shared interest for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The forced repatriation raises questions about its potential impact on cross-border relations and the stability of the wider region. Employing diplomatic strategies and international cooperation will be crucial in navigating these security concerns and ensuring that the repatriation process contributes to, rather than hinders, regional stability.

The successful reintegration of returnees into Afghan society is paramount. Afghanistan faces the significant challenge of absorbing a large population returning after years of displacement. Substantial resources, international aid, and collaborative initiatives are necessary to support economic and social reintegration efforts. Pakistan's role extends to facilitating a smooth transition and collaborating with Afghanistan to ensure the well-being of returnees (Ahmadi & Lakhani, 2016). The forced repatriation of Afghan refugees raises fundamental humanitarian concerns regarding their rights and well-being. International organizations, including the United Nations, emphasize the importance of voluntary and dignified repatriation (UNHCR, 2020). Vigilantly monitoring human rights violations, including the right to seek asylum and protection from refoulement, is essential. Adopting a human-centric approach to forced migration situations, should guide policies and actions related to repatriation, ensuring that the process aligns with international humanitarian norms. The road to repatriation underscores the necessity of diplomatic collaboration between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Addressing the multifaceted implications requires coordinated efforts, open communication, and shared responsibilities. The international community, including organizations like the United Nations, can play a pivotal role in facilitating dialogue, providing resources, and ensuring that the repatriation process aligns with humanitarian principles. Diplomatic strategies that foster collaboration and mutual understanding will be instrumental in navigating the complexities of forced repatriation and its aftermath. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the implications of forced repatriation from all angles and work together to ensure that the process is successful.

7. Policy Recommendations for Peaceful Repatriation

The forced repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan is a complex issue that demands a comprehensive set of policies. To ensure a peaceful and sustainable repatriation process, we need to address economic, social, and humanitarian dimensions. The following recommendations are intended to guide policymakers in creating an environment that is conducive to the well-being of both Afghan returnees and host countries, especially Pakistan. There is dire need to promote socio-economic development in Afghanistan. Different communities must invest in initiatives that enhance economic opportunities, reduce poverty, and address marginalization. This will reduce the likelihood of Afghan refugees resorting to terrorist activities and provide them with a sense of belonging and stability. Secondly, it is necessary to engage in diplomatic efforts and foster collaboration between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Joint initiatives, dialogue forums, and collaborative projects can contribute to regional stability. Involving international organizations and neighboring countries can help address cross-border challenges, promote understanding, and ensure a coordinated approach to repatriation. Prioritizing human rights is equally important. It must be ensured that voluntary, dignified return of Afghan refugees aligned with international humanitarian standards. Collaborating with human rights organizations and the United Nations to monitor and safeguard individual rights can prevent any violations during the repatriation process.

Socio-economic support programs are crucial for the reintegration of Afghan returnees. Afghan Government must develop and implement programs that provide livelihood development, vocational training, and job placement. Securing funding from international aid agencies can ensure a smooth economic transition for returnees in Afghanistan. Investing in education and healthcare infrastructure is also vital. Enhancing educational and healthcare infrastructure in Afghanistan to accommodate the returning population and developing strategies to integrate Afghan returnee children into the education system can address language barriers and capacity limitations. Reintegration assistance programs are also necessary, addressing the specific needs of returnees. Counseling services, community support networks, and cultural integration can help them adjust to their new lives. Collaboration with

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations is crucial to address social and psychological aspects of reintegration. International agencies should implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of repatriation policies. Regularly reviewing the socio-economic conditions of returnees, identifying challenges, and adjusting policies based on feedback from returnees, local communities, and international organizations is essential.

Cross-border economic development initiatives that benefit both Afghanistan and Pakistan, promoting trade, infrastructure development, and job creation can be explored. This can help build trust and promote cooperation between the two countries. Public awareness campaigns can inform communities about the repatriation process, dispel misconceptions, and promote social cohesion. Engaging local leaders, community influencers, and media outlets can disseminate accurate information and build understanding among host communities and returnees. Establishing legal protections for returnees, addressing property rights, citizenship, and access to public services, is a must. Collaboration with legal experts, NGOs, and relevant international agencies can create a legal framework safeguarding the rights of Afghan returnees. Finally, we must seek increased international aid and partnership to support the repatriation process. Collaborating with donor countries, international organizations, and NGOs to secure financial resources for infrastructure development, humanitarian assistance, and sustainable reintegration programs is critical. By implementing these policy recommendations, we can create a conducive environment for the peaceful return and successful reintegration of Afghan refugees. This can contribute to regional stability, prosperity, and most importantly, human dignity.

8. Conclusion

The return of Afghan refugees in 2023 marks a pivotal moment in the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The repatriation process requires the utmost care, sensitivity and strategic planning to navigate the complex implications it poses. Pakistan's open-door policy, forged during the Soviet-Afghan War, was driven by cultural ties and Islamic principles. However, over the years, economic strains, security concerns, and shifting political dynamics have resulted in the 2023 policy shift towards forced repatriation. The socio-economic contribution of Afghan refugees to Pakistan's economy is indisputable, but there are also challenges in social integration, education, and healthcare. The anticipated economic adjustments post-repatriation raise questions about the void left and potential strains on sectors where refugees were engaged in the informal economy. The security concerns that forced repatriation raises require a delicate balance. Diplomatic engagement, human rights considerations, and collaboration on regional stability are essential components for a successful repatriation process. Pakistan faces social and cultural shifts during the returnees' reintegration into Afghan society. Humanitarian considerations stress the importance of dignified repatriation. Diplomatic collaboration and international cooperation are crucial in navigating this journey.

Policy recommendations for peaceful repatriation outline a comprehensive approach, encompassing diplomatic engagement, socio-economic support, human rights considerations, and international collaboration. These recommendations serve as a guide for policymakers to craft inclusive and effective strategies that prioritize the well-being of both Afghan returnees and host communities. The repatriation of Afghan refugees represents a complex interplay of geopolitical realities, humanitarian principles, and the delicate balance between national interests and regional stability. The success of the repatriation process hinges on a commitment to human rights, collaborative efforts, and a forward-looking approach that addresses immediate challenges while fostering sustainable development. It is essential to draw lessons from the past, learn from international experiences, and prioritize the dignity, rights, and well-being of the individuals at the heart of this forced repatriation. Only through a concerted and compassionate effort can the road to repatriation lead to a future where peace, stability, and prosperity prevail for both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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