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The Forced Return of Afghan Refugees and Implications for Stability

Summary

- Afghans are the third largest refugee group worldwide, and even though the largest numbers of returns come from Pakistan and Iran, an increasing number are being repatriated from Europe.
- Lack of access to land, essential services, and income-earning opportunities and exposure to violent conflict means that returnees often become displaced internally, joining the close to one million current internally displaced persons (IDPs).
- Returnees are resettling in large numbers in urban areas, putting additional strain on services and reportedly creating tensions with longer-term residents.
- Women returnees have been particularly affected by restrictions on mobility that, in turn, affect their access to basic services, including education and health.
- Despite the government's resolve to strengthen interventions on behalf of returnees and to end the protracted situation of Afghans in exile, given the country's deteriorating security situation and dire state of the economy, Afghanistan is not fully prepared to continue receiving large influxes of returnees.

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Introduction

Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran are returning home in increasing numbers, but many of these returns are involuntary or “spontaneous.” As a result, additional strain is being placed on Afghan government service provision and the communities in which returnees settle—inhibiting development progress and exacerbating instability. Conditions faced upon returning home are also driving the increasing flow of refugees into Europe and other regions.

Worldwide, Afghans form one of the largest refugee groups and represent one of the largest repatriation situations. Although Pakistan has not acceded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, today it hosts approximately 1 million registered and 1.5 million unregistered refugees. Iran hosts 951,140 registered Afghan refugees.¹

There was a spike in returns from Pakistan in early 2015 following the attack on a military school in Peshawar in December 2014, and actions by Pakistani security forces and local authorities continue to push refugees to return. During the first ten months of 2015, Pakistan deported 20,000 undocumented Afghan refugees and reported nearly 96,000 spontaneous returns of undocumented refugees (see table 1). In the same period, Iran deported nearly 200,000 undocumented Afghan refugees and

reported nearly 261,000 spontaneous returns of undocumented refugees. Germany has recently announced a stricter refugee policy that would return the majority of Afghan refugees—the second largest refugee group entering Europe after Syrians. Other countries are likely to follow suit.

Table 1. Spontaneous Returns and Deportations from Pakistan and Iran, January–October 2015

	Spontaneous returns of registered refugees ²	Spontaneous returns of undocumented refugees ³	Deportations ⁴	Totals (country)
Pakistan	54,717	95,778	20,077	170,572
Iran	57,486	260,558	192,351	455,678
Totals (type of returnee)	57,486	356,336	212,428	626,250

Uncertainty over the Government of Pakistan's extension of refugee registration may contribute to further returns until the situation is resolved, and is heightening anxiety amongst Afghan refugees. Although Pakistan's interior ministry signaled that the government would allow registered refugees to remain in the country after a December 31 deadline, as of this writing no formal announcement has been made to clarify their status, despite several discussions in the Cabinet.⁵ Spontaneous returnees are leaving Pakistan largely because of push factors; most returnees have indicated to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) providing them aid that they would stay if they could because of Afghanistan's security situation, lack of economic means, and the fear of persecution.⁶ Those who choose to leave Pakistan do so because they have found it untenable to remain. Push factors include harassment, extortion by Pakistani police, and difficulty in renewing tenancy agreements and finding casual labor.

Most spontaneous refugees are not the wealthier Afghans, who have significant assets and investments in Pakistan and can apply for special visas. It is the poorer refugees—laborers and workers in the informal economy—who are returning involuntarily. Human Rights Watch has reported that housing and property of some refugees have been seized or destroyed. Some district governments have stipulated that all registered Afghan refugees must relocate to a government-supervised camp and that they would deport any undocumented Afghan citizens.⁷ Returnees from both Pakistan and Iran are also influenced greatly by a desire to improve their social status, an enduring affinity to their country, and a strong perception of being second-class citizens—discrimination is a particularly strong motivator for those returning from Iran.⁸

What Happens When They Return?

The Afghan government has taken several steps to assist with returns and with displacement more broadly.⁹ In 2012, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and the United Nations Refugee Agency adopted the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries (SSAR). The Afghan government has also instituted a national IDP strategy; a repatriation and reintegration policy; and a high commission on migration, which is led by the president and overseen by Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah.

Despite the government's efforts, the policy framework for reintegration remains disjointed. While the overall goal is to support returnees' repatriation to their areas of origin, the reality is that many end up clustered in urban areas. Some humanitarian actors have also failed to recognize and respond to the trend of urban displacement. The decline in aid over the past few years has led to a decrease in support and services that NGOs have traditionally provided to IDPs. The resulting shortage in assistance is further exacerbated by additional returnees.

The nature of spontaneous returns—often precipitated by coercive actions in host states—do not give returnees adequate time to assess locations for their return, identify shelter and services, and take care of asset transfers or make arrangements with relatives. This situation ultimately puts them at a higher risk of poverty and makes long-term reintegration and security efforts even more challenging.

Insecurity and Exposure to Violent Conflict

Many returnees express dismay with their situation and the dearth of options open to them. Returnees are exposed to higher risks of violent conflict. Lack of information and social connections in the places to which they return add to their vulnerability. Their experiences upon return can impact their levels of confidence and trust in the government to represent their interests and provide for their basic needs. This can dispose returnees toward groups fighting the Afghan government.¹⁰

Other returnees become internally displaced as a result of insecurity in their areas of origin. Where the government is largely absent, young male returnees are particularly at risk for recruitment into violent extremist groups and criminal networks. Their high visibility in rural areas, social isolation, and lack of legitimate income opportunities make them easy targets for recruitment. NGOs working with returnees believe that competing violent extremist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, may be more attractive for returnees because of the higher financial incentives they provide.

Social Reintegration

Most returnees have been displaced for decades, with many second or third generation Afghans born in displacement. Having grown up outside Afghanistan, they face social and cultural challenges upon returning to an unfamiliar country.

NGOs involved in the reintegration of returnees report challenges that young people in particular face, including feelings of alienation from the wider community, especially in urban areas, as well as discrimination.¹¹ Returnees that lived in an urban area before being displaced to another urban area still face major difficulties, as their experience is different. Afghans repatriated from other countries, including European countries and Australia, face similar challenges. Further, some returnees from Iran are suffering from opium addiction, which can increase their risk of involvement in criminal activities.

Women returnees face tighter social restrictions in urban areas due to the loss of a sense of community. Restrictions on mobility further impede their efforts to attend school and seek health care. Recent research on displaced women in urban areas found that they commonly experience significant psychosocial trauma, gender-based violence among returnee families, and an increase in the burden of absorbing economic shocks.¹²

Land and Housing

Rapid urbanization in Afghanistan is being driven, in large part, by internal and external displacement.¹³ Currently, between 25 and 30 percent of the total population resides in urban areas, and the urban population will double in the next fifteen years.¹⁴ Although returnees may join communities who themselves were displaced, the specific needs of recent arrivals are different from those living in protracted displacement.¹⁵ Urban areas experiencing rapid growth are already under strain, impacting service delivery and security for both returnees and IDPs.

Contestation and conflict over land is common and widespread in Afghanistan and significantly affects returnees. Successive waves of internal and external displacement have forced many to vacate land and housing. In some cases, their lands have been occupied by IDPs or other returnees and in other cases by local power brokers. In addition, there is not enough available land to support the increase in family sizes, contributing to food insecurity among returnees and IDPs alike.¹⁶

Displacement and other factors have eroded traditional mechanisms for resolving tenancy disputes, and it is difficult for owners to claim their properties without an original title or deed. Tensions between returnees and tenants often end with violence or the threat of violence among the disputing parties.¹⁷

A presidential decree allocates land plots to returnees under the Land Allocation Scheme. The process of allocation has reportedly been slow and lacking in transparency, and plots are often unoccupied due to their poor quality or the lack of nearby services.¹⁸ In addition, the concentration of displaced persons in peri-urban, camp-like situations isolates returnees from other communities.

Access to Employment and Services

Accessing income-earning opportunities is among returnees' greatest difficulties upon return.¹⁹ Unemployment among returnees and IDPs is high, partly because of their limited social connections. In addition, many returnees lack the capital to invest in informal sector activities or to buy assets to reestablish livelihoods after their return.

Returnees may have acquired skills and knowledge that would be valuable to vitalizing local economies; however, there is currently no assessment of returnee skills and efforts to match them with opportunities. Further, the educational credentials of many refugees who have studied in schools and madrassas in Pakistan are not accepted by Afghan education institutions. Some do not attempt to get their credentials certified because of the lengthy process and demand for bribes. Those who have studied in smaller villages in Pakistan are unfamiliar with the educational requirements in Afghan schools and are left frustrated. Those who have studied in madrassas in Pakistan face the additional challenge of being seen as agents of the Taliban and other insurgent/terrorist groups.

The shortage of schools for girls in rural areas is one reason why returnees choose to resettle in cities, but not all families have this choice and some decide not to send their daughters to school. Schools in urban centers are already overwhelmed, and the challenge of absorbing students grows along with displacement to urban areas.

Recommendations

Responding to and supporting Afghans living in protracted displacement should be the first priority for the international community and partners of the SSAR. However, given the growing number of returnees, it is imperative to address the particular challenges they face:

- Agreement by Pakistan on a multi-annual, phased return will allow the Afghan government, humanitarian and development actors, and returnees to be better prepared. Such a timetable, based on the absorption capacity within Afghanistan, is also in the best interests of Pakistan and countries in Europe—in the least, ensuring that returnees do not reenter Pakistan or attempt to seek refuge elsewhere.
- Greater coordination among relevant Afghan government ministries should be matched with stronger coordination and dedicated programs by international humanitarian and development actors. Improvements should include enhanced capacity support to the Afghan government and the use of existing data on returnees and displaced persons to identify districts with high returnee populations and greater resource needs. Young returnees and IDPs in particular face specific displacement-related vulnerabilities—about which there is a dearth of documented knowledge, let alone support programs.
- The government of Afghanistan should implement a clear policy on the provision of land and housing for returnees and ensure the transparent allocation of high-quality land in close proximity to services and local communities. This will help reduce the physical and social isolation faced by returnees in rural and peri-urban areas. Addressing contested land that is under multiple claims will also allow returnees greater choice in their area of resettlement.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief looks at the security and socioeconomic impact of the growing numbers of Afghan returnees from Pakistan and Iran and provides recommendations on how humanitarian, development, and security actors can better address their needs. Belquis Ahmadi is a senior program officer with USIP's Afghanistan program, and Sadaf Lakhani is a senior governance and fragility adviser at TrustWorks Global and the World Bank.

- The government and humanitarian and development actors must have a dedicated strategy to address the increasing urbanization of displacement. In particular, Afghan authorities should coordinate on housing needs and how returnees can benefit from new housing projects, as well as with relevant line ministries on dedicated service delivery for returnees in urban areas.
- Other measures to ensure smooth integration need to support the transfer and acceptance of educational credentials and identification of market opportunities for those with specialized skills. The valuable skills and knowledge that returnees offer can contribute to growing the economy.
- Ensuring that the specific needs of returnees are recognized and planned for requires dedicated attention. The government and all international actors should include returnees in decision-making structures at the community level and increase transparency regarding the allocation of resources.

Notes

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