

Beyond Promises: The Durable Solution to the Afghan Refugee Problem

Written by M. Ashraf Haidari, Guest Contributor
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The saga of Afghan refugees began in late December 1979: Afghans were an impoverished people but content with their agrarian and traditional way of life. They hardly ever wished to migrate abroad for economic opportunities. But their normal lives abruptly ceased in the days following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as the country became a major victim of the Cold War. Soviet tanks rolled into Afghan villages indiscriminately killing innocent civilians, destroying their livelihoods, and driving most Afghans abroad in search of protection and human security. More Afghans fled violence, persecution and ethnic cleansing and genocide as a result of regional proxy conflicts in Afghanistan throughout 1990s. Many sought refuge in neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

However, over the course of the past three decades, Afghan refugees have never hesitated to return home as soon as conditions have given them hope for the restoration of peace and justice in Afghanistan. In 1992 and 1993, for example, following the fall of the Afghan communist regime, more than 2 million Afghan refugees voluntarily repatriated from Pakistan and Iran. But their return ground to a halt shortly after the breakout of the civil war that plunged Afghanistan into anarchy and chaos for a decade.

Buoyed up by international re-engagement in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, 5.7 million Afghan refugees have returned home from Pakistan and Iran, making this the largest voluntary repatriation in the history of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Despite Afghan refugees' record repatriation and the many hardships they face on return, Iranian and Pakistani officials have occasionally politicized what is actually a humanitarian issue - inappropriately labeling Afghan refugees as "burden on our economy" or potential "recruits for terrorism." Unfortunately, these political stereotypes not only mischaracterize Afghan refugees but also disregard the many contributions that refugees actually make to their host societies and

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the world at large.

After all, refugees and asylum seekers are ordinary civilians with dignity and human rights but whose normal lives have suddenly changed for the worse due to circumstances that have forced them to abandon their home for safety elsewhere. German physicist Albert Einstein and French writer Victor Hugo, for instance, were great intellectuals of their time, but they were suddenly refugees in a strange land after escaping persecution in their home countries. While in exile, they gave back much in knowledge to their host societies and continued making significant contributions to science and literature.

The millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran are assets to those countries' economies. Many Afghans in both states fill a glaring need in the labor sector, working casual jobs at wages much lower than that paid to locals who may not even be willing to accept such jobs because of social taboos associated with casual labor. Other Afghan refugees use their special skills - such as carpet weaving - to produce quality Afghan rugs, which local firms purchase below market price, brand them made in the host country, and then sell them in developed countries for manifold profit.

Still, another large segment of the Afghan refugee population, particularly in Pakistan, receives monthly remittances of US\$800 to \$1,000 from their relatives in developed countries (mostly Europe, North America, Australia, and the Gulf states), and spend the funds on housing and services in the local economies. Moreover, a great number of well-off Afghan refugees run businesses in Pakistan, Iran, and the Gulf states, making notable contributions to those countries' economic growth. Since 2001, a large number of exiled Afghan businessmen have returned home and invested in key sectors such as telecommunications, construction, transportation, and logistics, which in turn have facilitated increased trade and commerce through and between Afghanistan and its neighbors, particularly Pakistan and Iran.

Other allegations that terrorists recruit from Afghan refugee camps are utterly baseless and a political excuse to avoid cooperating sincerely in the "war against terror." Afghan refugees are actually victims of violence and terrorism, and abusing their status is clearly a violation of their rights under the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Countries party to the Geneva Convention and other international human rights pacts are obligated to respect refugee rights as human rights and safeguard them by providing refugees with protection from the violence, persecution, and insecurity that collectively make it impossible for most refugees to return home.

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Although 5.7 million Afghan refugees have repatriated from Pakistan and Iran over the past 10 years, most of the remaining refugees are reluctant to return home. When a UN reporter recently asked one Afghan refugee, Hazrat Shah, if he planned to repatriate, the carpet weaver now living in Pakistan replied: "There is no place in the world like home. But where would you go if your house were ablaze?" He added, "Today two new graves have been dug for two brothers who were killed in a landmine explosion in Afghanistan." The two youngsters - not related to Hazrat Shah - had returned home to Gereshk in Helmand province to find jobs and gradually to pave the way for the repatriation of their entire family from Pakistan.

The government and people of Afghanistan appreciate the humanitarian assistance Pakistan, Iran, and other host countries have provided to Afghan refugees and asylum seekers over the past three decades. But "pull" factors such as improved security, enhanced protection and reintegration assistance, and increased employment opportunities in Afghanistan should determine "push" factors in host states.

All countries hosting large numbers of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers (Pakistan, Iran, Australia, Greece, UK, Germany, and the Netherlands) must honor the principle of non-refoulement rooted in international and Islamic law to refrain from the forcible deportation of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers. The Afghan government maintains separate trilateral agreements with Pakistan, Iran, and the UNHCR - a key provision of which is to facilitate voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from the two countries only if the conditions inside Afghanistan allow.

Although host states have an interest in encouraging refugees to go back home, the UNHCR is mandated to prevent and protect refugees and asylum seekers from repatriating prematurely if the prevailing conditions at home are not ready for their return. Except for spontaneous returns during 2002-2005, Afghan refugees must have been warned about increasing instability and a severe lack of reintegration assistance in Afghanistan in the following years.

The fall of the Taliban in 2001 - coupled with the political rhetoric of implementing a long-term strategy modeled after the Marshall Plan to secure the future of Afghanistan - made millions of refugees overly optimistic. Of course, a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan has yet to materialize. Nonetheless, the talk of it did re-displace hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees who had a good life that took them more than two decades to establish in exile.

The fact that thousands of returnees have ended up internally displaced without assistance

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should be cause for serious concern to the UNHCR and the international community to halt further premature repatriation of Afghan refugees and deportation of asylum seekers until the conditions in Afghanistan have improved. At the same time, the international community must honor the principle of burden sharing and provide relief assistance to states with large numbers of refugees. Assistance to Pakistan and Iran should aim at empowering Afghan refugees so that they will gain skills necessary both to contribute to their host societies and later to use those skills to earn an income on return home.

Additionally, developed countries must expand their resettlement programs, taking in more Afghan refugees from Iran and Pakistan on an annual basis. Granting asylum to and resettling Afghans in the developed countries will go a long way in helping rebuild and develop Afghanistan. Resilience and high achievement motivation that characterize most refugees and asylum seekers will quickly enable resettled Afghan families to adapt into their new societies, taking advantage of social and economic opportunities there to establish themselves and to continue supporting their relatives at home, as well as in Pakistan and Iran.

In the long run, most resettled Afghans will have gained wealth and education which they would certainly use to invest in Afghanistan. Proof of this is evident in the return of many wealthy Afghans and technocrats who have made significant contributions to Afghanistan's reconstruction since 2002.

Almost 2,500 years ago, Euripides wrote, "There is no greater sorrow on Earth than the loss of one's native land." Indeed, for most Afghan refugees, like Hazrat Shah, no foreign land can ever replace their homeland where they will return as soon as they feel secure to do so. It is obvious that the real durable solution to the Afghan refugee problem is voluntary repatriation, which can only be guaranteed by security in Afghanistan. Hence, Pakistan, Iran and Western nations with high concentration of Afghan asylum seekers can and must cooperate to stabilize Afghanistan first. Durable stability and prosperity in the country would automatically attract Afghan refugees to voluntarily return home - negating the need for pressure or forcible repatriation by the host states.

Most returnees are at the breaking point given the enormity of security and socio-economic challenges facing them in Afghanistan. They are indeed an unfortunate lot. Exiled life was imposed on many by the war against the former Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Other Afghans' displacement throughout the 1990s was caused by the West's premature disengagement from Afghanistan - a country they knowingly allowed to become a regional proxy battlefield and a terrorist base that saw nothing but death, destruction, destitution and despair for a full decade.

□□ Allowing Afghanistan to slide back into the chaos of the 1990s is sure to endanger

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international peace and security. The international community, and the West in particular, is morally obligated to secure Afghanistan and must help its refugees reintegrate successfully in order to rebuild their country in the long run.

***M. Ashraf Haidari** is the deputy assistant national security advisor of Afghanistan, and was the chargé d'affaires and deputy ambassador of the Afghan Embassy in Washington, DC.*

Photo by Sebastian Rich.

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