

Impacts of migration between Afghanistan and its hinterland

Afghanistan has been the focus for the greatest – and most complex – refugee crisis in modern history. Starting in 1992, waves of displacement have coincided with significant waves of repatriation, especially over the last decade, although reducing in scale over the last few years.

The majority of refugees have fled to Pakistan and Iran. Those in Pakistan have been predominantly, although not exclusively, Pushtun, while those in Iran are, for the most part, from northern and central Afghanistan, where a majority speaks Dari, a dialect akin to Iran's Farsi. Hazaras are among the Dari speakers, although they also have their own dialect of Farsi, Hazaragi.

The refugees in Pakistan were until recently accommodated in refugee camps the length of the border, with a greater concentration in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province than in Baluchistan. The camps were administered by the Pakistan Government, with additional support provided by UNHCR, the World Food Programme and NGOs.

Iran, in contrast, sought to avoid the international presence created by UN agencies and NGOs and instead, apart from establishing a small number of refugee camps which it administered along with the Iranian Red Crescent Society, required Afghan refugees to fend for themselves within the Iranian economy and housing market. This is consistent with the view that Iran has not provided rights and benefits normally accorded to refugees under the UN Refugees Convention.

Afghans in Iran suffered particularly from a long-established prejudice against them which resulted in frequent insults and abuse.

UNHCR has operated in Iran throughout the refugee crisis and has worked with the government to provide a limited range of services for registered Afghans and to facilitate returns and resettlement to third countries.

It is important to recognize, however, that both Pakistan and Iran have hosted very significant Afghan refugee populations for many years. UNHCR estimated that in 2012, Pakistan hosted 1.64 million refugees and Iran hosted 868,000 refugees; both refugee populations predominantly comprised Afghans.

In Iran at least, assistance and support of Afghan refugees has been incrementally reduced since the 1990s, noting that in 1994, expenditure on two million Afghans

was estimated by the Iranian government to be as high as US\$10 million per day for subsidized education, health services, transport, fuel and basic goods.

The US-led military intervention of October 2001 was seen by Pakistan and Iran to justify an accelerated push on refugees to return. Pakistan, which had already overseen a reduction in the services provided to refugees, began to plan a process of camp closures. This largely took effect after 2005, when Pakistan conducted a census of Afghan refugees and registered those covered.

The registration process accorded no rights to Afghan refugees in Pakistan other than the right to remain where they were until their camp was demolished. However, it enabled Pakistan to be much tougher with the continuing arrival of economic migrants from Afghanistan.

Those without documentation therefore found themselves under frequent scrutiny by the police and would suffer harassment and, on occasion, deportation. Iran had already begun to place increasing pressure on Afghans to return from 1993 onwards. This manifested itself in periodic police operations when Afghans would be picked up on the streets, without having the opportunity to alert any relatives, and deported in very large numbers.

Some spent a period of time, prior to deportation, in one of a number of detention facilities where conditions were particularly severe. The police would often pay no regard to the existence of one of a number of temporary documents issued to Afghans by the Iranian government to accord a limited right to stay. This pattern has continued into the post-2001 period.

This brief review of the refugee experience for Afghans in Iran and Pakistan is instructive in projecting future trends for at least three reasons. First, it indicates that seeking asylum in these two neighboring countries has become a survival strategy that a significant proportion of the Afghan population has either direct or indirect experience of.

Second, and a related point, is that many Afghans have family members or other relatives in Iran and Pakistan, on whom they may be able to rely should they decide to leave Afghanistan. Indeed, relying on informal support will become increasingly significant as the government in both Iran and Pakistan reduce their welcome for Afghan refugees, and this declining hospitality is another factor that may influence the decision whether or not to leave Afghanistan.

On balance, most published studies and commentators do not envisage massive new refugee flows to Iran or Pakistan, nor towards Central Asia, during or in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 transitions.

In addition to changing policies and circumstances in Iran and Pakistan making these two traditional countries of destination less accessible, two other reasons have been suggested.

One is that Pakistan and Iran have become less attractive places to seek work, in very recent years, as the opportunities available within the urban economy of Afghanistan have provided alternatives to the harsh treatment which Afghans suffer in Iran and Pakistan.

However, in a situation in which it is the norm for families to diversify their income sources, the balance between these options is likely to remain very fluid. With the planned drawdown in the international military and civilian presence, the urban economy may not provide the same opportunities that it has in recent years and there may be a greater willingness to tolerate the difficulties which exist in Iran and Pakistan.

The recent election of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani may also have an indirect impact if the President follows through with his desire to improve engagement with the West, and there is an improvement in the economic situation in Iran.

This in turn could attract Afghans to Iran in pursuit of greater employment opportunities.

Finally in recent years it shows that refugees from Afghanistan to its hinterland countries had a bad effects on security, economics and educational system of Afghanistan.