

# WEEKLY ANALYSIS

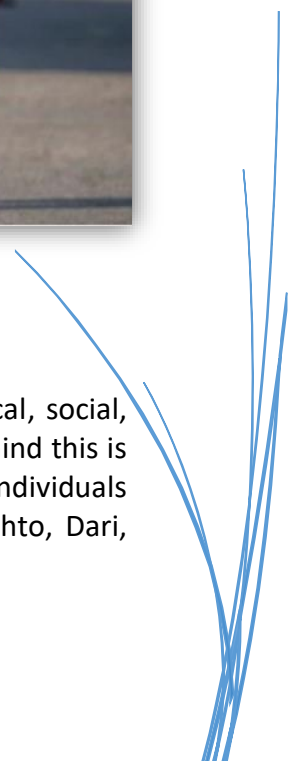
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## THE DIRE SITUATION OF AFGHAN REFUGEES; SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



## THE DIRE SITUATION OF AFGHAN REFUGEES; SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### INTRODUCTION

Afghans have been suffering from immigration difficulties for the past few decades. According to a survey, almost 70 percent of Afghans have experienced immigration once in their life.<sup>1</sup> Some other statistics show that one in every 4 or 5 Afghans has immigrated to Pakistan or Iran once in the last few decades.

Afghan refugees not only face a lot of problems on the way to other countries but also face many challenges after their arrival. Amnesty International recently said in a report that Iranian and Turkish security forces unlawfully open fire on Afghans, including women and children, who attempt to cross their borders and reach safety. The organization documented at least 14 killings by Iranian and Turkish security forces, 11 of whom were killed by the Iranian security forces. According to the report, the actual death toll is likely to be significantly higher. Humanitarian workers and Afghan doctors told the organization they recorded at least 59 deaths and 31 injuries between August and December 2021 alone.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, various countries, particularly Iran and Turkey, routinely return Afghan refugees unlawfully and forcibly and ill-treat them. Afghan refugees living in Iran and Pakistan also face a lot of problems and harassment from time to time. For instance, a few months ago, there was a wave of persecution and harassment of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran, during which thousands of refugees and migrants were tortured, killed or forcibly deported. Even the most disturbing and heartbreaking videos of the torture of Afghan refugees have been circulated on social media.

Since last August 2021, a new phase of Afghan immigration has started, mainly due to political and economic problems in the country. Since last year, in addition to normal immigration, many

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<sup>1</sup> ICRC, Our World: Views from Afghanistan, Opinion Survey, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International. "Iran/Turkey: Fleeing Afghans unlawfully returned after coming under fire at borders" Aug 31, 2022. Available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/iran-turkey-fleeing-afghans-unlawfully-returned-after-coming-under-fire-at-borders/>



educated Afghans have either left or leaving the country, which is called brain drain in academic terms. It is assumed that the reason is the harsh policies of the Islamic Emirate. Most of these emigrants are concerned about the restrictions in the field of education, the restrictions on freedom of speech and the intolerance of dissenting thoughts, the provision of public jobs only to the members of the Taliban, and other such factors.

In addition to reviewing the number of Afghan refugees and their situation in different countries, this paper also includes some recommendations for the refugees' host countries, international agencies and other related policymakers and aid agencies. It also includes the recommendations presented in the international seminar entitled "The Future of Relations between Afghanistan and Neighboring Countries" by the Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS) in Kabul a few months ago.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Afghan immigration has a long history, and it was due to both economic and security factors. Still, the communist coup of April 27, 1978, forced Afghans to leave Afghanistan "en masse" for the first time.

This immigration was in four phases. The first phase lasted from the Saur communist coup to the Soviet invasion. The second phase started with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and ended with the withdrawal of the Soviets. The third phase is the period of the civil war in Afghanistan, and the fourth phase started with the attacks of American and NATO forces on Afghan soil.

In the first phase, According to the United Nations Refugee Agency figures, the number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan reached 80000 in 1978, then 400000 in 1979. Similarly, the number of Afghan refugees in Iran reached 100000 in 1979.<sup>3</sup>

In the second phase, one year after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1980), the total number of Afghan refugees in the world reached approximately 1.73 million people. In the second year, this number reached 3.88 million, and in the year of the withdrawal of the Soviets (1989), the total number of Afghan refugees in the world was 5.664 million.<sup>4</sup> Afghans were forced to immigrate more than ever before as the immigration of Afghans to the industrialized world also

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<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, A/AC.96/577-14 August 1980, 31<sup>st</sup> Session Executive Committee, Report on UNHCR Assistance Activities in 1979-1980 and Proposed Voluntary Funds Programmes and Budget for 1981, par. 602, p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> UN Data: <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=UNHCR&f=indID%3aType-Ref>



began during these years. The return of refugees to the country also started in this phase, according to the Geneva Accords.

In the third phase (civil war), after the withdrawal of the Soviets, until the arrival of American and NATO forces, approximately 4 million refugees returned to the country. Still, with the beginning of the civil war, the process of immigration from Afghanistan was going on. In this phase, Afghan refugees were received coldly in the neighbouring countries compared to the first phase.<sup>5</sup>

In the fourth phase, after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, when the US-led NATO forces attacked Afghanistan, nearly 300 thousand Afghans were again forced to leave the country and seek refuge in Pakistan. But when an interim government was established in Kabul after the Bonn conference, approximately 3.2 million Afghans returned from Pakistan and Iran until 2005. Still, when concerns about the country's security situation increased after 2014, immigration from Afghanistan to European countries accelerated again.<sup>6</sup>

## AFGHAN REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN

The first tripartite agreement about Afghan refugees between (Afghanistan-Pakistan-UNHCR) was signed in March 2003, and the first general census of Afghan refugees was conducted in 2005. According to the census, 3,047 million Afghans were refugees in Pakistan. In general, 58 percent of Afghan refugees lived outside and 42 percent in the refugee camps. About 51 percent of these refugees had immigrated to Pakistan before 1985.<sup>7</sup>

From October 2006 to February 2007, approximately 2161984 Afghans were registered and given (Afghan Citizen) cards.<sup>8</sup> Since many refugees returned to the country, the number dropped to about 1554910 registered Afghan refugees living in Pakistan in 2015.<sup>9</sup> This number was slightly reduced in 2019 and reached 1.4 million people.<sup>10</sup> There is no accurate data on

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<sup>5</sup> Isabel Mehlmann, Migration in Afghanistan: A country profile 2011, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, pp: 18, see it online: < <http://digitalarchive.maastrichtuniversity.nl/fedora/get/guid:85a6d61b-cf54-4d07-881e-c6b1b92444c3/ASSET1> >

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, Afghan Refugee Statistics, February 2005

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR, "Pakistan, UNHCR say census counts 3 million Afghans" May 2005. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2005/5/427643df4/pakistan-unhcr-say-census-counts-3-million-afghans.html>

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR, Registration of Afghans in Pakistan, Briefing Notes, 16 Feb 2007, see it online: < <http://www.unhcr.org/45d58a692.html> >

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, 2015 Year-End report in Pakistan. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/pdfsummaries/GR2015-Pakistan-eng.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR, 2019 Year-End report in Pakistan. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/pdfsummaries/GR2019-Pakistan-eng.pdf>



unregistered Afghan refugees, but in 2015, according to the Minister for States and Frontier Regions of Pakistan, the number of unregistered Afghan refugees was approximately 1.4 million.<sup>11</sup>

As of January 2022, approximately 3 million Afghans were living in Pakistan, around 1.4 million of them are Proof of Registration (PoR) cardholders, approximately 840 000 hold an Afghan Citizen Card (ACC), and an estimated 775 000 are undocumented. While PoR and ACC cardholders are offered limited protection, mainly from refoulement, undocumented Afghans are exposed to arrest, detention and deportation.<sup>12</sup>

## AFGHAN REFUGEES IN IRAN

After 2001, many refugees returned from Iran. Still, there were approximately 951 142 registered and 1 to 2 million unregistered Afghan refugees living in Iran in 2016.

The figures of the United Nations Refugee Agency show that currently (in 2022), the number of registered Afghan refugees in Iran is 780 thousand, along with 2.1 million unregistered refugees and 600 thousand refugees with passports.<sup>13</sup> However, Iranian authorities claim that the number of Afghan refugees in this country reaches 4 million.<sup>14</sup> Most of the Afghan refugees in this country are of the Shia religion and Hazara tribe, as well as Tajik tribe. However, there is no exact number of unregistered refugees, and it is assumed that the share of refugees from all ethnic groups is high because most of the unregistered refugees are Afghans who have migrated to this country for work.

Why the number of unregistered Afghan refugees in Iran is high, the main reason is economic immigration; Because a large number of Afghans go to Iran for work. Another reason is the transit route of refugees through Iran. As many Afghans go to Europe, most of them go through Iran. Therefore, along with other factors, the migration of Afghans to Europe has also increased the number of Afghan refugees in Iran (some of them are either arrested by the Iranian police or stay there for a while).

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<sup>11</sup> Express Tribune, Pakistan to register 1.4m Afghan refugees by July: minister, 11 March 2015, retrieved at 9 May 2015, see it online: < <http://tribune.com.pk/story/851602/pakistan-to-register-1-4m-afghan-refugees-by-july-minister/>

<sup>12</sup> European Union Agency for Asylum, "EUAA publishes report on Afghan refugees in Pakistan" May 2022. Available at: <https://euaa.europa.eu/news-events/euaa-publishes-report-afghan-refugees-pakistan>

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR. "Afghan refugees in Iran" available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/>

<sup>14</sup> Aljazeera. "What does the future hold for Afghan refugees in Iran?" June 2022. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/12/what-does-the-future-hold-for-afghan-refugees-in-iran>



However, Iran signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol in 1976, but Pakistan has not yet signed this convention and its protocol. According to these conventions, no one can forcibly return refugees. But unfortunately, forced deportation of Afghan refugees from Iran was always taking place, and often thousands of Afghan refugees were deported from this country every day, even in the cold winter.

## THE CURRENT SITUATION OF AFGHAN REFUGEES

Although millions of Afghan refugees have returned from neighbouring countries and the rest of the world in the past two decades, at the same time, due to various factors, the process of refugees leaving the country continued. Therefore, current figures show that at least 3 million Afghan refugees live in Iran, 3 million in Pakistan, and about one million in the rest of the world, particularly in European countries.

Since last August (2021), the immigration process of Afghans has accelerated again, and hundreds of thousands of Afghans are choosing to immigrate to neighbouring countries and the rest of the world. According to some statistics, after August 15, 2021, at least 124000 Afghans were evacuated in just six weeks, and since then, tens of thousands of Afghans have gradually left the country. For instance, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has documented 117547 new arrivals from Afghanistan in Pakistan, with a significant peak of 35289 persons in August 2021.<sup>15</sup> This phase was very different from the previous ones because most Afghans who left the country were highly educated and skilled people.

Currently, the largest number of refugees are in the two neighbouring countries, Iran and Pakistan. The third country where many Afghan refugees are now living is Turkey. Some figures show that there are currently 300000 to 500000 Afghan refugees in Turkey. However, the opposition party of the Turkish government, which criticizes the Turkish government in terms of refugees, claims that the number of Afghan refugees in this country is 1.5 million. Still, some sources estimate that there are currently around 800000 Afghan refugees living in Turkey.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Afghans have immigrated to other neighbouring countries such as Tajikistan, but because of their low number, they have fewer problems.

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<sup>15</sup> European Union Agency for Asylum, "EUAA publishes report on Afghan refugees in Pakistan" May 2022. Available at: <https://euaa.europa.eu/news-events/euaa-publishes-report-afghan-refugees-pakistan>

<sup>16</sup> Azadi, "Fleeing Afghans Who Reach Turkey Get No Respite From Violence, Persecution" Sep 2022. Available at: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-refugees-turkey-violence-persecution-taliban/32019218.html>



In the past few decades, Afghan refugees have always faced many severe problems and challenges in different countries, mainly neighbouring countries. On the one hand, they even face death threats on the dangerous routes of immigration, especially on the way to Europe, as we can mention the latest report of Amnesty International regarding opening fire on Afghan refugees by the security forces of Iran and Turkey; On the other hand, after arrival, they are constantly deprived of their human rights, and sometimes subjected to excruciating torture, long-term prison terms without trial, forced use in proxy wars, lack of financial and job security, staying like prisoners for a long time in refugees camps, forced return and deportation and so on.

The ill-treatment of Afghan refugees in other countries and their problems can be clearly seen in the fact that the police of the host countries continuously harass even refugees with legal documents. For instance, a study has found that since 2015 in Pakistan, hundreds and thousands of such refugees have been arrested by the government of Pakistan every year who have immigration documents (PoR cards). The number of such arrests was high in some years and low in others. For example, in 2017, at least 3744 such refugees were arrested by the government of Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

In a recent case, reports of the arrest of hundreds of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, including women and children, were published in early September (2022). Some refugees have said in interviews with the media that some of their family members have been detained for several months by the government of Pakistan for not having legal documents, and the families of the arrested people are living in a dire situation.<sup>18</sup>

#### Two Iranian Clerics Killed In Knife Attack In Mashhad

In Iran, a few months ago, after two Iranian clerics were killed in a knife attack<sup>19</sup> by an Afghan citizen, a lot of problems arose for Afghan refugees, and many videos were circulated on social media, showing that Afghan refugees are being brutally tortured, even their body parts are amputated.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> European Union Agency for Asylum, "Pakistan-Situation of Afghan Refugees" May 2022. Page 40. Available at: [https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2022-05/2022\\_05\\_EUAA\\_COI\\_Report\\_Pakistan\\_Situation\\_of\\_Afghan\\_refugees.pdf](https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2022-05/2022_05_EUAA_COI_Report_Pakistan_Situation_of_Afghan_refugees.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> See Online: <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/taliban-in-talks-with-pakistan-over-release-of-300-detained-afghans20220911165429/>

<sup>19</sup> New York Times. "Tensions Flare Between Neighbors After Afghan Man Kills Iranian Clerics" April 28, 2022. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/28/world/asia/afghanistan-iran-refugees-migrants.html>

<sup>20</sup> See Online: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/videos-show-mistreatment-afghan-refugees-iran/31793242.html>





Therefore, along with various other problems, the arrest of Afghan refugees, forced return and deportation, harassment and torture are the problems that have reactions at the national and international levels. However, the process of arresting and forcibly returning Afghan refugees continued in the past years. For example, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency, more than 3600 Afghan refugees were detained by the Pakistani police in 2015.<sup>21</sup> In Iran, the process of arresting Afghan refugees was always taking place and rarely stopped. The latest figures show that at least 135000 Afghan refugees have been deported from Iran in the past six months.<sup>22</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Millions of registered and unregistered refugees are still living in neighbouring countries, facing many problems from time to time. In this regard, the request of the nations of Afghanistan and neighbouring countries from the governments of the host countries is to consider the war-torn situation of Afghanistan and adopt policies of good treatment of Afghan refugees and eliminate the problems facing Afghan refugees.
- Forced return and deportation of Afghan refugees from neighbouring countries is a significant problem, due to which the Afghan government is under pressure. The deported refugees are facing many difficulties and dire situations. Therefore, the neighbouring countries are requested to understand the situation in Afghanistan and stop the forced evacuation. Instead, they help the Afghan government and refugees so that they return to the country voluntarily.
- Although the war in Afghanistan has almost stopped and one of the reasons for not returning refugees has largely disappeared, at the same time, there are still many problems for returning refugees in war-torn Afghanistan. Among them, the economic situation of the country can be mentioned. Therefore, the neighbouring countries are requested to tolerate the Afghan refugees according to the principle of good neighbourliness.
- Afghan refugees living in neighbouring countries should not be a tool of political pressure, and the situation of Afghan refugees should not deteriorate due to the deterioration of bilateral relations.

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<sup>21</sup> UNHCR, Pakistan fact sheet December 2015, see it online: < <http://unhcrpk.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Pakistan-fact-sheet-December-2015.pdf> >

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad Sohaib Hsrat. "Iran forcibly expels over 135,000 Afghans in 6 months" Pajhwok Afghan News. 11 Sep 2022. Available at:

<https://pajhwok.com/2022/09/11/iran-forcibly-expels-over-135000-afghans-in-6-months/>



- Unjust courts of Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries, difficulties in accessing education and health services, harassment by the police, problems regarding visas and other legal documents, threats to the assets and businesses of Afghan refugees and other issues be solved, and the host governments to reconsider their policies in these areas.
- It seems that the United Nations refugee agencies are not paying as much attention to the situation of Afghan refugees as compared to the previous decades. Therefore, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are requested to increase their role in supporting and protecting Afghan refugees' rights in different countries to access their rights under the support of these agencies.
- The uncertain future of Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries should be ended by registering them and giving them immigration cards.
- Many Afghans cannot return due to the treatment of their patients. Steps should be taken to register those refugees in particular and solve the problems they face.
- The Afghan government has to create a clear policy regarding the return of refugees and take action to eliminate the long-term obstacles to the return of refugees and create a practical resettlement plan; as a large number of refugees have been forced to return to immigration due to the existing problems in the country in the past years.
- To increase coordination and cooperation between Afghanistan and the neighbouring countries in solving the problems of refugees, joint commissions should be formed to solve the issues of refugees from time to time and to prevent the politicization of problems related to refugees.
- Negative propaganda against each other in Afghanistan and its neighbours should be prevented to eliminate its adverse effects on refugees. Currently, only the negative aspects are promoted. Still, the good treatment of refugees in other countries is not mentioned, as it only fuels the hostility between the two nations.

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