

Impacts of Repatriation of Afghan Refugees on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan

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Abstract

This study explores the socio economics, political and security impacts of the repatriation of Afghan refugees on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan. The presence of a large number of Afghan refugees on the soil of KPK for decades has significantly influenced the province's political environment, affecting administration, security, and socio-economic aspects of KPK. After living since 1979, the government of Pakistan is determined to send back these 3.7 million Afghan to their country. The decision seems to be motivated by security reason is a bolt from the blue as they are not preparing to live KPK after living for years. The study evaluates to know the reason behind the repatriation process has been politicized. The study analysis the impacts of refugee repatriation on Pakistan relations with Afghanistan, coupled with the observance of international human rights standards in the repatriation process by Pakistan. Through an analysis of secondary data this study provides information about the complex and multidimensional nature of refugee repatriation and its lasting impacts on KPK's political and social environments. The findings of the study highlight the challenges faced by KPK's political leadership and administration in balancing the demands of local populations, national security interests, and international obligations and norms. The impacts provided challenges and benefits to KPK and Pakistan but being a complex issue, it requires due care and systematic approach to the process. The policy needs to implemented in phases and any hast in implementing it should be avoided.

Keywords: Refugee, Repatriation, KPK, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Impacts

Introduction

The repatriation of Afghan refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, is a critical issue that has vital implications for both the refugees and the host region, Pakistan. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) a province of Pakistan, has been a host to one of the largest Afghan refugee populations in the world for several decades as it lies with the Afghan border. The government of Pakistan due to its weak economic position and with changing geopolitical dynamics wants to send the refugees back to Afghanistan. There is a growing interest in understanding the impacts of repatriation efforts on the refugees and the host region. UNO and others humanitarian world organizations urging Pakistan to drop the idea of refugee's repatriation but Pakistan seems to be committed to send these refugees back to their country in order to achieve some economic strategic objectives. It is fact that a bulk of refugees resides in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan which is more likely to be effect from the repatriation therefore this study aims to investigate the socio-economic, political, and security impacts of the repatriation of Afghan refugees on KPK.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of the study are in the following

1. To assess the socio-economic impact of Afghan refugee repatriation on KPK's economy
2. To analyze the political impacts of repatriation on the governance and security situation in KPK.
3. To examine the cultural and social dynamics that result from the return of Afghan refugees.
4. To evaluate the challenges and opportunities that arises during the repatriation process.

Significance of the research

The significance of the proposed study on the impacts of the repatriation of Afghan refugees on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, is multifaceted and extends to various stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers, humanitarian organizations, and the affected communities. The findings will provide useful input for policymakers at both the regional and national levels as they can better manage the reintegration process, ensuring that the needs of both returning refugees and the local population are addressed (Khan & Sajid, 2022). Humanitarian organizations and agencies working on refugee issues will benefit from a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities linked with repatriation. This information will help them develop more effective programs to support refugees during their return and reintegration in their country. The study emphasizes the humanitarian aspects of refugee repatriation, particularly the rights and welfare of returning refugees. It through lights on the need for ethical considerations in repatriation policies as it ensures that the process is voluntary, safe, and dignified. This focus contributes to broader discussions on human rights and protection of refugees thus providing a moral and ethical foundation for future repatriation efforts (Bukhari, 2021). The decades long stay of Afghan refugees in KPK has also impacted the environment, including land use, water resources, and deforestation. Repatriation offers a chance to assess these environmental impacts and develop mechanism for effective land and resource management. This study's findings can lead to environmental restoration efforts and promote sustainable practices in refugee-hosting areas (Akhtar & Qazi, 2020). The findings may have impacts for regional and international relations, particularly in the context of ongoing negotiations and cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan on refugee-related issues. A profound understanding of the impacts can enlighten diplomatic contacts. Given the region's history of conflict and security concerns, understanding the political and security implications of repatriation is of vital importance. This study can help in devising mechanism to reduce potential security threats linked with the repatriation process. The repatriation of Afghan refugees is intimately linked to durable peace and stability in the region. KPK's stability is important not only for Pakistan but also for the broader South Asian region. By analyzing the challenges and opportunities linked with repatriation, this study provides insights that are essential for developing peace building efforts that address the root causes of displacement and develop regional stability (Nawaz, 2022). KPK is a region that has hosted a significant Afghan refugee population for long. Understanding the socio-economic effects of repatriation on the local economy and job market is essential for planning regional development and resource allocation. The repatriation of Afghan refugees has significant impacts for public services and infrastructure in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). The presence of a huge number of refugees puts pressure on local resources, namely education, healthcare, and sanitation systems. Understanding how these services are impacted during and after repatriation can help in planning and resource allocation, ensuring that the local population and returning refugees have sufficient access to basic services (Shah & Khan, 2021). The impacts of Afghan refugee repatriation on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are of key importance, and this study aims to shed light on the multifaceted impacts of this process. By exploring the socio-economic, political, security and cultural aspects, the study will provide useful information for policy planners, researchers, and humanitarian organizations linked with the repatriation of Afghan refugees in KPK.

Literature Review

Simmons shah (2023) sheds lights on the force repatriation of Afghan refugees. The writer has the opinion that 1.7 million of Afghan refugee is in hot water due to the decision of the government of Pakistan to leave the undocumented Afghan refugees the country up to 31 October. It will augment miseries their lives as they are been living in Pakistan for long and have businesses and job for living. "They have established their lives in Pakistan, they have their businesses and houses and their kids go to school there. Their children and grandchildren haven't even seen Afghanistan, so they are considering themselves blended Pakistanis now." (Shah, 2023) Prof Ajaz khan (2023) believes that the government of Pakistan wants to pressurize the currant Afghan government to exert pressure on Tehriki- Taliban Pakistan (TTP) not to create security problems for Pakistan. The writer further believe that it will not solve the security problems of Pakistan but only further increase hardships in the lives of 1.7 million Afghan refugees. "It's an improbable scenario that these actions will create economic and administrative problems for the Afghan Taliban, and make them yield to Pakistani pressures. The Afghan Taliban appears to be less concerned about the economic well-being of the people, as is demonstrated by their uncompromising response to economic sanctions. On the contrary, these actions may breed resentment and strengthen anti-Pakistan sentiments among Afghans. This may also push the Afghan Government towards supporting the TTP, rather than ignoring them or allowing them to exist without interference. They may see support for the TTP as a counter-pressure tactic. This could result in further damage to Pakistan-Afghanistan relations" (Khan, 2023).

Socio Economic Impacts of the Repatriation on Afghan Refugees on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The socio-economic impacts of the repatriation of Afghan refugees on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) are multidimensional, affecting various aspects of the region's economy

Shortage of manpower: Afghan refugees have been a significant part of the informal labor force in KPK, especially in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and small-scale industries. Their repatriation can lead to labor shortages, affecting productivity and increasing wages in these sectors (Khan & Ahmad, 2022). They are expert in manual laborer works and it will be very hard for the local people of KPK to fill that gap efficiently. Moreover, a large number of Afghan has expertise in hoteling which will be a titanic task for the locals to overcome that deficiency.

Jobs for Locals people: On the positive side, the departure of refugees can open up employment opportunities for the local population, potentially reducing unemployment rates. However, this depends on the local workforce's ability to fill these roles. It will reduce the rate of unemployment in KPK as more jobs will be open for them due to the departure of Afghan refugees.

Economic Recession: Refugees contribute to local economies through consumption, entrepreneurship, and trade. Their departure can lead to a reduction in demand for goods and services, negatively impacting local businesses, especially those in refugee-dense areas (Rehman & Gul, 2021). Thousands of Afghan serving in Europe and Gulf countries they send their saving to Pakistan where their families are settled. These families then invest these remittances in business in Pakistan and particularly in KPK. This is also some degree of foreign direct investment which is great source of economic growth. With the departure of Afghan refugees there will be reduction in investment by the Afghan which will ultimately leads to slow downning of economic activities in KPK. It will affect not only effect the local economy of Pakistan but also effect the economy of Pakistan.

Impacts on Real estate Business: The repatriation can affect the business of real estate particularly in rental housing as due to the departure of Afghan refugees demand for the rental houses will be decreased hence their business will be suffer negatively. A decrease in demand due to the departure

of refugees may lead to lower rental prices and reduced income for property owners. According to Zulfiqar Ali (2016), “uncertainty has gripped property market in the provincial capital. Prices and rental rates have started falling down in posh localities like Hayatabad where Afghans have large concentration. The dealers forecast heavy slump in the real estate sector if Afghans go back to their country. Information gathered from the market show that rent of five-bedroom house has jumped down from Rs30, 000 to Rs25, 000 in Hayatabad where roughly 40 per cent of the population is Afghans. The dealers are looking for new clients since Afghans have vacated residential quarters” (p, 3).

Release of Pressure on Public Services: The repatriation might ease the pressure on public services such as healthcare, education, and sanitation. This can lead to improved service delivery and better access for the local population (Shah & Ali, 2023). There is a great pressure on the resources of the government of KPK especially in health sector. The government providing free health care facilities to these millions of Afghan free of cost which is a huge burden on government exchequer. The government is also providing to them electricity, gas and sanitation facilities. With the departure of Afghan refugees much burden of the government of KPK will be eased and it will divert its energy to serve the people of KPK. It will not only reduce the cost of government but will also improve the capacity of service delivery.

Reduction in International Aid: the federal government of Pakistan and the government of KPK are receiving international aid and development assistance linked to the refugee population for many years in different sectors. With repatriation, this aid may decrease, impacting projects and programs that benefit both refugees and local people of KPK (Yusuf & Bukhari, 2020). Pakistan is receiving handsome money from UNO, United States, Europe and Gulf countries for the wellbeing of Afghan refugees every year. ‘The United States has provided more than \$273 million (nearly Rs 62 billion) in humanitarian assistance for Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Pakistani host communities. In Fiscal Year 2022 alone, the U.S. provided nearly \$60 million (more than Rs 13 billion) in assistance to the refugees and their host communities (US Embassy, 2022)’. It will negatively impact both the central and provincial government of KPK.

Impacts on informal economic activities: Many Afghan refugees engage in informal trade and small businesses in KPK. Their departure could lead to a decline in this informal economy. (Hussain & Jan, 2022). “The repercussions of this policy are expected to be concentrated in KP and Baluchistan, housing three-fourths of the 1.7 million unregistered immigrant populations. Predominantly Afghans (99 per cent), these individuals are recognized for their involvement in tending to fruit orchards, working in coal and marble mines, and facilitating cross-border goods trade in KP and Baluchistan. In Punjab and Sindh, illegal aliens serve as a source of inexpensive manual labour in public works and construction industry (Subhi, 2023, p, 4)”. The socio-economic impacts of Afghan refugee repatriation on KPK's economy are complex and multidimensional. While there are some benefits, such as reduced pressure on public services and new employment opportunities for the people of KPK, there are also some vital challenges, including economic slowdowns, labor shortages, and the loss of social capital. These impacts underscore the need for careful planning and management to meet these challenges. It also needs support from international community to ensure that the repatriation process is beneficial for both the refugees and the host country.

Political Impacts

The repatriation of Afghan refugees has important impacts on the political horizon of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), influencing various aspects namely, governance, social services, social cohesion, and regional stability etc.

Diversion of Resources: The return of Afghan refugees often necessitates a reallocation of government resources, shifting political priorities. Policies that once focused on refugee

management and integration may pivot toward the needs of the local population, such as economic development, infrastructure, and social services (Khan & Ahmad, 2021). Pakistan is spending huge amount for the wellbeing of millions of Afghan refugees at present in social, health care sector etc. The return of these Afghan refugees will provide to Pakistan some breathing space as its economy is already under pressure due to balance of payment and trade deficit. Pakistan will be able to divert this spending for uplifting its economy, developing infrastructure, improving GDP growth and developing the social sector to improve health, educational and recreational facilities to the people of KPK

Political Mobilization: The return of Afghan refugees has been a burning issue in KPK political landscape. It has been often politicized by many political parties and others stakeholders in KPK. On one hand, the local people and political leaders have consistently declared their reservation about the burden on resources, infrastructure, and services due to the protracted stay of Afghan refugees, which has inflamed local resentment and sometime intolerant feelings among the people of KPK. This factor has developed an atmosphere where political parties compete with each other to make a political narrative for their popularity by promising more border restrictions and more vigorous repatriation policies. But the repatriation process has often been associated with broader security considerations, particularly in area that has witnessed consistent militancy and instability.

Promotion of ethnic politics & sectarian tensions: KPK is a home of multi ethnic groups, and the repatriation of Afghan refugees can develop ethnic tensions. “In the political realm, nationalist parties of KPK and Baluchistan are sympathizers of these Afghan refugees due to shared cultural, social, religious and most importantly ethnic ties (Bukhari, 2024)”. Political actors may exploit this factor to gain political support, influencing the broader political horizon of KPK. It will create tension in Hazara division of KPK as the majority non-Pashto speaking people live there and there is not found any admiration for further stay of Afghan refugees. Certainly, it may stir sectarian tension as there are areas in KPK where sectarian clashes often taking place like district Kurram and district Orakzai. In the said districts Afghan is supported by the Sunni as their c-sect in turn they expect active help from them against the Shia inhabitants of these groups in case of armed clashes. Extremist sectarian groups can use the repatriation process as an opportunity to assert their influence or settle old scores, leading to local violence and unrest in militancy affected areas. This could destabilize already fragile region within KPK (Hussain & Qazi, 2022).

Impact on Insurgency and Militancy: The repatriation of Afghan refugees has vital implications for border security management and cross-border relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This can affect the political dialogue about national security and border management in KPK. There may be danger of spillover effects on the security of KPK as well as of Pakistan (Rehman & Gul, 2023). Ongoing repatriation move might affect the nature of insurgency and militancy in the whole region. On the one hand it may minimize the number of militants refuted among refugee populations, but at the same time it could also increase resurgence of cross-border militancy if not managed effectively (Hussain & Qazi, 2022). The repatriation of refugees is often seemed through the prism of national security. It is believed that spontaneous or poorly planned repatriation could destabilize KPK further. It is also in the mind of security establishment that the repatriation process may lead to a fresh round of resurgence of militant activities across the border in Afghanistan which has been controlled after titanic struggle, which, in turn, might engulf KPK as the former federally Administered Areas and Malakand division vulnerable to such activities.

Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: The repatriation of Afghan refugees is a burning issue in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. Moreover, the repatriation process has also considerably impacted Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan. Tension is flaring over the treatment of refugees and the conditions of their return between the two countries. “Pakistan maintains that the deportation drive

targets all illegal immigrants, not just Afghans. However, the move has strained relations with the Taliban-led government in Kabul, which has urged Islamabad to treat Afghan nationals with respect and insists that Pakistan's security issues are internal matters (express tribune, September 3, 2024)". These political complexities are coupled with international pressure and expectations making hard for the foreign policy planner of Pakistan to navigate its commitments to human rights and international law while safeguarding its own security and national interests. In nut shell, the repatriation of Afghan refugees has not only developed political discourse within KPK but also effect Pakistan's foreign policy and its relations with its next-door neighbor, Afghanistan (Zaidi, 2023).

International Pressure and Influence: International organizations and donor states often play an important role in refugee repatriation processes. The role of these countries and agencies cannot be ignored as it can build a negative image of Pakistan in the world. Thus, their role affects local political decisions, asking for certain programs or actions that are in accordance with world humanitarian standards, which can be politically sensitive in local political conditions (Khan & Ali, 2020).

Institutional Reforms: Managing the repatriation of Afghan refugees will put enormous pressure on governance in KPK. This can expose shortcomings in institutional ability, leading to political discourse over effectiveness of governance and the need for adjustment and reform (Shah & Khan, 2021). These challenges linked with repatriation may also leads to governance reforms for improving governance, law enforcement, and public administration in KPK. These reforms can lead to remodel the political atmosphere by changing power dynamics and administrative practices and skills (Ahmed & Farooq, 2022).

Security Impacts

The repatriation of Afghan refugees has significant security impacts on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan regional security dynamics. These impacts include both positive and negative aspects on the security in the region. It can generate challenges for the authorities.

Increased Border Vigilance: to meet the security challenges from the western border, the repatriation process demands effective management of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to prevent illegal crossings and ensure that the return is carried out according with the plan. This often leads to increased border security measures, including enhanced surveillance, checkpoints, and patrols (Rehman & Gul, 2023).

Cross-Border Infiltration Risks: There is a potential danger that the militants or these criminals might use the repatriation process a cover to cross the border to carry out their criminal activities. This can lead to increased security concerns within KPK, as militants might use the crossing to re-establish networks or carry out attacks (Hussain & Qazi, 2022). The increase in momentum in militancy and the sudden influx or outflow of a large number of people can create hurdles for local law enforcement authorities. Thus, the process can lead to an increase in criminal activities, that is human trafficking, smuggling, and other cross-border crimes, as criminal networks may exploit the confusion linked with a large-scale movement of the refugees (Ali & Nawaz, 2023).

Reduction in Refugee-Linked Militancy: there is a silver lining of the process as some Afghan refugees have been found in the past linked to militant groups their repatriation could minimize the influence and vigor of such groups within the KPK. But this factor depends on the ability and capacity of the authorities to effectively control the process and prevent militants from returning to Pakistan (Rehman & Gul, 2023).

Danger of Radicalization: The process of repatriation, if poorly carried out, could lead to extremism and radicalization among both the returning refugees and the local population in KPK. There is a continuous war in Afghanistan since 1979 which has affected the adjacent areas of KPK up to great extent. Factors for radicalization such as economic constraints, poverty, low literacy rate coupled with lack of civic amenities, and social marginalization can provide fertile ground for militant recruitment and radicalization which will undermine the security and integrity of not only of KPK but will extent to the whole of Pakistan (Nawaz & Youssef, 2021).

Diplomatic and Security Relations with Afghanistan: The repatriation of Afghan refugees is intimately linked with the diplomatic relations of Pakistan with Afghanistan. Mismanagement or force repatriation process of the process could damage these relations which have already in the grip of trust deficit. It will maximize the cross-border tensions and over all Pak-Afghan relations. Thus, it will also impact regional security of KPK (Zaidi, 2023).

Conclusion

The repatriation of Afghan refugees is a very complex and multidimensional issue that has far-reaching and profound socio- political and economic implications for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). The reciprocation of local resource competition, security considerations, ethnic and sectarian conflicts, and compulsions of international relations make the refugee situation a significant and consistent political challenge. While repatriation may release some of the pressures on KPK's economy, resources and infrastructure, it also can lead to destabilize the region if not managed tactfully and with due care. The issue has earned an important position in the province's political discourse. The impacts of repatriation are influencing political dynamics of the province like, governance, electoral strategies, and Pakistan's foreign policy. As KPK continues to faces these challenges, the refugee repatriation process will likely remain a vital factor setting the province's political and social political dynamics for long time. The issue has been a dominant issue for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) political system; it is impacting the province's political landscape in comprehensive and durable ways. This complex issue is not only a matter of humanitarian concern but is profoundly linked with the province's security, economic stability, and social life. Politically, the refugee issue may be a double-edged sword, with local leaders use it for achieving political objectives but at the same time they will face a grave and serious challenges which may be arise in the process. The presence of a large number of refugees has depleted KPK's resources, leading to tensions between the people of KPK and Afghan refugee. It is now a burning issue in politics of KPK. Internationally, KPK's handling of the Afghan refugee's plays an important role in developing Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly with Afghanistan and world humanitarian organizations and the United Nations. The compulsions to observe international human rights standards and at the same time address domestic security concerns have placed KPK and Pakistan in a politically delicate and awkward position. The role of the political leaders of the province is more sensitive and crucial as they have to navigate these pressures and compulsions and will protect the national interest. The repatriation process has profound implications for Pakistan's national security. We know that the region has been affected from conflict and militancy since long therefore a slight mistake can plunged the region in t militancy and extremism which will create huge security as well as financial problems for Pakistan. This scenario will develop another political discourse in the KPK. The province's political leaders must deal this delicate issue with due care. They must reconcile the need for national security with the international obligations of hosting and repatriating refugees. The task is certainly more difficult by the instability and the rule of Afghan Taliban who are little known for respect of human rights. The repatriation of Afghan refugees from KPK is a complicated political issue that requires devising a policy with utmost care and deliberations. It is like a walking on tight rop beneath thousands meter depth. Pakistan cannot afford failure as the failure may bring catastrophe for the nation as the country has enormous economic constraint as well as facing

militancy in the areas burdening Afghanistan. The work of policy planner is very delicate and crucial they have to maintain the delicate balance between local political demands, national security, economic realities, and observing international norms. The political impacts of repatriation of afghan refugees are seem to continue still influencing KPK's political atmosphere. These impacts may extend to the other parts of Pakistan and may cause polarization in the country. The challenge for KPK's political leadership and policy planners will be to tackle this issue in a manner that meet the apprehension of all stakeholders while upholding stability and providing a favorable atmosphere for durable and lasting development in the region. The repatriation process initiated by Pakistan mainly on security grounds as the Taliban regime in Afghanistan are not cooperating with Pakistan to uproot the elements who are undermine the security of Pakistan the international actors, especially the states that were party to the Afghan war, has a prime duty to ensure the welfare and safety of the millions Afghan that were displaced in the result of international politics. These states must also provide help and support to those Afghans they have agreed to give refuge to, so that the refugees can rebuild their lives in double quick time. At the same time, however, Pakistan must show little more generosity and patient for these unfortunate people on the earth. The present Kabul regime is, of course, proving to be a major problem — but Pakistan as a responsible state in the world must not lose sight of humanity because of it. Many of the refugees the government wants to deport know very little about their country. Many have considered Pakistan their home for many years now. It would be a little harsh from a cultural perspective to send them in haste. The process may be carried out in phases and with the consultation with all stockholders. Moreover, international law and norms linked to such problems must be observe for not only the safty and integrity of the refugees but also necessary for honor and image of Pakistan which seem a responsible nation in the world. The repatriation of Afghan refugees to their homeland has profound security implications for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan. This complex process brings both challenges and opportunities, influencing regional stability, law enforcement, and the socio-political landscape of the province. The research highlights that while repatriation can reduce refugee-linked militancy and potentially alleviate some ethnic tensions, it also creates new security risks, such as increased cross-border infiltration, strain on local law enforcement, and the rise of criminal activities. The delicate balance between ensuring border security and addressing humanitarian needs is crucial. Mismanagement of the repatriation process can lead to radicalization and exacerbate ethnic and sectarian tensions, undermining the region's stability. Moreover, the repatriation has broader implications for Pakistan's diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, as well as the involvement of international organizations in managing the security challenges. The success of the repatriation process largely depends on coordinated efforts among local, national, and international actors to address these challenges while protecting the rights and safety of returning refugees. In conclusion, the security impacts of Afghan refugee repatriation on KPK are multifaceted and demand careful management to prevent potential destabilization while leveraging opportunities for peace and stability in the region. The repatriation of Afghan refugees has far-reaching impacts on the political landscape of KPK, affecting everything from electoral politics and social cohesion to regional security and international relations. These changes require careful management to ensure that the repatriation process contributes positively to the region's stability and development, rather than exacerbating existing tensions or creating new political challenges. The repatriation of Afghan refugees presents a complex mix of challenges and opportunities that impact both the returning refugees and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) region in various ways. These dynamics are essential to understand for developing effective policies and interventions

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