

Executive Summary

More than two decades of protracted conflict from the late 1970s onward saw Afghan refugee communities settle around the world. At the end of 2007, Afghanistan was still the source of the world’s largest number of refugees under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While Afghans are dispersed among 72 different countries, 96 percent of displaced Afghans remain in Pakistan and Iran.¹ The majority of those who remain in Pakistan and Iran have lived in exile for over 20 years, and half of them are estimated to have been born outside Afghanistan.² Currently, around 2.7 million registered Afghan refugees are still living in Pakistan and Iran³—the majority are in their second or even third generation of displacement. In Pakistan, 74 percent of the Afghan population is under 28 years old,⁴ while 71 percent of the Afghan population in Iran is 29 years old or younger.⁵

In both contexts, these second generation Afghans have grown up in very different circumstances to those of their parents and peers in Afghanistan. For these young refugees, returning to their “homeland” does not necessarily mean returning “home.” Understanding the characteristics of this significant group of young Afghans, their perceptions toward return, and their reintegration experiences holds critical importance for policymaking around the issues of: facilitating the return and reintegration of young Afghans; securing the lives and livelihoods

of the multiple generations of Afghans remaining in exile; and managing continuing cross-border population movements to the benefit of both the migrants and the sending and receiving countries.

This study delves beneath the surface of refugees’ simple “yes” or “no” response as to whether they intend to return, as represented in existing quantitative data. Rather, it illustrates the profound difficulties that they face in weighing the benefits and disadvantages of returning to Afghanistan. It considers the complexities of deciding to return to one’s “homeland,” the influence of ties to Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, as well as the less visible social and emotional reintegration trajectories of returnee respondents, including the crucial links between these issues and material challenges of reintegration. This study is based on interviews with 199 purposively selected respondents across three countries.

With a focus on gender, this report analyses returning refugees’ reactions to the environment in which they find themselves upon returning to Afghanistan and the various adaptation processes through which individuals undergo. It concludes that the way in which individuals find meaning for themselves in relation to Afghanistan as their homeland is one of the crucial factors affecting their perceptions of return and future outlook. The study emphasises the importance of less visible, non-material support for young returnees, and identifies the need for greater external assistance for these young Afghans. The process of reintegration in their “homeland” is not a simple geographical movement of population, and these second-generation Afghan refugees are not homogeneous. They have diverse interests and intentions depending on individual background, experiences, place of residence and opportunities—all of which were influenced by changing political and social dynamics. These elements need to be carefully considered to support their permanent settlement in Afghanistan.

1 UNHCR, *2007 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2008), 8.

2 UNHCR, *UNHCR Global Appeal 2008-2009* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2007), 260.

3 IRIN News. “Afghanistan: Limited Scope to Absorb More Refugees,” 15 March 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=83474> (accessed 5 May 2009).

4 Government of Pakistan and UNHCR, *Registration of Afghans in Pakistan 2007* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan and UNHCR, 2007), 10.

5 Amayesh data 2005, in *Second-Generation Afghans in Iran: Integration, Identity and Return*, ed. M.J. Abbasi-Shavazi et al. (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit [AREU], 2008), 3.

Recommendations

Voluntary return: reducing the risks of reintegration failure

1. *Improving work skills and access to employment during transition*

- The Government of Afghanistan, in coordination with the governments of Pakistan and Iran and with the support of donors, should engage in continuous efforts to develop the skills of refugee youth, driven by the demand and needs of local labour markets in Afghanistan.
- Existing training centres and technical courses in cities and refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran should be improved with facilities focused on the needs of the Afghan market.

2. *Facilitate realistic resettlement planning: information and visits*

- In collaboration with the governments of Pakistan and Iran, radio and other media could be used effectively to convey reliable information to refugee youth on support systems available to returnees in Afghanistan.
- The governments of Iran and Afghanistan are encouraged to engage in further bilateral talks to facilitate greater access to preparatory visits for young refugees.

3. *Education in transition: a key concern for second-generation Afghan refugees*

- Young refugees' fear of losing the opportunity to be educated if they return to Afghanistan must be addressed through improved access to quality education.
- In coordination with the governments of the two host countries, the Afghan Ministry of Education should actively facilitate securing the legal status of Afghan schools in Pakistan and Iran as the places where second-generation Afghan refugees would earn qualifications to prepare themselves for their return.
- Clearer and more accessible procedures should be in place for the approval and acceptance

of certification from schools and universities in the neighbouring countries, particularly in Pakistan where the language of instruction may differ from that of Afghanistan.

4. *Advocacy: positive motivation for return*

- In collaboration with the Pakistani and Iranian governments, the Government of Afghanistan with the support of international agencies should build a comprehensive communications strategy targeting young refugees. The importance of one's own "homeland" should be highlighted in promotional campaigns delivered via a range of media and community outlets.
- It is important to create positive motivation for voluntary return rather than pressure through deportation, which results in strong resistance to returning to Afghanistan.

Complex reintegration: Influencing the balance of factors

1. *Promoting emotional security: Advocacy for social inclusion and anti-discrimination policies*

- The Government of Afghanistan, together with international agencies, should develop media campaigns advocating for social acceptance and non-discriminatory treatment of all Afghans—including returnees.
- For some returnees, encouragement that facilitates social inclusion has sometimes simply been the result of the generous compassion of others. Education programmes that promote the equal treatment of all people for those in positions of some authority (e.g. teachers, headmasters and mullahs) would improve their ability to positively influence the receiving community, particularly in social spaces such as schools or villages.
- Interaction with fellow returnees and Afghan friends who understand how returnees lived previously should be facilitated. This may offer opportunities for individuals to express the values they formed during refuge, providing a valuable outlet to release some of the tension

resulting from experiences of being unable to fit in.

- As a part of more long-term social and economic programming, the reintegration process of selected second-generation returnees should be monitored not only at the time of initial return but also over the medium and long term. The lessons accumulated from this initiative could be applied to improve further programming for permanent resettlement.

2. *Enhancing opportunities for employment*

- The outreach of existing employment service centres should be extended to more districts and rural areas. Postings at the employment service centres should be provided in local languages and cover a wider range of positions (unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled) compared to limited postings targeting the skilled and educated. Incentives should be provided as a part of an income-generating programme to encourage employers to post job vacancies at newly established employment centres.
- A more transparent, affirmative-action recruiting system to provide equal access for youth from socially and economically underprivileged backgrounds, in particular returnees who are not familiar with the local environment, is proposed as a priority programme for local government and development organisations. This system could involve actively employing returnees as teachers, literacy trainers and health workers in community organisations where their exposure to new ideas from their experience outside Afghanistan could positively affect local communities.
- Female members of vulnerable returnee families are often unable to work in Afghanistan because of restrictive social norms. This may reduce household responsiveness to crises, prompting remigration. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs, along with the ministries of Labour, Social Affairs and Martyrs, and the Disabled as well as NGOs, should improve existing efforts to provide more market-oriented, culturally sensitive livelihood opportunities for

economically vulnerable women in rural and urban areas.

3. *Meeting material needs during reintegration: access to connections, skills, capital and property*

- Second-generation Afghan returnees of a lower socioeconomic status and without skills and basic education should be key beneficiaries of programmes providing material support.
- The right to own property is one of the key pull factors drawing refugees back to Afghanistan. Although challenging, the existing system of land allocation, with the support of an oversight committee, must be further promoted to be realistic, efficient and transparent.
- Urban planning processes should take greater priority given the increase in urban populations related to the influx of returnees and internal migrants. At the same time, attention should be paid to employment generation in both urban and rural areas to reduce challenges related to meeting material needs and to slow the flow of migrants to urban locations.

4. *Increasing needs: Quality education as a pull factor*

- Donors and civil society must be strongly committed to longer-term funding of post-primary education in both urban and rural areas, reflecting the growing needs of young returnees both with or without formal education and for future generations.
- Opportunities in higher education, which are not readily available to Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, are strong pull factors that could bring educated refugees back to Afghanistan. The Afghan government should: ensure that equal, corruption-free opportunities for higher education in Afghanistan exist; invest in scholarships for returnees; and improve the governance systems that allocate university places, reducing perceived and actual corruption in university admissions processes.

5. *Physical security: Desire for police reform and protection*

- Respondents in this study commonly mentioned concerns about less serious crimes (such as robbery and theft) and uneasiness over the unreliability of the police (related to corruption issues) as factors affecting return decisions and the willingness to stay after return. To improve the performance and public image of the police, the Ministry of Interior Affairs and the international community should increase the pace of police reform and enforce penalties for proven corrupt behaviour.
- Stronger government-led, gender-sensitive social protection efforts may lead to a reduction in the harassment of women in public, providing safeguards similar to those that some respondents benefited from while outside of Afghanistan. The Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs and the international community should strengthen efforts to recruit female police officers and increase provision of effective and relevant gender training for all police officers. New laws should be adopted and existing laws enforced to protect women's safety and security in both public and private domains.

6. *Managing legal migration: Options for gradual return*

- A focus on managing—rather than limiting or prohibiting—labour migration would better support the successful resettlement of Afghan households. The Afghan government should ensure Afghans can easily obtain a passport. The Government of Afghanistan and those of the host countries should continue their bilateral dialogue to develop laws and agreements facilitating a more manageable migration framework that reduces illegal migration.
- The gradual return of household members is a common strategy used by Afghan families to mitigate the risks associated with repatriation. The Government of Iran in particular, supported by international aid agencies, should facilitate these strategies by providing re-entry visas for those heading to Afghanistan for reconnaissance visits and by maintaining support to vulnerable households that remain in the host country.
- It is important to recognise that not all Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, first- and second-generation alike, will return to Afghanistan voluntarily in the near future; among these cases are those who have protection needs and those who have married Pakistanis or Iranians. Furthermore, the capacity of Afghanistan to absorb the vast numbers of refugees who remain in these neighbouring countries requires continuous, realistic re-examination and a consistent humanitarian approach.