

COMMUNITY NETWORKS AND INFORMAL GOVERNANCE: WHAT PAKISTAN CAN LEARN FROM AFGHAN REFUGEE'S COMMUNITY BUILDING

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Abstract

Pakistan is host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world. This paper examines how Afghan refugee communities have relied on ethnolinguistic ties and social capital networks to build resilient informal governance structures through the assistance of the earlier generation of Afghan migrants who gained Pakistani nationality status in the 1970s and became the anchors. Based on the Social Capital Theory, this study shows how bonding, bridging, and linking social capital (through kinship networks and community hosting) have facilitated Afghan refugees to build resilient communities despite the lack of proper formal systems of governing them. Meanwhile, this paper does not ignore the valid national security concerns posed by in Pakistan posed by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Daesh which have led to its deportation policy as indicated in the National Action Plan, as well as the inability of the Afghan Taliban government to prevent cross-border terrorism. Based on academic sources and recent primary interview data gathered in 2025 among refugees in urban/rural settlements as well as in refugee villages in districts Pishin and Quetta, the findings reveal the need for formal good governance. The discussion suggests a governance framework that is realistic and aligns with the reality on the ground is needed: the porous borders will guarantee the deportee returns, the established communities will secure the undocumented population, and the effective governance will have to be facilitative as well as enforced.

INTRODUCTION

The management of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan lies at the cross roads of the humanitarian duty, security necessity, and social truth. Over 40 years Pakistan has been home to one of the largest populations of refugees in the world since the Soviet invasion in the 1979 civil war, Taliban control, American intervention, and the Taliban regaining power in 2021. This prolonged

displacement has created complicated social dynamics, and the Afghan refugees have built resilient communities through ethnolinguistic solidarity and networks of social capital that have supported them even in the face of substandard formal assistance and ever-increasing hostile policy conditions (Khan and Ahmed, 2023). However, the governance of refugees in Pakistan can not be

viewed only in the humanitarian perspective. The nation has experienced the terrorism threats continuously, and the terroristic groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Daesh-Khorasan based in the Afghan territory and providing attacks that have killed thousands of Pakistani are also a problem of the nation. The fact or failure of the Afghanistan Taliban government to stop the usage of Afghan soil by these groups as an operation base has generated lawful security interests that form the basis of Pakistani policy-making actions (Basit, 2023). Counterterrorism has become a national priority, the National Action Plan adopted after the 2014 Army Public School attack that shook Pakistan, and the impact of this change on the governance of refugees cannot be attributed to xenophobia or policy failure.

The paper will travel across these poles, recognizing that there are legitimate security interests, but showing that the existing enforcement-based methods are incapable of meeting their goals because of the social realities that the government must deal with. The point of debate is that the survival and community building of the Afghan refugees has hinged on sound ethnolinguistic affiliations as well as social capital networks and not on official governance arrangements. In particular, the Afghan refugees, which have come since 1979, have been received, sheltered and assisted by the previous phases of Afghan migrants, especially the Pashtuns who entered Pakistan in the 1970s and later received Pakistani nationality. These are Pakistani naturalized Afghans who have offered the shelter, aid, protection, rehabilitation, and self-reliance support which official systems have not been able to provide sufficiently well. This community-based dynamic of hosting is a key to understanding the principles of developing governance systems that will not ignore security issues but will act in collaboration with social realities and not in opposition to them.

The study provided below is based on two types of evidence. To begin with, recent academic publications since 2021 present both theoretical backgrounds of and empirical context to comprehend the processes of building the refugee

community, governance, and the security environment. Second, and most importantly, primary interview data achieved in 2025 will give the evidence first hand on the community building mechanisms, deportation evasion via community protection, and experience of de facto statelessness among Afghan refugees. These interviews, which were carried out on urban settlements, rural regions and refugee villages, shed light on forces that cannot be captured in academic literature, the exact process by which communities guard their members against enforcement, the sense of utter meaninglessness of documentation that offers no real rights and no real protection, and the survival tactics that have sustained the refugees over the course of four decades.

The interviews have shown a population that is de facto stateless even though they have nationality documents on paper. Afghan refugees that have Proof of Registration (PoR) cards have documents that neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan considers as the foundation of meaningful rights provision. The failed state apparatus in Afghanistan offers no consular or diplomatic support to citizens in foreign countries; refugees do not receive services of the Afghan government, do not get document renewals issued by the Afghan authorities and are not provided any protection in case of violation of their rights in Pakistan. At the same time, Pakistan also has no framework of refugee rights as it never signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and PoR holders are in a state of legal limbo, with documentation giving them a partial protection against deportation but not granting them positive rights against employment, education, health, or political representation. Such de facto statelessness, which is recorded by the testimonies of refugees, is one of the primary failures of governance which is reinforced by the contemporary policies.

2. Theoretical Framework: Social Capital and Ethnolinguistic Solidarity.

The Social Capital Theory offers the necessary analysis tool to explain why Afghan refugees have endured and established communities in Pakistan even without sufficient formal assistance and

growing hostile state regimes. The idea of social capital, resources embedded in social networks and relations that can be drawn on to create a purposive action, sheds light on how ethnolinguistic solidarity has replaced formal governance in satisfying the needs of refugees (Portes, 2022). The dimension of social capital in the context of refugees has two aspects. The social capital of today identifies three types of capital that have varying properties and operation. Bonding social capital is a connection of like-minded people, family, co-ethnic, co-religionists, which creates strong support and solidarity (Putnam, 2020). In the case of Afghan refugees, bonding capital is carried by the system of extended families, connections with tribes, and the ethnic identity (Pashtun identity) which relates refugees not only with other Afghans but also with Pakistani Pashtuns on the other side of the border. The immediate support needed to survive through displacement is made available by these dense, trust based networks.

Bridging social capital refers to a relationship between social cleavages between dissimilar people and the availability of various resources (Granovetter, 2023). In the case of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the most important bridging relations are those between the new refugees and the earlier Afghan migrants who have received Pakistani citizenship. These naturalized Afghan-origin Pakistanis occupy an intermediate status: on the one hand, they are linked to refugees in their ethnic, linguistic and even kinship connections but at the same time are fully legal, acquired economic status and social acceptance into Pakistani society. Their ability to mediate between refugee communities and host society institutions is one key resource that the formal governance has not been acknowledging or utilizing.

The connection of social capital is used to refer to vertical relationships between people and institutions with varying degrees of power (Woolcock, 2021). In the case of refugees living in legal precarity, capital connecting with authorities and formal institutions offers ways of protection, service access, and advocacy. But as hostility from formal institutions toward refugees is practiced, the connection between capital might turn into a

liability instead of asset, and the refugees will face the risk of enforcement instead of protection

2.1 The Pakistani Community of Afghanistan Origin as a Social Capital Anchor.

The important observation in explaining the survival of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is the contribution of the previous Afghanistan migrants who acquired Pakistani citizenship. In the 1970s, prior to the Soviet invasion, which caused mass displacement, the Afghans began to migrate to Pakistan in large numbers to get access to economic opportunities and settled in frontier areas and large metropolises. Most of them gained Pakistani citizenship via different avenues that existed at that time (Malik & Hassan, 2022). These naturalized citizens created their own businesses, purchased land, formed their social networks, and integrated into the Pakistani society without losing their ethnic and linguistic and blood relations with Afghanistan.

The existing Afghan-origin Pakistanis were the first to offer hosts and advocates to incoming refugees when mass exodus started after the Soviet invasion in 1979. Extended family ties, collective Pashtun identity, and ethnic solidarity inspired the hosting relationships that offered what the formal mechanisms were unable to offer, instant shelter in formal homes and locales, employment in Afghan businesses, security in the form of community networks, and assimilation into existing social systems. It was a community-based hosting that was done to a great extent beyond official humanitarian mechanisms, a parallel system of support that was keeping refugees alive irrespective of whether they were registered or not and their inclusion in international aid.

According to a study conducted by Ahmad and Bano (2023), the Afghanistan-Pakistan border has recorded a vast network of kinship networks that have enabled the hosting of refugees. Their analysis shows that most Afghan refugees in Pakistan are able to recognize their relatives among naturalized Pakistani of Afghan origin, where such kinship ties become the main forms of support during initial displacement and continuous support in the case of extended stay. The researchers discovered that refugees who were

resettled with relatives had better economic results, reduced psychological stress, and community integration compared to those who relied on formal humanitarian structures, highlighting the effectiveness of community-based support.

Shah and Afridi (2022) used social network analysis on 200 households of refugees to analyze the network structure and its connection to the outcome of refugees. They found that refugees who had large amounts of bridging capital especially links with Pakistani citizens of Afghan descent had much better economic results and less distress as compared to refugees with bonding capital confined to other refugees. Importantly, network heterogeneity grew as the length of residence increased, with the progress of the refugees becoming linked by networks other than the immediate ethnic networks. Nevertheless, individuals that had kinship with established Afghan-origin Pakistanis showed faster network growth, implying that the anchors of communities can apply wider integration.

2.2 Enabling Self Reliance through Community Building

The dependence between social capital and self-reliance among the Afghan refugees is in a fundamental difference with models expected in the humanitarian programming. The classic humanitarian strategies understand self-reliance as a goal that needs to be met by counteractions externalities, skills training, microfinance, job placement, and that develop individual capabilities to fight reliance (Easton-Calabria, 2022). Although these interventions are not irrelevant, they fail to understand the way in which self reliance in the case of Afghan experts residing in Pakistan is formed.

Community networks are the main way that provides jobs, business opportunities, housing, and other social provisions to the Afghan refugees that help them to be self-reliant without formal systems. In the construction, transportation, trade, and services, especially, the business to be owned by Afghans prefers to hire co-ethnic employees, offering them job opportunities they would otherwise not have in the formal labor market,

where refugees face legal limitations and discrimination (Afridi & Ullah, 2023). Ethnic networks have informal credit schemes that offer start-up capital to small business enterprises without any collateral or legal forms of documentation that are required to achieve formal financial institutions. The housing access is done via ethnic networks as landlords of Afghan origin rent their houses to refugees that other individuals would not rent to.

Shafiq and Hassan (2024) analyzed how community networks and economic self-reliance relate based on longitudinal research of 600 respondent refugees. Their panel study showed that network links, especially bridging links to the established Pakistani of Afghan origin, forecasted the outcome of self-reliance more effectively than individual human capital traits such as education and previous labor market experience. The authors discovered two-way correlation: improved social capital promoted economic self-sufficiency, and economic performances widened social networks creating positive feedbacks. These processes were mostly functioning beyond formal systems of governance implying that self-reliance programming must complement and not replace the integration of communities economically.

3. Refugee governance in Pakistan

To comprehend both successes and losses of the Pakistani refugee government, it is necessary to analyze its historical development, including the context of security which has been becoming a significant factor that has influenced policy responses. This history does not only reflect on the swings and swings in policies but on the underlying conflict between humanitarianism and security needs and social facts that governance has been inept at resolving.

3.1 Emergency Phase and Open Border Policy (1979- 1989).

The response of Pakistan to the displacement of Afghanistan was based on a high level of openness, and the government supported the open borders with millions of Afghans being able to enter the country without a visa or without any deep documentation (Hussain & Ali, 2022). This

hospitality was demonstrative of several things: ethnic and cultural impertinence linking Pashtun groups across the border, religious unity making hospitality the Islamic imperative, Cold War geopolitics whereby Afghan refugees were anti-Soviet freedom fighters who deserved assistance, and practical understanding that controlling the border in a mountainous frontier terrain was simply impossible.

The governance in this phase involved coordination of government and great international assistance. At the federal and provincial levels, the government created the Commissionerate of the Afghan Refugees and UNHCR and international NGOs have assistants programs funded abundantly by the Western world. Refugee settlements were set up along the borders and the refugees were given a piece of land on which they built their houses and availed themselves of basic facilities. But the formal system of humanitarian was limited to meeting part of the demands of the refugees. Official camps were accompanied by large-scale informal settlement, with the addition of refugees to the already established communities of Afghan origin in cities and towns and receiving support in the form of kinship and ethnic networks instead of humanitarian registration (Khan and Ahmed, 2023).

The state of emergency set the trends that would be followed in the following decades. The formal governments existed alongside the informal community-based service, the latter usually more substantial to the real welfare of refugees. Foreign interest and investment generated demands of foreign assistance which would not be sustainable. The long-term integration was ignored due to the temporariness assumptions that refugees would go back after the settlement of the conflict.

3.2 The Period of Transition and Waning Support (1989-2001).

The withdrawal of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan in 1989 marked a phase of diminishing international attention, decrease in funds, and changes of Pakistani policy orientations. The geopolitical shift in the end of Cold War weakened the interest of the West to

support refugees, and ongoing conflict in Afghanistan never allowed expected mass repatriation (Malik, 2021). The governance in Pakistan laid more stress on voluntary repatriation and decreased its investment in support of refugees. This was the time when the shift toward the economic self-sufficiency of refugees via the community networks started growing, as their dependency on humanitarian assistance became less and less significant. Even numerous left the refugee villages and went to urban areas where they could find jobs and support of an ethnic community. It was this shift which proved refugee ability to adapt and be self-sufficient with loss of formal assistance but with some community mechanisms instead of formal programming to avoid governance visibility and acknowledgment. Another issue that developed during the transition period was the rise of security issues that would escalate in the coming decades. The presence of Afghan refugees was linked to weapon proliferation, drug trafficking, and militancy that had thrived during the anti-Soviet jihad (Rashid, 2021). Although these were frequently overstated and applied across the board to the refugee population they hoisted security discourse that would become more and more influential in governance strategies.

3.3 Post-9/11 Scenario (2001-2015).

Attacks of September 11, 2001 and the invasion of Afghanistan by United States changed the way the governance of Pakistani refugees was oriented to the issue of security essentially. New displacement of Afghanistan augmented the refugee masses, and the security discourse shifted more towards considering the presence of refugees as a source of possible danger instead of humanitarian consideration (Huysmans and Squire, 2021). The Pakistani government replied by imposing more documentation efforts, registration drills and travel bans. The security issues were not totally baseless. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border was porous, which housed the flow of refugees was also hosting militant movements, with groups such as Al-Qaeda, Taliban groups, and various jihadist groups operating on both sides of the border (Basit, 2023). Although the overwhelming

majority of refugees were not related to militancy, the inability to draw the line between populations, along with the real cases of militant penetration, provided a security justification of the increased regulation of the situations with the refugee presence.

The Proof of Registration (PoR) system that was implemented at this time was an effort to deal with security issues by way of documentation. Starting with the 2006 all-inclusive registration of about 1.6 million Afghan refugees resulted in categories of differentiations with varying vulnerabilities (Naik & Hassan, 2024). The registration was supposed to create a difference between registered refugees that had a right to temporary protection and undocumented groups that might contain security threats. Registration, however, catalyzed unforeseen effects: large groups escaped registration, resulting in undocumented groups that would be the focus of future enforcement but would not be detected by the governance systems.

3.4 National Action Plan and Security Imperative (2014-2025).

In December 2014, an Army Public School in Peshawar (December 2014 Peshawar attack) was attacked by TTP militants who killed 149 people and many of them were children as a watershed moment in Pakistani security policy. As a response, the National Action Plan (NAP) made counterterrorism the first national priority with a wide political consensus (Yusuf, 2021). Though NAP included various aspects such as military actions, legal changes, and anti-extremist strategies, it also implied a lot in terms of refugee governance.

Security justification of increased enforcement of these refugees should be recognized. TTP has been engaged in unremitting terrorism activities since the territory of Afghanistan and the attacks have been sustained and even increased since the Taliban takeover in 2021. Daesh-Khorasani has also been based on the Afghan territory and has carried out attacks in Pakistan against religious minorities and security agencies (Jadoon, Sayed, and Mines, 2022). The Afghan government led by the Taliban has failed or refused to keep their words to Pakistan by ensuring that they do not

allow the use of the Afghan land by these groups as a base. Such a failure of Afghan counterterrorism poses real security dilemmas that Pakistani policy should realize.

A study by Mir and Zahid (2023) captures the state of security dynamics that motivate the Pakistani enforcement strategies. According to their analysis, there was a surge in the terrorist attacks in Pakistan by their origin in Afghanistan land, with TTP undertaking growth in activities especially after the Taliban overthrew the government. Pakistani security services have accredited particular attacks to militants who entered into refugee flows or have had links between refugee communities. They may not be blaming the refugees as a group, however, but these attributions affect human perceptions of security, which in turn influence responses to policy.

These security concerns were reflected in the intensification of the enforcement that reached an announcement in October 2023 which mandated all the illegal foreigners to exit Pakistan. The announcement of the policy came at a time of notably high fatality rates of TTP attacks, and Pakistani authorities specifically attribute the threat of terrorism to the presence of refugees (Amnesty International, 2023). Mass deportations ensued, and hundreds of thousands of Afghans were sent back to Afghanistan even though humanitarian objections were raised over the situation under Taliban rule.

3.5 The Governance Paradox

The enforcement strategy has a sensible security rationale but 40 years of implementation shows that enforcement is not able to fulfill its goals due to social reality. Deportation movements create a short-term decrease in population and subsequent migration in the porous borders. Registration compels document sections of refugee communities and others stay covert in community protective networks. Security oriented restrictions push refugees further beyond the formal government towards the invisibility that security demands whilst enhancing informal networks that enforcement mechanisms are incapable of reaching.

The main contradiction lies in the fact that security-focused enforcement can weaken instead of strengthen security. The forced underground refugees are not visible to the governance systems which could otherwise check their presence and regulate their presence. Enforcement gives rise to community resentment which minimizes cooperation that is needed in the intelligence-gathering. Those deportees who come back via irregular means lose whatever documented status they had, becoming part of undocumented populations that are more security risks than documented populations. An effective governance framework should find a way to deal with this paradox by working on legitimate security issues in ways that will result in increased security and not by imposing means of enforcement which would only contribute to the opposite.

4. Methodology

To comprehend how Afghan refugees have managed to survive and settle in Pakistan, it is necessary to review the existing academic resources and the first-hand testimony of the refugees. This part summarizes the results of scholarly studies, as well as implications of primary interview data gathered in 2025, to understand how community building maintains refugees, facilitates evading deportation, and contributes to the development of de facto statelessness that has been perpetuated by existing governance. This paper primarily uses the data collection method that is the primary interview. The main research aspect in this study was the semi-structured interviews that were to take place in early 2025 with the Afghan refugees in three settlement situations in Quetta (Mariabad, Ghausabad, Gobar Maidani and Mughalabad) and the refugee villages in the Pishin district of Surkhaab and Saranan. This multi-site method allowed not only to compare the mechanisms of community building at different settlements but also to define some general patterns on which refugee experience is based in spite of the location. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the participants of the interview. Both documented refugees with PoR cards and undocumented persons without formal status were intentionally sampled to compare the experiences across

different documentation categories. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were carried out; 10 in urban/rural settlements and 10 in refugee villages. Interviews were recorded with the help of translation and were conducted in Pashto and Dari and transcribed to be analyzed thematically. The interview guide covered a variety of areas: routes to Pakistan and entry into America, support and assistance in the process of displacement, community organization and community participation, experience with documentation and government apparatus, fear of deportation and evasion, and sense of belonging, nationality and statelessness.

The semi-structured format resulted in the ability to probe the emergent themes and ensures consistency between interviews. Ethics played a key role because of the vulnerable nature of the participants with a number of them being undocumented and thus subjects of enforcement. It was a voluntary and informed consent. No demographic data was taken. The interviews were held in confined locations of their choice. The results are presented in a manner that does not allow individual identification. The institutional review board approved the research, and the protocols dealing with vulnerable population were made in its specifications. The community-based shelter and hosting refer to the practice of providing shelter and housing services to individuals experiencing homelessness without hosting them in shelter homes.

4.1 Shelter as a component of Community Building

Scholarly literature and primary interview data attest that community networks have been a major means of delivering shelter to Afghan refugees and not formal humanitarian systems. According to Kabir and Awan (2022), only around 30 percent of registered Afghan refugees live in official refugee villages, with most of them obtaining housing opportunities in rental markets and informal settlements in both cities and the countryside. The key data builds up on this finding by establishing the mechanisms by which community-based housing functions. The interviewees always pointed to kinship links to

current Afghan-origin Pakistanis as a major source of initial shelter. As one of the urban refugees in Gobar Maidani area of Quetta described it:

“We live in mud made houses the men and women had worked so hard day and night to collect 4 lakh rupees and then we built this mud house and now we pay rent 15 hundred per month and after 1 year we would have to leave this place or must pay huge sum of rent.”

This trend of first hosting by naturalized family members then switching to rental accommodation within ethnic network was evident throughout the interviews. The kinship hosting system acts as a shock absorber, offering temporary shelter which formal systems are not able to offer and then community mediated transitions to independent housing when refugees root themselves economically. Qualitative security of housing in ethnic networks is different to formal tenure. According to Gul and Shaheen (2024), community-mediated housing arrangements offered a higher level of practical security in comparison to formal tenure in spite of legal precarity. This finding is confirmed by primary interview data, which also unveils the mechanisms. According to one of the unregistered refugees in Ghausabad:

We are a tight knit community who watch out after one another, whenever there is a police raid on the offing, my friends would advise me in advance and I would leave my house to go hide somewhere near.

Ethnic cohesion in housing patterns is also applied to the undocumented workers. Several interviewees reported that landlords, neighbors, and community members are actively involved in hiding undocumented status of people by authorities, forming a community-based protection that law-enforcement officers cannot easily infiltrate.

4.2. Assistance and Systems of Mutual Support.

Humanitarian aid has been inadequate and intermittent just covering parts of the refugee population over a short time. The gap has been filled by community-based mutual support systems which offer help based on the mechanism of the Afghan cultural traditions and ethnic solidarity. Raza and Ahmed (2024) discovered that humanitarian aid that is individually-targeted was

neutral or detrimental to social capital indicators, which may weaken community solidarity with the introduction of external resources that can replace the mutual support requirements. The same sentiments were conveyed by the participants of the interviews with the interviewees as one of the refugees of the Saranan refugee village said:

“We find higher education hard to acquire since, we do not have CNIC cards. UNHCR constructed this school here where our children can receive education besides this there is no more training centers, education courses among other things.”

Outside the religious institutions, informal lending and credit networks in the ethnic networks offer resources that the formal financial institutions do not allow refugees to obtain. According to the participants of the interview, rotating savings groups, interest-free loans by fellow community members, and business credit on the basis of ethnic trust instead of collateral were described. The overlapping support regimes show the weaknesses of formal humanitarian solutions to serve the needs of populations that are part of robust community networks. As one of the refugee women in Surkhaab camp wrote:

“We only have a school which is provided to us by UNHCR. We don’t have hospital, doctor, water or any kind of basic amenities. People are poor they cannot all of these state or INGOs must help us.”

4.3 Community-Based Protection

The safety of refugees against enforcement, exploitation, and violence is achieved majorly by the community mechanisms, as opposed to formal protection systems. Primary interview evidence gives us richer data on the ways in which communities safeguard members of the community against being deported, evidence that has been captured in the scholarly literature in general terms, but that refugee testimony sheds light on in specifics. One of the major protection mechanisms is community early warning systems. The interviewees explained that information about police activities or immigration crackdown propagate quickly through family and other social networking systems and allow the vulnerable to go undetected. As one of the illegal urban refugees put it:

“Whenever someone comes and tells us on behalf of the government to leave Pakistan, saying “this is the final warning,” we respond by saying that we will leave soon. We received warnings twice before, and then we went into hiding. The police take our men away in vehicles, which is why we can’t stay in one place for long we keep moving and hiding in different locations. “

Community coordination is a method of physical concealment of the enforcement operations. Several respondents explained that they would conceal themselves in the homes of neighbors, the property of their relatives, or the community areas when checking documents. The fact that undocumented refugees are economically embedded into the community networks adds protection. The Pakistani business owners of Afghani descent rely on the refugee labor; deporting them will hurt the citizen employers. As one of the refugees who had belonged to the Surkhaab refugee village articulated:

“In Pakistan, we migrants are large in number, we are present everywhere. We run businesses, invest money in Pakistan, raise livestock, and earn through hard work. Pakistan feels dear to us because of the migrant community itself. How many people can Pakistan really deport? We are a very large population. I believe Pakistan cannot completely remove all of us because we contribute positively to the economy. We play an important role in Pakistan, especially in Quetta, when it comes to business and trade.”

This interdependence in the economy gives protection that is difficult to break by enforcing it formally. Community non-cooperation that includes enforcement (both economically organized and ethnically based) protects undocumented populations against detection and deportation.

4.4 De Facto Statelessness

The most important discovery in the primary data of interviews may be the experience of de facto statelessness in the case of Afghan refugees, where they are legally stateless but cannot enjoy the rights that their nationality would ordinarily afford them, nor do they receive any immigrant/refugee rights by their host nation. This is the case with documented refugees with PoR cards as well as undocumented populations exposing core

governance failures being supported by existing policies. The participants of the interviews all spoke of the lack of access to diplomatic as well as consular assistance by the Afghan government. The failed state apparatus in Afghanistan does not offer consular and diplomatic services to its nationals outside the country. As a refugee with PoR card explained:

“Our community would like to get CNIC, but if that is not possible we would like to get long term POR cards that doesn’t expire after 6 months or a card that even after expiry until getting the new one the police don’t arrest our men and by help of that card our children also get their education.”

At the same time, Pakistan does not confer substantive rights to documentation refugees. The PoR card does not offer safeguards against prompt deportation but it does not guarantee favorable employment, education, healthcare, and political rights. The participants of the interviews reported about the senselessness of documentation that offers no real protection:

“Refugees face difficulties in opening bank accounts, securing jobs, or renting property, as landlords and employers often mistrust or reject POR documentation”.

The statelessness de facto experience has far reaching consequences to the belonging and identity. Under existing between two countries, the participants said they belonged to neither:

“Afghanistan is our country we would like to return, but nobody can take the responsibility of war, over there any time anything can happen. Here also we don’t have a good life our POR cards are not accepted in some cities and we cannot move to city too”.

This state of De-facto statelessness is a circumstance that afflicts both documented and undocumented populations alike. Although the risk of immediate deportation is slightly reduced to that of undocumented individuals, both groups cannot enjoy the benefits that nationality otherwise grants.

4.5 Settlement Variations

Primary interview data show differences in mechanisms of community building within settlement types and validate general patterns of community based survival, protection and experienced statelessness. Urban refugees in

Gobar Maidani, Mughalabad and Mariabad and Ghausabad of Quetta provided the most extensive bridging capital with networks extending beyond the Afghan populations to encompass other Pakistani populations with economic exchanges, neighborhood associations and institutional interactions. Nevertheless, the largest pressure of enforcement was also noted among the urban refugees due to regular document checks, harassment by the police, and fear of deportation. In urban environments, concealment mechanisms mentioned above were extremely important in terms of community protection, and ethnic neighborhoods were the refuges of non-enforcement. The best bonding capital was exhibited by the rural refugees in the Saranan refugee village in terms of tribal and kinship. The unity of Pashtun identity between Afghan refugees and Pakistani Pashtuns in rural settings formed especially close solidarity with the interviewees giving responses that downplayed the differences between Afghanistan and Pakistan:

“We are safe here our community is united they respect females they are kind to women so if females are safe it means the village people are safe.”

This ethnic cohesion translates into strong community protection whereby the rural participants were less likely to report the enforcement pressure compared to the urban participants. Nevertheless, economic opportunities and access to services were also shown to be less among rural refugees, which posed trade-offs between solidarity and economic growth. The residents of the refugee villages were in a middle ground. Formal village organizations brought certain institutional support that refugees cannot get in informal settlements, such as UNHCR registration, limited assistance program, and community facilities. Nevertheless, the fear of deportation was higher amongst refugee village residents, as one of the villagers in Surkhaab refugee village said:

“I feel very anxious and fearful about the deportation policy. After living here for nine years, building my home, and raising my children, the thought of being forced to leave makes me feel insecure and hopeless.”

5. The Border Porous Reality and Implication.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan border stretches across a distance of 2,600 kilometers of mountainous land, which has never been successfully put under control by any government. The Pashtun tribes that have retained their presence on both sides of the border have never accepted it as a legitimate boundary to movement and kinship ties across the border have been used to cross the border in the hundred years since the time of its introduction.

Tariq and Iqbal (2023) record the magnitude of contemporary transnational movement indicating that at official points alone, 1.5 to 2 million crossings are recorded each year besides untold numbers crossing informally. Thousands of crossings of the frontier are made daily at the official borders at Torkham and Chaman, and hundreds of unofficial crossing points serve the frontier. Informal crossing points are being enforced with minimal force due to constraints of the terrain, the presence of security forces and the non-cooperation of the community with this form of enforcement. The porosity of the border that facilitates the return of refugees also brings about security vulnerabilities that establish the need to impose means of enforcement. Similar to the paths that refugees follow TTP and Daesh militants cross the border by relying on relations and topography conditions that allow them to move (Jadoon, Sayed, and Mines, 2022). The fact that it is hard to differentiate between the refugees and militants going through informal channels poses real security dilemmas that governance must solve. Irregular channels are used by the refugees as well as the militants when there are no legal channels through which they can be present in the country and they are also not monitored. A system of directing the flow of refugees through an organized system would help to focus on the enforcement resource to the actual areas of concern such as irregular movement.

According to Mir and Zahid (2023), the cooperation in intelligence between the Afghan-origin communities who have intelligence on the militant networks is the key to effective counterterrorism. Strategies that lead to hostility in the community exclude such cooperation and community partnership strategies may produce the

intelligence access security needs. The question of enforcement versus facilitation is not a humanitarian issue but rather a security issue.

5.1 The Taliban Effect and Pressure of Permanent Dislocation.

In August 2021, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan radically changed the background of governance of refugees by ruling out the options of safe returns and ensuring pressure of displacement. The Taliban rule has caused massive violations of human rights, economic devastation, and humanitarian crises that guarantee further Afghan wishing to escape (Amnesty International, 2023). At the same time, the Taliban threat of hostility against most groups of refugees especially the former employees of the former regimes, foreign forces or even civil societies renders the reentry hazardous to large segments of the refugees. Primary interview data indicates the particular fears that surround voluntary return:

"We came here because my daughters couldn't study in Afghanistan and I can't work there and now Pakistan is sending us back to the sexist regime... it's such a shame"

The governance failure is typified by the specific vulnerability of second-generation refugees who have never resided in Afghanistan, but are not Pakistani citizens. According to one of the Pakistan born refugees:

"We want Citizenship from UNHCR or Pakistan Government so we could avail the same facilities as host community. Cause in other countries if we stay for like 5 years they will get us PR, in Pakistan we are here for like 26 years and still not a decided future. And they have not taken any steps for us."

The current Taliban regime is a determinant factor, such that sustainable refugee return is impossible through deportation. The deported ones come back through porous borders into Pakistani communities that welcome them. Those who are not able to go back experience humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan that creates international discourse on the Pakistani policy. Both results sabotage policy goals and create more costs than temporary population reduction would provide.

6. Towards a Realistic Governance Framework.

The principles of realistic governance structure must be based on various principles obtained after the examination of community building measures, dynamics of security and governance failures. This study proposes a framework based upon:

1. Security by Means of Inclusion and Not Exclusion: There are legitimate security concerns, which governance of the security scenario is the solution, yet the strategy of enforcement that pushes populations underground is the antithesis of solutions to security concerns rather than support of the security challenge. Making refugee populations involved in formal governance can make it possible to monitor, regulate, and cooperate in intelligence that are necessary to achieve security. Partnership strategies within the community create co-operation opportunities that cannot be realised through enforcing them.

2. Recognition of Permanent Presence: The framework should understand that large Afghan communities will be left in Pakistan no matter what policy choices are adopted. Four decades of habitation, generations born in Pakistan, economic assimilation, and kinship have given birth to facts that cannot be removed by force. Temporary presence or total removal-based policy is unrealistic and produces worse consequences than policies that acknowledge permanent presence of large groups of people.

3. Community Capacity Recognition: The framework must acknowledge that the Afghan-origin communities have capacities to host, provide protection, services and govern in ways incommensurable with the formal system. Instead of using such communities as an enforcement target, governance should acknowledge them as partners whose cooperation allows managing the displacement in a more efficient manner.

4. Addressing De Facto Statelessness: The core issue of lack of rights to nationality protection by any state that refugees face should be addressed. Precarity is perpetuated by documentation that offers no rights with a purpose other than neither protecting the welfare of refugees nor government interests. A reformed framework should offer substantive access to rights, rather than the paper documentation.

5. Facilitation Over Enforcement: Since the border is porous, enforcement will not accomplish its goals, which are to prevent presence or permanent extinction. It is either recorded, controlled presence which can be controlled by systems and unrecorded uncontrolled presence which cannot be controlled at all. Approaches of facilitation that offer avenues to legal status will make populations within governance reach easier than enforcement approaches that will push them to the shadow.

6.1 Legal Framework Reforms & Border Management

The present legal practice used by Pakistan which is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, no domestic law on the refugees, dealing with the Afghans by administrative means, at the will of the executive, creates the sense of precariousness and uncertainty that makes refugees turn to informal systems. Suggested laws must introduce clear definitions and procedures, list substantive rights, develop secure documentation, create appealing procedures and outline institutional obligations. The paradox of integration without membership among long-term Afghan refugees is captured by Khan and Begum (2024) in their documentation of the long-term coexistence of a high degree of de facto integration and the official legal exclusion. An actual legal system would and would establish a legal position corresponding to the social one, in which people who have lived decades in Pakistan deserve avenues to establish position rather than constant precariousness.

The security concerns that have been expressed are genuine and therefore approaches that are used to solve them must support and not weak the security. Community partnership strategies that involve the Afghan-origin communities as security partners may produce intelligence cooperation that cannot be enforced without losing community trust that would be required to keep working with the community. These approaches may involve community-based reporting mechanisms which can allow communities to report on security issues without placing all its members at risk of being targeted, intelligence cooperation arrangements which can offer

communities the promises of security cooperation, and a progressive form of trust-building which can offer the promise of keeping all its governance committed to reflecting on security threats and ordinary refugees. Furthermore, Documentation systems ought to strive to be comprehensive in ensuring that registrations are accessible as opposed to creating undocumented populations by restrictive processes. The registration process should be constantly open, offer substantial value, and encompass the returnees who have already been deported but need regularization. Importantly, the documentation should have substantive rights, employment conferred, access to services, protection against arbitrary application conferring incentives to be registered. The purportless paperwork which primary interview participants told about does not serve the refugee welfare and does not serve the purpose of governance. Substantive rights provision would not only draw populations under formal governance but would also deal with the de facto statelessness that the existing strategies have been extending.

Border control must serve to control and not prevent the movement across borders. The fact that it is porous means that it cannot be prevented, the only question is whether or not movement is through formal channels that allow some form of governance or the informal areas that avoid governance at all costs. Legal crossing must be accessible, and the documents obtained by refugees must be accessible, as well as border procedures that are not restrictively challenging. The existing limitations that do not allow legal crossing of people who are not appropriately documented force migration into informal routes where it is not checkable. The resources that are used to enforce the legislation should focus on the trafficking networks and the security threats as opposed to refugees who are ordinary. The difference between refugees who want to be safe and militants or criminals cannot be drawn without intelligence-oriented methods that target specific dangers instead of enforcing the idea of not letting everyone cross illegally.

7. Conclusion

The case of the Afghan refugee experience in Pakistan illustrates how strong community-based survival strategies are and how constrained are governance strategies that do not take into account social realities. The Afghan refugees have endured four decades, living mainly on ethnolinguistic solidarity and social capital networks, hosted by their predecessor Afghan migrants who was able to receive citizenship in Pakistan, and living on informal economies which lies within their ethnic networks. This survival has been attained by this community rather than by formal structures of government that have ranged between poor assistance, and direct aggression.

The dynamics are clarified by primary interview data gathered in 2025, which the scholarly literature cannot individually communicate. Refugees explain the host with kinship which shelters them at a time of failure in the regular systems. They narrate community early warning systems and collective concealment that allows them to evade deportation. They describe the deep meaninglessness of documentation that gives no real rights or protection and so they are left in de facto statelessness as neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan makes their nominal nationality the basis upon which they could be granted real rights.

The Pakistani enforcement strategies are justified by the security considerations. TTP and Daesh carry out terrorism on the Afghan soil and the government of Afghanistan has been unable to stop attacks across the borders. These facts necessitate governance responses that respond to security imperatives. Nonetheless, enforcement strategies that push refugee populations underground risks and compromises instead of enhancing security through creating hostility within the community and preclusion of intelligence cooperation. A governance system that takes populations under the formal reach and developing partnerships with communities would be more likely to achieve security goals than enforcement, which offers uncontrolled space. The politics structure presented here balances the humanitarian imperative and the security imperative with each being valid but acknowledging that none of the existing methods

is working. Making the lives of those who want to stay lawful, enabling returnees to legalize, and responding to de facto statelessness by means of substantive rights delivery, and collaboration with communities as partners and not objects might yield more effective results than enforcement efforts have been able to deliver. This kind of structure would neither do away with security threats nor would it completely address humanitarian issues but it would be a step towards sustainable governance that recognizes the realities on the ground.

The Afghan refugee dilemma in Pakistan depicts that human communities are incredibly resilient and have the ability to self-organize that can be used to advantage or destroyed by the actions of the governing body. The forty years of trying to regulate such presence by the use of restriction and enforcing measures have resulted in undocumented populations, resistance by the community, irregular immigration, and trafficking opportunities without achieving the policy goals. This study thus presents forth reforms for good governance which can be adopted by Pakistan to govern the refugees that will always be seeping through porous borders into Pakistan under Draconian regimes.

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