

## Refugees and National Security in Pakistan: Myths vs. Realities

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### Abstract

Historically, Pakistan was among the few big foreign inflow of refugees in the world, especially with the invasion of the Soviet in Afghanistan back in 1979. Millions of Afghan refugees have found their way to Pakistan and they have settled in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Baluchistan provinces over the various decades. Although the efforts of Pakistan as a sanctuary provider has gained international attention, with the growth of the refugee population, reference to national security is placed on the issue and this intensified in the wake of 9/11. As past governments and media houses continue to assert, the settlements have been declared as hotbeds of terrorism, transnational militancy, trafficking of arms and drugs. Nevertheless, this is a connection that is not usually backed by empirical evidence and combines irregular migration and armed insurrection.

In this paper, the securitization of refugee discourse in Pakistan is critically evaluated by making the differentiation between constructed myths and documented facts. It states that uncontrolled migration of people can cause logistical and bureaucratic issues, but the image of refugees being the security threat by default is overstated and detrimental. Security agency reports, studies by various research agencies, and reports by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicate that the majority of refugees are non-violent persons who fall victims to persecution and war rather than the criminals. The paper discusses the process through which the stories promoting fear lead to marginalizing and criminalizing populations that are refugees and hamper both the humanitarian protection and long-term integration programs.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the abnormality of security failures in most cases has nothing to do with the presence of refugees but with the lack of an all inclusive legal and policy framework in Pakistan to control their status and rights. This paper ends with a call to switch to rights-based rather than security-based approaches, such as national laws protecting refugees, better vetting and registration as well as better regional cooperation that can tackle the reasons why displacement takes place. These measures not only improve the overall security of the country but also make the management of refugees in Pakistan to correspond with the international standards and humanitarian expectations.

### Introduction

Pakistan has been one of the most vulnerable hotspots regarding humanitarian crisis in South Asia especially with respect to forced migration of the Afghan war. Since 1979, flows of Afghan refugees have entered into Pakistan because of military conflict, political uncertainties as well as persecutions.

The highest figure recorded by Pakistan in hosting the refugees was more than 3 million in the late 1980s, but the figures have been changing with the changing political dynamics in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Although the country has always been playing one such part, the discourse governing the issue of refugees in Pakistan has become extremely securitized. The refugees are not only considered to be the victims of the geopolitical disturbances nowadays; they are viewed often as the links to crime, terrorism, and disorder.

Over the past few decades particularly after the post September 11, 2001 events, there has been a great change in the way in which refugees have been perceived. The international debate of national security started to associate the humanitarian issues of the refugee flows with the terrorist penetration.<sup>2</sup> This story picked up pace in Pakistan because of domestic insurgency, cross-border tensions, and emerging extremism. The blame was mainly directed to the Afghan refugees who were accused of hosting militants, provided cross-border terrorism and furthering the distribution of weapons and drugs.<sup>3</sup> This securitized perception has influenced national policies, media, and even general population to commonly form without the backing of quality evidence pranced insight.

The following paper aims at critically analyzing these stories by investigating the complicated and contentious discourse of refugees and national security in Pakistan. It attempts to dispel some of the iconized beliefs that have contributed to the perception and action of state and population and match them against the verifiable realities as made available by research, institutional reports and empirical evidence. The objective is to present evidence based and objective argument on whether refugees do present a danger to national security or the state has over-securitized the refugee question in a disproportionate manner to achieve some other political, strategic objectives.

It is also the introduction where it prepares the ground on discussing the impacts of securitization on the refugee policies in Pakistan. This governance vacuum has been caused by the lack of a formal refugee law and ad hoc responses by the administration in addition to being caused by the lack of mechanisms of long-term integration. Such vacuum is not only a threat to the rights of refugees, but also a threat to the national security through its inability to adequately regulate and accommodate these groups through integration.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the response to the problem of refugees in Pakistan should reflect the notion that the further development of the situation should be mutual and constructive, rather than oriented on reactions to crisis security situations and direct violations.

### **Historical Background and Refugee Flows in Pakistan**

The involvement in refugee population, especially the Afghan one has been long-lasting in the history of modern times in the case of Pakistan. The nation experienced mass influx of refugees first in the post 1979 (Soviet invasion) Afghanistan. In the 1980s, around 3.2 million Afghans were believed to have crossed over to Pakistan and this made the country the biggest refugee country in the world at the time.<sup>5</sup> These refugees were accommodated around the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and

<sup>1</sup> "Country - Pakistan (Islamic Republic Of)," accessed July 6, 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/pak>.

<sup>2</sup> Ejemai Eboreime et al., "From Drought to Displacement: Assessing the Impacts of Climate Change on Conflict and Forced Migration in West Africa's Sahel Region," *The Journal of Climate Change and Health* 23 (May 1, 2025): 100448, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2025.100448>.

<sup>3</sup> "From Crisis to Cure: The Afghan Refugee Dilemma, Security, and Technological Interventions in: Asiascape: Digital Asia Volume 11 Issue 3 (2024)," accessed July 6, 2025, [https://brill.com/view/journals/dias/11/3/article-p180\\_3.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/dias/11/3/article-p180_3.xml).

<sup>4</sup> Abuzar Abbasi, Dr Tansif Ur Rehman, and Ali Usman Ashraf, "Beyond Borders, Beneath Law: The Legal Vacuum for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Pakistan," *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies* 3, no. 2 (June 23, 2025): 2751–60, <https://doi.org/10.59075/ajkveq20>.

<sup>5</sup> "UNHCR Ukraine Delivery Updates - 12 January 2024," UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), accessed July 6, 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106107>.

Baluchistan where major informal settlement agreements were found in Karachi, Quetta, and Peshawar cities.

Pakistan initially took an open-door policy against the Afghan refugees who were welcomed without undergoing any formal legal activities and the international agencies like United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) helped the refugees stay in Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> The refugees were given Proofs of Registration (PoR) cards, which gave them a rudimentary legal status and admission to humanitarian services. Nevertheless, the refugee community had not been given a national law to protect their rights, so being dependent on the political winds, these rights still were vulnerable. Over the years as the war in Afghanistan continued to develop, fresh incursions of refugees into Pakistan occurred during the Taliban rule (1996-2001), post invasion by the U.S. led coalition in 2001 and the latest in August 2021, when the Taliban came to power once again.

The decades of extended refugee presence started leaving the traces in shaping the attitudes and policy narratives of the states as well. The attitude of ordinary people changed such that refugees who used to be viewed as fellow Muslims fighting oppression were now met with the attitude that they are economic threats and sources of insecurity.<sup>7</sup> There was growing hostility due to economic pressures, overcrowding in urban areas and supposed participation in crime by some members of the Afghanistan nationals. The Pakistani state, facing the pressure to reduce terrorism and manage the insurrection within the country, began to associate refugees with militancy capacity, in particular considering the cross-border insurgencies in the tribal area and attacks that could be connected to Afghan-based networks.

Nonetheless, although these advancements took place, Pakistan has continued to conduct policy openly, spontaneously and temporarily regarding refugees.<sup>8</sup> The lack of special legal regime and parliamentary control has seen refugees being managed using the administrative orders and vetting based on security. This lack of a structure on the legal side has provided space to inconsistencies in treatment, occasional crack downs and instability on the side of the refugee and law enforcement themselves. The present assessment of the securitization of the discourse of refugee situation in Pakistan today is incomplete without taking into account this historical background, and whether it is an instrument of empirical or political expediency.

### **Securitization of Refugees in Pakistan: Political Narratives and Media Discourses**

The creation of the image of refugees as a threat to security in Pakistan has not been the isolated event but the repercussion of changes in political discourse, the instability in the region, and media propagation of these changes. The definition of securitization in this context implies the process of framing of refugee population, in this case, the Afghan refugees, as existential threats to the state within the scope of war, and the appurtenance to the special measures of the state and the policies to be adopted that would otherwise be considered illegitimate in the scope of legally established international human rights norms.<sup>9</sup> This process has been intensified in Pakistan, especially since the early 2000s, when the focus of the state shifted to counterterrorism and issue of security on borders.

<sup>6</sup> Shaiza Nazir, Abdul Basit Khan, and Muhammad Javed Ashraf, "A Historical Analysis of the Socio-Economic Implications of Afghan Refugees for Pakistan," *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review* 8, no. 3 (September 30, 2024): 753–63, [https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2024\(8-III\)68](https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2024(8-III)68).

<sup>7</sup> Dr Rifat Kaleem, "PAKISTAN AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS: CASE STUDY OF LAND BORDER MANAGEMENT IN RELATION TO NATIONAL SECURITY OF PAKISTAN," *Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review* 3, no. 1 (February 21, 2025): 62–79, <https://doi.org/10.12345/3203b090>.

<sup>8</sup> Arjumand Bano Kazmi, "Pakistan's Judicial Engagement with International Refugee Law," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 36, no. 4 (December 1, 2024): 397–418, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eeaf001>.

<sup>9</sup> "Lynne Rienner Publishers | Security A New Framework for Analysis," accessed July 6, 2025, [https://www.rienner.com/title/Security\\_A\\_New\\_Framework\\_for\\_Analysis](https://www.rienner.com/title/Security_A_New_Framework_for_Analysis).

The Pakistani political leaderships that followed one another have tended to focus on the perceived connection between refugees and terrorism, especially as applied to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda members, and the Islamic State in the recent past. There have also been many official statements on the refugee camps in Afghanistan in which they are called a safe haven of militants and this has been developed to get the view that the refugees are not victims but rather possible accomplices.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the assertions are scarcely supported by disaggregated statistics or plausible research. Although instances of refugees committing crime have been reported, including the individual cases, they are more of exception than the rule. Some sweeping generalizations have been applied to fostering a narrative in the population that has contributed to this hawkish policy and forced repatriation.

The Pakistani media has been one of the crucial sources of those securitized narratives. There is much repetition of state rhetoric in major newspapers and television channels lacking critical coverage and instead focusing on the productive building of refugees as criminals, drug dealers, and terrorists.<sup>11</sup> Social media has also added to such narratives where unverified material dominates and xenophobic remarks influence the opinion pandemic as it happens. These consistent images of refugees as security risks only allow levels of mistreatment, arbitrary detention and denial of services in a cycle of marginalization.

In addition, securitization has caused people to lose focus on structural basis of insecurity including failed governance, failed border management and failure to provide social services. Refugees are put in the easy place of scapegoat to system weaknesses. This is the instrumental later of security talk use in such a way that political figures can redirect criticism and get legitimacy when there is an increase of domestic unpopularity. Any discussion of refugees in this environment refuses to be heard except in the crudest terms or as somehow unpatriotic.

The process through which securitization works is critical to understand since this point shows that the policies of refugees tend to be developed based on contextual considerations rather than the process of evaluation guided by empirical evidence. In the long term, this type of narratives not only denies the rights of refugees but also negates real national security because it obstructs the identification of fundamental causes and the creation of disaffected communities that are defenseless and exposed to manipulation.

### **Realities on the Ground: Crime, Militancy, and Refugee Communities**

Although the narrative and portrayal of refugees and especially sex crime and terrorism by states and the media in Pakistan is associated with Afghan refugees, a clear observation of the available statistics places a very different and less general scenario. Nevertheless, even after decades of the allegations, there is very little hard data to support the claim that the larger refugee group is involved in organized crime or militancy in a systematic manner. The majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan live in poverty, are employed in the informal economy and experience systematic discrimination, it is not them who are engaged in active security threats.<sup>12</sup>

Various, several reports by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other independent bodies have found that crime among refugee population is statistically equivalent

<sup>10</sup> "Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive | International Crisis Group," May 22, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan-afghanistan/pakistan-afghanistan-tempering-deportation-drive>.

<sup>11</sup> Mahnoor Ghani Sheikh and Dr Raza e Mustafa, "Global Narratives of Displacement: Media Representation Shapes Public Perception and Policy Responses to Refugee Crises," *Journal of Social Signs Review* 2, no. 4 (December 29, 2024): 621–55.

<sup>12</sup> "(PDF) Securitization of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan after 9-11," accessed July 6, 2025, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347557902\\_Securitization\\_of\\_Afghan\\_Refugees\\_in\\_Pakistan\\_after\\_9-11](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347557902_Securitization_of_Afghan_Refugees_in_Pakistan_after_9-11).

to, or in other regions lower, to the host population.<sup>13</sup> Where engagement has occurred it has tended to be with socio-economic deprivation, absence of legal status or police harassment over political issues of ideological extremism. To give a case in point, the illegal immigrants usually have to make way to unpaid or exploitative labor, or in unfavorable conditions of make-shift housing, leading to better conditions of petty crime, or exploitation over terrorism.

The tendency to equate refugees with militancy has also been undermined by findings from Pakistan's own law enforcement agencies. According to several police and intelligence briefings, while some militant actors may have exploited porous borders and informal refugee settlements for shelter or logistics, these instances are not representative of the refugee population as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, most terrorist attacks within Pakistan have been carried out by citizens or foreign fighters infiltrating independently—not refugees with UNHCR registration or legal status. Thus, the conflation of Afghan nationality or refugee identity with terrorism is both inaccurate and damaging.

Moreover, many Afghan refugees in Pakistan have actively resisted militant influences. Community leaders, educators, and youth organizations within refugee camps have partnered with NGOs to combat radicalization and promote resilience through education and employment. These positive efforts are often overlooked in mainstream discourse, reinforcing a one-sided security narrative that lacks balance and perspective.

Rather than refugees being drivers of insecurity, it is often the absence of legal protections, durable solutions, and meaningful integration policies that create vulnerabilities. Marginalized populations without legal rights or economic opportunities are more susceptible to coercion or exploitation—not by virtue of their identity, but due to structural neglect. Recognizing this is key to forming an effective national security policy that addresses the root causes of instability rather than scapegoating vulnerable groups.

### **Legal and Policy Gaps in Pakistan's Refugee Framework**

The fact that Pakistan has no form of official legislation happens to be one of its most pressing issues when it comes to its approach in dealing with the refugees. Pakistan is not an apostle of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol, and does not have its own refugee law. Consequently, the resultant effect is that refugee governance works upon an administrative patchwork policy, otherwise implemented reactively instead of proactively. This legal gap does not only create obstacles to protecting refugees, but also creates threats to the national security as it leaves the population of refugees unregulated, undocumented and prone to exploitation.

At present, the issue of managing Afghan refugees is regulated mainly by the system of ad hoc agreements between the Government of Pakistan and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR-recognized refugees receive Proof of Registration (PoR) or Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC) that grant only some privileges with access to basic services and to protection against arbitrary detention.<sup>15</sup> These documents are however, prone to political manipulations, where repatriation or renewal deadlines are being elongated or cancelled to suit changing domestic or regional pressures. The uncertainty generated by this will affect refugee populations with fear and mistrust, as well as limit their access to work, education, and treatment.

When there are no evident legal definitions and/or institutional responsibility, the enforcement agencies do reduce refugees to undocumented migrants or even security suspects. Undocumented

<sup>13</sup> "UNHCR Ukraine Delivery Updates - 12 January 2024," UNHCR Operational Data Portal (ODP), accessed July 6, 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106107>.

<sup>14</sup> "Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive | International Crisis Group," May 22, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan-afghanistan/pakistan-afghanistan-tempering-deportation-drive>.

<sup>15</sup> "UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency," UNHCR Pakistan, accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/pk/>.

refugees, whose card has expired or are entangled by the red tapes are the most susceptible to all forms of extortion, arbitrary arrest, and forced deportation.<sup>16</sup> Such ambiguity between the categories of refugees, migrants, and insurgents also supports securitized discourse and causes human rights abuses in the name of national interest.

Moreover, there is no universal refugee legislation and, therefore, there is no status determination system, appeal route or the presence of a court to monitor the asylum cases in Pakistan. Not only is such behavior illegal under the international humanitarian norm, but it is also confusing to the authorities that are supposed to carry out such duties. Without the legal clarity, the refugees are under the mercy of administrative decisions that waver and change according to the political will.

The adoption of an official policy of refugees in the country, which will correspond to the international practice, will give refugees and state institutions a systematic legal framework. Such a law may have norms on determining the status of a refugee, define the rights and duties of a refugee, govern returns based on the principle of non-refoulement. Such a change would also bolster national security in facilitating more accurate tracking, vetting and integration of refugee populations, not with the ad hoc or mass arrest approach, but with law.

### **Implications of Securitization for Refugee Rights and State Security**

Securitization of refugees in Pakistan has developed a cascade of consequences both to the refugee communities and the security and governing landscape of the state at large. The ability of the state to demonize refugees as vulnerable in terms of security issues but not in terms of enjoying rights as individuals has served to create an atmosphere where rights infringements are not only accepted but can even be patronized in political interests. Meanwhile, this tactic compromises the security governance that it is supposed to preserve through encouraging instability, marginalization and alienation.

To refugees, securitization has meant unending discrimination, systematic exclusion as well as inability to access basic services. Often, Afghan refugees and in particular those whose documents have not been renewed are extorted by police, detained arbitrarily, and are continuously threatened with deportation.<sup>17</sup> This makes the refugees fear attacks and thus they do not get to hospitals, children do not get to schools and they do not report crimes, in effect shoving them to the background of the society. Not only does this diminish their dignity and right to be considered human, but it also makes them more susceptible to compulsion, trafficking, or inducement into an extremist network. Paradoxically, the policies that are meant to help fight the security threats themselves might establish the situation that promotes them.

On a broader level, securitization diverts attention and resources away from meaningful refugee integration and toward policing and surveillance. Pakistan has spent considerable political and administrative capital on short-term enforcement operations, mass repatriation drives, and crackdowns—often with little measurable impact on reducing actual security threats.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, insufficient investment in refugee education, healthcare, and livelihoods has left many in protracted displacement without opportunities for self-reliance or contribution to society.

Importantly, the securitized narrative has also hindered Pakistan's engagement with the international community. Human rights watchdogs and multilateral organizations have frequently criticized

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Imran and Dr Syedah Sadia Kazmi, "The Rule of Law Crisis and Its Implications on National Security in Pakistan," *Journal of Political Studies* 32, no. 1 (May 20, 2025): 36–57.

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Salman, Safdar Hussain, and Hina Butt, "INTEGRATING THEORIES OF SECURITIZATION: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (2024).

<sup>18</sup> "Pakistan-Afghanistan: Tempering the Deportation Drive | International Crisis Group," May 22, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan-afghanistan/pakistan-afghanistan-tempering-deportation-drive>.

Pakistan's treatment of refugees, especially its lack of adherence to the non-refoulement principle.<sup>19</sup> This weakens Pakistan's moral and diplomatic standing and affects international funding and cooperation in managing future refugee crises. A state that prioritizes enforcement over humanitarian protection risks becoming isolated at a time when global solidarity and burden-sharing are most needed.

From a national security standpoint, ignoring the social, economic, and psychological well-being of refugee communities is shortsighted. Refugees who are integrated into society, given legal recognition, and offered meaningful economic opportunities are far less likely to pose a security threat than those who are ostracized and left in legal limbo. Thus, human security and national security are not mutually exclusive; they are deeply interconnected.

In sum, the securitization of refugees in Pakistan has failed both as a rights-based policy and as a sustainable security strategy. The path forward lies in rebalancing the discourse—shifting from reactive enforcement to proactive integration, from fear to evidence, and from ad hoc crackdowns to long-term legal reform.

### **Toward a Balanced Refugee Policy: Recommendations**

In light of the empirical findings and critical review of Pakistan's current approach to refugee management, there is a clear need to shift from a securitized, ad hoc response to a structured, humane, and rights-based framework. Addressing both national security and humanitarian obligations requires a multi-dimensional strategy that balances legal, political, and socio-economic considerations. The following recommendations outline key reforms necessary to move toward a more coherent refugee policy in Pakistan.

#### **1. Enact National Refugee Legislation**

The most urgent step is the formulation and passage of a comprehensive refugee law.<sup>20</sup> This legislation should clearly define who qualifies as a refugee, establish a legal framework for asylum claims, and incorporate safeguards against arbitrary detention and refoulement. Legal recognition will enable better regulation and protect both refugees and state interests through transparent status determination and documentation processes.

#### **2. Establish Independent Refugee Institutions**

Pakistan must create specialized institutions—such as a Refugee Status Determination (RSD) body and an oversight commission—to manage refugee affairs independently of political and security agencies. These institutions should operate in coordination with UNHCR, civil society, and provincial governments to ensure rights-based service delivery.<sup>21</sup>

#### **3. Improve Registration and Documentation Mechanisms**

An inclusive and secure documentation process is vital to avoid the criminalization of undocumented refugees. The current Proof of Registration (PoR) and Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) systems should be upgraded with biometric verification, renewal mechanisms, and digital records accessible to both federal and provincial authorities.<sup>22</sup> Proper documentation reduces the burden on law enforcement and allows refugees to access basic services legally.

<sup>19</sup> "Pakistan: Forced Returns Expose Afghans to Persecution, Destitution | Human Rights Watch," accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/19/pakistan-forced-returns-expose-afghans-persecution-destitution>.

<sup>20</sup> "Situation of Refugees in Warzone of The World and Their Legal Issues | Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences," accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.internationalrasd.org/journals/index.php/pjhss/article/view/2334>.

<sup>21</sup> "Insights from Studying the Dynamics of Onward Migration Among Afghan Nationals in Pakistan | SpringerLink," accessed July 6, 2025, [https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-981-99-8001-7\\_38-1](https://link.springer.com/rwe/10.1007/978-981-99-8001-7_38-1).

<sup>22</sup> "Pakistan," UNHCR, July 4, 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/pakistan>.

#### **4. Promote Refugee Integration Through Access to Services**

Instead of isolating refugees in camps or informal settlements, Pakistan should facilitate their gradual integration into society through access to education, healthcare, and employment. Donor-supported integration programs—especially in underserved provinces—can create shared benefits for both refugee and host communities while mitigating social friction.

#### **5. Reframe Public and Media Narratives**

A national public awareness campaign—engaging journalists, religious leaders, and civil society—should be launched to counter harmful myths about refugees and promote empathy and factual understanding. This cultural shift is critical to preventing xenophobia and restoring dignity to refugee populations.

#### **6. Strengthen Regional and International Cooperation**

Pakistan cannot on its own resolve problems of refugees. International donors and multilateral organizations are also necessary in finding lasting solutions through regional coordination with Afghanistan and Iran. The mechanisms of joint repatriation, mutual economic collaboration, and border management procedures should be framed under the common understanding of international law and the interests of the region to stabilize it.<sup>23</sup>

With the use of these reforms, Pakistan will be able to change its refugee policy to be something that will not only be working at safeguarding the national security but at the same time being able to keep its long-standing humanitarian obligations. An organized and humane process is not only morally supported but advantageous in the long run to peace and harmony of the region.

### **Conclusion**

The refugee problem in Pakistan, especially the Afghan refugees, has been complex and a very dynamic issue lying within the borders of humanitarian commitments, state identity or national ground, geopolitics and domestic security. Pakistan has been a destination and a scene of resistance in at least 40 years since it opened its borders to refugees but also faces difficulties to cope with the socio-political and economic impact of long accompanying displacement. However, with recent years, the language of refugees has grown more securitized and human beings with valid demands of protection have been transformed into seen as a security threat to the state.

In this paper, I have broken up the prevailing myths associating the refugees to terrorist networks and national destabilization in Pakistan. It has demonstrated that although minor cases might involve refugee individuals, there has been no empirical evidence to show that the refugee communities are systemically threatening to national security. Rather, securitization language has been politically expedient, which allows governments to divert blame away on their poor performance during domestic rule and use intercept, enforcement, and forceful repatriation policies to amass state power. The implications on the refugee communities have been appalling: fear, marginalization, legal insecurity and deprivation of the basic rights.

At the same time, the securitized approach has proven ineffective in achieving genuine security outcomes. By alienating large refugee populations and denying them pathways to integration, the state inadvertently fosters the very vulnerabilities it seeks to eliminate. Unregulated and undocumented communities—lacking legal status and access to education or employment—are not only more difficult to monitor but are also more susceptible to exploitation, trafficking, and radicalization. The absence of a legal framework and the over-reliance on law enforcement as a policy tool have created a governance vacuum, undermining both human security and state stability.

<sup>23</sup> “Pakistan: Forced Returns Expose Afghans to Persecution, Destitution | Human Rights Watch,” accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/19/pakistan-forced-returns-expose-afghans-persecution-destitution>.



What emerges from this analysis is the urgent need for a paradigm shift in refugee policy—one that is grounded in legal norms, human dignity, and long-term strategic thinking. Pakistan must move beyond crisis management and toward the development of durable solutions that balance its legitimate security concerns with its international and moral responsibilities. This requires the enactment of a national refugee law, the establishment of independent refugee institutions, and the promotion of social cohesion through inclusive development policies.

Also, the state should allocate funding to redesigning of the discourse on refugees. Addressing misinformation, inclusion and empowering civil society, and the creation of empathetic stories are important in the restoration of trust and creating co-existence. We have to stop viewing refugees as burdens on the societal neck but rather look at them as human beings who have potentials to add values to the society when given a chance.

Ultimately, the myths about refugees and national security in Pakistan are more concealing than transparent. The risk to national cohesion lies not in the presence of refugees, but in the inability to provide their protection, record and integrate them in accordance with the law in a rule of law and humane way. It is through these structural inefficiencies that Pakistan can not only realize its security interests, but also its long tradition of invitation and other forms of unity in the region.

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