

Transnational Figurations of Displacement

Now more than ever: Afghans in Pakistan need more mobility and durable solutions to stay

The Taliban’s recent seizure of Kabul and overall control of the country has once again led many Afghans to flee their country. With more than 2.67 million Afghans registered as refugees worldwide (as of 2020), and possibly more to come, Afghans are the second-largest refugee population after Syrians. Their displacement began more than 40 years ago, many of whom have taken refuge in Pakistan, which has 1.4 million Afghans registered with UNHCR as refugees (UNHCR, 2020) and more than 800,000 registered with the government of Pakistan. Close to one million Afghans remain undocumented in Pakistan.

Over the past few months, Pakistani authorities announced repeatedly that they will not allow new Afghan refugees to enter their country. Instead, Pakistan is promoting the establishment of secure areas by the international community inside Afghanistan for all those seeking refuge. In the case of large-scale cross-border refugee movements, Pakistan plans to establish refugee camps in the border areas to contain Afghans and avoid their onward movement to Pakistani cities. Given the fact that Pakistan has used the last two decades to seal up to 90 per cent of the 2,640 kilometres border, the government’s strategy to keep Afghans out is likely to be effective.

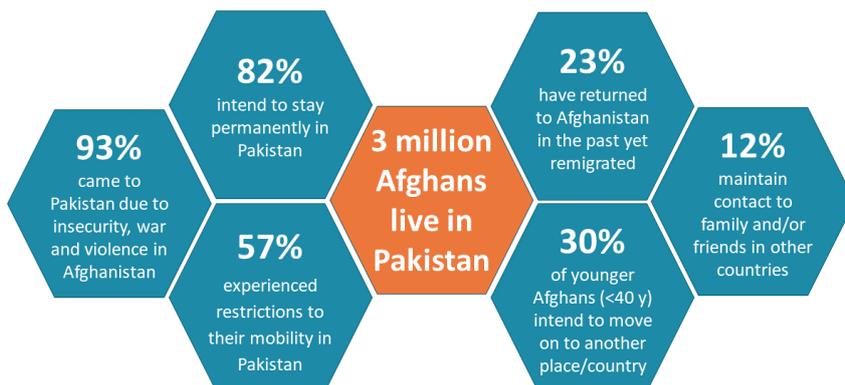
‘without pathways to settle down legally in Pakistan, transnational mobility alone is not a way out of protracted displacement’

Decreasing mobility at the place of displacement

Deliberate policies by the government of Pakistan restrict the transnational and translocal movement of Afghans to/in Pakistan and hence contribute to protracted displacement. According to a survey by TRAFIG researchers, 57 per cent of Afghans face mobility restrictions within the country, mainly due to their registration status. Police harassment is widespread and occurs in the form of extortion or corruption at police checkpoints in the city and at traffic junctions; respondents reported violence and

beatings in custody or when stopped and taken out of a bus for searching; unannounced search operations in Afghans’ premises and shops; abusive language, and, in general, awareness of the omnipresent “possibility that the police or security authorities can penetrate your space anytime”, as one Afghan put it.

The fear of abuse and detention keeps Afghans immobilised in their place of residence in Pakistan. The Pakistani government and increasingly the public tend to perceive Afghans as sources of insecurity and terrorism. Their movement across borders is progressively impeded by government efforts to seal the Afghan–Pakistani border and introduce strict visa regulations for (re) entry into Pakistan. This trend of politically motivated immobility



exacerbates an already untenable situation of displacement, where basic protection measures have been granted to proof of registration (PoR) card holders on an ad hoc basis and with short delays since 2015. New cards are currently being issued with a validity date of 31 December 2023.

Moving around but not out of displacement

People in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region have always been well connected and highly mobile translocally (within borders) and transnationally (across borders) between South, West and Central Asia and beyond. According to a survey by TRAFIG researchers, almost one-quarter of our respondents (n=299) returned at least once to Afghanistan since they were displaced and came back to Pakistan four times on average. Some of this movement is circular through scoping visits, where Afghans go to Afghanistan to assess the security situation and their prospects for making a living ‘back home’. Others travel to and fro on a regular basis to secure their assets for a future return or to sell them in case of an

emergency. Seasonal work is still a viable livelihood strategy—for some, their only means of survival—where Afghans migrate to Pakistan or Iran for several months at a time and return when the season is over. Another group of ‘circular migrants’ are Afghan businessmen who continue the age-old practice of doing business in Pakistan and beyond to support their life in Afghanistan and/or Pakistan.

Circular migration has always allowed Afghans to establish a means of livelihood where none may be possible in their country of origin. TRAFIG survey respondents mentioned insecurity and the lack of livelihood options in Afghanistan as the two most common reasons why they remigrated to Pakistan. But without pathways to settle down legally in Pakistan, this type of transnational mobility alone is not a way out of protracted displacement.

What is the way out?

Ending the protracted displacement of Afghans in Pakistan requires a change in Pakistani policies towards Afghans. The Pakistani government should:

Issue a National Refugee Law: The law should

- provide future certainty for registered Afghans through long-term extensions of existing PoR cards;
- open a PoR card registration drive for current ACC holders and undocumented Afghans;
- include rights to own property, businesses, and to obtain a driver’s license for all registered Afghans.

OR

Transform Pakistan’s current protection system into a generous visa regulation system for Afghans

- The Pakistani government should grant visas to Afghans independent of their reason for being in Pakistan.
- Afghans should be able to obtain passports and long-term residence visas through Afghan consulates in Pakistan.
- Visas should ensure a ‘right to remain’ in the country for a period of time, allowing Afghans to live securely and plan their future.

Whichever course of action is taken, the **following outcomes** are crucial:

- Afghans with protection needs should have the option to undergo UNHCR-administered refugee status determination (RSD) procedures and be able to apply for asylum in Pakistan.
- All Afghans—whether holders of PoR cards, ACCs, visas, or undocumented individuals—should have the right to mobility, not only throughout Pakistan but also across the border to keep up relationships in Afghanistan and beyond.
- Afghans residing in Pakistan for more than ten years and those who were born in Pakistan to Afghan parents should be eligible for Pakistani citizenship.

This practice note is based on Mielke, K, M.et al. (2021). *Figurations of Displacement in and beyond Pakistan: Empirical findings and reflections on protracted displacement and translocal connections of Afghans* (TRAFIG working paper 7). Bonn: BICC.

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