Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Manuscript 1609

Human Security or State Security? Afghan Refugees and Policy Dilemmas in Pakistan

Saad Zakria

Azmat Ullah

Follow this and additional works at: https://kjhss.khazar.org/journal

ORIGINAL STUDY

Human Security or State Security? Afghan Refugees and Policy Dilemmas in Pakistan

Saad Zakria [a], **Azmat Ullah** [b,*]

[a] PhD Scholar, Department of History, Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF), Pakistan
[b] Associate Professor/Chairman Department of History, Government College University Faisalabad (GCUF)

ABSTRACT

Between 2008 and 2022, Pakistan faced a complex policy dilemma in managing Afghan refugees, balancing humanitarian obligations with national security concerns. After hosting Afghan refugees for more than four decades, Pakistan's approach gradually shifted from humanitarian accommodation and regional solidarity to securitization, stricter documentation, border controls, and repatriation efforts. Analysis of secondary data shows that many refugees experienced legal uncertainty, limited access to education and healthcare, poor labor conditions, and pressure to return despite instability in Afghanistan. Simultaneously, Pakistan confronted genuine challenges, including terrorism risks, irregular migration, economic burdens, declining international assistance, and pressure on public services. The study argues that the human security perspective, which prioritizes refugee welfare and rights, weakened significantly after 9/11 and especially following the 2014 Army Public School attack. Sustainable refugee governance requires legal protection, fair documentation systems, regional cooperation, donor burden-sharing, and truly voluntary, safe repatriation processes.

Keywords: Human security, State security, Afghan refugees, Securitization, Refugee policy

Introduction

The Afghan Refugee situation in Pakistan is one of the longest and most complicated refugee situations in the modern world (Ali et al., 2022). Pakistan has been the host country for several waves of Afghan refugees since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan in 1979 and on-going instability within Afghanistan due to other factors such as civil war, Taliban control, foreign intervention etc. It started off as an emergency humanitarian response and then morphed into a long-term political, social, economic and security issue (Bakare et al., 2025). Afghan displacement was not a short-term concern anymore by 2008–2022;

Received 26 February 2026; revised 11 July 2026; accepted 5 September 2026.
Available online 15 October 2026

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: saadzakria@gmail.com (S. Zakria), azmatullah@gcuf.edu.pk (A. Ullah).

https://doi.org/10.5782/2223-2621.1609
2223-2621/© 2026 Published by Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 Licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

it had become a deeply entrenched issue that included border governance, legal status, and provision of public services, economic survival, national security, and relations with neighbours (Bibi, 2024).

The first reaction of the Pakistani government towards Afghan refugees had religious affinity, ethnic connections, humanitarian sympathy, and Cold War geopolitical considerations (Fayyaz & Siddiqui, 2023). In the early decades, Afghan refugee camps, informal settlements, cross-border networks, and international support were the primary means of accommodation for refugees. But refugee governance evolved over time (Ikanda et al., 2025). Many of the people born in Pakistan were Afghans, but they lacked citizenship, permanent legal protection, and secure access to basic rights.Many born in Pakistan were Afghans but without citizenship, permanent legal status, and secure access to basic rights. This resulted in Afghan refugees being on the ground in Pakistan for decades but staying treated as temporary outsiders (Iqbal, 2025).

Following 9/11 the policy situation became more acute as Pakistan's domestic security scenario drastically transformed. The state's perception of Afghan mobility as a security issue was reinforced by militancy, terrorism, insecurity along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and tensions between the two countries (Islam & Ahmadzai, 2025). This momentum gained further momentum following the 2014 attack on Army Public School in Peshawar, leading to greater political and media linkage of Afghan refugees, particularly undocumented Afghans, to terrorism, irregular migration, crime and pressure on public resources (Iqbal et al., 2024). Consequently, there was a further move towards documentation, border control and surveillance, refugee deadlines, and tighter refugee movement control in Pakistan's refugee policy (Zarawar et al., 2024).

This change put human security in opposition to state security (Jehangir, 2023). Human security is what is needed for Afghan refugees: protection from fear, protection from poverty, protection from exclusion, protection from forced return, protection from legal uncertainty, protection from lack of education, lack of healthcare, lack of livelihood, and lack of dignity (Zaib et al., 2026). Afghans in Pakistan have been plagued by insecure legal status, predominantly in informal employment, access restrictions to education and health services and frequent insecurity of registration and repatriation (Iqbal & Liang, 2026). Their security is not just about being safe from violence, it's also about having a legal identity, being accepted in society, the ability to earn a living and a chance at a safe future.

Meanwhile, the security of the state of Pakistan cannot be overlooked (Tariq & Gul, 2025). It has been a terror threat, militancy on its borders, migration, porous borders, economic issues and reduction in donor funding etc. in the country (Khalid & Khan, 2026). The large refugee population has strained public services, urban infrastructure, the job market, and provincial governments, especially in KPK and Balochistan. The Pakistani government has seen the influx of illegal Afghan citizens as a management and security issue. Hence, repatriation has often been touted as a policy option to address security threats, financial strain and governance challenges (Iqbal et al., 2025).

But, a state-centred approach has its drawbacks. If the refugees are viewed as a threat to security primarily, their humanitarian needs take a back seat, and policies can generate fear, harassment, exclusion, and forced repatriation, instead of voluntary and sustainable repatriation (Khan, 2024). Afghan refugees often have strong social, economic, and family ties in Pakistan, and Afghanistan has also, in many cases, been unstable, economically weak, and insecure. Forced or pressured return is unlikely to solve displacement and can result in re-migration, increased vulnerability and new instability (Sultan et al., 2025). So a balanced approach is needed which acknowledges Pakistan's legitimate security concerns while keeping in mind the refugee's human security needs in the Afghan refugee situation (Latif, 2026).

Thus, the objective of the present study is to discuss the impact of the two competing objectives of human security and state security on Pakistan's Afghan refugee policy (2008–2022). This study's rationale is that it is important to see Afghan refugee governance as a policy dilemma involving a mix of humanitarian and national security concerns, rather than just the humanitarian or national security aspect (Khan et al., 2024). The study aims at illuminating the nature of this tension and the reasons why Pakistan shifted from humanitarian accommodation to securitized repatriation, its impact on Afghan refugees' legal, social, and economic circumstances, and the need for a more balanced refugee governance framework to ensure sustainable protection, national security, and regional stability (Mahmood, 2022).

Literature review

Afghan refugee work in Pakistan can be found in the general literature of the human security – state security dichotomy. Human security is a development concept made popular by UNDP's Human Development Report (1994) that focuses on the protection of individuals from fear, want, exclusion and vulnerability, rather than the protection of territory. On the other hand, state security is about sovereignty, state control of borders, internal security and the protection of the state from external and internal threats. According to the book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* by Buzan et al. (1998), security is not just a material state, but a political construct, in which some issues are seen as emergency threats. This theoretical divergence has been of significant relevance to Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as they have been seen in two different ways – as a humanitarian population in need of protection, and as a governance issue related to governance of undocumented movement, terrorist threats, economic impacts and border security concerns. The Afghan refugee issue can thus not be examined solely under the prism of migration but needs to be evaluated as a policy dilemma in which the needs of the refugees and security concerns of the host state continuously interact.

This learning is enhanced by book-based scholarship on refugees. Loescher (1993), in *Beyond Charity*, argues that refugee crises are not temporary humanitarian accidents but are deeply connected with international politics, conflict and responsibility-sharing. Likewise, in *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Gatrell (2013) identifies war, state collapse and political exclusion as causes of refugees and the condition of those refugees is determined by policies of host states and international institutions. In *The Refugee in International Law*, Goodwin-Gill & McAdam (2021), highlight the need for legal clarity, non-refoulement, access to basic rights and humane treatment in refugee protection. In *Survival Migration,* Betts & Collier (2013) also claims that some forced migrants are not typical refugees as their displacement is driven by a combination of conflict, insecurity, poverty and institutional failure. These book based arguments are helpful for the Pakistani case because the displacement of the Afghans has been sustained for over 40 years and many Afghan families have been residing in Pakistan for generations without permanent legal status nor any clear citizenship avenues.

One of the key issues in the literature is that Pakistan lacks an over-arching refugee law framework. Since 1979, Pakistan has been host to millions of Afghans, but has not ratified any Refugee Convention and there is no national refugee law in place in Pakistan. Consequently, Afghan refugees have been managed mainly on an administrative basis, relying on Proof of Registration cards, Afghan Citizen Cards and tripartite agreements, temporary extensions and the Foreigners Act 1946. This legal uncertainty, scholars like Ali et al. (2022) and Siddikoglu & Sagiroglu (2023) argue, has provided some flexibility

in dealing with Afghan refugees in terms of the law in Pakistan, but has also left refugees feeling insecure. While some protection is available to registered refugees, undocumented Afghans continue to be at risk of arrest, harassment, exclusion and pressure to repatriate. This literature demonstrates that legal status is not just a bureaucratic matter, but has a direct impact on access to education, healthcare, employment, mobility, dignity and protection from forced return.

The securitization literature offers an explanation of the shift in Afghan refugee policy in Pakistan from the humanitarian paradigm to the more controlling one. The literature of securitization provides us with an explanation that, over time, the Afghan refugee policy in Pakistan has shifted from humanitarian to controlling. Securitization is when political actors present an issue as an existential threat requiring 'extraordinary measures' – according to Copenhagen School. The Politics of Insecurity, by Huysmans (2006), claims that migration is securitized in the context of migrants' links with crime, terrorism, welfare pressure, or cultural anxiety. Securitized framing gained more traction in Pakistan following 9/11 and further boost after the attack on Army Public School in Peshawar in 2014. A number of research studies have suggested that Afghan refugees in particular, and undocumented Afghans in general, were increasingly associated in political and media debates with terrorism, "cross border militancy", illegal migration and law-and-order issues. Jehangir (2023) has found that the media discourse had a significant influence on creating public perception of Afghan refugees and forced repatriation. Securitization theory also cautions against focusing on a refugee population as a threat in order to diminish the humanitarian protection and lead to fear, exclusion and forced return.

The literature on the socioeconomic situation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan points to long-term marginalisation in the employment, education, healthcare, housing and documentation sectors. The majority of Afghan refugees have jobs in the informal economy including daily labour, transport, construction, agriculture, small trade and carpet weaving. The informal sector is a source for survival income, but it typically lacks legal protection, stable income, contracts and social mobility. According to Mielke & Etzold (2022) the documentation and border regimes have become more stringent, restricting the mobility of Afghans in Pakistan. Recent research on Afghan migrants in Peshawar also reveals that lack of documentation, poverty, discrimination, language and fear of deportation limit social services and access to human rights. Gender-based analysis further reveals the additional vulnerabilities that Afghan refugee women experience as a result of displacement, gender norms, poverty, restricted scope in movement and limited access to education and employment (Qaderi et al., 2025). Therefore the situation of Afghan refugees is affected by the conflict in Afghanistan, but also by exclusionary conditions in the host society.

This study is particularly influenced by the literature related to repatriation and durable solutions. UNHCR has, in general, defined three durable solutions: voluntary return, local integration and third country resettlement. In Pakistan, however, voluntary repatriation has been the policy of choice and pathways for local integration and citizenship have been limited. Betts & Collier (2017), in *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*, suggest that refugee policy can and does fail when return is considered as a straightforward administration process, without taking into account safety, employment, education and reintegration. In the Afghan situation, the repatriation process has been encouraged even in the face of ongoing insecurity and economic fragility in Afghanistan. The findings released since the re-conquest of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021 and the repatriation of the Afghans by Pakistan in 2023, indicate that many Afghans continued to be under pressure to return to Afghanistan despite its political instability and economic fragility. The pressure to deport, the fear of arrest and insufficient safe reintegration have made return more controversial,

according to reports by UNHCR, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. These findings reinforce the need to make repatriation sustainable in order to be truly voluntary, safe, dignified and assisted with reintegration support (Hayat & Ahmadi, 2025).

On a broad level, the literature available provides valuable insights into the governance of Afghan refugees, although these occasionally focus on legal status, securitization, socioeconomic marginalisation and repatriation as discrete issues (Irfan, 2026). The legal studies address the lack of refugee law in Pakistan, while the security studies are dedicated to the issues of terrorism, border control and undocumented migration, the humanitarian studies are devoted to issues of poverty, education, healthcare and gender vulnerability, and policy studies address the issue of repatriation and donor fatigue. What is missing is that far fewer studies consider these dimensions in combination in one human security versus state security framework. This study aims to fill that void by examining the Afghan refugee policy in the state of Pakistan from 2008 to 2022 and the ongoing conflict between the protection rights of refugees and the state's security concerns. The literature thus implies that a 'refugee policy' that is based exclusively on securitization or exclusively on humanitarian sympathy is not sustainable. Rather, Pakistan needs a balanced governance system for the refugees which includes clarity on the law, protection-sensitive border management, equitable documentation, provision of basic services and truly voluntary repatriation, with international burden sharing.

Theoretical framework

Securitization theory

Securitization Theory proposed by the Copenhagen School, specifically by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, is the most relevant theory to be applied in this study. The theory is that an issue turns into a security issue not only when it is actually threatening, but when political actors, state institutions, media and political leaders are making it to be a serious threat. When a problem is labeled as an existential threat to the state, extreme measures like tight border controls, surveillance, detention, forced documentation and repatriation become more acceptable. For the purpose of the present study securitization theory is applicable since there was a continuous movement of Afghan refugees from the humanitarian category to the security category in Pakistan.

In the case of Pakistan, Afghan refugees were initially hosted on humanitarian, religious, ethnic, and regional solidarity grounds. The State, however, following the 9/11 and even more strongly following the attack on the Army Public School in 2014, increasingly associated Afghan refugees with terrorism, irregular migration, crime, border insecurity and pressure upon public services. This helped to frame Afghan refugees not just as entry of people in need of protection but also a potential threat to Pakistan's internal security and sovereignty. This securitized framing led to policies like higher documentation requirements, introduction of fences along the borders, deadlines for repatriation, surveillance and pressure on undocumented Afghans to return.

Securitization Theory helps describe the main argument of this study: The Afghan refugee policy in Pakistan from 2008 to 2022 was driven by a struggle between human security and state security. Afghan refugees needed Legal protection, education, health and medical care, livelihoods, dignity, and protection from forced return from the human security point of view. As far as the state security was concerned, Pakistan's concerns were on terrorism, border issues, economic pressure, donor fatigue, and internal balance. Thus, securitization theory demonstrates how, over time, refugee rights shifted to a back seat to state security and humanitarian protection to a more back-burning role.

The theory is helpful in the sense that it doesn't disregard the fact that there are certain security issues inherent in the Pakistani situation, but it challenges the notion that an entire refugee population is a security threat. Securitization can cause policies to be oppressive instead of protective and can contribute to the neglect of refugees' social and economic vulnerabilities. Securitization theory is used in this study to analyse the reasons why repatriation has been Pakistan's preferred policy, low level of integration among Afghan refugees in Pakistan and why they continued to be uncertain about their legal status and feel excluded even in a country where the conditions in Afghanistan were uncertain.

Methodology

The researcher adopts mixed methods research design to study the policy dilemma of human security and state security for the management of Afghan refugees in Pakistan from 2008 to 2022. Secondary data is the prime source for the study which is mainly the thesis on repatriation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, UNHCR reports, tripartite agreements, refugee registration documents, media reports, academic papers and policy studies. Document analysis of refugee-related policies, administrative notifications, Proof of Registration cards, Afghan Citizen Cards, the Voluntary Repatriation Programme, the 2010 Afghan Management and Repatriation Policy and post-2014 National Action Plan developments is conducted through a qualitative approach. Afghan refugees are analyzed using discourse analysis with the aim of examining how they were depicted in political speeches, media coverage and policy discourses in relation to issues of terrorism, irregular migration, border insecurity and repatriation following 9/11 and the attack at the Army public school in 2014. Theme coding is also applied with the focus on aspects of human security, state security, repatriation, legal uncertainty, socioeconomic marginalization, border management, and security-threat narratives. Furthermore, simple quantitative trend analysis is provided on the estimates of refugees, PoR and ACC holders, undocumented Afghans, annual returns, re-migration patterns and significant policy adjustments. For this analytical framework, the components of historical institutionalism, human security indicators, and the UNHCR durable solutions framework were brought together to account for continuity and change within Pakistan's refugee policy. Nevertheless, the study benefits from a framework that is well-rounded, and the absence of reliable data on undocumented Afghans and political sensitivity of security-related data, and the absence of new field interviews, are weaknesses.

Results

This section outlines the key research findings emerging from data that covers Afghan refugee management in Pakistan from 2008 to 2022. The findings are structured according to the main argument of article: Pakistan's Afghan refugee policy is an example for the continuity of a human security against state security policy dilemma. On the one hand Afghan refugees continued to be a group which was vulnerable and faced legal grayness, economic deprivation, informal employment, less access to education and health care services added with pressure to return back home: Afghanistan. The other side had state subversion from terrorism, undocumented migration, border management pressure, fiscal stress or revenue-wise show and allocative lack of ability to convey open administrations, benefactor exhaustion and district high hand over issues. Hence, conclusion indicates that the Afghan refugee dilemma cannot be reduced fully to a humanitarian or security question. This is a classic policy dilemma in which refugee protection and national security continued to be tightly intertwined.

The thesis data draws on secondary data sourced from UNHCR reports; government policy documents; refugee registration records; media discourse and academic literature as well as statistics relating to repatriation. This combines qualitative and quantitative evidence. The qualitative three-dimensional analysis explains representation of Afghan refugees in policy and public discourse about this specific population segment through humanitarian, socioeconomic and security factors. Quantitative results are indicative of patterns regarding categories of refugees, fiscal burden and pressure on services, repatriation flows and re-migration, unemployment, decline in cross-border trade and funding support from donors. Combined, these findings shed light on the gradual shift in Pakistan's refugee policy from humanitarian accommodation to a focus on documentation control, securitization and repatriation.

The findings further demonstrated that Afghan refugees in Pakistan did not constitute one homogenous entity as detailed in Table 1 (Proof of Registration Card holders, and undocumented or unregistered Afghans). They had been categorized under different administrative and legal categories like Proof of Registration card holders, Afghan Citizen Card holders, and undocumented or unregistered Afghans. Such categories determined their access to access to protection, services, livelihood opportunities and movement as well as vulnerability to repatriation pressure. Refugees that had documentation were little acknowledged, while undocumented Afghans continued to be exceedingly at risk of apprehension, expulsion, marginalization, and financial vulnerability. This indicates that legal status played a critical role in shaping the human security of refugees.

Simultaneously, findings reveal that the need felt by Pakistan's state for greater security became more urgent over time during this study period, especially ever since 9/11 and the Army Public School attack in 2014. Political and media discourse increasingly associated afghans with terrorism, crime, illegal immigration and border insecurity. This securitization shaped policy options such as the tightening of borders, return deadlines, border patrols and the coercion of refugees in leaving. Yet data also shows that this flow of repatriation was not necessarily sustainable as a result of returning especially often facing unemployment, poor reintegration conditions, insecurity and lack of services in Afghanistan. Trends in re-migration are rising, with forced or pressured return neither ending displacement nor rescuing it from continued reproduction.

Table 1. Afghan refugee categories in Pakistan.

Afghan Refugees	Proof of Registration (PoR) Card Holders	Afghan Citizen Card Holder (ACC)	Unregistered / Undocumented
Arrival to Pakistan	Arrived before 2005	Arrived before 2018	Arrived in 2021 or later
Registration	Registered between 2006–2007	Registered between 2017–2018	Not registered; some provided basic information to SHARP and/or UNHCR
Number of refugees	1.32 million	840,000	1.375 million
Living in	KPK and Balochistan	KPK and Balochistan	Unknown

Source: UNHCR Pakistan Operational Data Portal; EUAA Report on Afghan Refugees in Pakistan; Refugees International (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022).

According to the table, unregistered or undocumented Afghans comprised the big majority of 1.375 million people followed by PoR card holders 1.32 million and ACC holders with 840 thousand people Refugees International (2021 & 2023); UNHCR (2026 & 2026). This proves that Pakistan had an unresolved humanitarian issue of Afghan refugees but it was also a documentation and governance problem. There were more undocumented people in the US than estimated - which meant that the state was more concerned about managing its borders and refugees remained exposed, because of the ambiguity of their legal status.

The results also show that the refugee policy conducted by Pakistan was still largely reliant on temporary administrative mechanisms rather than a permanent law regarding the status of refugees. Limited insurance came through PoR and ACC cards, but no legal integration into Polish society, citizenship or more credible and long-term guarantees of socio-economic security. Outcome: Refugee protection continued to be unstable, with uncertainty experienced by refugees during renewal periods, repatriation campaigns and security crackdowns.

Table 2. Fiscal and service impacts of hosting Afghan refugees in Pakistan (2001–2022).

Year/Period	Fiscal and Service Impact	Source/Estimate
2001–2010	Approx. $3 billion spent by Pakistan on refugee care and non-specific services	Pakistan Asia Youth Forum
2010s	$500 million annually spent on refugee-related costs, services, and administration	Pakistan Asia Youth Forum
2021–2022	Over $1 billion allocated for new influx management, services, and camps after Taliban takeover	Pakistan Asia Youth Forum
Proposed policy 2021	Hosting 700,000 refugees projected to cost $2.2 billion over 3 years for camps and services	Express Tribune
Service strain indicators	Healthcare use jumped by about 175% capacity; significant overcrowding in schools; competing demand on utilities	Policy Wire article syntheses
2022 funding coverage	Only about 25% of refugee-related funding covered by international donors; 75% borne by Pakistan's budget	GHAG analysis

Source: Pak Asia Youth Forum; The Express Tribune; Refugees International / CGD Pak Asia Youth Forum (2026).

The economic findings of Table 2 indicate that hosting refugees exerted direct and quantifiable strains on Pakistan's social services. According to reports, Pakistan incurs costs nearing $3 billion dealing with refugees and their needs between 2001–2010. For the 2010s, the estimate was approximately $500 million a year. The pressure rose again after the Taliban return in 2021, with more than $1 billion pledged for their abrupt placement, services, and camp-related requirements. The cost of hosting the extra 700,000 refugees would be $2.2 million over three years, it was estimated. These numbers elucidate why Afghan refugees were increasingly portrayed by Pakistani policymakers as a fiscal and administrative burden Rana (2021).

The results related to the service are also very important. It was reported that most of the healthcare facilities worked at almost 175% capacity in regions hosting refugees; schools became crowded and utilities were strained. These pressures were most acute in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, where many Afghans had settled. The study finds that only 25% refugee-related funding was covered by international donors, while 75% was borne on Pakistan's budget highlighting the gap between international responsibility-sharing and the domestic burden.

The trade data of Table 3 suggests that Afghan refugees were connected to Pakistan-Afghanistan cross-border commercial networks. Afghan refugees contributed to informal trade, transport, labour, and border economies. However, repatriation campaigns, border closures, documentation uncertainty, and security controls disrupted these networks Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2025). The sharp contrast between the 2016–17 transit trade peak of about $3,460 million and later reductions shows that refugee governance and border security measures had economic consequences. Although not all trade decline can be attributed only to refugee repatriation, the thesis data suggests that refugee-linked informal economies were affected by repatriation pressure and tighter border management.

From the Table 4, we can see that repatriation is not a steady return. Afghan returnees from Pakistan were variable across the decade, with a minimum of 0.21 million in 2011, a maximum of 0.93 million in 2020 and values of 0.82 million (2021). Concurrently,

Table 3. Bilateral goods trade and Afghan refugee returns.

Year	Bilateral Goods Trade (US$ million)	Afghan Refugee Returns (UNHCR assisted)
2016–17	Transit trade peaked at about $3,460 million assessed value / transit traffic	About 380,884 returnees in 2016
2017–18	Bilateral trade about $1,750 million, total exports plus imports	Not provided, but known to decline sharply from 2016
2018–19	Bilateral trade about $1,828 million	Not provided
2019–20	Bilateral trade about $1,330 million	Not provided
2020–21	Bilateral trade about $1,596 million	Not provided
2020	Total trade declined to about $870 million during 2010–2020 trend	Not provided
2023–24	Transit trade dropped 59% to about $2,890 million from about $7,950 million	Not provided

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan; UNHCR Pakistan Operational Data Portal.

Table 4. Afghan returnees, re-migration, unemployment, and Pakistan cross-border trade decline (2008–2021).

Year	Afghan Returnees from Pakistan (millions)	Estimated Re-Migration to Pakistan (%)	Afghanistan Unemployment Rate (%)	Pakistan Cross-Border Trade Decline (%)
2008	0.28	15	11.2	05
2009	0.35	18	11.0	06
2010	0.23	20	11.8	04
2011	0.21	19	12.5	08
2012	0.39	22	12.9	10
2013	0.62	25	13.5	12
2014	0.56	27	13.8	15
2015	0.25	28	14.1	10
2016	0.37	30	14.6	20
2017	0.46	32	15.0	25
2018	0.54	35	15.4	30
2019	0.48	36	15.9	35
2020	0.93	40	16.2	40
2021	0.82	42	16.8	38

Source: UNHCR Pakistan Operational Data Portal; World Bank Data; ILOSTAT; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan (International Labour Organization, 2026).

the estimated number who had re-migrated to Pakistan increased from 15% (2008) to 42% (2021). This is one of the most important results because it proved that return was often pee soil. The root cause of failure of the Afghans: Many returnees could not reintegrate in Afghanistan due to lack of jobs, weak infrastructure &insecurity and limited services.

The unemployment rate of Afghanistan increased from 11.2% in 2008 to allow them to16.8% by 2021 It confirms the assumption that unfavorable economic conditions in Afghanistan led to eccumaticize of sustainability of repatriation. However, the weak labour market that refugees returned to entrenched unemployment and poverty, which fuelled re-migration into Pakistan. So, repatriation didn't completely resolve the refugee issue; so often led to recycling of displacement between Pakistan and Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2026).

Pakistan's cross-border trade decline also rose sharply during the same period, reaching 40% in 2020 and 38% in 2021. This suggests that refugee return, re-migration, border tightening, and regional instability were connected to wider economic disruption. The data supports the thesis argument that refugee management cannot be separated from regional economic and security conditions.

Table 5. Shrinking donor appeal amid repatriation (2008–2021).

Year	UNHCR Appeal (US$ million)	Funding Received (US$ million)	Funding Gap (%)	Refugees Repatriated: Pakistan + Iran
2008	119	95	20%	274,000
2010	123	87	29%	112,000
2012	142	96	32%	82,000
2014	146	101	31%	59,000
2016	152	118	22%	614,000
2017	150	101	33%	98,000
2019	127	84	34%	56,000
2021	126	82	35%	68,000

Source: UNHCR Global Reports; UNHCR Operational Data Portal; ReliefWeb ReliefWeb (2026).

The Table 5 provides a comparative analysis of funding through the windows of donor commitments suggests international assistance has not kept up with the scale of refugee and returnee needs. Although UNHCR appeals remained high between $119 million in 2008 and $152 million in 2016 there continued to be funding gaps over the period (UNHCR, 2026). The funding gap widened from 20% in 2008 to 35% in 2021 (UNHCR, 2026). The support from donors was not enough even in times of high repatriation. The funding gap remained 22% in 2016, when 614,000 refugees returned from Pakistan and Iran. It indicates that sufficient reintegration support could not keep pace with large-scale return (UNHCR, 2026).

The findings also reflect donor fatigue. With refugees returns waxed and waned over the crisis with many protracted, donors seemed reluctant to continue sustainable funding. Despite an appeal of $126 million, only $82 million was received by 2021 – a funding gap of 35% World Bank (2026). This compromised Pakistan's capacity to assist refugee-hosting regions and Afghanistan's capacity to facilitate the reintegration of returnees. This led to a vicious cycle, whereby refugees faced pressure to return but continued to find conditions for their return insufficient.

These findings strongly reinforce the characterisation of Pakistan's Afghan refugee policy as a position located between human security and state security, further underpinning their empirical value. Refugees are also under pressures to return, despite the fact that conditions in Afghanistan remain unstable: they often had insecure legal status, could only find informal work and access to education and health care was limited. From a state security standpoint, Pakistan had border-management issues, terrorism angst, fiscal stress, service strain and donor fatigue. These datasets reveal that while the securitization of repatriation after 2014, particularly following the Army Public School attack in 2014, intensified, repatriation became more closely intertwined with counterterrorism and internal security.

The most noteworthy conclusion is that repatriation has never been consistent. The higher rates of re-migration, the rising unemployment in Afghanistan and the continuing funding gap, demonstrate that return policies are not sufficient to tackle what has caused people to flee in the first place. What this type of policy frequently did, was to shift the pressure from Pakistan to Afghanistan only to revert back through re-migration. The results thus support the argument that a solely state-security-based solution cannot resolve a long-lasting refugee crisis. A measured policy should merge documentation, protection, legal certainty, assistance and services in the place of destination as well as regional cooperation and lasting reintegration support.

Discussion

The results of this research indicate that the Afghan refugee policy made by the state of Pakistan from 2008 to 2022 is not only a humanitarian matter, but also a matter of national security. Rather, it represents an ongoing conflict between human security and state security (Mielke & Etzold, 2022). In terms of human security, Afghan refugees: needed legal protection, access to education, to health services, to livelihoods, to dignity, and to protection from forced or unsafe return. From the state security point of view, however, the issues of terrorism, undocumented migration, border management, economic pressure, and pressure on public services were of significant concern for Pakistan (Polko, 2025). This tension intensified following 9/11 and particularly following the 2014 attack on Army Public School, when the governance of the Afghan refugees was increasingly associated with documentation, border control, securitization and repatriation. This contributes to the argument of the theory of securitization that securitization is a process in which political and institutional actors interpret an issue as a threat for which "extraordinary security measures" are called for Buzan et al. (1998).

One of the key findings of the study is the strong impact of the legal status of Afghan refugees on their vulnerability in Pakistan. There was some administrative recognition, but refugee protection was short- and uncertain-term for those who had POCs and Afghan Citizen Cards.Protection for refugees with POCs and Afghan Citizen Cards was only temporary and uncertain (Niwaz et al., 2025). Undocumented Afghans were even more vulnerable in that they had higher risks of being arrested, harassed, denied services, and pressured to return. This reveals that documentation was not only a technical or a bureaucratic issue but was having an impact on the human security as well. There was no national refugee law in Pakistan and instead Pakistan had to depend on ad hoc administrative measures, further adding to the uncertainty for refugees and the state. Previous research also indicates that Pakistan's failure to establish permanent refugee law has left Afghan refugees in an unstable position despite their long presence in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2022; Siddikoglu & Sagiroglu, 2023).

The results also suggest long-term socioeconomic marginalisation of Afghan refugees (Shah et al., 2023). A large number of refugees were relying on informal forms of employment, daily wage labour, small trade, transport, construction, agriculture and other low-paid survival activities. These types of employment enabled refugees to live but were not considered to offer them stable income, legal protection, social mobility or long-term security. They were further deprived of education and health care, making it difficult for them to create a secure life in Pakistan. These conditions demonstrate that refugee insecurity does not only manifest itself in physical violence or forced return but also in poverty, exclusion, lack of documentation, lack of services, and limited life opportunities. This mirrors the human security paradigm and the protection of state borders is not considered as a primary objective of protection, as human security is primarily about protection from fear, want and social vulnerability (UNDP, 1994). It also backs recent studies that indicate that Afghan migrants in Pakistan are denied access to social services, healthcare, education, and secure livelihoods (Iqbal et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2025).

The study does not also overlook the legitimate security and governance concerns of Pakistan. However, Pakistan has been providing shelter to Afghan refugees for more than 40 years, and it has also been dealing with the menace of terrorism, poor border security, financial problems, donor apathy, and strain on public services in the provinces of KPK and Balochistan. The results on fiscal burden, healthcare pressure, overcrowded schools, and limited donor support prove that the management of Afghan refugees became a governance and security problem for the Pakistani state with the passage of time (Iqbal et al., 2024;

Iqbal et al., 2025). Hence, it would be easier to say that Pakistan had only the hostility towards the refugees in mind while making the policy shift. Instead, it was a mix of actual security threats, insufficient global burden-sharing, and domestic political issues that influenced Pakistan's strategy. However, the problem arises when these concerns lead to the treatment of refugees mainly as security risks instead of as a vulnerable population requiring protection (Huysmans, 2006; Jehangir, 2023).

Repatriation is a key discussion as the findings indicate that return was not always feasible (Siddikoglu & Sagiroglu, 2023). Repatriation was at times declared as a solution to the Afghan refugee issue, but the evidence indicated that many returnees were not able to access services in Afghanistan, report insecurity, and experienced weak reintegration in Afghanistan (Rahman et al., 2025). Increased re-migration rates suggest that many Afghan refugees have migrated back to Pakistan having been unable to establish themselves in their host country (Bibi, 2024). This indicates that return did not always bring an end to displacement; it often displaced people temporarily across the border. In order to implement durable solutions, return must be voluntary, safe, dignified and accompanied by reintegration support. If return is encouraged under pressure, fear, or insecurity, it cannot be considered a sustainable solution. The argument is supported by the refugee studies literature, which cautions against the use of return as an easy administrative process in the absence of stable conditions in the country of origin (Betts & Collier, 2013; Betts & Collier, 2017).

This securitisation of Afghan refugees also had significant social and political implications (Nisar et al., 2024). When refugees are repeatedly linked with terrorism, crime, irregular migration, or pressure on state resources, public sympathy declines and restrictive policies become easier to justify. This was reinforced in the post-2014 policy landscape in Pakistan, where the discussion of Afghan refugees shifted towards the language of security and border control (Varghese et al., 2024). Not all the security concerns were false, but the perception of the entire refugee population as a threat diminished the human side to policy. Afghan refugees and forced return were also significantly influenced by the media discourse (Jehangir, 2023). Consequently, refugee protection was also less prominent and documentation drives, deadlines, surveillance, and repatriation more.

The overall results indicate that a state security policy alone is not enough to solve the Afghan refugee issues in Pakistan. Political, economic and legal conditions that underpin displacement, poverty, legal insecurity and the recurrent movement of populations may not be addressed by security measures (Khan et al., 2024; Latif, 2026). Likewise, a strictly humanitarian focus, without taking into account Pakistan's security and economic limitations, would be insufficient. Thus, it is essential to have a balanced refugee governance framework. This should comprise of refugee laws, equitable documentation processes, protection-sensitive border control, enhanced access to basic services, international burden-sharing and voluntary return. Indeed, Pakistan faces security threats but these threats can be handled without compromising the dignity, rights and human security of Afghan refugees (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2021; Mielke & Etzold, 2022).

Conclusion

The article argues that the Afghan refugee policy adopted by Pakistan between 2008–2022 represent a triumph of state security over human security in the latter country. The findings reveal that Afghan refugees were not just a humanitarian population in need of protection, food, education, healthcare and legal status; they had also come to be viewed more and more through the lens of border control, terrorism, illegal migration and national security. The dual framing created a policy quandary in which Pakistan sought to walk

the line between its traditional humanitarian role and increasing concerns over domestic stability, economic strain and regional insecurity.

The results shown that Pakistan's dependence on short-term managerial solutions with low visibility, like PoR cards, ACC registration, ad hoc extensions and repatriation deadlines were unable to deliver a sustainable response. Ahmad was legally insecure, economically disenfranchised, and socially vulnerable. Meanwhile, Pakistan grappled with actual constraints with low levels of donor support, pressure on public services, cross border militancy and smallness due to weak documentation systems. Nevertheless, the post-9/11 securitized frame and especially after 2014 Army Public School attack frequently relegated refugee protection to second-order importance.

It also demonstrates how repatriation was not always sustainable. Increase in re-migration rates, unemployment within Afghanistan, and continued instability after the return of the Taliban in 2021 demonstrates how return policies often failed to tackle the root causes of displacement. More refugees have simply been flowing to and fro between Pakistan and Afghanistan, due to continuing insecurity, poverty earlier in their return home or the absence of options for reintegration.

Hence, a fair and solely state-security approach could not provide a long-lasting solution for the protracted refugee crisis. Pakistan should have an effective Refugee Governance Framework which accommodates security concerns of the state while commensurate the human security needs of refugees. Clear legislation, a review of documentation, the expansion of access to fundamental services, local regional cooperation, shared obligation by benefactor nations and authentically deliberate return are basic. That way, Afghan refugees will not be caught between insecurity inside Afghanistan and uncertainty in Pakistan.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Author contribution

Saad Zakria conducted the literature review, document collection, qualitative coding, and historical institutional analysis. Azmat Ullah conceptualized the theoretical framework, supervised the project evaluation, and thoroughly reviewed and edited the final manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final text.

References

Ali, S., Zakir, M. H., Imran, I., & Khan, S. H. (2022). Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Navigating the Legal and Humanitarian Challenges. *Asian Social Studies and Applied Research (ASSAR)*, 3(2), 62-79.

Bakare, N., *et al.* (2025). Human Security and Sustainable Development Goals: The Voices of Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 60(4), 2593-2611.

Betts, A. (2013). *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Betts, A. & Collier, P. (2017). *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*. London: Penguin.

Bibi, S. (2024). Quarterly on Refugee Problems-AWR Bulletin (QRP). *Quarterly on Refugee Problems-AWR Bulletin*, 63(2), 141-155.

Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

European Union Agency for Asylum (2022). EUAA Publishes Report on Afghan Refugees in Pakistan. https://www.euaa.europa.eu/news-events/euaa-publishes-report-afghan-refugees-pakistan. Accessed: April 20, 2026.

Fayyaz, S. & Siddiqui, T. (2023). Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Humanitarian and Security Challenges. *Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention*, 14(2), 25-34.

Gatrell, P. (2013). *The Making of the Modern Refugee*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goodwin-Gill, G. S. & McAdam, J. (2021). *The Refugee in International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hayat, K. & Ahmadi, B. (2025). The Role of Government and UNHCR in Promoting Educational Access for Afghan Refugees in Pakistan. *Progress in Social Development*, 6(2), 343-353.

Huysmans, J. (2006). *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU*. London: Routledge.

Ikanda, F. N., Muhumad, A. A., & Kuhnt, J. (2025). Refugee Securitization and the Challenges of Formal Integration: Case of Somali Refugees in Kenya and Ethiopia. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 13(1), 5.

International Labour Organization (2026). ILOSTAT Database Tracker. https://ilostat.ilo.org/. Accessed: March 03, 2026.

Iqbal, K. (2025). Multifaceted Roles of Afghan Women Immigrants in Peshawar Beyond Their Precarious Legal and Social Status. *Discover Global Society*, 3(1), 90.

Iqbal, K. & Liang, H. (2026). Beyond Borders, Beyond Care, Beyond Barriers: Navigating Barriers to Healthcare Access for Undocumented Afghan Immigrants in Host Societies. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 13(1), 430.

Iqbal, K., Hongcheng, S., & Liang, H. (2024). A Challenge in Access to Social Services of Undocumented Afghan Immigrants in Host Society of Peshawar, Pakistan. *Discover Global Society*, 2(1), 81.

Iqbal, K., Hongcheng, S., & Liang, H. (2025). Conflict-Induced Displacement in Pakistan: A Sociological Study of Lived Experiences of Involuntary Migration among Afghan Immigrants. *Discover Social Science and Health*, 5(1), 6.

Iqbal, K., Liang, H., & Alam, S. (2025). Migration, Marginality and Education: A Narrative Literature Review on Exploring Educational Challenges for Afghan Migrants in Host Society of Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 13(1), 218-234.

Irfan, B. (2026). Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Forced Deportations, Health Vulnerabilities and Humanitarian Responsibilities. *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, 1-14.

Islam, M. & Ahmadzai, S. (2025). Refugee Challenges Beyond Borders: Afghan Displacement and Pakistan Policy Response in the Post-2021 Era. *Pakistan*, 65(1), 186-221.

Jehangir, A. (2023). Finding Peace Journalism: An Analysis of Pakistani Media Discourse on Afghan Refugees and Their Forced Repatriation from Pakistan. *Media, War & Conflict*, 16(4), 582-598.

Khalid, N. & Khan, A. (2026). Pakistan's Foreign Policy Responses to Taliban Governance in Afghanistan: Implications for Regional Stability and Security. *Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy*, 4(1), 259-277.

Khan, M. A. (2024). Pre-Afghan Taliban Refugee Exodus and the Complexities of Returning Home. *The Pakistan Development Review*, 63(1), 111-122.

Khan, M. S., *et al.* (2024). Gender, Culture, and Migration: A Qualitative Study of the Socioeconomic Challenges Facing Afghan Women Refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 28(5), 90-102.

Latif, M. A. (2026). Racialized Vulnerability and Socioeconomic Determinants of Health among Afghan Refugees in Pakistan. *Scientific Reports*. 11434. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-026-42144-4.

Loescher, G. (1993). *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the Global Refugee Crisis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mahmood, D. R. (2022). Afghan Refugees: A Threat to the Economic Security of Pakistan. *Journal of Psychology and Political Science*, 3(1), 16-23.

Mielke, K. & Etzold, B. (2022). Afghans' Narrowing Mobility Options in Pakistan and the Right to Transnational Living: A Figurational Perspective. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(18), 4347-4364.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan (2026). Kabul Bilateral Trade Portal. https://mofa.gov.pk/kabul-bilateral-trade. Accessed March 04, 2026.

Nisar, M. H., Khalid, H., Ali, J., & Khalid, F. (2024). Socio-Economic Analysis of Afghan Refugees Repatriation from Pakistan: A 2023 Case Study. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 12(1), 517-524.

Niwaz, A., Naz, D. B. A., & Iqbal, D. J. (2025). Social Integration of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Challenges & Opportunities. *TPM-Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, 32(S2), 2468-2478.

Pak Asia Youth Forum (2026). Pakistan's 40-Year Journey with Afghan Refugees. https://pakasiayouthforum.com/pakistans-40-year-journey-with-afghan-refugees/. Accessed: April 04, 2026.

Polko, P. (2025). Just and Unjust Securitization of Migration: A Comparative Analysis of Migration to Poland from MENA Countries and Ukraine. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 7, 1464288: 1-9.

Qaderi, S. G., Jatmika, S., & Rafihammidi, M. (2025). Forced Expulsion of Afghan Refugees from Iran after 2025 Strikes. *Univerzita Obrany. Ustav Strategickych Studii. Obrana a Strategie*, 2025(2), 151-166.

Rahman, R., Zafar, R., & Rahman, F. (2025). The Impact of Pakistan's Refugee Policy on International Relations: A Case Study of Afghan Refugees. *Journal of Religion and Society*, 3(1), 494-514.

Refugees International (2021). Pakistan Needs a Refugee Compact to Support Afghans. *Devex Briefing*. https://www.refugeesinternational.org/devex-pakistan-needs-a-refugee-compact-to-support-afghans/. Accessed: April 04, 2026.

Refugees International (2023). They Left Us Without Any Support: Afghans in Pakistan Waiting for Solutions. https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/they-left-us-without-any-support-afghans-in-pakistan-waiting-for-solutions/. Accessed April 05, 2026.

ReliefWeb (2026). ReliefWeb Active Crisis Repository. https://reliefweb.int/. Accessed: May 01, 2026.

Shah, A. A. L., *et al.* (2023). Disadvantaged Economic Conditions and Stricter Border Rules Shape Afghan Refugees' Ethnobotany: Insights from Kohat District, NW Pakistan. *Plants*, 12(3), 574.

Siddikoglu, H. & Sagiroglu, A. Z. (2023). The Responses of Pakistan and Turkey to Refugee Influxes: A Comparative Analysis of Durable Solutions to Protracted Displacements. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 11(1), 41-56.

Sultan, M. Z., Khan, A. B., & Sultan, S. (2025). Addressing the Humanitarian Crisis while Settling or Repatriating the Afghan Refugees: Way Forward for Pakistan and Afghanistan. *Research Consortium Archive*, 3(3), 1623-1635.

Tariq, M. & Gul, S. (2025). The Issue of Human Rights in Afghanistan: An Appraisal. *Pakistan Journal of Social Science Review*, 4(6), 85-93.

Rana, S. (18 July 2021). Hosting 700k Afghans Will Cost $2.2 B for 3 Years. *The Express Tribune*. https://tribune.com.pk/story/2311234/hosting-700k-afghans-will-cost-22-b-for-3-years. Accessed: May 02, 2026.

UNDP (1994). *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

UNHCR (2026). Global Refugee Report Series. https://www.unhcr.org/global-report. Accessed July 02, 2026.

UNHCR (2026). Pakistan Operational Data Portal. https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/pak. Accessed: July 05, 2025.

Varghese, V., Kumar, A., & Ramachandran, V. (2024). From Crisis to Cure: The Afghan Refugee Dilemma, Security, and Technological Interventions. *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 11(3), 180-214.

World Bank (2026). World Bank Open Data Indices. https://data.worldbank.org/. Accessed: July 05, 2026.

Zaib, K., Hassan, S., & Zahir, K. (2026). Voices of Displaced: A VADER-Based Sentiment Analysis of Afghan Repatriates' Long-Term Lived Experiences in Pakistan. *International Premier Journal of Languages & Literature*, 4(2), 16-33.

Zarawar, A., Alokozay, N., & Numan, M. (2024). A Comparative Analysis of Pakistan Relations with Afghan Taliban and with the Previous Afghan Government (2014-2021): Security Dilemma Perspectives. *Research Journal of Social Sciences and Economics Review*, 5(3), 11-22.