

# ISLAMIC EMIRATES GOVERNMENT'S POLICY REGARDING AFGHAN REFUGEES IN IRAN AND PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT

*This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in extensive secondary data analysis to investigate the Taliban government's foreign policy towards Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan. Drawing on a wide range of intellectual sources—including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journals, policy analyses, and official Taliban communications—the research explores the Taliban's policy regarding refugee in Iran and Pakistan. Primary data consists of speeches, press releases, and official statements from Taliban leaders and ministries, providing direct insight into the government's policy priorities and rhetoric regarding Afghan migrants and bilateral cooperation with neighboring states. Complementing these are reports from international organizations and humanitarian groups, allowing for triangulation and a critical assessment of policy implementation versus official discourse. Thematic content analysis serves as the main analytical tool to uncover recurring narratives, priorities, and ideological framing in Taliban rhetoric, particularly their portrayal of refugees as subjects of humanitarian concern and instruments of diplomatic negotiation. The study focuses on the Taliban's insistence on organized, dignified repatriation mechanisms and their calls for cooperation with Iran and Pakistan, while also highlighting the challenges posed by forced deportations and human rights concerns. Despite limitations such as restricted access to field data and potential bias in Taliban-issued materials, this research provides a nuanced, contextualized understanding of the Taliban's refugee-related foreign policy, contributing to scholarship on regional migration politics and international norms in conflict-affected settings.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to investigate the Taliban government's policy towards refugees in the neighboring Iran and Pakistan. The last four decades have seen the Afghan refugees residing in these states. With the number of refugees worldwide rising to a record high 37.8 million by the middle of 2024, Afghanistan was the single worst offender with 16 percent or a nearly one out of six-refugees hailing there. Nearly 90 percent of 6.1 million Afghanistan refugees in the globe reside in neighboring Iran or Pakistan with the major numbers of them in Iran. As at June 30, 2025, the number of registered Afghan stateless in Pakistan stands at about 1.36 million alone. This

figure is according to UNHCR statistics and by this, they mean those in possession of Proof of Registration (PoR) cards. Also, it has been estimated that there are 800,000 Afghans with the Afghan citizen cards (ACC). Another 1.8 million of Afghan are estimated to be living in Pakistan on an undocumented basis (Crisis Group, 2025). It is estimated that there are about 3.8 million Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran. This consists of refugees and those that have migrated due to different reasons such as finding refuge of the Taliban and economic opportunities (UNHCR, 2025). The research paper is therefore an attempt to analyze the Taliban government policy to these

2.66 million people who have resided in the country out of the country over a long period of time. The research involves the foreign policy of the government on these nations, although, the problem on Aghan refugees residing in them is centralized.

The number of Afghans has been increased into Pakistan since the 1980s during the anti-Soviet jihad, through the civil war in Afghanistan in the years 8089. Millions of other people sought refuge in Pakistan during the U.S.-led operation in 2001-2021, and hundreds of thousands of others fled abroad after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the middle of 2021. Islamabad has maintained over the years, a behavior towards refugees based mainly on the state of the relationship with Kabul. As the relationships between Pakistan and Kabul go sour, the criminal and terrorist activities are blamed on the Afghan refugees even when there is no evidence to support this accusation. It is on this basis that the Pakistani government has rationalized the recent wave of crackdown on the refugees that commenced late in 2023 though in reality this is actually the repercussion of the revival of militancy in the provinces bordering Afghanistan and the tensions militant attacks have created between the Pakistani government and Afghanistan Taliban to retaliate violently against each other (Hugo et al., 2012).

By mid-2024, Iran had the highest number of refugees in the world which were 3.8 million with 99 percent being of the Afghanistan nationality and a small number belonging to other nations (UNHCR, 2025). In the forty years of conflict and war in Afghanistan, Iran has continued to be a

major destination of various Afghan groups of people since the 1960s due to the proximity of Iran to Afghanistan, shared languages, and cultural similarities- most notably the Dari speaking and Shia Muslims communities including the Hazara people (Zahra Kamal, 2023). But Iran has been put under pressure due to accommodation of millions of migrants needing humanitarian aid and more so it is dealing with economic woes that are rising. Although the government previously had an open attitude to accepting earlier generations of refugees living in Afghanistan, the policies have tightened up in the mid-1990s. An estimated 3.8 million people are in refugee-like situations in Iran but only 20 percent of that number is registered refugee, and another half- a million Afghans in Iran are considered to be having no legal status, according to the UN High Commissioner on refugees (UNHCR). Although there are currently estimated to be close to 1 million Afghans, the recent influx that took place soon after the Taliban took over in Afghanistan once again triggered the development of a new process that offers temporary legal status to immigrants, but it also accelerated the efforts to deport unauthorized individuals. Afghans who had been unable to gain legal status in Iran were being deported in hundreds of thousands a year since the Taliban claimed power in Afghanistan, and the government said in September that as many as 2 million of the 2.8 million Afghans living in the country illegally were to be deported by March 2025 (Naseh, 2025).

Figure 01: Afghan refugees in the neighboring countries



*Source: Migration Policy Institute* It shows number of registered refugees and individuals from Afghanistan deemed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to be in refugee-like situations.

### **Historical background of Afghan Refugees in Iran and Afghanistan:**

Many Afghans have traditionally made a long time home in present-day Iran because of their nearness and the historical events that have occurred both in Iran and Afghanistan. The modern era of forced migration can be divided into five phases related to the various outbreaks of instability in Afghanistan and evolution of policy priorities in Iran. Massive displacement of people inside Afghanistan started with the Saur Revolution in 1978, when communist takeover occurred, and then the Soviet Union was pressing the struggling communist government in 1979. The invasion resulted in the decade-long warfare between the Soviet troops and the Afghan resistance fighters the Mujahideen (Otoukesh et al., 2012).

This was also around the same time as the Islamic Revolution in Iran whereby the new Iranian government propagated the shelting of Afghans in Iran as a method of support to fellow Muslims in their quest to protect their ways of worship against communist suppression. Other scholars, however have argued that the open-door and generally friendly policy of Iran was caused more by some pragmatic reasons rather than religious unity since the new government wanted workers and could not allocate too many resources on the border. However, regardless of the intentions of the government, this is when the Afghans in Iran could receive blue cards and become immigrants (mohajerin) and obtain the rights equivalent of those of an Iranian ID holder in this period. The case in Iran had an upsurge of refugees and other displaced people between 1979 to 1988 whose total number of refugees and other displaced individuals rose to about 2.9 million upwards of 130,000. (Rahimitabar et al., 2023).

The Soviet forces in Afghanistan withdrew in 1989 as the Mujahideen with the support of the United States and other allies overwhelmed them to take control of Afghanistan and the communist regime in Kabul was removed in 1992. There was then a fight over power and the result is a vicious civil war between 1992 and 1996. The result of this conflict was the

huge destructions in Kabul and other areas of the country resulting to the second major exodus of the people to Iran. In 1996, Taliban took charge of about 80 percent of Afghanistan including Kabul and proclaimed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. With the power of the Taliban, a third big exodus started due to the harsh oppression of individual rights, in particular women and ethnic minorities like the Hazaras. The Taliban did not allow women and girls to attend school or work outside the home and in 1998 killed at least 2,000 Hazara civilians in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, according to human rights organizations including the Human Rights Watch. The refugee status in Iran continued to stabilize through the new influx of refugees and further repatriation of refugees, occurring between 1996 and 2001 to around 2 million refugees in Iran (Naseh et al., 2018).

The fourth major refugee wave came about weeks after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks when the United States initiated the large military movement called Operation Enduring Freedom in order to identify and disrupt the al Qaeda, the Islamist militant group under the protection of the Taliban that perpetrated the terror attacks. Though the official end of the military operation coincided with 2014, the US and the NATO allies as well as their partners countries kept military presence in Afghanistan until 2021 by the mandate of the UN Security Council, with the declared purpose of preventing possible future threats of NATO member states by terrorism attacks organized in Afghanistan. One of the first actions made during this new era is the establishment of Amayesh card system by Iran in 2003 where the card was used as the only way to give temporary residence permit and identity documents to Afghani refugees. Since this system was introduced, the number of Afghans in Iran reduces in 2001 to about 1.9 million Afghans and in 2003 the numbers diminished to fewer than 1 million Afghans. BAFIA was the Iranian Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs that regulated the issues of refugees and Amayesh card registration in the country (Naseh, 2025).

As according to the documented sources, at least four refugee influxes of Afghanistan were settled in Pakistan. First there was the famous Sour Revolutions in 1978. By the end of 1979, over 190, 000 Afghan Afghans had fled to Pakistan as refugees. The refugee inflow towards Pakistan twice; once due to Pakistani genocide of Bengalis mushrib, second major refugee inflow came into being after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979. By the end of 1980, more than 4 million of these Afghan refugees lived in the second country and the number was still growing. In the aftermath of Soviet war and subsequent Mujahedeen regime, it was noted that at the beginning of 1990s around 1.2 million Afghan refugees got repatriated back to their own nation (Kronenfeld, 2008). It was reported that when 1994 started, the number of Afghan refugee died down Pakistan from 3.2 million to 1.47 million. The third period took origin with the incident of 9/11 and after U.S invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. This foreign arabesque yet again initiated a big mass exodus of refugees to Pakistan and by 2002 UNHCR yet again documented three million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. The fourth massive wave of Afghan refugees enters Pakistan once again is how US withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan in August 2021. Several waves of refugee caused changes in policy measures to cope with growing refugee issue (Hennel et al., 2022).

In the early days of influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan, the refugees were welcomed warmly on the basis of religious feelings. There were no restrictions to the movement of the refugees within Pakistan and the right to work and live anywhere in Pakistan. But as the number of refugees swelled over the years as well as the fact that they have been in the country longer, this initial friendliness did not continue gaining momentum and they were perceived to exert pressure on the services and labour market in Pakistan. Meanwhile, crime rate and terrorism in the country also rose at the same time resulting in the skepticism of Afghan refugees. This is the case where by the mid-1990s, the policy in dealing with the Afghan refugee problem in Pakistan is the 'Voluntary' repatriation of the refugees. In the same manner, subsequent waves also produced

mixed response by Pakistani side (Fayyaz et al., 2023).

It is essential to comprehend the policy of the Taliban government with regards to Iran and Pakistan (refugees and other migrants) in the geopolitical situation that persists nowadays. With the withdrawal of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2021 and the takeover by the Taliban once again, millions of Afghans have fled to other countries, primarily Iran and Pakistan. Afghan refugees have historically found their place mainly in these countries, and now, with the re installed Taliban rule, migration and foreign relations have changed. When examining the role of the Taliban regarding the rights of Afghan migrants, their right to return, and way of how they are treated, one sees the most-important details of their foreign policy and internal assets control (Fayyaz et al., 2023).

This study aims to fill a gap in the existing scholarship by examining the Taliban's foreign relations through the lens of migration policy. It will also contribute to a broader understanding of the Afghan government's approach under Taliban leadership, particularly how it engages with neighboring states over humanitarian and border control issues. By analyzing bilateral agreements, repatriation efforts, and public statements, this research will shed light on how the Taliban navigates regional diplomacy, international pressure, and domestic responsibilities.

Most importantly, the study will offer significant insights into refugee and migration studies. It will explore how Afghanistan, under Taliban control, has approached the management of displaced populations, both within its borders and beyond. Unlike previous administrations, the Taliban's policies may be driven more by ideological, security, or pragmatic concerns rather than international norms. This analysis will contribute to the understanding of how refugee crises are handled by regimes with limited international recognition and strained resources. Ultimately, the study will offer a nuanced view of the intersection between migration, state policy, and international relations in a region marked by volatility and historical migration flows.

### **Methodology:**

The given scholarly work majorly utilizes a qualitative research methodology, which is based on resorting to the use of secondary sources of data that will allow investigating the policy of the Taliban government towards Iran and Pakistan, where the attention will be paid to researching the implications thereof on refugees and other migrants. The information involved in the study encompasses massive references of intellectual sources like intellectual books, peer-reviewed journals, analysis of policies and quality research papers. The sources offer historical backgrounds, theories and comparisons that give a basis to comprehend the Taliban foreign and migration policies. Another part of the study dwells upon the examination of official policy writing and posts of the Taliban government published in the media. These are speeches of the high-ranked leaders of the Taliban and official press releases as well as messages of the Taliban ministry of foreign affairs and Taliban ministry of refugees and repatriation. These primary sources provide first-hand information on the attitudes of the Taliban towards policy, priorities and its diplomatic rhetoric especially when it concerns its neighbors and the Afghan refugees in foreign countries. Another way the study makes use of documents is through reports given by international organization, think tanks, and humanitarian groups that track refugee migration and regional diplomacy.

Such sources allow triangulating the reports of the Taliban and give an outside view on how their policies are carried out and what effects they have. Thematic analysis of data is used to detect common patterns and narratives and the changes that can occur in policy. Special focus is made on the way the Taliban represents its duties to the Afghanistan migrants, negotiates with Iran and Pakistan regarding the refugee outcomes, and how these acts can be considered in line with the international norms or not. As it is based on well-known secondary sources and official communications, this approach makes it possible to discuss the approach of the Taliban both to the regional migration and foreign relations comprehensively, contextually, and critically. It makes sure that the analysis is based on current

and well known knowledge as well as bring new knowledge to a growing develop to be centered on gap area in the field of study.

Thematic data analysis using content analysis will work as the primary method of data analysis in this study. Thematic analysis of content is a qualitative method of identifying and inquiring into a repeating theme and pattern in the text data under examination. It helps especially in the study of politics and policy as the language, framing, and discourse indicate the implicit priorities and ideologies. The study hopes to determine how the Taliban government shapes its narrative on refugees and how it uses the story to shape its policy and regional relations because the author will use the themes to arrange the data. Taliban rhetoric of migration and refugee will form one of the focal points. This can be done by analyzing speeches, statements and policy papers to know what the Taliban thinks about Afghan migrants which is either as victims of foreign intervention, as a matter of national concern or otherwise as diplomatic instruments. The discussion will give an understanding of where the Taliban position itself with respect to domestic relations and international relations. The second issue of importance is the bilateral relations with Iran and Pakistan, particularly migration management. The two neighbors have the most Afghan refugees and the way the Taliban has integrated them be it in diplomacy, repatriation agreements or in patrolling the borders can give a distinct view on priorities and abilities in foreign policy.

However, the study faces limitations. The lack of primary field data, due to restricted access to Taliban-controlled areas, presents a significant challenge. Additionally, there may be bias in Taliban-issued materials, and it is often difficult to verify whether stated policies are effectively implemented on the ground

### **Literature Review:**

The available literature on the subject of Afghan refugees is extensive to a great extent and, in particular, a lot of attention is paid to the policy and social dynamics of reception in such host countries as Pakistan and Iran. In the Pakistan context, some appreciable researches have been conducted regarding the changing scenario of Afghans. Fayyaz et al. (2023)

question the humanitarian and security issues that have long been the concern of having Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the regional impacts of that situation. The work by Kronenfeld (2008) traces earlier but still topical consequences of the legal and social position of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the absence of measures to integrate them into the long term. Most recently, Masudi and Mustafa (2022) target the legal status of the Afghan refugees and provide insights into the lack of coherent national laws to protect these individuals because Pakistan has not signed any international refugee treaties. Ali (2022) talks about the future of the Afghan refugees who will still be left in the country, and the challenges they will have to face, either by integrating with the local population or going back to Afghanistan. In a more policy-driven approach, Khan et al. (2022) examine the shift of the Pakistani refugee policy over the years, tracing important changes in the lines of governance strategies and the impact they produced on the refugee population.

Likewise, the research on the Afghan refugees in Iran covers the different socio-political and humanitarian concerns. The article by Seddighi et al. (2024) discusses the issue of barriers that Afghan refugee children face when accessing education in Iran which has had various legal and administrative obstructions to the educational opportunities of refugees in the past. The study by Ruhani et al. (2023) is related to the increasing problem of xenophobia and social exclusion, in which they have found that there is a prevalence of anti-refugee attitude, which impacts the process of Afghan integration and their safety. Rahimitabar et al. (2023) and Amuzadeh-Araei et al. (2025) review health inequality stating that health is a significant issue among Afghan refugees in Iran because undocumented Afghan refugees and women could not access quality healthcare facilities. However, regardless of this academic depth on the status and treatment of Afghan refugees in their host nations, there is a significant gap when it comes to the research in regard to the existence of the Afghan policy towards its own refugees especially in light of the Taliban reign since 2021. Although there has been widespread publicity with respect to deportation and

repatriation procedures, very little scholarly literature has examined how the Taliban government-controlled project looks upon and treats the repatriation of Afghan refugees, or the policies, in case, it has formulated to readjusted the returnees back into the Afghan society. The described gap indicates the necessity of more research on domestic policies of Afghanistan in relation to its displaced citizens.

### **Taliban's policy towards Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan**

The Taliban's policy towards refugees in Iran and Pakistan has been centralized on slowing down the process of their repatriation to Afghanistan. Their engagements, delegations, talks and pleas truns around that objective to slow down the process in order to stabiles at home. The Taliban, currently the de facto authorities in Afghanistan, have expressed concern over the mass deportations of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran. They have urged the countries to grant more time for undocumented Afghans to leave. The Taliban have also requested that Pakistan open a mobile office at the border to issue identification documents (tazkira) to returning refugees. While the Taliban have not explicitly stated a policy for refugees in these countries, their actions and statements indicate a desire to facilitate their return to Afghanistan and to ensure they are treated fairly (Rahimitabar et al., 2023).

Deportations of Afghans have been going on in Iran on a lesser scale. To give an illustration, in February 2023, Iran deported approximately 43,000 Afghans back to their country, due to the absence of legal documents on residence. Iran has high inflation and unemployment and Radio Free Europe (RFE) Iran has cited over and over again that Iran has been alarmed by the presence of undocumented Afghans in their country, and Iran officials have time and again blamed the Afghans to insecurity and unemployment in Iran. In October 2023, RFE wrote that there had been harassment and assaulting of some of the Afghani community who had sought refuge in Iran (Afghanistan International, 2025). This is not something novel. In 2013 Human Rights Watch (HRW) alleged that Iran was not only torturing many

of the Afghanistan but also they were making arbitrary arrests, detention of many people. In 2016, HRW also documented that thousands of undocumented Afghanistan migrants in Iran are being drafted in by the Revolutionary Guards Corps of Iran to fight in Syria, some saying they had been threatened by deportation otherwise. RAND reported in November 2021 that thousands of Afghans in Iran continued to be recruited to fight in paramilitary forces in Syria, that Iran had implicitly raided them to receive permanent residence in Iran in exchange (Ali, 2022).

According to the Diplomat Asia magazine, the Iranian government has over the years encouraged the policy of accepting Afghan Shia to cater to the fact that the national population growth in Iran has declined tremendously over the years (Iran is a Shia majority nation). The Diplomat further reveals that the Iranian policy on Afghan refugees has even turned out to be one of the areas of disagreement between the reformers and the hardliners in Iran regime with the former accusing the latter of exploiting Afghans as a way of diminishing the indigenous Iranians and even facilitating leakage of Iranian community to other nations. This has resulted in more attention paid to present Iranian policies of letting Afghans purchase land, and getting access to the agreements of education and medical care. According to UNHCR only, 31 per cent of funds needed to finance their operations in 2023 to provide support to Afghans in Iran had been committed to them by donors as of October 2023 and this funding was in addition to the funds that they require to finance their operations to support refugees in Afghanistan. The agency said the UK had earmarked, gently, US\$3.7 million towards these programmes (UNHCR, 2025).

Security is one of the reasons the Pakistan government representatives have given to justify their decision to undertake mass deportations of the Afghans. According to an Interim Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti quoted by Reuters as saying when making a statement on the deportation decision that of the 24 suicide bombing in Pakistan this year, 14 were by the Afghan nationals. According to VOA News, unofficial sources say that the aim of Islamabad may be to pressure the new Taliban regime in Afghanistan because: the latter is seen as not

doing anything to shut Pakistan-based Taliban hideouts in Afghanistan (ur-Rehman, 2023). According to Foreign Policy magazine as well, the recent announcement of the executive is a security issue and the Taliban regime support the terrorists groups in Pakistan.

The Taliban's request in October 2023 for countries hosting Afghan refugees to delay repatriation highlights a pragmatic shift in its foreign policy, particularly toward Iran and other neighboring states with large Afghan populations. By appealing for "tolerance" and opposing forced deportations, the Taliban-led government seeks to manage a growing refugee crisis diplomatically, acknowledging the strain mass returns could place on Afghanistan's fragile infrastructure and economy (Press, 2025). This appeal serves multiple purposes. Internationally, it positions the Taliban as a responsible actor concerned with humanitarian issues, potentially aimed at gaining legitimacy and easing international isolation. Domestically, the Taliban is attempting to reassure refugees—especially those who fled for political reasons—that conditions have stabilized, encouraging voluntary return and thereby boosting its narrative of restored peace and control. In its foreign policy toward Iran specifically, the Taliban's statement is a conciliatory gesture. Iran has hosted millions of Afghan refugees for decades and has recently intensified deportations. The Taliban's request can be seen as an effort to reduce tensions and promote bilateral cooperation (Khan, 2024).

The August 2025 press release from the Afghan Presidential Palace under the Taliban regime illustrates a strategic foreign policy stance regarding Afghan refugees, particularly those in Pakistan and Iran. Through this public statement, the Taliban government reasserts its claim to legitimacy and seeks to position itself as a responsible actor on the international stage by appealing to humanitarian norms and international law (Afghanistan International, 2025). By calling on the United Nations and international organisations to ensure the "honourable" return of Afghan refugees, the Taliban signals its intent to manage repatriation in a dignified and voluntary manner, distinguishing itself from perceptions of chaos or coercion. This aligns with a broader

diplomatic approach aimed at building credibility with international partners, even amid limited formal recognition. The statement's specific emphasis on Pakistan and its influential societal groups highlights the importance of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations in the Taliban's regional foreign policy. By invoking shared cultural ties and mutual benefit, the Taliban aims to exert soft pressure on Pakistan to halt or moderate forced deportations. The language suggests a careful balancing act—condemning Pakistan's actions without directly antagonising a key neighbour. Moreover, the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation Affairs' condemnation of deportations reflects the Taliban's domestic agenda to project itself as a protector of Afghan citizens, even those abroad. This reinforces a narrative of governance and national unity. In essence, the Taliban's foreign policy approach on refugee issues blends calls for regional cooperation, appeals to international norms, and efforts to maintain diplomatic relations—especially with Pakistan and Iran. The overall goal is to present the regime as capable of handling refugee reintegration responsibly, while using the refugee issue to assert sovereignty and pursue international legitimacy (Ministry of Refugees, 2025).

On Monday, special envoy of Pakistan to Afghanistan, Ambassador Muhammad Sadiq Khan said that all negotiations with Afghanistan will be closed down in the event Taliban became refractory of concerns of Islamabad over terror attacks through Afghanistan. Pakistani authorities have continuously been claiming that the leaders of the militancy groups were based in Afghanistan and that they use the territory to organize the Pakistan attacks. The Kabul government rejects the claims TTP (Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan) is a problem which is a very big problem to us. It is not tolerable as it is killing our young kids and boys day after day. The issue of martyrdom has become so normal in some regions. That is to say, it would be criminal not to pay attention to that. There has to be a way out. This will be something that Afghanistan will have to cooperate with us on. It must not be working with us and then all deals are off. Nothing would have been done And on nothing more would there be progress at all, he had said,

(Khan, 2025). The statement underscores growing tensions that directly impact the Taliban's foreign policy concerning Afghan refugees, particularly in Iran and Pakistan. His warning that negotiations would be halted if the Taliban does not address Islamabad's concerns over cross-border terrorism reflects how security issues are increasingly linked to refugee policies. Pakistan has long accused Afghanistan of harboring leaders of militant groups like the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), who allegedly use Afghan territory to stage attacks. The Taliban government's rejection of these claims and its counter-assertion that TTP is also a domestic threat illustrates a defensive foreign policy posture—one aimed at asserting sovereignty while attempting to avoid direct confrontation. In this context, the issue of Afghan refugees becomes more than humanitarian; it turns into a diplomatic pressure point. Pakistan's frustrations may lead to stricter deportations or harsher treatment of Afghan refugees, which the Taliban has already condemned. Thus, the refugee issue intertwines with security diplomacy. The Taliban's challenge lies in balancing internal pressures, denying terrorist affiliations, and maintaining regional ties—especially with Pakistan, a vital neighbour. Their refugee-related foreign policy increasingly serves as both a shield and a bargaining tool in managing complex geopolitical dynamics (Arab News, 2025).

According to Abdul Rahman Rashid, the deputy minister for refugees and repatriation in the Taliban government, the mass expulsions by host countries are unacceptable, and the dismissal of Afghans can be regarded as a severe breach of international standards and norms of humanitarianism as well as Islamic beliefs and ideologies. "The extent to which Afghan refugees have been exiled by their countries of refuge is something that Afghanistan has never encountered before," he said at a press conference in the Taliban capital of Kabul (The Associated Press, 2025). Deputy Minister Abdul Rahman Rashid's statement reflects the Taliban's evolving foreign policy narrative concerning Afghan refugees, particularly those in Iran and Pakistan. By condemning mass expulsions as a breach of international humanitarian norms and Islamic principles,

the Taliban is strategically blending global legal standards with religious rhetoric to strengthen its moral and diplomatic position. Labeling the deportations as “unacceptable” and unprecedented, the Taliban seeks to portray itself as a legitimate governing authority concerned with the welfare of its citizens, even beyond its borders (Afghanistan International, 2025). This stance is aimed not only at defending Afghan nationals abroad but also at appealing to international humanitarian bodies and Muslim-majority host countries, especially Iran, where religion plays a significant role in policy discourse. The Taliban’s foreign policy here is twofold: first, it seeks to discourage host countries from forced repatriations by framing such actions as violations of both global and Islamic values. Second, it aims to use the refugee issue as a platform to demand recognition and foster bilateral dialogue, positioning itself as a responsible state actor. The statement also underscores a calculated use of refugee diplomacy—leveraging humanitarian language and shared religious identity to protect Afghan migrants while also pushing for international engagement and political legitimacy.

The Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation’s acknowledgment that “there are still about 6 million Afghan refugees abroad” reflects the significant scale of the refugee crisis, which the Taliban is now actively addressing through its foreign policy. This statement shows a shift from passive response to proactive engagement, as the Taliban seeks to assert itself as a legitimate governing authority capable of managing international humanitarian concerns. Internally, the crisis is compounded by environmental disasters, with Mahmood Al Haq Ahadi, head of policy and planning, noting that “around 13,500 families were internally displaced” due to droughts, floods, and storms, pushing the total of internally displaced families to “close to 2.5 million.” These figures highlight the immense pressure on the Taliban government to manage both internal displacement and external repatriation. To address these challenges, the ministry plans to send delegations to host countries “with an orientation that was on legal assistance and the need to solve problems of Afghan asylum seekers.” This indicates a

diplomatic approach rooted in dialogue, not confrontation. Ahadi’s emphasis that “our purpose is to have a solution based on discussions and cooperation that will last sustainably” signals a long-term foreign policy aimed at rebuilding regional trust and resolving refugee issues through negotiation and mutual understanding (Press, 2025).

The recent Afghanistan-Pakistan Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) meeting marks a significant moment in the Taliban’s foreign policy, particularly concerning Afghan refugees in Pakistan. With Sadiq leading the Pakistani delegation and tensions rising over refugee deportations and border clashes, the Taliban used this platform to highlight its diplomatic stance and call for cooperation. Zia Ahmad Takal, representing Afghanistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reported that acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi “expressed his deep concern over the state of relations between Kabul and Islamabad,” focusing especially on “the forced deportation of Afghan refugees.” This direct expression of concern reflects the Taliban’s strategic shift toward formal diplomatic engagement and structured dialogue rather than retaliation or passive protest. Muttaqi’s call for issues to be resolved “through dialogue in an atmosphere of mutual trust” shows the Taliban’s emphasis on diplomacy and regional stability as cornerstones of its refugee-related foreign policy. The language used—encouraging calm and warning against “actions or statements that may lead to public resentment or provoke emotions”—underscores a careful, calculated approach to de-escalate tensions. Sadiq’s acknowledgment that both nations “share deep ties” and must “explore ways to resolve challenges” signals tentative mutual interest in maintaining communication. The Taliban is clearly leveraging refugee diplomacy to press for broader regional engagement and legitimacy (Ariana News, 2025).

The Taliban’s foreign policy approach regarding Afghan refugees is increasingly focused on economic and humanitarian dimensions, as well, as highlighted by Nooruddin Azizi’s 2023 visit to Islamabad. Azizi, the acting minister of industry and trade, emphasized that a key concern was Afghan deportees’ inability to return their assets from Pakistan. He stressed

the scale of the issue, saying, “This is not a matter of 10 people or 100 people, this is a matter of 1.7 million people.” This statement underscores the Taliban’s framing of the deportation crisis as not just a humanitarian concern but also an economic and diplomatic one. By advocating for a “detailed roadmap” between the Afghan embassy in Islamabad and Pakistan’s foreign office to facilitate asset recovery, the Taliban is pursuing a foreign policy based on structured negotiation and long-term resolution. This reflects a pragmatic shift toward using refugee-related issues to reinforce bilateral ties and seek economic justice for its citizens abroad. Azizi’s warning that “winter is coming” and that returning refugees face serious challenges—“their medicine and health issues, their food ... we have many problems ahead”—demonstrates the Taliban’s intent to leverage the humanitarian burden as both a domestic governance challenge and a foreign policy pressure point. The goal is clear: to gain regional cooperation and legitimacy through diplomacy and responsibility (Charlotte Greenfield, 2023).

The April 2022 visit of a high-level Afghan delegation to Pakistan marked a key moment in the Taliban’s foreign policy concerning Afghan refugees. Led by the Minister of Industry and Commerce and including the Deputy Minister of Refugees and Repatriation, the delegation’s dual focus on refugees and Afghan businesspersons highlights a strategic blend of humanitarian concern and economic diplomacy. By engaging with both Afghan refugee communities and business representatives in Pakistan, the Taliban signaled its intention to assert political responsibility for its diaspora. This approach demonstrates an effort to strengthen the regime’s legitimacy by addressing the real-world concerns of displaced Afghans, many of whom have lived and invested in Pakistan for decades. The delegation’s outreach reflects the Taliban’s broader goal of fostering cooperative regional relations to manage the refugee crisis diplomatically rather than confrontationally. The involvement of UNHCR, which emphasized its support for “voluntary, dignified, and sustainable returns,” further legitimized the Taliban’s participation in international dialogue. It also reinforced the

Taliban’s evolving foreign policy position—presenting itself as a cooperative partner seeking solutions rooted in human rights and regional stability. This event illustrates how the Taliban uses refugee diplomacy not only to influence host countries like Pakistan but also to seek broader recognition and support from global institutions (afgembisb.passport@gmail.com, 2025).

The Taliban’s foreign policy regarding Afghan refugees emphasizes structured coordination and institutional legitimacy. According to the Ministry of Refugees, the Refugee Issues Commission, established by the 157th decree, seeks “national and international cooperation” for sustainable resettlement and legal services. Led by Deputy Prime Minister Maulvi Abdul Salam Hanafi and including “31 high-ranking officials,” this high commission reflects the Taliban’s effort to formalize refugee governance. By approving a detailed “procedure in 8 chapters and 31 articles,” the Taliban aims to show international partners its capacity for organized response, framing refugee management as a shared humanitarian responsibility and a cornerstone of diplomatic engagement (Ministry of Refugees, 2025).

Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi’s statement on the “forced deportation of Afghan refugees” reflects a critical aspect of the Taliban’s foreign policy: using diplomatic channels to protect Afghan nationals abroad and reinforce regional engagement. By highlighting the “mistreatment they face by certain government bodies,” Muttaqi positions the Taliban as a defender of Afghan citizens, appealing both to international norms and bilateral sensitivities. Describing the situation as “regrettable, provocative, and detrimental to the bilateral relations between the two countries,” Muttaqi frames Pakistan’s actions not just as a humanitarian issue but as a direct threat to Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. This rhetoric is consistent with the Taliban’s broader diplomatic strategy—linking refugee treatment to regional stability and cooperation. His call for a “reconsideration and improvement of the current approach” underscores a preference for dialogue over confrontation, aligning with the Taliban’s evolving image as a pragmatic actor in regional politics. The response from Pakistan’s representative, Mr. Nizamani, who “assured

that the matter would be conveyed to the relevant authorities,” indicates that the Taliban’s diplomatic pressure may be fostering cautious engagement (Foreign Affairs, 2025). The Taliban’s policy regarding Afghan refugees in Pakistan is clearly articulated through high-level diplomatic exchanges and strong condemnation of unilateral actions. Prime Minister Hasan Akhund criticized Pakistan’s “unilateral measures” to forcibly deport “more than 800,000 Afghans,” including those born or long settled in Pakistan. By stating that these measures “are intensifying the problem and hindering progress toward a solution,” Akhund highlights the Taliban’s preference for collaborative, negotiated repatriation over coercive deportations. Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi echoed this concern, “expressed his deep concern and disappointment over the situation and forced deportation of Afghan refugees,” signaling that the issue is a major diplomatic priority. The involvement of Pakistan’s top diplomat Ishaq Dar, who reassured that Afghans “will not be mistreated,” reflects ongoing diplomatic engagement despite tensions. The Taliban’s foreign policy leverages these diplomatic channels to frame the refugee issue as both a humanitarian and bilateral relationship concern. Akhund’s call for Pakistan to “facilitate the dignified return of Afghan refugees” underscores the regime’s insistence on respecting refugee rights and controlling the repatriation process. Moreover, reports of “arbitrary arrests, extortion and harassment” further justify the Taliban’s firm stance, positioning itself as protector of Afghan refugees while pressing for respectful treatment abroad, especially by key neighbors like Pakistan (Arab News, 2025).

The Taliban’s policy, particularly in relation to Pakistan, is clearly reflected in the special meeting chaired by Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund. The meeting strongly condemned the “inappropriate treatment and forced expulsion of Afghan refugees,” labeling these actions as “un-Islamic and against fundamental human rights.” This framing blends religious rhetoric with international human rights language, aiming to strengthen the Taliban’s moral authority both regionally and globally. The officials emphasized that such treatment is “contrary to

accepted principles and Islamic guidelines,” appealing directly to Pakistan’s religious and cultural sensibilities. By calling on “people, political parties, and influential figures in Pakistan to uphold their Islamic and neighborly responsibilities,” the Taliban uses soft power to pressure Pakistan, highlighting shared cultural and religious bonds. The meeting also stressed the “long-standing positive relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan” and warned that “inappropriate actions could undermine this relationship.” This reveals the Taliban’s pragmatic understanding of the importance of maintaining regional stability and cooperation. Finally, the appeal to the United Nations and international organizations to “prevent a humanitarian crisis” and ensure a “dignified return” signals the Taliban’s effort to engage the international community diplomatically. Overall, the Taliban’s foreign policy blends religious legitimacy, regional diplomacy, and calls for international cooperation to protect Afghan refugees and preserve bilateral ties (Bakhtar, 2025).

Mufti Abdul Mutalib Haqqani’s statement reflects the Taliban’s foreign policy of promoting “gradual and honourable” repatriation of Afghan refugees through a “joint mechanism with Pakistan.” He emphasized that while “bringing the refugees back is official Afghan policy,” forced deportations are unacceptable, calling them “against international laws,” “contrary to Islamic values,” and “against good, neighbourly norms.” This highlights the Taliban’s strategic use of religious and legal arguments to pressure Pakistan. Haqqani also noted ongoing talks, stating, “We have held meetings with Pakistani officials,” showing the Taliban’s preference for diplomatic dialogue to manage refugee issues and maintain bilateral cooperation (Khan, 23:28:40+05:00).”

### **Taliban’s Policy Towards Iran**

The Taliban’s foreign policy on Afghan refugees, particularly regarding Iran, emphasizes a cooperative yet cautious approach. The government has “publicly stated it will accept returning Afghan refugees from Iran,” signaling a willingness to facilitate repatriation while providing “short-term shelter

and transportation assistance.” This reflects an effort to portray the Taliban as responsible and capable of managing refugee flows humanely. Mawlawi Abdul Kabir’s meetings with Pakistan’s charge d’affaires and Iran’s acting ambassador further highlight the Taliban’s diplomatic engagement with key host countries. The Afghan ministry’s social media post quoting Kabir’s hope that “host countries will exercise patience and forbearance toward refugees” reveals a strategic appeal for regional cooperation and tolerance during a sensitive period. This approach underscores the Taliban’s dual aim: to assert control over repatriation processes while fostering positive relations with neighboring states. By stressing patience and forbearance, the Taliban seeks to reduce forced deportations and human rights abuses, framing itself as a partner for regional stability. Overall, the policy blends humanitarian concern with pragmatic diplomacy, reflecting the Taliban’s intent to manage refugee issues through dialogue and cooperation with Iran and Pakistan.

The Taliban’s foreign policy toward Afghan refugees in Iran underscores a preference for a “gradual mechanism” over forced deportations, as reflected in the statement urging host countries to consider an “organized return process” due to “lack of conditions at home.” This reveals the Taliban’s pragmatic acknowledgment of Afghanistan’s current challenges, signaling a cautious approach that seeks to balance repatriation with humanitarian realities. Iran’s acting ambassador Bekdali’s call for a “permanent solution” and to ensure refugees receive “necessary legal documents” aligns with the Taliban’s emphasis on orderly management of refugee issues, indicating potential willingness for cooperation. However, the lack of immediate confirmation from Bekdali’s office highlights ongoing uncertainties in bilateral coordination. The Taliban’s stance implicitly pressures Iran to avoid forced returns, especially amid critiques from refugee rights groups that stress the deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan—where “the economy is in shambles,” “majority relies on aid,” and “women face severe curbs on basic rights.” By advocating for legal protections and a measured repatriation, the Taliban seeks to present itself

as a responsible actor capable of managing refugee flows while leveraging regional diplomacy to gain legitimacy and support. This approach reflects an attempt to navigate complex humanitarian and political challenges in its foreign policy with Iran (Zaman, 2025). The Taliban’s foreign policy regarding Afghan refugees in Iran reflects a dual approach of humanitarian advocacy and diplomatic engagement. Mawlawi Abdul Kabir’s meeting with Iran’s Ambassador Alireza Begdeli highlights direct diplomatic efforts to address the “recently increased mistreatment of Afghan refugees in Iran.” Kabir’s call for host countries to “respect international refugee laws” and treat Afghans “with humanity and in accordance with Islamic principles” underscores the Taliban’s strategic use of religious and legal frameworks to appeal to Iran’s sense of responsibility. The emphasis on encouraging refugees to return is tempered by caution, with Kabir insisting that repatriation must follow an “organized and gradual mechanism” because “conditions in Afghanistan are not yet fully conducive to large-scale repatriation.” This nuanced position balances the Taliban’s official policy of repatriation with recognition of Afghanistan’s ongoing instability. Furthermore, spokesperson Abdul Mutalib Haqqani confirmed the Taliban’s vocal complaints to Iran over “numerous cases of abuse and even killings,” illustrating active diplomatic pressure to protect Afghan refugees. The statement, “We have talked to Iranian officials...and shared such concerns,” reveals a policy that combines humanitarian concerns with pragmatic diplomacy. Overall, the Taliban aims to safeguard refugee welfare while fostering cooperation with Iran, reinforcing its image as a responsible regional actor amid ongoing refugee challenges”(Mena, 2023). The Taliban’s foreign policy regarding Afghan refugees in Iran is centered on diplomatic engagement and advocating for dignified repatriation. In 2022, following border skirmishes and reports of refugee mistreatment, the Taliban sent a delegation to Iran, signaling their proactive approach to addressing these tensions. Khalil Rahman Haqqani, Acting Minister of Refugees and Returnees, met with Iran’s ambassador Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, emphasizing the need for a

“joint mechanism” to manage the return process. Haqqani stated that while the Taliban “decided to return the migrants to their country,” this should be done “with dignity,” underscoring the regime’s insistence on humane treatment. This approach reflects the Taliban’s dual strategy: asserting sovereignty over repatriation while engaging diplomatically to manage relations with Iran. By calling for cooperation and a structured process, the Taliban seeks to prevent forced or chaotic deportations, which could exacerbate humanitarian issues and strain bilateral ties. The delegation’s visit and demand for a joint mechanism highlight the Taliban’s attempt to balance refugee management with regional diplomacy, projecting an image of responsibility and concern for Afghan citizens abroad, especially in a sensitive context marked by border disputes and refugee hardships (Iran Press, 2024).

The Taliban’s foreign policy regarding Afghan refugees in Iran is marked by public condemnation of the reported mistreatment and forced deportations. Abdul Salam Hanafi, deputy to the Taliban’s prime minister, criticized the “forced deportation of Afghan migrants from Iran,” describing it as “alarming,” with “more than 40,000 people reportedly returning” daily through key border points like Islam Qala and Pul-e-Abrisham. Hanafi’s statement signals the Taliban’s deep concern about the humanitarian impact of these mass returns. Despite the large influx, Hanafi maintained that the situation is “under control,” reflecting an attempt to project governmental stability and capacity to manage the crisis. He further accused Iranian authorities and some citizens of violating the rights of Afghan refugees “not only along migration routes but also within camps inside Iran,” highlighting systemic issues faced by Afghans abroad. This criticism reveals a strategic dimension to the Taliban’s foreign policy: using public statements to pressure Iran while asserting their role as protectors of Afghan nationals. By highlighting abuses and forced deportations, the Taliban aims to draw international attention and encourage Iran to comply with humanitarian standards, emphasizing the need for a more humane and

cooperative approach in managing refugee flows (Afghanistan International, 2025).

### Conclusion

The Taliban’s foreign policy concerning Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan embodies a multifaceted approach shaped by humanitarian concerns, diplomatic engagement, and regional geopolitical dynamics. Through various official statements, diplomatic meetings, and public pronouncements, the Taliban government has consistently underscored its commitment to the dignified, humane, and orderly repatriation of millions of Afghan refugees stranded in neighboring countries, especially Iran and Pakistan. At the core of their policy is an insistence on a “gradual mechanism” for return, avoiding “forced deportations,” which they have deemed “against international laws,” “contrary to Islamic values,” and harmful to the long-standing “neighborly norms” that bind Afghanistan to its regional partners.

The Taliban’s objectives in this regard are threefold. First, they seek to reassert control and sovereignty over the refugee issue, signaling that the repatriation process should be a matter of Afghan-led coordination rather than unilateral actions by host countries. For instance, Mawlawi Abdul Kabir and other senior Taliban officials have repeatedly advocated for “organized and gradual” returns and have called on host nations like Iran to respect “international refugee laws” and treat Afghans “with humanity and in accordance with Islamic principles.” Second, the Taliban aim to project themselves as responsible regional actors, capable of managing one of the most pressing humanitarian crises affecting the region. This involves direct diplomatic engagement with Iranian officials, exemplified by meetings between Taliban ministers and Iranian ambassadors, where mutual cooperation and the protection of refugee rights are emphasized. Third, the Taliban endeavor to leverage their stance on refugee protection to gain broader legitimacy and possibly solicit international support or sympathy, by highlighting the hardships faced by Afghan refugees, including “rights violations,” “mistreatment,” and “forced deportations.”

However, the Taliban's foreign policy faces significant and persistent challenges, reflecting the complex realities on the ground. Despite diplomatic efforts, the situation remains dire. Reports of mass deportations—such as more than 40,000 Afghan migrants returning daily via key border crossings—and allegations of systemic abuses in Iranian refugee camps underline the humanitarian crisis's scale and severity. Taliban officials like Abdul Salam Hanafi have openly criticized Iran for “alarming” forced deportations and “violations” against Afghan refugees, demonstrating the diplomatic friction inherent in managing this issue. Moreover, the Taliban government itself grapples with limited resources and an unstable domestic environment, making it difficult to provide adequate infrastructure, shelter, and services for the large influx of returnees. The Taliban's acknowledgement that “conditions in Afghanistan are not yet fully conducive to large-scale repatriation” reflects a pragmatic recognition of their current capacity constraints.

Furthermore, the refugee issue is intertwined with broader regional tensions, especially between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which complicates the diplomatic landscape. Accusations of Pakistan harboring militant groups and the deportation of undocumented Afghans add layers of political sensitivity. In this context, the Taliban have called for cooperation and dialogue rather than unilateral actions, appealing to “neighborly responsibilities” and shared cultural ties to preserve long-term stability and positive bilateral relations.

Content analysis of Taliban statements reveals a strategic narrative: they consistently emphasize legal and Islamic principles, humanitarian concerns, and the necessity of joint mechanisms with host countries to manage repatriation sustainably. This rhetorical framework serves multiple purposes—it pressures host countries to comply with international norms, legitimizes the Taliban's governance role domestically and internationally, and frames the refugee crisis as a shared regional challenge requiring cooperation.

In conclusion, the Taliban's foreign policy on Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan is a complex, multi-dimensional effort to navigate humanitarian imperatives, diplomatic engagement, and geopolitical realities. Their objectives focus on ensuring dignified returns, maintaining sovereignty over the refugee issue, and securing cooperation from regional neighbors. However, the persistent problems of forced deportations, human rights abuses, and domestic capacity constraints highlight the deep challenges confronting the Taliban. Through content analysis, it becomes clear that the Taliban's approach relies on a careful balance of humanitarian rhetoric, pragmatic diplomacy, and political pressure, reflecting both their ambitions and the complex realities of managing one of the world's most protracted refugee crises amidst ongoing regional tensions.

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