



From Disappointment to Hope: Transforming Experiences of Young Afghans Returning “Home” from Pakistan and Iran

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Overview

Looking beyond perspectives limited to a “return to homeland,” this briefing paper focuses on Afghan youth and young adults who were either born or grew up in Pakistan or Iran. By examining personal journeys of their return to Afghanistan, resettlement and, for some, onward movement¹, it addresses gaps in:

- the understanding of the less visible social and emotional trajectories experienced by young Afghan refugees related to returning to and reintegration in their “homeland”; and
- the crucial links between these issues and the challenges they face related to meeting material needs during reintegration.

Both of these issues can threaten the eventual success of their resettlement.

This paper’s findings have been drawn from detailed analysis of interviews with 199 purposively selected second-generation Afghan refugee and returnee respondents² in these two neighbouring countries and in Afghanistan.³ The study was administrated through



Awaiting a return to Afghanistan at voluntary repatriation centre in Balochistan, Pakistan

1 referring to going back to Pakistan or Iran or looking to the West or other countries

2 This research project selected respondents who were: Afghan males and females between 15 and 30 years old, who had spent more than half of their lives in Pakistan or Iran, and who had also returned from these neighbouring countries since late 2001.

3 See country case studies: Mamiko Saito and Pam Hunte, “To Return or to Remain: The Dilemma of Second-Generation Afghans in Pakistan” (Kabul: AREU,

the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and funded by the European Commission; it follows 2004-05 research conducted by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) on transnational networks, which drew attention to a gap in information about the significant number of Afghan youth and young adults in Pakistan and Iran.

After decades of protracted conflict beginning in the late 1970s, Afghanistan was the source of the world's largest number of refugees from a single country under UNHCR's mandate at the end of 2007. While Afghanistan's population was dispersed among 72 different countries, 96 percent of these displaced Afghans reside in Pakistan and Iran.⁴ The majority of those who remain in these neighbouring countries have lived in exile for more than 20 years; an estimated half of displaced Afghans in Pakistan and Iran were born outside Afghanistan in a second or even third generation of displacement.⁵ Of the more than quarter million of those who repatriated in 2008, 99 percent were from Pakistan; additionally, some 2.8 million registered Afghan refugees are still living in Pakistan and Iran.⁶ In Pakistan, 74 percent of the Afghan population is under 28 years old⁷ while, in Iran, 71 percent of the Afghan population is 29 years old or younger.⁸

2007); Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi, Diana Glazebrook, Gholamreza Jamshidiha, Hossein Mahmoudian and Rasoul Sadeghi, "Second-Generation Afghans in Iran: Integration, Identity and Return" (Kabul: AREU, 2008); and Mamiko Saito, "Second-Generation Afghans in Neighbouring Countries: From *Mohajer* to *Hamwatan*: Afghans Return Home" (Kabul: AREU, 2007).

4 UNHCR, *2007 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2008), 8.

5 UNHCR, *UNHCR Global Appeal 2008-2009* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2007).

6 UN News Service, "Afghan Returnee Numbers This Year Top 276,000 UN Refugee Agency," 3 November 2008, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=28795&Cr=Afghan&Cr1> (accessed 4 November 2008).

7 Government of Pakistan and UNHCR, *Registration of Afghans in Pakistan 2007* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan and UNHCR, 2007).

8 Amayesh data (2005) in Abbasi-Shavazi et al., "Second-generation Afghans in Iran."

In both countries, this sizeable group of young Afghans have grown up in a very different environment from that of both their parents and their own generation who remained in Afghanistan during the period of conflict. They have had significantly greater access to urban facilities than those who stayed, as well as different opportunities and experiences as refugees among Pakistanis and Iranians. For these young refugees, returning to their "homeland" is often accompanied by a complex mix of different kinds of stress – probably more so than for previous generations who had actually lived in Afghanistan and may have left loved ones there.

Since 2002, UNHCR has recorded more than 5.6 million Afghans – around 20 percent of Afghanistan's overall population – as having returned from Pakistan and Iran both through its voluntary assisted repatriation programme (4.3 million) as well as spontaneously (1.3 million); 46 percent of those who returned voluntarily went to Kabul and Nangarhar provinces.⁹ The majority of those who repatriated in 2002 – the "season" that saw massive refugee returns – had been in refuge during the previous seven years, while many of those who had lived in the neighbouring countries for decades stayed.¹⁰ This trend of rapid voluntary repatriation has slowed down since 2005, reflecting the emerging concerns over security in Afghanistan as well as persistent difficulties in finding housing and livelihood opportunities. Deportations from Iran of illegal and some legal Afghan migrants continue, implying repatriation numbers may increase but under less-than-voluntary circumstances.¹¹ In 2008, repatriation from Pakistan unexpectedly increased, reflecting the current food and fuel crisis, closure of the Jalozai refugee camp, and insecurity in North West Frontier Province.¹²

9 UNHCR, "Operational Information Monthly Summary Report—July 2008," http://www.aims.org.af/services/sectoral/emergency_assistance/refugee/unhcr_summaries/jul_08/summary1.pdf (accessed 2 November 2008); UN News Service, "Afghan Returnee Numbers."

10 David Turton and Peter Marsden, *Taking Refugees for a Ride?* (Kabul: AREU, 2002), 49.

11 UNHCR, *Global Appeal 2008-2009*.

12 UN News Service, "Afghan Returnee Numbers."

What is unclear from the repatriation trends above is the proportion of returnees who eventually settle in Afghanistan for the long term. Evidence from the field reveals continuous emotional struggles and lack of certainty about future intentions among young Afghans who returned to their “homeland.” More than half of this study’s returnee respondents cited cases of someone close to them recently remigrating to Iran or Pakistan. At the time of fieldwork in 2007, over a quarter of the returnee respondents in Afghanistan still had hopes or expectations of leaving the country again in either the short or the long term; they cited a wide range of reasons informed by a variety of emotional responses to the reintegration process.

Translating those aspirations into action is more difficult for those having less independent decision-making ability within the household. It must be recognised, however, that women – even those less educated and with less freedom of movement – do have the potential to pass on their negative perceptions of their “homeland” to the next generation and to other relatives still in exile, as data from this study shows. Similarly, even those who so far have managed to live in Afghanistan sometimes advised their relatives in exile never to come back since life in

Afghanistan turned out to be dissatisfying. The personal fulfilment and satisfaction of all second-generation returnees cannot be neglected; it plays a role in the broader picture of refugees’ decision-making about returning and expectations related to reintegration. More importantly, the research shows that if returnees remigrate after having failed to reintegrate successfully, they are likely to be even more critical of possibilities of returning in the future.

The findings point to taking action that recognises the need for less visible, non-material programming and for proactive advocacy supporting the permanent settlement of these second-generation Afghans in Afghanistan. It is of critical importance that policy debate and programme development be informed by understanding the characteristics of this sizeable group of young Afghans who have grown up away from their country as well as their perceptions of return and reintegration experiences. This would help to ensure that both Afghanistan and the young returnees themselves benefit from the experience of return and that the Afghan population remaining in neighbouring countries and ongoing cross-border movements are managed in the best possible ways.

I. Understanding Young Afghan Refugees

Making decisions about whether or not to return is not easy, especially for these young Afghans who often experience internal tension over their identities in relation to Afghanistan, a “homeland” that they know less about compared to Pakistan or Iran, where they have grown up. The balance of these feelings is fragile and constantly in flux because of their experiences as refugees during childhood and adolescence, key periods of identity formation. Based on multiple sources of information, many respondents had developed conflicting perceptions of Afghanistan, holding both positive thoughts and negative concerns about life there. The meaning that individuals give to Afghanistan constantly shifts, informed by

life experiences including personal interactions with various Afghans and host populations, along with and broader regional political and social dynamics. The delicate, evolving balance of interconnected, and often contradictory, facets of their identity influences their frequently changing views of “homeland” and host society. Understanding that refugees’ past experiences directly affect their present situation is crucial to fully exploring their ideas and experiences related to repatriation and their future prospects of long-term resettlement in Afghanistan.

Data from refugee respondents living in Pakistan and Iran show that many view their lives in exile

as non-permanent and accept the inevitability of eventual return; however, they have yet to make a final decision about whether or not to return to Afghanistan in the short or medium term — an issue open to further influence by the constantly evolving political and economic environment. The correct timing for an individual to return may differ even within the same household, as seen among some respondents whose major concern about return was the fear that their education would be discontinued. Motivated by curiosity, some shared a great interest in going back at least once to see and experience Afghanistan, but they were open to remigrating if this attempt was not successful. This optimistic attitude towards returning and the anticipated potential for movement are the key points to note. This is because these perspectives exist alongside deep links and emotional ties to the locations in which they grew up, making personal decision-making about return a highly contradictory and complex process.

Struggling with identity

For second-generation Afghans, growing up as refugees in a country that does not consider them its own exacerbates the complexity of establishing “who they are”; this is due to their participation in two contexts at the same time — the Afghan family sphere and the Pakistani or Iranian social

I’m neither Iranian nor Afghan.

—30-year-old male studying for a master’s degree, Iran

sphere. Regardless of the extent to which respondents integrated into the host society, these dual influences were often seen to result in a degree of intrapersonal conflict since young Afghans try to balance contradictory values while also navigating the challenges of adolescence. Fundamentally, their values were more or less shaped by Afghan norms, but their behaviour, especially within the Afghan domain, was defined by family and societal expectations.

In various contexts and spaces, however, individuals commonly faced situations in which

they felt the need to assimilate and adjust to their environment in order to “belong” either superficially or more profoundly. Such shifts of behaviour are often accompanied by internal conflicts quite simply because second-generation Afghan refugees cannot legally belong to the same category as their Pakistani and Iranian friends and acquaintances. This inability to belong and enjoy rights as a citizen of the host country is another way in which refugees come to learn about themselves and Afghanistan; such experiences may create feelings of social exclusion that may contrast with their levels of comfort in refuge, mainly because they have grown up there and are familiar with the environment.

The term *mohajer* originally referred to refugees who had fled their homes to avoid religious oppression or persecution¹³ but does not retain this meaning in the eyes of second-generation Afghan refugees. It was perceived as derogatory when used by some of the host country population, for example, in the taunts that many respondents experienced. These were stressful experiences, particularly for children and youth who were already facing the difficult situation of growing up among “others” and were seeking a base to which they could anchor their values and ideas.

For second-generation refugees, returning to their “homeland” does not necessarily mean an actual return:

many have grown up without ever having experienced life in Afghanistan. For this group, intentions to return are less motivated by recovering an idealised past, kept alive through stories from relatives and other refugees, than by the ideas of rights, access to

[A] country is like a mother: the rights that a mother has on a child, we should try to fulfill her rights. So we should try to accomplish the rights of the country.

—19-year-old male student of a religious school, Quetta

13 Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, “The Afghan Refugee in Pakistan: an Ambiguous Identity,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 1, no. 2 (1988): 141-52.

property and citizenship – which they were not necessarily able to fully acquire while growing up in refuge.¹⁴ It is important to note that many second-generation Afghan refugees embrace these expectations of their country as part of their return. If these high expectations are not met, disappointment may be sharp and lead to thoughts of onward movement – remigrating to the host country or moving elsewhere.

Impact of host country on attitudes toward being Afghan and Afghanistan

For Afghan youths in Pakistan and Iran, the process of identity formation is heavily influenced by their surrounding environments, along with individual characteristics, family background, ties to relatives and communities, and gender norms. The values of the two host countries (within the context of broader political and sociocultural environments) significantly influence the values of individuals, particularly those who have interacted to a greater degree in the public sphere and learned how to act in public according to local social expectations and requirements. These contextual factors have created the basis on which young refugees perceive their own “Afghan-ness” – reflecting how others (from Pakistani or Iranian society) perceive them. This ties in with their attitudes toward Afghanistan and return, and among returnees, their reintegration prospects.

Efforts to be less noticeable as Afghans in public, either occasionally or permanently, were more frequent among respondents who grew up in Iran than in Pakistan. The major reasons reported by respondents were not only related to the highly sensitive political environment but also a sense

of shame associated with being Afghan, linked to perceptions of being less valued socially and culturally. As a result, this context of fear and shame, as experienced by many respondents, tends to hinder the formation and maintenance of a strong positive Afghan identity. This context is particularly evident in selected urban areas of Iran where minorities are often both intentionally and unintentionally encouraged to assimilate into the mainstream population.

Struggles over identity are exacerbated when refugees try to mask their Afghan-ness and status as *mohajerin* to blend in, producing conflict between the attempt to assimilate and the ongoing feeling of “non-belonging.” For some respondents, the efforts to blend in were too demanding and they were more motivated to return to Afghanistan. For others, extreme reactions included denying links to Afghanistan and strongly resisting return; this was found more often among respondents in Iran. Such strategies to become invisible and deny repatriation exist precisely because of an escalation in deportation and associated negative images of Afghans. Second-generation refugees in this situation tend to have difficulties forming clear understandings of their links to Afghanistan; this, in turn, makes reintegration after return an even more complex process.

Human capital for Afghanistan

As many of these youth continually struggle with thoughts of return, on another level their large-scale repatriation from neighbouring countries should be seen as a crucial strategy to rebuild Afghanistan’s societies from the grassroots level. This is particularly significant in rural areas, where reconstruction – with limited resources and personnel after the decades of conflict – is still underway. Some of the returnee respondents, though having left school at a very early age themselves, were found covering teacher



Many Afghan women who grew up in Iran are accustomed to wearing black Iranian-style hijab. Those who wear Afghan burqas in Iran are sometimes mocked.

¹⁴ Roger Zetter, “Reconceptualising the Myth of Return: Continuity and Transition amongst the Greek-Cypriot Refugees of 1974,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 12, no. 1 (1999): 1-22.

shortages in remote villages, including through informal and religious education. Whether or not respondents had formal schooling in Pakistan or Iran, many reported that they had acquired new technical skills, a better understanding of health and hygiene, and the skills to communicate with people with dissimilar ideas and behaviours.

Through gradual interaction with those already in Afghanistan, returnees bringing various skills and values can have a positive impact on Afghan society. For example, one respondent observed a shift in attitude toward her in her new role as a female teacher in a remote village; from local residents, she also learned how to best use her skills despite having fewer resources and about alternative ways to live and interact. If facilitated and supported by the state and

nongovernmental actors, these types of two-way exchanges and learning may open the doors to greater understanding of others in the community and nation.

Furthermore, a focus on attracting returnees from among highly educated Afghans in nearby countries rather than those who have legally settled in countries further away may be beneficial. It is more likely to be sustainable in terms of a contribution to Afghanistan's development since there is a higher probability they will settle for longer in Afghanistan. Afghan youth and young adults coming back with experiences acquired from neighbouring countries should be seen as great potential assets for the reconstruction of Afghanistan following decades of conflict and the loss of human capital.

II. The Challenges of Resettling in Afghanistan

Many second-generation Afghans experience the complexities of both making decisions about returning while in exile and reintegration trajectories while in their "homeland." These can be seen as part of the same process since the complexities and internal conflict experienced in refuge do not disappear upon return.

Refugees who have returned to Afghanistan are usually considered economically less vulnerable than those who stayed during the years of conflict because of the education and skills they acquired as well as the savings some accrued. However, from the point of view of returnees, particularly those of the second generation, repatriation is often accompanied by a complex mix of stress

When I saw the neglect of Pakistanis and their government toward us, I thought it was because we were Afghans. But now in my country, our government also neglects poor people, so how should we feel?

—30-year-old housewife in a remote village in Baghlan who returned from rural Pakistan

and emotional struggles, resulting from leaving the place they knew best. Returning may also mean that personal experiences of being a non-citizen in a country (regardless of their degree of familiarity with it) are simply repeated upon returning to their "homeland." The extent of this would depend on the gap between their experiences upon return and their expectations and hopes.

After arrival, many reported finding differences in their new environment and in people compared to life in refuge. But some found Afghanistan more or less what they had been used to; these were often males, especially those who had maintained close contact with family in Afghanistan while in exile or had moved to returnee-concentrated areas. However, what native compatriots deemed as "common sense" was not necessarily naturally understood, particularly by those who had few or no opportunities to see Afghanistan until their arrival. Returning refugees would usually notice: first, changes in material aspects of their new environment; second, differences in social interactions; and then, less visible differences in values discovered through extended interaction with the society.

Currently in Afghanistan, the initial material and security conditions for successful voluntary repatriation and reintegration are not in place. These then combine with varying degrees of emotional stress related to issues of identity and what being “home” entails, increasing the risk of unsuccessful resettlement; this potentially prompts returnees’ to move elsewhere or to negatively influence others’ decisions about returning. Those in poorer socioeconomic categories are particularly vulnerable to the influence of all of these experiences when combined with material needs that remain unmet.

Meeting material needs during reintegration

Meeting material needs is one of the major challenges during the reintegration process for many returnees. Finding employment is particularly difficult – for both returnees and those who remained.

Among returnees, this study found that skills were not sufficient to gain access to work. Even skilled returnees were not necessarily able to find employment upon return because the skills acquired in Pakistan and Iran are not always useful in Afghanistan. Rather, access to work

I want to work for my country. If I could earn enough for three meals a day here, then I wouldn't return to Iran.

—27-year-old skilled mason who has returned to Iran, leaving family in his village in Herat

depends on: the needs of the market; the right timing; the location of return; the possibility of acquiring materials and equipment; the availability of initial investment funds; and connections to existing groups or power holders. In cases of self-employment, one or more of the following conditions are crucial: some kind of guarantee, connections to a business partner, and capital. Despite some having acquired work experience while in exile, a lack of connections and unfamiliarity with the local market are formidable obstacles. Notably, some respondents who were relatively wealthy and had strong extended family networks did not mention

serious concerns related to employment.

In trying to adjust to life in Afghanistan, labour migration is often used as a livelihood strategy¹⁵, whereby one or more household members remain in or return to the neighbouring countries for work. This was particularly the case among the average and below-average income respondents in this study. Compared to urban locations, rural areas hosted a slightly higher number of returnee households that had family members working abroad. Many faced unemployment in Afghanistan and had no other means to secure livelihoods. Under these circumstances, some have no option but to send men away to work despite it being illegal and dangerous. It is a proactive way of adjusting to a new life that allows most of a household’s members to remain in Afghanistan and have their material needs fulfilled. Those who migrate for work, however, must at least have enough external support (e.g. credit, someone taking care of the remaining family members, networks and information to find employment) as well as money to cover travel expenses. If these are not available and all coping strategies have been exhausted, this study showed that vulnerable returnees likely reach a tipping point at which they give up trying to adjust to life in Afghanistan. Instead, they remigrate to the host country where they used to be able to manage a higher standard of living.

Social rejection of returnees

For some second-generation returnees, social rejection by fellow Afghans who had remained during the years of conflict was another difficult experience since the motivation to return was because of experiences of “non-belonging” in Pakistan and Iran. The degree of social acceptance exhibited by the Afghans who remained in Afghanistan and by the society more generally considerably affected reintegration processes and their outcomes, as did how returnees personally responded to those who remained.

¹⁵ Alessandro Monsutti, “Afghan Transnational Networks: Looking Beyond Repatriation” (Kabul: AREU 2006).

By and large, some of those who remained in Afghanistan appear to hold negative views of some returnees, especially those whose experiences in Pakistan or Iran led them to have better education, skills and economic security. One factor involves the fear of competition for resources: those who remained may see the large-scale return of refugees as a threat to their “territory” in education, work, property ownership and social status, particularly if the return occurs rapidly in an area with limited absorptive capacity.

Such negative perceptions within the general society may often be directed at particular returnees who are visibly different – physically or culturally – and are easy targets for harassment by their peers. In particular, some who have been highly integrated into a Pakistani or Iranian way of life cannot or do not know what is “normal” for Afghans. They may be subject to contempt, labelled as “spoiled,” “loafers” or “not Afghan.” In addition, returnee women are relatively easily identified by what they wear, and their appearance and behaviour can be at odds with local cultural expectations and social codes leading to rejection by others.

In particular, Afghans who had remained in Afghanistan used the label *Iranigak* (“little Iran”), implying that, especially in areas where symbols and items associated with Iran were viewed negatively, they tended not to be welcoming towards some of those returning from Iran. Even for refugees who were fiercely patriotic about Afghanistan or harboured very negative feelings toward their host country, returning to Afghanistan sometimes meant facing discrimination based on their “non-Afghan-ness” and a continual sense of “non-belonging” – even in their “homeland.”

Unequal treatment in the Afghan context

Facing exclusion because of one’s returnee status was only one of the discouraging experiences for respondents. Encountering discrimination based on one’s background (such as ethnicity, religion, political ideology class and gender) was another

stressful experience for second-generation refugees in their native land. They experienced this kind of judgement even more intensely than

If we talk about such differences, Afghanistan will continue fighting. We should forget saying, “Hazara,” “Panjshiri,” “Uzbek,” etc. We’re from one country and Afghans. No Pakistani names us as “You are Shia, Hazara, etc.”

–19-year old female student from Khost, in Peshawar

first-generation refugees or Afghans who remained in Afghanistan and were more aware of these tensions in the country. While second-generation Afghans were brought up in Pakistan and Iran, parents and relatives may have exposed them to these issues. Still, the more dominant feeling of being “different,” was related to being

a refugee compared to a citizen of the host country; in exile, this tended to overshadow other ethnic and religious affiliations.

Before returning, many second-generation respondents expected that their feelings of being “different” would be eased in Afghanistan. Based on their experiences after return, however, they raised the issue of feeling marginalised because access to certain education and work opportunities was heavily influenced by bribery and *wasita* (relations to powerful people). Respondents who had received education in secondary school or higher reported corruption related to achieving success in school and university entrance exams as well as accessing scholarships; they said that only those

When young people see this kind of thing [corruption], we lose interest and hope in studying any more. [...] In Iran, it wasn’t my country. Here it’s my country but I don’t have my rights.

–19-year old female NGO employee in Herat who studied in Tehran

who had power and money could access more favourable opportunities. Some respondents

These years I’m feeling quiet and disappointed about life. When I first came back, I had many desires for my future... Now I don’t have any specific goal or purpose, just killing my time... Day by day, I lose my trust in people. Today’s relationships are based on purpose [that is, for financial or other benefit rather than true friendship].

—25-year-old tailor with fifth grade education in Kabul who is thinking of leaving for Iran

had problems obtaining school certificates, often linked to not having the right contacts. This experience created frustration and distrust toward the government and, in the end, their “homeland.” Concerns about being unable to rely upon authorities, including the police, for security and other matters were also commonly voiced, leaving socially and economically less privileged respondents feeling particularly neglected in their own country.

On the other hand, some (more often

male) respondents said that they experienced more immediate social acceptance and a welcoming attitude from the receiving population at a relatively early stage of reintegration. They felt this was due to pre-existing social relationships, strong ties that had been maintained with relatives during exile, and other markers of status. If a returnee was considered a socially respectable person in the community (for example, in a position of influence, religiously devout, or able to bring benefit to others), he or she was less likely to face harassment. This influence, related to social status, depended on the extent to which characteristics were shared by both the returnees and those in the same community who had remained in Afghanistan.

Questioning self-identity and belonging

Regardless of their education, gender, and level of social acceptance or emotional contentment, as well as the extent of material difficulties faced, nearly all respondents expressed generally

negative, stereotypical images of fellow Afghans who had grown up in Afghanistan during the war years. Many returnee respondents — both educated and uneducated — saw themselves as more open-minded, having experienced new people and cultures in Pakistan or Iran. In particular, educated returnees (more common among those from Iran) criticised the “inferior” material culture of Afghans who had remained. Based on values formed while growing up in Pakistan or Iran, returnees often felt they saw the situation in Afghanistan through the lens of an “outsider” and compared this life to the one they experienced in refuge.

In all three countries, some respondents raised serious concerns about the direction in which they perceived Afghanistan to be going in the context of Islamic values. Generally, some second-generation Afghans who grew up in Pakistan criticised Afghanistan’s “less Islamic” environment, which was described as having been contaminated by the influence of foreigners. Those who grew up in Iran, however, tended to perceive Islam in Afghanistan as more fundamentalist and backward. These contradictions sometimes entered into individual and household decisions about an appropriate place to lead their own lives and those of the next generation.

...in Afghanistan now, I don’t feel relaxed. I don’t know why. Maybe my real home is somewhere else.

—19-year-old female student from Pakistan in Kabul

The extent to which returnees will eventually feel a shared identity with others in their communities and be socially and emotionally comfortable in that place tends to be closely associated with their process of adaptation. To address or combat feelings of difference, many returnees adjust their behaviour and actions to fit in with their new environment. This process may occur naturally over time or may be an intentional adjustment of their public image in response to social norms; during this process, a degree of internal conflict may be created between the

private and public personas of returnees who cling to deeply entrenched personal values. This is a critical point to note: second-generation refugees may have returned to Afghanistan for the moment, but they may not necessarily feel that they fit in nor feel content in the place they are expected to stay in the long term. In combination with material hardships, the social exclusion of some returnees tends to be accelerated by: the inability to feel a sense of belonging in Afghanistan, the experience of isolation (in such contexts as family, society, school and workplace), and related emotional depression.

Notably, among the respondents in this study, it is the more highly educated males and females that tended to face greater social and emotional contradictions during their process of reintegration, possibly linked to greater exposure to “open-minded” ideas from their lives in Pakistan or Iran. Those who were less educated and of lower economic status expressed that their struggle was primarily against material and physical insecurity, which many had also similarly faced in exile.

The impact of the transition on women

After relocating to Afghanistan, women in particular are significantly affected by the changes in physical surroundings. Limited public infrastructure and inadequate availability of material goods result in increased domestic work. Compared to their lives in Pakistan or Iran, young women — particularly in rural areas — also have less access to healthcare services due to the lack of nearby health facilities and to movement restrictions resulting from inadequate road infrastructure and means of transportation acceptable for women. Many of these women in rural areas now rarely leave their villages. In exile, many women were allowed to move about for work, school or family visits. In Afghanistan, however, women live in an unfavourable environment with decreased mobility because of security issues (e.g. harassment and kidnapping), more restrictive social norms, and unavailability of facilities (e.g. lack of secure public

transportation). For vulnerable female returnees whose households have no other income earners, few acceptable work options exist. The “shame” that is at times associated with working women is likely to motivate them to move to Afghanistan’s urban areas, Iran and Pakistan, where they can earn some income with fewer restrictions — as they used to do in the neighbouring countries.

In relation to physical security, a few female respondents reported experiencing brutal domestic violence from either or both their family and husbands. This led them to perceive deficiencies in the Afghan legal system compared to the system in Pakistan or Iran where they felt “safer.” For these women, the crucial factor in deciding whether or not to return to Afghanistan, or subsequently remigrate, is the protection that is available at the potential destination.

Overall, while in refuge many women respondents had become used to behaving in ways that are commonly perceived by those remaining in Afghanistan as too “free” for women in Afghanistan. The reputation of the family in Afghanistan largely depends on the perception of its women as being “honourable” and “Afghan.” Appearance and attitudes that may be perceived as “foreign” are often cited as evidence of women having abandoned their “Afghan-ness”; this is particularly significant in a society in transition where women are expected to transfer knowledge of their culture to the next generation. Thus, second-generation Afghan women who grew up in Pakistan and Iran tend to face greater emotional struggles when deciding whether or not to return; women who have returned to Afghanistan also encounter difficult emotional struggles during their reintegration process.

Appearance and attitudes that may be perceived as “foreign” are often cited as evidence of women having abandoned their “Afghan-ness.”

III. From *Mohajer* to *Hamwatan*: Ongoing Negotiation

Balancing the factors influencing reintegration processes

No simple generalisations can be made about different reintegration paths and their outcomes. This is in part because reintegration is an ongoing process; many respondents do not have fixed ideas and future intentions. Even in the duration of an interview, some of their opinions and ideas appeared to be contradictory – revealing their internal struggles and ambiguous ideas related to the future. It is, therefore, difficult to classify respondents in terms of their future intentions; however, nearly half intended at the time of the interview to remain in their current place of residence in Afghanistan. Some also expressed a preference to settle in urban areas of Afghanistan to enhance their access to facilities, education beyond the primary level (for themselves and their children), and employment. Others, however, expressed thoughts of moving back to the neighbouring countries or elsewhere.

Reintegration outcomes are seen as different points along a continuum reflecting varying

...reintegration is an ongoing process; many respondents do not have fixed ideas and future intentions. Even in the duration of an interview, some of their opinions and ideas appeared to be contradictory – revealing their internal struggles and ambiguous ideas related to the future.



Afghan students in Peshawar, Pakistan decorated their school with these poems and pictures of historic Afghan kings, famous Afghans and symbols of Afghanistan. Second-generation Afghan refugees learn about their homeland from stories, narratives, books, celebrations at home and school as well as in their communities.

degrees of success, ranging from desires to settle permanently in Afghanistan to wishes to leave again temporarily or for the long term. Shown in Figure 1, each respondent's complex reintegration experience was influenced by a wide range of factors including: personality, background, experiences prior to becoming a refugee, the particular circumstances of displacement, experiences in exile, social networks, conditions of return, and his or her own interpretations of “home” and “belonging.” The reintegration process has three interlinked dimensions: material satisfaction, social acceptance and personal fulfilment (that is, the degree of contentment from settling in one's own “homeland”). A critical balance of all these dimensions (with none significantly lacking) was crucial for a return to be sustainable. When these were not in balance, the resettlement outcome of onward movement became more central to the respondent's considerations.

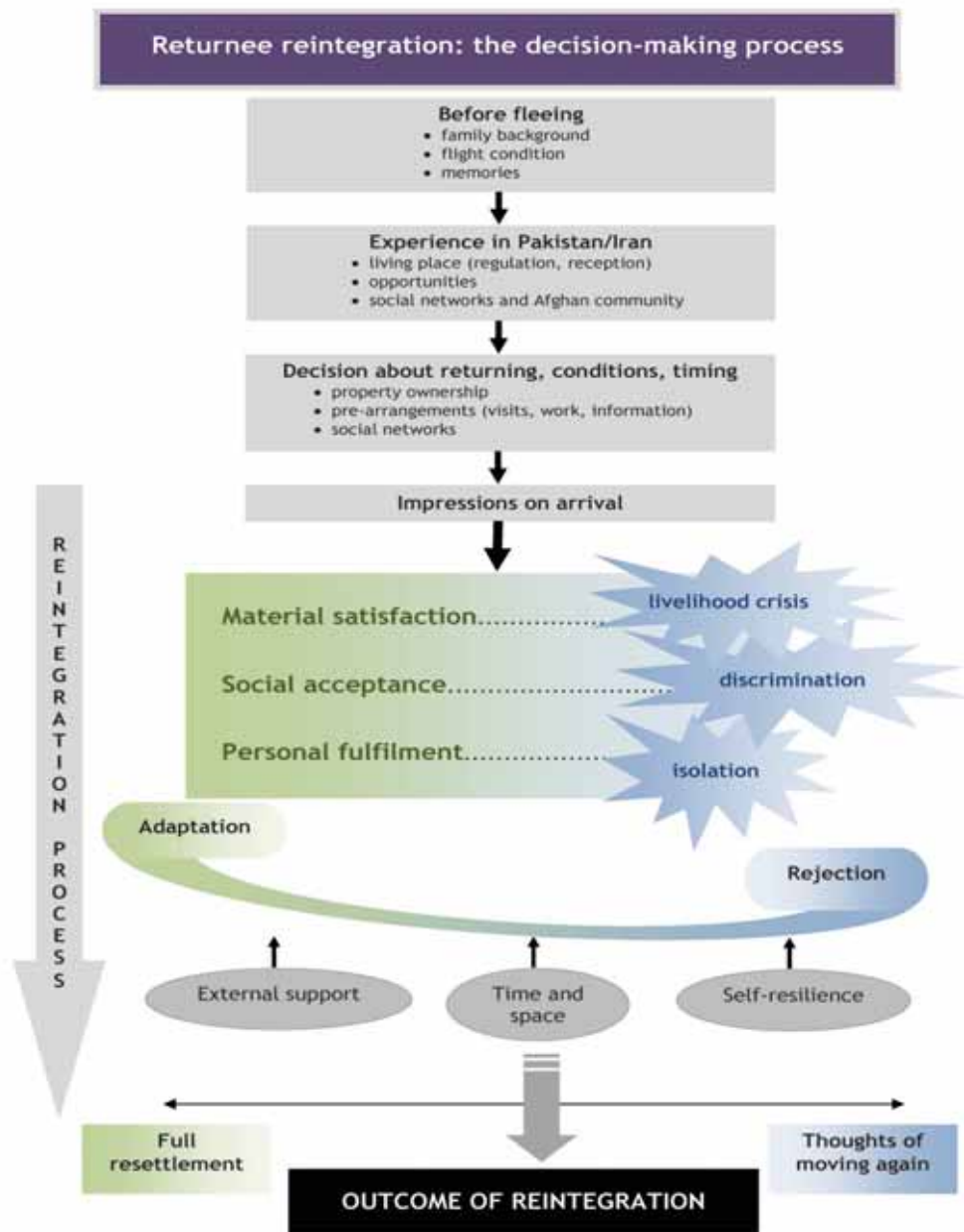


Figure 1: The process of returnee reintegration

Coping for the sake of their *watan*: a key pull factor in returning to and staying in Afghanistan

One of the key motivations in the decisions of many refugees to go back to their *watan* (homeland) is the mental and emotional satisfaction they expect to feel there – despite often hearing about material hardships they will experience. This is often accompanied by the hope of elevating one’s social status from subordinate

mohajer to respected Afghan in a society made up of other *hamwatan* (compatriot) and where one can work with his or her own people to achieve a stable, prosperous future. The ways in which they find personal meaning from living in their own country, and the sense of comfort derived from this identity, is therefore crucial to successful resettlement.

Living in their own *watan* is also an important “pull factor” keeping them in Afghanistan; it eases

the pain of material and emotional hardships. It can raise their inner strength to confront the difficulties of resettling (at least to the extent – different for each individual – at which they feel they can no longer cope). This was true even for women who lived in isolation in Afghan enclaves in Pakistan and Iran and who, because of family pressure, almost never interacted with the host population during this period. Living in their own *watan* gave the majority of returnee respondents a sense of freedom and often helped them face both the challenges of material needs that went unmet and personal frustrations – if they were able to relate to *watan* in a positive way.

watan: homeland

hamwatan: from the same *watan*; compatriot

The notion of *watan* relates primarily to a limited geographical area in which individuals are well known to each other. In the diaspora context, however, this notion expands. Any Afghan may be considered a *hamwatan* or belonging to the same *watan*. *Watan* is to be treasured and seen as vulnerable; it must be defended in ways similar to how the women members of a family are protected.

Bernt Glatzer, 2001, “War and Boundaries in Afghanistan: Significance and Relativity of Local and Social Boundaries,” *Weird des Islams*, 41, no. 3: 379–99.

Many returnees expect their “homeland” to be a place where their rights to equal treatment and opportunities are ensured because they are respected citizens and where they are freed from feelings of “non-belonging” and inferiority related to their refugee status. These expectations continuously evolve as unanticipated difficulties arise after they return. For those who do not resettle easily into life at “home” in Afghanistan, they face great temptation to recall the positive aspects of life in Pakistan or Iran, fuelling further questioning of where to make their future; this is similar to parts of the earlier process of deciding whether or not to repatriate. If they then remigrate because of overwhelming disappointment with (and, for a few, hatred of) their *watan*, even stronger pull factors will be required to bring them back to Afghanistan again.

It must also be recognised that these young returnees often maintain strong ties to the place where they grew up and, in terms of their emotional attachment, do not make much of

a distinction between the two countries. This attachment, the degree of which depends on the individual, exists simultaneously among multiple spaces. Regardless of whether or not resettlement is intended to be permanent, many wish or plan to visit Pakistan or Iran in the near future. This is primarily to see relatives and friends (who may be Afghan, Pakistani or Iranian), to revisit places from their memories, to deal with work-related issues, or to relieve the boredom of life in Afghanistan.

Reintegration processes involve renegotiating a returnee’s core values related to society and people, comparing different lifestyles and ideas in Afghanistan to those he or she experienced in Pakistan and Iran. Coupled with more general challenges related to adolescence or early adulthood, young returnees develop new understandings of “home” and their future within it. This study makes clear that re-entry difficulties can potentially be mitigated by more effectively tapping into external support aimed at meeting both material and emotional needs through such means as: land allocation by the government; relief assistance from government and nongovernmental organisations; financial support and moral encouragement from relatives; generosity and care provided to youth by the elders and parents; having teachers motivate students to serve their own country; and facilitating opportunities for youth participation in community group activities. These may also be mitigated by encouraging self-resilience and development of coping mechanisms, promoting their ability and willingness to tackle hardships and challenges in order to reintegrate in the *watan*. Improving their emotional security and the ways in which they identify with their “homeland” could increase the number of young returnees resettling for the long term and, in turn, play a key role in the social and political stability of Afghanistan.

The processes of reintegration in their *watan* are not simply the geographical movement of population nor are these second-generation Afghans a homogeneous group. Having maintained strong links to Pakistan and Iran, they are diverse in their individual backgrounds, experiences, places of residence and opportunities; all of these

were shaped by changing political and social dynamics. These complex elements of identity and belonging should be carefully considered when attempting to enhance more permanent settlement of second-generation Afghan refugees in their “homeland.”

IV. Ways Forward

This study’s primary aim is to inform policy and programme development. These final recommendations, therefore, draw out key points that could potentially shift the factors affecting second-generation refugees toward voluntary return and positive reintegration experiences. These recommendations, based on analysis of the interview data, are primarily aimed at the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, along with donors, international organisations and concerned stakeholders. It is acknowledged that the prevailing situation for refugees in Pakistan and Iran, as well as for recent returnees to Afghanistan, may have in some ways changed since the time the research was conducted in 2006-07. In fact, being at the intersection of a broad range of interacting factors, it will indeed always be subject to change.

Voluntary return: Reducing the risks of reintegration failure

1. Improving work skills and access to employment during transition: Enhancing the capacity to take risks related to return and reintegration

- The Government of Afghanistan, in coordination with those of Pakistan and Iran and the support of donors, should engage in continuous efforts to develop the skills of refugee youth, driven by the demand and needs of the local labour market in Afghanistan. Many of these youth are expected to be the breadwinners of their households.
- Existing training centres and technical courses in cities and refugee camps in Pakistan and

Iran should be improved with facilities focused on the needs of the Afghan market; this is aimed at assisting refugee youth who lack job contacts to prepare appropriately for the employment market they will face on return. Priority access should be given to vulnerable groups such as those in households headed by women or children, those without formal education, those with disabilities, or those who are jobless in their country of refuge. Local residents of Pakistan and Iran who are also economically vulnerable may also benefit from this training.

2. Facilitating realistic resettlement planning: Information and visits

- For young refugees with fewer social networks and other assets to support themselves after return, it is crucial that reliable sources are used to provide accurate information on support systems in Afghanistan available to returnees (e.g. land allocation, employment services and the National Skills Development Programme) as well as a local contact in Afghanistan in order to access employment information in the location of resettlement. In collaboration with the governments of Pakistan and Iran, this information could be conveyed effectively through radio and other media.
- Realistic resettlement planning assists reintegration, as evidenced by the experiences of recent returnees, particularly from Pakistan. Those who were more likely to obtain work did so through stronger social networks, skills, owning property, well-prepared visits to Afghanistan in advance, and planned arrangements

for voluntary return. In order to facilitate successful voluntary return, the Iranian and Afghan governments are encouraged to engage in further bilateral talks to facilitate greater access of young refugees to preparatory visits. Many of them feel overwhelmingly uneasy toward Afghanistan as a result of never having seen or experienced it in real life.

3. Education in transition: A key concern for second-generation Afghans

- One key reason that second-generation Afghan refugees do not want to return is because their education could possibly be discontinued. Their fear of losing the opportunity to be educated must be addressed; the Government of Afghanistan, with the support of the international community, should continue to improve access to quality education in Afghanistan (particularly beyond the primary level in rural areas). In coordination with the governments of the two host countries, the Afghan Ministry of Education should actively facilitate securing the legal status of Afghan schools in Pakistan and Iran as the places where second-generation Afghans would earn qualifications to prepare themselves for their return. Through encouragement from Afghan teachers, these young people may develop a positive Afghan identity that could lead to a desire to serve Afghanistan. Incentives for students to return to the country may be introduced through vacation-time internships offered by the Government, private companies or civil society in Afghanistan.
- Clearer and more accessible procedures should be in place for the approval and acceptance of certification from schools and universities in the neighbouring countries, particularly in Pakistan where the language of instruction may differ from that of Afghanistan. Currently accessible, standardised information about these approval procedures is lacking, and at the same time there are many reports of procedures affected by bribery, discouraging repatriation. The Government should establish a “one-stop shop” in the Ministry of Education, staffed by knowledgeable personnel who

can provide accurate information about accrediting qualifications and can process certifications efficiently. This service should be readily accessible to students seeking consultations not only inside Afghanistan but also at multiple locations in Pakistan and Iran; this would help students to avoid having to return to neighbouring countries to complete the approval process.

4. Advocacy: Positive motivation for return

- In collaboration with the Pakistani and Iranian governments and with the support of international agencies, the Government of Afghanistan should build a comprehensive communications strategy targeting young refugees. Promotional campaigns, delivered via a range of media and community outlets, should highlight the importance of one’s homeland to motivate young Afghans to return. While acknowledging their diverse backgrounds, the campaigns should also emphasise a sense of unity among Afghans, motivating them to serve their country. It is important to create positive motivation for voluntary return rather than pressure from deportation, which results in strong resistance to returning to Afghanistan.

Complex reintegration: Influencing the balance of factors

1. Promoting emotional security: Advocacy for social inclusion and anti-discrimination policies

- The Government of Afghanistan, together with international agencies, should develop media campaigns advocating for social acceptance and non-discriminatory treatment of all Afghans, including returnees. These campaigns should encourage such social inclusion particularly in the public sphere (such as in schools). Such efforts could increase the receiving communities’ understanding of the transition faced by young returnees and help them provide encouragement to returnees adjusting to different values and being “home.” Sustained government-led advocacy to raise awareness of anti-corruption policies and to improve transparency could play a key role in

promoting solidarity among all Afghans.

- For some returnees, encouragement that facilitates social inclusion has sometimes simply been the result of the generous compassion of others. Education programmes that promote the equal treatment of all people provided for those in positions of some authority (e.g. teachers, headmasters and mullahs) improve their ability to positively influence the receiving community, particularly in social spaces such as within schools or villages. Such individuals would benefit from education programmes that promote the equal treatment of all people. Community-based mechanisms to regulate discrimination against returnees could also be developed. Concerned government ministries working with youth (such as the Ministry of Education) can work in close coordination to develop such programmes.
- Interaction with fellow returnees and Afghan friends who understand how returnees lived previously may offer an opportunity for individuals to express the values they formed during refuge, providing a valuable outlet to release some of the tension resulting from experiences of being unable to fit in. This could be facilitated through donors' financial support of NGOs in forming community groups. For example, youth *jirgas* could be established for young female and male returnees to share experiences in separate-sex groups and have opportunities for self-development as they also serve their community. These efforts should include promoting support among family members to ensure that girls and women are permitted to participate in these groups.
- As a part of more long-term social and economic programming, the reintegration process of selected second-generation returnees should be monitored not only at the time of initial return but also over the medium and long term. The lessons accumulated from this initiative could be applied to improve further programming for permanent resettlement.

2. Enhancing opportunities for employment

- The Afghan government, donors, civil society and

the private sector should cooperate to improve access to jobs for vulnerable groups, particularly those who do not have connections or other means to enter the job market in Afghanistan. The outreach of existing employment service centres should be extended to more districts and rural areas. Postings at the employment service centres should be provided in local languages and cover a wider range of positions (unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled) compared to limited postings targeting the skilled and educated. Incentives should be provided as a part of an income-generating programme to encourage employers to post job vacancies at newly established employment centres. Local radio stations could be used to disseminate information.

- A more transparent affirmative-action recruiting system to provide equal access for youth from socially and economically underprivileged backgrounds, in particular returnees who are not familiar with the local environment, is proposed as a priority programme for local government and development organisations. This system could involve actively employing returnees as teachers, literacy trainers and health workers in community organisations where their exposure to new ideas from their experience outside Afghanistan could positively affect local communities. In areas of high concentration of returnees, their skills should be specifically identified and recorded by the local government. This information should be effectively mobilised to the benefit of the community as a whole; this may be done in coordination with aid agencies through strategised programming and implementation of development projects. This programme should include not only professional service providers but also those in the field of business and trade, skilled workers, technicians and others.
- Female members of vulnerable returnee families are often unable to work in Afghanistan because of restrictive social norms. This may reduce household responsiveness to crises, prompting remigration. The Ministry of Women's Affairs, along with the ministries of Labour, Social Affairs

and Martyrs, and the Disabled as well as NGOs, should improve existing efforts to provide more market-oriented, culturally sensitive livelihood opportunities for economically vulnerable women in rural and urban areas.

3. Meeting material needs during reintegration: Access to connections, skills, capital and property

- Second-generation Afghan returnees of a lower socioeconomic status and without skills and basic education should be key beneficiaries of programmes providing material support. These include opportunities for labour-intensive work (e.g. through water and sanitation programmes), skills training that matches market needs (e.g. through the National Skills Development Programme), priority access to housing and land allocation, and microcredit and business development services (e.g. the Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan and the National Area-Based Development Programme). In some cases, adjustments to programme requirements could ensure that returnees qualify for, for example, loans through microfinance institutions.
- The right to own property is one of the key pull factors drawing refugees back to Afghanistan. This is true even for second-generation Afghans who have less of a connection to their country based on real living experience (unlike their parents who had actually lived there) but who aspire to own land or a home. Although challenging, the existing system of land allocation, with the support of an oversight committee, must be further promoted to be realistic, efficient, and transparent. To contribute to improving service provision, feedback systems should be established, incorporating third-party input including randomly selected potential beneficiaries — both elderly and youth.
- Urban planning processes should take greater priority given the increase in urban populations related to the influx of returnees and internal migrants. At the same time, attention should be paid to employment generation in both urban and rural areas to reduce challenges related to meeting material needs and to slow the flow of

migrants to urban locations.

4. Increasing needs: Quality education as a pull factor

- Donors and civil society must be strongly committed to longer-term funding of post-primary education in both urban and rural areas, reflecting the growing needs of young returnees either with or without formal education and for future generations. To attract highly qualified students to rural areas, competitive incentives to enhance access to continuous education could be provided, for example, secure transportation and accommodation.
- Opportunities in higher education, which are not readily available to Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, are strong pull factors that could bring educated refugees back to Afghanistan. The Afghan government should: ensure that equal, corruption-free opportunities for higher education in Afghanistan exist; invest in scholarships for returnees; and improve the governance systems that allocate university places, reducing perceived and actual corruption in university admissions processes.

5. Physical security: Desire for police reform and protection

- For those who intend to remain in Afghanistan for the long term, security is inextricably linked to potential economic development. Concerns about less serious crimes (such as robbery and theft) and uneasiness over the unreliability of the police (related to corruption issues) were also commonly mentioned by respondents in this study. To improve the performance and public image of the police, the Ministry of Interior Affairs and the international community should increase the pace of police reform and enforce penalties for proven corrupt behaviour.
- Stronger government-led, gender-sensitive social protection efforts may lead to a reduction in the harassment of women in public, providing safeguards similar to those that some respondents benefited from while outside of Afghanistan. The Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs and the international com-

munity should strengthen efforts to recruit female police officers and increase provision of effective and relevant gender training for all police officers. New laws should be adopted and existing laws enforced to protect women's safety and security in both public and private domains.

6. *Managing legal migration: Options for gradual return*

- A focus on managing – rather than limiting or prohibiting – labour migration would better support the successful resettlement of Afghan households. Iran's efforts to stem labour migration, including making access to formal visas difficult and deporting undocumented Afghans, simply drive people into illegal migration. The Afghan government should ensure Afghans can easily obtain a passport. The Government of Afghanistan and those of the host countries should continue their bilateral dialogue to develop laws and agreements facilitating a more manageable migration

framework that reduces illegal migration. This framework should recognise that all three countries both send and receive workers.

- The gradual return of household members is a common strategy used by Afghan families to mitigate the risks associated with repatriation. The government of Iran in particular, supported by international aid agencies, need to facilitate these strategies by providing re-entry visas for those heading to Afghanistan for reconnaissance visits and by maintaining support to vulnerable households that remain in the host country.
- It is important to recognise that not all Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, first- and second-generation alike, will return to Afghanistan voluntarily in the near future; among these cases are those who have protection needs and those who have married Pakistanis or Iranians. Furthermore, the capacity of Afghanistan to absorb the vast numbers of refugees who remain in these neighbouring countries requires continuous, realistic re-examination and a consistent humanitarian approach.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research organisation headquartered in Kabul. AREU's mission is to conduct high-quality research that informs and influences policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and facilitating reflection and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives.

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