



Afghanistan Policy Page

A one-page brief from the [Afghanistan Congressional Communications Hub](#) on a major issue concerning U.S. policy and engagement in Afghanistan.

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Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Key Facts & Take Aways

- Up to **8 million Afghan refugees** have been affected since 1978. The UNHCR believes approx. 2.6 million remain outside Afghan borders (1.7m in Pakistan; 935,000 in Iran); making it the **largest single refugee diaspora population in the world**.
- The UNHCR estimates that **5.6 million Afghans** have returned home since 2002, causing a **25% increase in Afghanistan's population**.
- Immediately after the Soviet invasion **it is estimated that 3.7 million refugees fled to Iran and Pakistan**, and more continued to flee throughout the 80s and 90s.
- Conflict in Afghanistan since 1978 has also created **significant numbers of IDPs**. During the civil war between Mujahedeen factions in the 1990s, **up to a million people, mostly Kabul residents, were displaced**.
- Since 2001, the UN estimates that armed conflict has resulted in **296,000 total IDPs at the present time** – with ongoing fighting increasing this number.
- UNHCR figures are based on **officially registered refugees** – many more remain unregistered.

Pakistan

- Roughly **two-thirds of all Afghan refugees are based in Pakistan**, mostly in the north west of the country. The majority of these individuals fled as a result of the Afghan-Soviet conflict – **over 50% of families moved in 1979 and 1980 alone**.
- UNHCR estimates **80% of all Afghans remaining in Pakistan have been living there for at least two decades; over half of these were born in Pakistan as 'second generation' refugees**. This has created significant issues in encouraging those remaining to 'return' to a home that they have never seen.
- Many of the camps that originally sheltered the refugees have been closed as greater numbers moved to urban areas. Experts have raised concerns over the **infiltration of refugee communities by the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other insurgent groups**.
- **Official registration of Afghan refugees in Pakistan** began in October 2006, conducted by Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority. Afghan registrants receive a 'Proof of Registration' (PoR) card that allows them to live and work in Pakistan for three years.
- On March 25, 2010, the Pakistani government endorsed a new Strategy for the Management of Afghans in Pakistan, which includes the **extension until the end of 2012 of (PoR) cards**, alongside continued voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan.

Key Issues in Afghanistan

- The **sustainability of returning refugees** to their former homes is a significant challenge – in providing them primarily with shelter, and also adequate access to basic utilities, education, health care, and work opportunities.
- The **Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation (MORR)** leads the Government of Afghanistan's efforts in assisting its citizens in returning from exile. In 2008 the government adopted the **Refugee Return and IDP Strategy (RRI)** to run various programs providing water, emergency shelter, income-generation and other assistance.
- **Land rights** remain a contentious issue for the reintegration of refugees. Returning refugees can find their former homes granted to another family; looking ahead, any future reintegration of former insurgents will contribute to this problem.
- **Urbanization** – the majority of refugees and IDPs in Afghanistan flock to urban areas. Kabul's population has swelled 25% due to returnees since 2002.

Iran

- In 1990, refugee numbers peaked with over 3 million Afghan refugees estimated to be living in Iran. An estimated 1.4 million returned home in 1992 following the fall of the Communist government. Unlike in Pakistan, **nearly all refugees live amongst urban communities**, not in camps.
- The **Iranian Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs (BAFIA)** conducts regular registrations of Afghan refugees – granting them access to basic health and education, and issuing Temporary Work Permits - 300,000 in 2009.
- The Iranian government has conducted several **'forced' returns of refugees** to Afghanistan in recent years that have drawn criticism from international human rights bodies and the Government of Afghanistan.
- The deteriorating economy and security in Afghanistan in recent years has **inhibited voluntary return of refugees** based in Iran (UNHCR records barely 5000 in 2009). A **'boomerang' effect** has also occurred, with former refugees crossing back into Iran because they could not sustain themselves in Afghanistan.

Internally Displaced Persons

- The majority of IDPs are from the south of Afghanistan where conflict with armed insurgent groups remains the most severe. UNHCR records that **IDP figures rose in Afghanistan between 2008 and 2009**.
- The recent NATO campaign in Marjah, Helmand Province has pushed IDP figures up in 2010. UNHCR reports that **27,700 people had been registered for displacement by February 2010**. It is anticipated that a planned operation in Kandahar will create similar humanitarian needs this year.

Possible Questions

- What is the role of international donor countries in assisting the Afghan government in reintegrating returning refugees? How successful are reintegration efforts?
- What efforts are being made to educate and protect vulnerable second generation Afghans born into refugee status?

Further Reading

- [UNHCR](#)
- [OCHA](#)
- [ReliefWeb](#)

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