

Afghan Refugee Education in Pakistan: History, Current Status and Implications

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ABSTRACT

Afghan refugees in Pakistan have a long history of residence, who had received various forms of education during different periods. From the Madrassa education advocating Jihad during the Soviet-Afghan war to vocational training, both Pakistan and the international community have played pivotal roles in shaping refugee education. Presently, Afghan refugee education in Pakistan faces a series of challenges. This paper provides a detailed account of the history of Afghan refugee education in Pakistan, examines the current challenges it faces, and explores the impact of refugee education on both the refugees themselves and Pakistani society.

Keywords: *Afghan refugees, Education, History, Current status, Implications.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Afghan refugees have a long-established presence in Pakistan. Since the 1970s, driven by political, factional, and communal conflicts, as well as wars and natural disasters, the majority of Afghans have sought asylum in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there remain approximately 3.1 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan.[1] Due to ongoing instability within Afghanistan, significant numbers of refugees continue to seek asylum in Pakistan annually.

The issue of Afghan refugees represents a significant challenge for both Pakistan and the international community. As a global concern, the refugee crisis impacts the security, stability, and development of regions, as well as the broader international landscape. Given that education is a critical component of addressing refugee concerns, it is important to examine the current status of Afghan refugee education in Pakistan. What influences refugees education, and what role does it play in fostering regional stability and social development?

Several scholars have engaged with this issue. Julia Dicum argues that education in emergency situations serves as a key tool for adaptation,

survival, community (re)building, and political will formation. [2] Catherine Gladwell, through her research on Afghan refugees in the UK, demonstrates that higher education levels among refugees are positively correlated with economic benefits, though precarious immigration status often undermines these advantages.[3] Hidayet Siddikoglu suggests that education plays an equally important role as Islam in shaping the social and cultural identities of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. [4] Fazal ur-Rahim Marwat, however, contends that refugee education is less about spreading knowledge and more about promoting a specific ideology.[5]

While these perspectives highlight important dimensions of education—its role in shaping reality, social and cultural identity, and ideology—there remains a lack of engagement with the broader contextual factors such as geopolitics, temporal dynamics, and community relations. These aspects must also be considered to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of education in refugee contexts.

Educational policies and practices for refugees have traditionally been developed within the framework of the nation-state. [6] However, the unique geopolitical and complex social structures of Pakistan and Afghanistan have necessitated the formulation of refugee education policies that extend beyond the nation-state paradigm. These

policies have been significantly influenced by the international community, various parties, ethnic groups, religious affiliations, and dominant ideologies. This paper aims to analyze and elucidate the historical context, current conditions, and challenges associated with Afghan refugee education in Pakistan. Additionally, it seeks to clarify the impact of refugee education on various stakeholders, including society at large, political entities, regional organizations, individuals, and social development.

2. HISTORY OF EDUCATION FOR AFGHAN REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN

The education of Afghan refugees in Pakistan has evolved significantly over time, shaped by international environment and domestic policies. The rise of communism in Afghanistan during the 1960s and 1970s challenged the traditional Islamic state, contributing to the complex socio-political landscape that influenced refugee education. Notably, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 intensified the notion of an Islamic Ummah (community of faith) across the Muslim world. This period saw the rise of Madrassa education aimed at defending the Islamic state, marking a significant turning point in the history of Madrassa within Afghanistan.

Pakistan's domestic policies during this time further contributed to the rise of Madrassa education among Afghan refugees. Pakistan, wary of its geopolitical situation, sought to strengthen the religious identity while downplaying the concept of the nation-state. This strategy was also linked to the ongoing dispute over the Pashtun region, which prompted the Pakistani government to bolster Madrassa education as a means of reinforcing solidarity among Afghan refugees.

In the mid-1990s, Afghanistan's continuing civil unrest, compounded by natural disasters, resulted in a surge of refugees fleeing to Pakistan. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, international support for Afghan refugees waned. This decline in external assistance prompted both the UNHCR and the Pakistani government to advocate for greater self-reliance among refugees, leading to an increased focus on vocational education and training to help refugees develop skills for employment.

Following the events of 9/11, refugee education faced additional challenges stemming from

Pakistan's shifting repatriation strategies, domestic policy uncertainties, and fluctuating relations with Afghanistan. Since 2010, heightened security tensions between the two nations have further restricted refugee mobility, limiting access to education and other resources. These geopolitical shifts, alongside domestic policy changes in Pakistan, have profoundly impacted the scope and quality of education available to Afghan refugees in recent years.

2.1 The Rise and Development of Camp Schools and Madrassas for Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

The Wiping out illiteracy education in Afghanistan played a significant role in the rise of religious education, particularly during the Taraki-Amin period (1978-1979), when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) launched one of the nationwide literacy campaign, which required all Afghan men, women, and children to acquire basic reading and writing skills within a year. To implement this ambitious plan, the government deployed approximately 18,500 teachers, many of whom were young university students loyal to the regime, into rural areas to spread education.[7]⁶

This literacy program, however, was not merely an educational initiative; it also served as a tool for disseminating the government's ideology. The curriculum focused heavily on promoting the PDPA's political views, and many of the teachers, being relatively inexperienced and aligned with the new regime, displayed arrogance and insensitivity toward local cultural norms. One particularly controversial aspect of the reform was the introduction of co-education, which required both men and women to attend the same classes. Additionally, local leaders, including Ulama and tribal elders, were compelled to participate in these classes.

The literacy campaign provoked significant resistance, especially in Pashtun-dominated regions. The policy of co-education and the requirement for women to participate in public education were seen as direct affronts to the Pashtunwali, particularly in regard to women's honor (Namus). These reforms undermined traditional social structures, and the resulting discontent became a catalyst for the resurgence of Madrassa education. Many religious scholars, deeply opposed to the PDPA's secularization efforts, began calling for a return to

traditional Islamic education, viewing it as a means of preserving Afghan religious and cultural identity.

In response to the growing unrest, the Afghan authorities intensified their persecution of religious leaders, intellectuals, Sufi Pirs, and other influential figures who opposed the regime's reforms. This repression led to widespread arrests and harassment, creating further resentment among the population. As the crackdown on religious and cultural leaders escalated, many Afghans began fleeing the country to escape persecution.

By the end of 1978, approximately 80,000 Afghans had sought asylum in Pakistan, where they were housed in eight camps in the North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). [7]⁷⁹ This number rapidly increased, and by the end of 1979, an estimated 400,000 refugees had arrived in Pakistan. [8] This mass displacement marked the beginning of a prolonged refugee crisis, during which religious education, particularly in madrassas, gained prominence as a form of resistance to the secularization policies of the Afghan government.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 resulted in a significant increase in the number of camp schools and religious schools (madrassas) for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. During this period, Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq played a pivotal role in facilitating the influx of Afghan refugees and supporting anti-Soviet efforts. In his bid to secure international support, Zia welcomed Afghan refugees into Pakistan, establishing the Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees (CCAR) to oversee their management, with a particular emphasis on promoting religious education.

Zia-ul-Haq's backing of religious education was driven by two key motives. First, both Pakistan and Afghanistan had territorial disputes over the Pashtun regions, and Zia sought to use religious education as a means of fostering a shared Islamic identity (Ummah), thereby downplaying nationalist sentiments and reinforcing the unity of the Muslim community. Second, Zia viewed India as Pakistan's primary adversary and saw religious education as a vehicle to cultivate fighters for the Kashmiri armed struggle. By promoting religious schools, Zia aimed to train a generation of militants who could contribute to Pakistan's regional strategic objectives.

The Soviet invasion also evoked widespread sympathy across the Muslim world, triggering an outpouring of support for the Afghan Jihad. Many

Islamic nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, funneled large amounts of financial aid to support the anti-Soviet cause. This influx of funds fueled the expansion of religious schools, which became central to the recruitment and mobilization of Afghan refugees for the armed resistance against Soviet forces. Through madrassas Afghan refugees were motivated to join the Jihad against the Soviet occupation.

During the specified period, educational institutions catering to Makhtabs and Madrassa education can be categorized into three distinct groups. The first category is the schools that have been established with the financial and operational backing of the ARC and the UNHCR. The second category includes schools that have been founded by Afghan political factions, which were recognized by Pakistan government. The final category encompasses Madrassas, which are religious educational institutions, that have been established by indigenous Pakistani organizations and political entities.

2.1.1 Schools Established by Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees and UNHCR

The surge in refugee numbers has exerted significant strain on Pakistan's social fabric, economic stability, and educational infrastructure. In response to this challenge, the provision of education for refugee children who are expected to remain in the country for an extended period is of paramount importance. To address this need, the Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees in collaboration with the UNHCR, initiated an educational program specifically tailored for refugee children. This initiative was designed to encourage the participation of NGOs in bolstering educational opportunities for refugees within Pakistan.

These organizations have played a pivotal role in enhancing the educational landscape for refugee children.

2.1.2 Schools Established by Afghan Parties

Between the Daud coup in 1973 and the subsequent Soviet invasion, a coalition of various groups — including religious leaders, feudal landowners, government officials, nationalist factions, disaffected members of the PDPA, and army personnel who had fled—formed political

parties based in Pakistan. Seven of these parties, later known as the Peshawar Seven, were officially recognized by Pakistan and permitted to operate within its borders. These parties actively engaged in educational activities within the refugee camps where they were based. Central to the curriculum in these camps was the anti-Soviet ideology of Jihad, which shaped the religious education provided. The madrassas became significant venues for the political parties, facilitating both the ideological development of their followers and the training of guerrilla fighters. Financial support from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other international sources, funneled through Pakistan, further enhanced the military capacity of these guerrilla forces. During this period, madrassas emerged as key recruitment centers for the Mujahedeen.

2.1.3 Religious Schools Established by Local Organisations and Parties in Pakistan

Following the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, several madrassas existed in Pakistan, representing the country's five major religious sects: Deobandi, Barelwi, Ahl al-Hadith, Jamat-i-Islami, and Shia.[9] Upon assuming power, General Zia-ul-Haq introduced the Nizam-i-Mustafa, which significantly increased the influence of Islam within the Pakistani military. [10] The subsequent Islamization of Pakistan under Zia's regime rendered the narrative of Jihad increasingly logical and coherent, particularly in the context of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Madrassas, which had long served as traditional centers of education in Pakistan, played a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and practices. Native Pakistani religious groups utilized these institutions as recruitment centers, targeting male Afghan refugees to join the ranks of Jihad movements. The Zia regime not only promoted the establishment and expansion of the Deobandi madrasa system but also benefited from an influx of external financial support, which led to a rapid proliferation of madrassas across the country. There were 33,000 Madrassas at this time, of which over 8000 were officially registered.[11] This period saw the significant growth of the Deobandi and Haqqani networks of religious education, which contributed to the emergence of the Taliban.

2.2 The Development of Vocational Education

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the conclusion of the Cold War, the strategic significance of South Asia to the West diminished, leading to a decline in international engagement and a phenomenon often referred to as "donor fatigue". Consequently, global interest in providing support to Afghan refugees decreased. Concurrently, Pakistan's fragile economy in the 1990s rendered it increasingly incapable of sustaining assistance to the Afghan refugee population. In response, both the UNHCR and the Government of Pakistan began to promote the concept of self-reliance among the refugees. Despite these efforts, ongoing civil conflict and natural disasters in Afghanistan continued to drive waves of refugees into Pakistan, creating further challenges. In this context, vocational education experienced substantial growth, with numerous vocational training centers established to provide skills in areas such as mechanical maintenance and blanket production.

3. THE STATUS AND CHALLENGES OF AFGHAN REFUGEE'S EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

3.1 The Status of Afghan Refugee's Education in Pakistan

Domestic education in Pakistan is generally underdeveloped, and the evaluation of refugee education must be contextualized within the broader educational landscape of the country. [12] Pakistan has the second highest out-of-school rate globally, with overall low educational attainment levels. The large influx of Afghan refugees further exacerbates the challenges faced by the Pakistani education system, placing additional strain on already limited resources and infrastructure.

Education for Afghan refugees today is closely tied to issues of identities. The primary identification documents for Afghan refugees in Pakistan include the Proof of Registration (PoR) card, the Afghan Citizen Card (ACC), and the Refugee Card. According to Mudassar Mohammad Javed, Mudassar M. Javed stated in March 2022 that, in order to be admitted to school Afghans need to present a UNHCR Asylum Seeker certificate and a PoR card or an ACC. [14] However, in January 2022, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) reported that holders of the Afghan Citizen

Card are not permitted to access public education in Pakistan.

Based on fieldwork conducted in Islamabad, three primary forms of education are currently available to Afghan refugees: Madrassa, refugee primary schools, and private schools. In Afghan villages, Madrassa education is generally provided in Pakistani mosques or vacant houses within refugee settlements. The teachers, typically Pakistani, offer instruction in subjects such as the Qur'an, Hadith, Islamic studies, mathematics, Urdu, and English. Primary education is supported by NGOs like the Pakistan Alliance for Girls Education (PAGE) and Alight, with curricula aligned with materials provided by donors. The PAGE program is structured into three stages, labeled Packages A, B, and C, which are designed to be completed within three years. Due to economic constraints, only a limited number of refugee children have access to private schooling.

Educational support from organizations, such as the UNHCR, is limited to children who hold official registration cards. In its 2016-2018 Refugee Education Strategy for Pakistan, the UNHCR reported that 51% of Afghan refugees aged 6 to 17 were enrolled in school. Among these students, 43% attended Afghan private schools, 23% were enrolled in Pakistani public schools, 25% attended refugee village schools, and 10% were enrolled in other institutions, including non-formal schools, Pakistani private schools, or Madrassas. Despite these efforts, approximately 49% of primary school-aged children (5-11 years), equivalent to around 180,000 children, remained out of school.[13]

3.2 Educational Challenges

The challenges can be concluded as the following aspects:

- **Outdated infrastructure:** In refugee village schools, the infrastructure remains underdeveloped. Classrooms are often open-air or semi-open-air, with inadequate teaching facilities to support effective learning.
- **Lack of trained teachers:** A significant proportion of teachers in refugee villages lack formal education or training, which hinders the quality of education provided.
- **Weak economic foundation:** The majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan are employed in manual labor, with an average daily wage of approximately 1,000

Pakistani rupees (equivalent to about 3.5 USD). Based on interviews with Afghan refugees, it is challenging for them to gain access to Pakistani public schools, and most are unable to afford the tuition fees of private schools.

- **Barriers to female education:** Several sociocultural factors impede the education of girls. Due to the concept of *Namus*—the Pashtun code of honor concerning women—females must be accompanied by an adult male when leaving the house. Since men are often engaged in work during the day, they lack time to escort children to and from school. Additionally, many Afghan families are reluctant to send girls to school due to concerns related to female honor. Large family sizes further exacerbate this issue, as girls are often expected to care for younger siblings and handle household chores. Moreover, early marriage remains prevalent, with girls frequently marrying after menarche.
- **Lack of access for undocumented refugees:** A substantial number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan are undocumented. According to the Afghan Refugee Solutions Platform (ADSP), Afghan refugees without a registration card or Afghan citizenship card are excluded from accessing educational services.[14]
- **Disruption of education due to repatriation:** In recent years, Pakistan's repatriation policies have caused disruptions in refugee education. The frequent movement of refugees has dismantled the traditional village settlement structure, leading to the closure of schools and interruptions in the continuity of education for Afghan refugee children.

4. IMPACT OF REFUGEE EDUCATION ON PAKISTAN AND REFUGEES THEMSELVES

The impact of refugee education in Pakistan has varied over time. In its early stages, religious education served a highly political purpose, with curricula primarily focused on war-related content. Supported by the Pakistani government and the international community, Madrassas expanded rapidly and played a significant role in the formation of various armed groups, religious organizations, and sectarian movements. During this period, the rise of the Taliban and the expansion of the Haqqani religious network took place, both of which continue to influence

contemporary Pakistan. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan also altered Pakistan's international standing, particularly through its acceptance of Afghan refugees. This move elevated Pakistan's position in the Islamic world, breaking the international isolation and blockade it had faced. Afghan refugees, viewed as a strategic asset, utilized Madrasa education to strengthen the sense of Islamic unity, grounded in the concept of the Ummah, while temporarily setting aside border disputes stemming from the Durand Line.

In later years, the introduction of vocational education and modern science and technology instruction contributed to the personal development of refugees, providing them with skills to improve their livelihoods.

Currently, however, the overall low level of education among Afghan refugees poses challenges for both the long-term development of the refugees and Pakistani society. Refugees' perspectives are often constrained by their limited educational attainment. While many refugees exhibit strong religious devotion, their understanding of religion is often superficial, making them vulnerable to external influences. Extremist groups have been adept at exploiting religious sentiment to incite unrest, which undermines regional security and hampers broader social progress.

5. CONCLUSION

Refugee education is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including national policies, the international context, and the specific historical circumstances in which refugees find themselves. The host country's unfamiliar culture compels refugees to adapt to new societal norms, requiring them to gradually assimilate the language, culture, and social practices of their new environment, which in turn shapes their identity over the duration of their displacement.

The impact of refugee education is bidirectional. On one hand, it profoundly influences the development of refugees, providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary for integration or future repatriation. On the other hand, the ideological orientation of refugee education can have significant repercussions on the host society. For instance, the early education of Afghan refugees, which centered on jihadi resistance to the Soviet, reinforced a sense of solidarity within the Islamic world. However, the militarized nature of this education also contributed to the rise of a gun

culture, which has left contemporary Pakistan vulnerable to armed conflict, violent extremism, and terrorism. This has posed ongoing challenges to the country's stability and development. The presence of refugees and their integration will likely remain a significant issue in Pakistani society for the foreseeable future.

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