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Afghan Refugees' Precarious Circumstances In Pakistan
And Iran

UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR
REFUGEES (UNHCR)

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Introduction & History

Afghanistan is a landlocked country in South-Central Asia that has faced more than 4 decades of natural disasters, chronic poverty, conflict, and food insecurity (UNHCR, 2026). Since the 1970s, repeated wars, the return of Taliban in 2021, and ongoing conflicts, millions of Afghans fled their homes in search for safety and protection (Siavoshi, 2024, pp. 211-215). As seen in Figure 1, the host countries, Iran and Pakistan, share borders with Afghanistan, resulting in the influx of Afghan refugees in these countries. Additionally, due to the similarities in culture, language, and religion, most Afghan refugees choose to resettle in these regions. Since the year 2023, an estimated 5 million Afghans have returned to their home country.

While some returns occurred on a voluntary basis, several Afghan refugees have been forced to flee host countries due to policies and precarious conditions or have been forcibly deported. As of 2025, Iran and Pakistan have increased return and deportation rates. Although there are no active physical conflicts in Afghanistan, UNHCR has identified the region as unsafe due to the Taliban rule, particularly for women and children, further highlighting additional insecurities such as poverty, food shortages, and failure of many public services. According to the Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs & Response Plan, humanitarian assistance is needed for approximately 22.9 million Afghan refugees and internally displaced individuals. While Iran and Pakistan have assisted Afghan refugees in various ways over the past 4 decades, countless inequalities, precarious living situations, and threat of deportations remain as of 2026 (UNHCR, 2026).

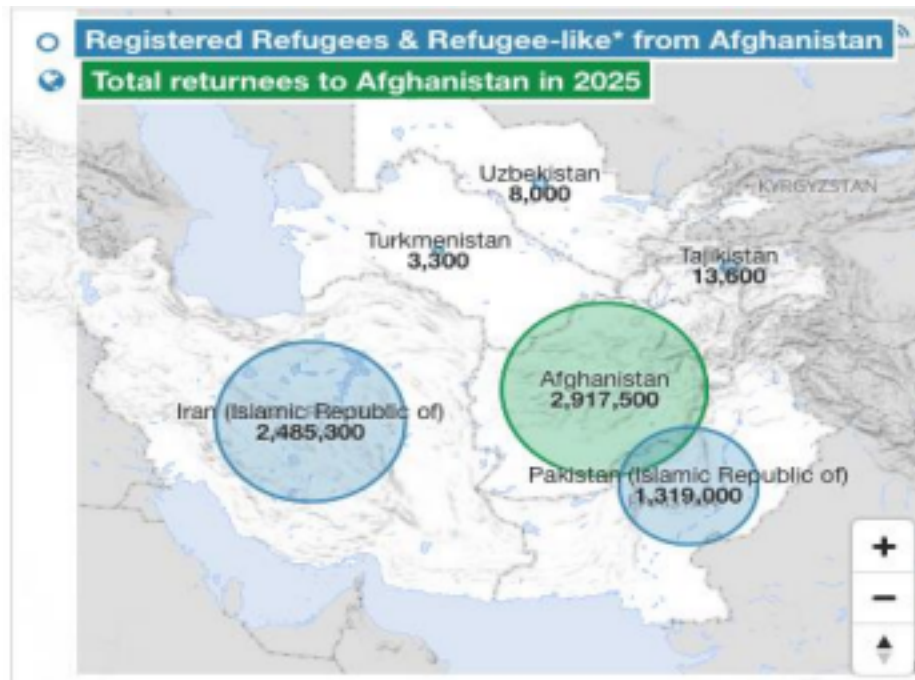


Figure 1
Registered refugees & refugee-like from Afghanistan and total returnees to Afghanistan in 2025 (map).

Note. Screenshot from the UNHCR data portal, *Afghanistan situation* (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>

Timeline of events in Afghanistan & Varying Policies in Host Countries of Iran & Pakistan

Timeline 1: 1973-1989

Iran

- The first influx of Afghan refugees to Iran began in 1979 due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.
- Open-door policy which allowed Afghans to stay in Iran indefinitely, accessing services such as school, healthcare, work, and letting them settle in many cities and villages freely (Siavoshi, 2024, pp. 211-212).

Pakistan

- The first large influx of Afghan refugees to Pakistan began in 1973 when King Zahir Shah was overthrown by Mohammed Daoud Khan who targeted Islamists and communists which forced them to flee Afghanistan (Qazi Zada et al., 2024, pp. 140).
- Pakistan did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention leaving the legal implications of millions of refugees uncertain by domestic policies, agreements, and collaborations with external organizations like the UNHCR whose help was limited (Durani et al., 2025, pp. 2-3).

Timeline 2: 1989-2012

Iran

- In 1989, Iran ends their open-door policy and creates a bureaucratic control system known as BAFIA: Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs.
- Early 1990s: Iran signed a tripartite repatriation agreement with Afghanistan and UNHCR, resulting in the repatriation of 600 thousand Afghan refugees in 1993
 - o In addition, due to changes in the government, cuts were made to services available for Afghans.
- Late 1990s: The emergence of Taliban rule in Afghanistan: resulting in yet another influx of refugees.
- Taliban collapsed and from 2001-2004, Iran's reduced capacity and increase in unemployment pushed for yet another repatriation.

- Tighter border control, restrictive labour laws, and the permanent shift from Blue Cards (indefinite stay granted) to Amayesh Cards (Temporary but renewable)
- In 2007, large deportations occurred along with the ban of Afghan refugees from certain Iranian provinces. In early 2010s, the Iranian government introduced:
 - Blocking of citizenships
 - Expansion of surveillance
 - Detention camps
 - Tighter borders
 - Reoccurring deportation threats (Siavoshi, 2024, pp. 212-213).

Pakistan

- After gaining momentum the Taliban came into power in 1996, during this time emigration from Afghanistan increased majorly as under the Taliban human rights were abused severely, including banning men and women from attending school and university. Despite Taliban's seizure of power, Pakistan continued to support the Taliban throughout 1990s offering logistical support and a safe haven during the US invasion. At the end of the Taliban's rule in 2001, 3.7 million Afghan refugees were registered across the world and nearly a million Afghans were displaced internally (Qazi Zada et al., 2024, pp. 141-143).
- In 2001 in Afghanistan, a new interim government was established to oversee a new constitution and democratic elections. This new hope and stability pushed improvements

in education, health, banking, and other public services.

- Between 2001 and 2005, nearly five million Afghans returned to home including 1.6 million from Pakistan with the help of the UNHCR.
- The Taliban regrouped with the help of Pakistani military and Inter-Service Intelligence Agency (ISI).
- After 9/11, Pakistan's help was reduced but not eliminated being a crucial element of the Taliban's resilience over time (Qazi Zada et al., 2024, pp. 141-143).

Timeline 3: 2013-2021

Iran

- The change in government eased deportation pressures and up to 450 thousand Afghans were issued 6-month visas.

- Afghan fighters and their families were granted Iranian citizenship after fighting in Syria. -

From 2019-2020, economic shock in Iran drives more deportation of Afghan refugees. ○

Some refugees voluntarily returned due to the currency devaluation in Iran.

- The intensification of Covid-19 also pushed for voluntary and forced returns of Afghan refugees.

- The Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, forcing another influx yet again.

- Shortly after, BAFIA announced that they will no longer accept new refugees due to

economic pressures (Siavoshi, 2024, pp. 213-215).

Pakistan

- In 2018 during a rally, the Prime Minister announced that all children of Afghans born and raised in Pakistan will have the right to a Pakistani citizenship. This received a lot of criticism from opponents and the Prime Minister backed down (EUAA, 2022, pp. 33).
- At the beginning of 2021 the UNHCR projected that there are 4.3 million internally displaced people in Afghanistan of which 400,000 were recorded in the first half of 2021.
- On August 15th the Taliban took over which led to half a million Afghans leaving the country at year end as projected by the UNHCR (Qazi Zada, et al., 2024, pp. 139).

Timeline 4: 2022-2026

Iran

- Iran launched a return plan where they warned Afghan refugees of deportation as of July 2025.
- In 2025, 2,917,500 Afghan refugees were deported back to their unsafe home with 1,879,200 deported from Iran and 995,700 deported from Pakistan (UNHCR, 2025).
- Currently, as Iranians fill the streets to protest the Islamic regime of Iran due to poor living conditions and lack of basic human rights, the future of both Iranians and Afghan refugees remains uncertain.

Pakistan

- In 2023, Pakistan announced that they will be realizing the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation

plan (IFRP), deporting all illegal and overstaying Afghans, including PoR and Afghan citizenship card (ACC) holders (UNHCR, 2025).

Precarious Conditions of Afghan Refugees in Host Countries

Pakistan

A. Legal status

Conditions in Pakistan for Afghan refugees have been inconsistent, unclear, and dependent on the economic needs of the country. In the late 1990s, Pakistan recognized the labour market needs for Afghan refugees yet people without proof of registration (PoR) cards were not allowed to work, and by late 2000s were classified as economic immigrants which eroded Afghans' rights and protection since they were no longer considered refugees (Durani et al., 2025, pp. 2-3). The latest escalation has been the "Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan" in 2025 which was set by the Government of Pakistan to regulate foreigners that are residing in the country without valid documentation, and for them to be deported, more specifically to forcefully deport Afghans (PoR and ACC holders included) to third-countries (UNHCR, 2025).

B. Health care Access and Barriers

Theoretically Afghans in Pakistan should have adequate access to health care since PoR holders are entitled to health services that match with Pakistani citizens. For unregistered Afghans health services are much less accessible, especially for women and pregnancy related care, as their economic resources are a much stronger determinant of receiving timely medical care (EUAA, 2022, pp. 84-85). On site studies suggest that the seemingly equal access to healthcare for Afghans in Pakistan is not successful in real life. An Afghan mother described that less severe illnesses go untreated until they get much worse, and that the health care facility is too expensive

and far from the camp for her to go on her own (Ismail, et al., 2025, pp. 127).

C. Education Access and Barriers

The constitution of Pakistan states that education is compulsory and must be possible for all children at no cost, no matter their origin, nationality, gender or race. Pakistan's shortage of schools and teachers have an extremely difficult time serving the constitution which has weakened the overall education system. The Pakistan Social and Living Standard Measurement Survey reports that 32% of school aged Pakistani children (age 5-16) are out of school, totaling to 22.8 million people. Based on a 2011 survey, the results are much worse for Afghans in Pakistan, as only 18% of Afghan girls of schooling age were enrolled in a school, and 39% of Afghan boys were enrolled in school (EUAA, 2022, pp. 72-73).

Common barriers to education include:

- Socioeconomic factors
- Lack of infrastructure
- Gender bias
- Security concerns, especially for girls in rural areas
- Absence of birth certificates and documentation (EUAA, 2022, pp. 74-75)
- Learning in a different language (Durrani, et al., 2025, pp. 4)

D. Psychological Implications: Afghan women in Pakistan

Women face systematic gender-based violence, restricted mobility, and unequal distribution of humanitarian aid. Afghan mothers have reported fear for their daughter's safety,

and lack of respect for women by men on campgrounds. In camps harassment of women is normalized, and if a woman tries to stand up for themselves there are harmful consequences. Afghan women in refugee camps try to step out of the gender norms and gain financial independence by starting small businesses like tailoring, carpet making, and selling vegetables at fruit markets. These activities and self-realization make the women proud, resilient and hopeful for providing a better future for their children (Ismail et al., 2025, pp. 127-128).

Iran

A. Legal status

Currently in Iran, there are three types of Afghan refugees. First are the registered refugees who are Amayesh cardholders which are temporary but renewable refugee ID/residence permit that allows them to legally stay with strict movement limits as travel permits are needed should they need to leave their province of registration. With this card, Afghan refugees have access to education, healthcare and insurance, banking services, and can apply for work permits only for predefined jobs. If there is a failure to renew documents, which come with high prices and fees, Afghan refugees face deportation. Some Afghan refugees have passports and Iranian visas acquire more rights than Amayesh cardholder. They have access to higher level jobs, freedom of movement, the ability to get a driver's license, and access to university education. However, after 2021, renewal of passports and visas became difficult, requiring a visit back in Afghanistan which is currently a challenge for many Afghans. Additionally, undocumented Afghans face the highest risk of arrest and deportation with access to limited services. They are unable to open a bank account, get SIM cards, open insurance accounts, or apply for work permits, resulting in their vulnerability to labour exploitation. Finally, there are undocumented Afghans who poses the headcount slip, providing temporary protection without full refugee

rights. Unfortunately, regardless of the headcount slip, they are under deportation threats and pressures (EUAA, 2022, pp. 12-30).

B. Health care Access and Barriers

All Afghan refugees, regardless of documentation, are permitted to use the primary healthcare including vaccinations, parental care, maternal and child health services, family planning, and essential medications. From 2015, registered Afghan refugees were able to enroll in Iran's national health insurance (UPHI) for hospital and clinical services, however there are high fees for such an insurance. On the other hand, undocumented and visa holder Afghans are not allowed to register for UPHI, resulting in high costs, particularly for pregnant women with constant fears of deportation. In addition, newborns of undocumented Afghan mothers cannot be registered in the Iranian system. Finally, during Covid-19, testing and vaccinations were broadly offered regardless of status (EUAA, 2022, pp. 67-68).

C. Education Access & Employment Barriers

Currently, Afghan refugee children have access to primary and secondary education in Iran, however schools may turn them down due to lack of identity documents, even for Afghan children born in Iran. Some practice barriers to education for these refugees are extra costs of uniforms, books, and online-learning tools. Unfortunately, access to higher education for undocumented/headcount slip holders and even some Amayesh cardholders is limited. Many Amayesh cardholders must apply for a student visa to be able to attend Iranian universities (EUAA, 2022, pp. 63-65).

In terms of employment, Amayesh cardholders can apply for government work permits with limitations to pre-approved job sectors and often restricted to province-based movement

rules while visa holders have broader access to various fields. However, undocumented Afghans are restricted and cannot apply for work permits, often working informally. Many Afghan refugees face exploitation as jobs open to them are low paid, menial, seasonal, and risky such as waste handling or construction. In addition, such jobs lack contracts and insurance with worsening conditions due to economic challenges in the country as a whole. Employment vulnerability is at an all-time high for Afghan refugees, particularly for women and children due to child labour and trafficking risks as Afghan households struggle (EUAA, 2022, pp. 65-67).

D. Psychological Implications

Covid-19 intensified the social suffering of Afghan refugees, particularly Afghan women due to stress of pandemic on top of war trauma, forced migration, and an insecure legal and political environment. Currently, several Afghan refugees undergo high levels of poverty, loss of income, food insecurity, housing instability, and increased gender-based violence and family conflicts (Golmohammad et al., 2025, pp. 6-7). Additionally, limited access to basic services such as bank accounts, SIM cards, and job permits creates feelings of hopelessness and humiliation, further pushing Afghan refugees to work around the rules or give up on goals. The biggest stress for Afghan refugees is the threat of deportation which affects both documented and undocumented refugees, resulting in reduced public life, silence on issues, and mental health strains such as stress, depression, and anxiety.

Many feel trapped and unable to plan their future in Iran as conditions are uncertain and opportunities are limited. Moreover, Afghan refugees undergo discrimination in schools and labour markets, contributing to lower levels of self-confidence, particularly for women as work permits and independence are restricted (Zandi-Navgran et al., 2023, pp. 5-8). Furthermore,

Afghan refugees feel unwelcomed and have a lack of belonging as social attitudes towards them are unfair. Many express that protesting their unstable conditions is impossible as they are often stereotyped as dangerous and undesirable members of society. The lack of support and empathy from many Iranians can be discouraging for Afghan refugees, leading to an increase of lack of belonging and motivation loss (Samari et al., 2023, pp. 36-38). Despite all these challenges and uncertain living conditions, many Afghan refugees believe that Iran is safer and more livable even with its exclusions (Zandi-Navgran, 2023, pp. 7-8).

International Response: UNHCR & Host Countries (Iran & Pakistan)

Iran

Throughout the history of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, UNHCR has been a huge advocate for those forced to flee their homes by responding to emergencies, protecting human rights, building better futures, collecting data and facilitating forums and committees. The UN refugee Agency delivers life-saving aid and protection, advocates for better asylum laws, and works towards long-term solutions that return all refugees home safely or secure their safety and success in a new country (UNHCR, 2026).

UNHCR has worked with Iran's government agency, BAFIA, to provide legal aid in two ways; (1) UNHCR-hired lawyers that offer free legal help regardless of Afghan refugee status, and (2) Dispute Settlement Committees (DSCs), run by BAFIA, for Amayesh cardholders that resolve disputes between Afghans and Iranians. In the first half of 2022, these services were able to reach thousands of Afghan refugees. Additionally, UNHCR provided protection and psychosocial counselling for highly vulnerable individuals, helping with stress, trauma, and protection concerns. Moreover, UNHCR has supported resettlement cases, further facilitating

voluntary returns to Afghanistan. This is mainly available for Amayesh cardholders and registered refugees through the headcount slips. Aside from providing cash assistance, UNHCR runs information and awareness campaigns to further explain services, resettlement options, and practical issues such as banking for new arrivals. Under the 2022 Regional Refugee Response Plan, UNHCR implemented support programs for education, food security, protection, livelihoods, and working with multiple UN and NGO partners (EUAA, 2022, pp. 71-73).

Furthermore, UNHCR advocated for Universal Public Health Insurance for Afghan refugees in Iran which is government-run initiative between BAFIA, UNHCR and Iran's health insurance organizations, IHIO and MoHME (Ministry of Health and Medical Education). By 2021, UNHCR covered 100% of the premium costs for 100,000 of the most vulnerable Afghan refugees, however due to economic challenges in Iran and Covid-19, UNHCR has approved the temporary increase of the Afghan refugees they will support through UPHI (Baloch, 2021). Finally, UNHCR Iran has partnered with various organization such as Society for Recovery Support (SRS), Rebirth Charity Organization (Rebirth), and active NGOs who support women

Pakistan

In the absence of a national refugee support framework, the UNHCR has been an integral part of Afghan refugee support in Pakistan. Despite Pakistan not signing the 1951 Refugee convention, the UNHCR has given extensive support and protection aligned with international standards to Afghans in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2026).

The most significant systematic contribution by the UNHCR was their collaboration with the Pakistani Government in 2006 on the issuance of PoR cards, which qualified the Afghans' status as registered refugees granting them legal temporary stay and access to basic

services like legal aid, education and health care (EUAA, 2022, p. 21). The UNHCR operates free advice and legal aid centers for PoR holders near the main refugee hubs. In 2022 there were nine locations. Services include interventions to release Afghans arrested due to their legal status, court representation, and legal counselling (EUAA, 2022, p. 90)

Additionally, since 2009 the Pakistani Government has been working together with the UNHCR under the Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) initiative to decrease the drain on public services and infrastructure in Pakistan. The benefits of this collaboration have reached more than 12.4 million Afghan refugees and Pakistanis prioritizing education, health, livelihoods, water and infrastructure. The program is designed to bridge the gap between short-term humanitarian needs and long-term development of the host country.

The four objectives of the RAHA program are:

- Community development and social cohesion
- Fostering livelihoods in local communities
- Restoring social services and infrastructure
- Strengthening social protection mechanisms (UNHCR, 2026)

Agreements between UNHCR, IRAN AND PAKISTAN

In 2019, UNHCR set up a formal cooperation forum with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, hoping to coordinate the long-term plan for Afghan refugees' resettlement. The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees is an agreement among UNHCR and these countries with two main goals: (1) Support host countries like Iran and Pakistan in providing services and managing Afghan refugee populations, and (2) Invest in areas of return in Afghanistan, providing safety

and basic support, for refugees who choose to return or when refugees are able to return to reduce the pressure of migration again (Baloch, 2021).

Despite UNHCR's helpful support and advocacy for Afghan refugees, deportations and detention continues for those who entered irregularly or those with invalid documentation (EUAA, 2022, p. 72). According to data calculated in 2025, more than 1.9 million Afghans have been coerced to return to their home country with more than 300,000 Afghans returning from Pakistan and over 1.5 million returning from Iran with 410,000 who were deported. According to the United Nations Human Rights (2026), thousands of those who have returned are unaccompanied children.

Experts are calling out that Afghanistan is not a safe country due to the Taliban power, further advocating for Afghan refugees by reminding host countries that they are violating UNCHR's 2023 non return advisory. Currently, there are vast uncertainties regarding the conditions of Afghan refugees in both host countries with particular concerns surrounding the returnees who are children, women, and households without a *mahram* (households who are run by women and do not have a male decision maker). These concerns are due to the Taliban's severe restrictions on women (United Nations, 2025).

Tasks of the Committee

Given Afghanistan's long-running crisis and the surge in displacement since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, this session has been called to discuss what the international community can do to respond to the precarious conditions Afghan refugees face in their host countries of Iran and Pakistan. Delegates should think about why such regions remain the main destination for Afghans fleeing insecurity and how constant policy shifts in both countries shape everyday life

for refugees through documentation rules, limits on movement and work, and ongoing risks of detention or deportation.

Keeping in mind that Iran and Pakistan are sovereign states, delegates are expected to propose practical, cooperative, and rights-based solutions that improve refugee protection and recognize pressures on host countries. Delegates should draft solutions, similar to the General Assembly, that set priorities, support, and action, focusing on reducing vulnerability created by uncertain legal status, providing access to fair and accessible pathways to documentation and renewal with advanced legal support, and provide protection from the deportation of those at risk, particularly women, children and undocumented families. Moreover, delegates should consider how UNHCR and partners can expand targeted support in health care, education, livelihoods, cash assistance, and psychological services, further improving outreach programs for clarification on existing services and accessibility. Finally, delegates should address international burden-sharing which could include increased funding for host countries and adding more third-country pathways, further assessing and improving how regional frameworks like the SSAR, as mentioned above, can support host countries while also investing in safe areas in Afghanistan which can result in safer returns with sustainable living conditions in those regions.

Note: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) protects and supports people forced to flee their homes because of conflict, violence, or persecution. They provide shelter, food, and help people find safety. More information can be found here: <https://www.unhcr.org/>

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ABOUT THE BACKGROUND GUIDE

This Background Guide has been prepared for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to support delegates at the ISOW Model UN on April 8, 2026.

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1. Executive Summary

The displacement of Afghan populations can be considered one of the longest-running and most complex refugee situations in the modern international system. Since



the late 1970s, repeated waves of foreign intervention, internal conflict, and political repression have led millions of Afghans to flee their homes, primarily to neighboring Pakistan and Iran (Khan, 2020; UNHCR, 2025). The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 made this crisis more intensified, causing new displacement while highly

reducing safety, rights, and opportunities within Afghanistan itself, especially for women and girls (OHCHR, 2023).

Even though Pakistan and Iran have hosted Afghan refugees for over four decades, recent political and economic developments have notably increased refugee precarity. In Pakistan, policies like the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) have normalized deportation and raised fear among Afghan communities (Jehangir, 2023). In Iran, intricate documentation systems and economic pressures have pushed many refugees into irregular status, making them easily exposable to exploitation and forced return (EUAA, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2013). This Briefing Note provides delegates with a structured overview of the historical causes of Afghan displacement, the mandate and limitations of the UNHCR, and the legal, economic, and social challenges facing Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran. It intends to support informed debate on sustainable, rights-based solutions embedded in international refugee law, particularly the principle of non-refoulement (Mowahid & Ahmadi, 2025).

2. A Brief History of Afghanistan

Afghanistan, often noted for its rugged terrain, is associated with volatility and extreme Islamic forms of governance. This nation has been revered as the graveyard of empires, highlighting its mystery as an enclosed society, landlocked in the remote central landmass of Central Asia.

However, Afghanistan has a rich history and society; it was not always prone to violence,

extremism, and unpredictability. Its cities and villages, such as Kabul and Herat, sat along the Silk Road, connecting and bringing commerce and ideas from across the world's corners, allowing the formation of rich and diverse cities and townships. Afghanistan's people and cities have no less of a role than the great cities of Tashkent, Delhi, Tehran, and Istanbul have held. However, despite its strategic importance and status as an unfortunate geographic and geopolitical hotspot, Afghanistan remains a region of interest for many of the world's hegemonic powers (Khan, 2020). This often has resulted in the interest of great power politics to override the interests of the local peoples, culminating in immense humanitarian crises in the forms of displacement, division, and repression.

The modern period of nation-state dynamics witnessed the British and Russian Empires engaging in what was known as "The Great Game" over Afghanistan. Its strategic importance ensured dominance on the Asian continent as the country remains at the crossroads of Eurasia's richest civilizations. The modern precarious conditions of Afghans remain a product of the Cold War geopolitical conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States, in which the Soviet Union would invade and occupy Afghanistan as a means to prop up a client Marxist-Leninist regime in the winter of 1979. The United States, along with its allies such as Pakistan, would train, fund, and support the Mujahideen, a collection of various Islamic fighters against the Soviet occupiers and the Marxist regime in Kabul (Khan, 2020). This would culminate in a catastrophic conflict, forcing many Afghans to flee to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran.

Although the Soviet Red Army would eventually withdraw from Afghanistan, and many Afghans did not return home, the fragile and volatile conditions did not cease. A civil war between the Kabul Marxist regime and Mujahideen fighters would continue to persist until 1996, eventually imposing a strict and repressive form of medieval traditions and laws onto its people as the Taliban would assume victory (Khan, 2020). In the outbreak of the new century, the American military and its NATO allies engaged in a war on terror in Afghanistan, spending two decades rigorously fighting the Taliban and other Islamist groups, only for the eventual withdrawal of US forces in 2021, culminating in the return of the Taliban to power. The continuous sporadic conditions between foreign occupation and internal conflict kept Afghans as the longest protracted refugees in Asia (Khan, 2020).

3. The Mandate and Challenges of the UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the primary international organization dedicated to protecting refugees and coordinating responses to displacement. The UNHCR mandate is rooted in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, which define the legal status of a refugee and emphasize the obligation of states to protect individuals fleeing persecution (Mowahid & Ahmadi, 2025). Central to this framework is the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits states from forcibly returning refugees to territories where their life or freedoms would be threatened.

With the Afghanistan refugee and displacement crisis, the UNHCR remains a critical actor in providing humanitarian assistance, legal documentation, and access to basic services in host countries such as Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, 2025). The organization also coordinates regional strategies to support local host communities while advocating for refugee rights. However, its means and capacity are constrained by limited funding, political resistance from host states, and insufficient international burden-sharing. Both Pakistan and Iran have expressed frustrations that they host millions of refugees while receiving comparatively low levels of long-term financial and resettlement support from wealthier states (UNHCR, 2025).

These pressures often translate into restrictive national policies. Historical evidence demonstrates that when host states perceive refugee hosting as an unfair burden, they are more likely to limit access to work, education, and legal protection (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Furthermore, the UNHCR faces significant challenges in monitoring returnees, as conditions in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan remain unsafe and unpredictable, mostly for women and marginalized minorities (OHCHR, 2023).

4. Precarious Circumstances in Pakistan

4.1 Legal Status and Forced Repatriation

Pakistan remains a major destination and host country for Afghan refugees, spanning generations since the first wave of refugees arrived in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This nation has allowed long-term residence through temporary registration systems. Cold War political

dynamics first welcomed the Afghans as Muslim kin against an ideological foe of Communism, which also allowed for American support to aid Pakistan's Afghan refugee population. However, recent policy changes, reflecting both the region's changing geopolitical dynamics and Pakistan's precarious economic and political conditions, have prioritized repatriation over protection. The Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) targets undocumented Afghans and has resulted in widespread arrests, evictions, and deportations (Jehangir, 2023). Even registered refugees face insecurity due to frequent policy shifts and weak enforcement of legal standards.

Media discourse in Pakistan has shifted towards framing Afghan refugees as a source of crime and terrorism, reinforcing public support for exclusionary measures (Jehangir, 2023). This environment produces conditions that undermine the principle of non-refoulement and expose refugees to forced return to unsafe conditions in Afghanistan (Amnesty International, 2022)

4.2 Economic Marginalization and Market Discrimination

Afghan refugees living in Pakistan often endure severe systemic barriers to economic participation. Studies indicate that the economic situation for Afghans in Pakistan remains quite volatile, as most are employed in informal labour markets, which often results in lower wages and riskier working conditions and exposure to workplace exploitation (Ahmed, 2019). Refugee status often results in lower pay compared to Pakistani nationals with similar skills, reinforcing cycles of poverty and dependency.

Economic insecurity has direct consequences for household well-being. Research indicates that Afghan refugee women in Pakistan live through widespread food insecurity and poor nutritional outcomes, particularly among female-headed households (Fatima et al., 2023). These conditions are further exacerbated by the lack of legal work permits and access to social protection systems.

4.3 Gendered Vulnerabilities and Health Challenges

Afghan women refugees experience distinct forms of precarity shaped by patriarchal barriers as an additional obstacle to the current legal insecurities and social exclusion many Afghans undergo. Studies document limited access to reproductive healthcare, and high cases of material health risks, as well as significant barriers to mental health support systems (Iqbal & Liang, 2025; Ur Rehman et al., 2021). Cultural norms, combined with weak legal protections, have further

restricted the ability to access education, which often hinders Afghan women's agency and makes them dependent on men in their families. Furthermore, the means to seek assistance after being widowed and reporting on abusive relationships are limited (Khan et al., 2024).

5. Precarious Circumstances in Iran

5.1 Documentation Systems and Legal Insecurity

Iran manages Afghan refugees primarily through the Amayesh registration system, which allows temporary legal status but needs frequent renewal and compliance with complicated administrative procedures (EUAA, 2022). Refugees who fail to renew documentation face the possibility of becoming undocumented, exposing them to detention and deportation (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

Legal scholars claim that the Amayesh system provides only minimal protection and falls short of international refugee standards, particularly in ensuring long-term stability and access to rights (Mowahid & Ahmadi, 2025).

5.2 Economic Shocks and Social Cohesion

Economic instability in Iran largely affects Afghan refugees. During periods of inflation or sanctions-related downturns, refugees experience greater declines in income and consumption compared to host communities (Hoseini & Jahan Dideh, 2022). These inequalities contribute to social tension and fuel negative viewpoints of refugees as economic competitors.

Research on public attitudes shows the emergence of prejudiced feelings and hatred emotions toward Afghan refugees, which influence policy debates and everyday interactions (Ruhani et al., 2023).

5.3 Access to Health and Education

Iran has taken steps to include some Afghan refugees in public health insurance schemes, representing a partial policy success (Amuzadeh-Araei et al., 2025). But, significant barriers remain, specifically for low-income families and individuals with disabilities. Refugees with disabilities face limited access to rehabilitation services due to cost, discrimination, and language barriers (Amini et al., 2024).

Comparative research asserts that Afghan refugees in Iran deal with poorer health outcomes than those resettled in countries such as Germany, highlighting regional disparities in protection and care (Rahimitabar et al., 2023). When it comes to education, while primary school access has expanded, higher education remains hugely inaccessible for Afghan refugees (Seddighi et al., 2022).

5.4 Secondary Migration and Global Implications

The lack of durable solutions in Iran has driven many Afghan refugees to attempt secondary migration to Europe. These journeys are often dangerous and arranged by smuggling networks, exposing refugees to exploitation and violence (Crawley & Kaytaz, 2022; Amnesty International, 2022). Such movements underline the limitations of regional protection frameworks and the urgent need for broader international responsibility-sharing (Mielke & Etzold, 2022).

6. Successes and Failures

6.1 Institutional Successes

In spite of having significant challenges, both Pakistan and Iran have maintained long-term collaboration with the UNHCR. Iran's inclusion of refugees in certain national health initiatives highlights an important example of policy integration (Amuzadeh-Araei et al., 2025). In Pakistan, vocational training programs have provided refugee populations with skills development, even as labor market discrimination persists (Khan et al., 2024).

6.2 Systemic Failures

The most persistent failure across both contexts is the continued violation of non-refoulement. Amnesty International (2022) records forced returns and the use of violence against Afghans attempting cross-border movement. Long-term legal uncertainty and absence of pathways to citizenship or permanent residence have established refugee precarity and undermined human development (Rahimitabar et al., 2023).

7. Tasks of the Committee: Questions for Debate

Delegates are encouraged to address the following questions:

1. Legal Regularization: How can documentation systems be simplified to prevent refugees from falling into undocumented status?
2. Economic Rights: What policies can decrease labor market discrimination and ensure fair wages for refugees?
3. Protection of Vulnerable Groups: How can women, children, and persons with disabilities be better supported?
4. International Responsibility: What mechanisms can expand third-country resettlement and reduce regional pressure?

8. Conclusion

This Background Guide has covered the history, legal responsibilities, and current challenges that shape the lives of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran. While both countries have hosted Afghan refugees for several years, ongoing problems like insecure legal status, limited job opportunities, and restricted access to health and education still continue to place refugees in difficult and uncertain circumstances. These challenges are made worse by regional instability and limited support from the international community. As delegates discuss this topic at the ISOW Model UN on April 8 in 2026, they are encouraged to think about solutions that respect national sovereignty, follow international refugee law, protect vulnerable groups, and support long-term and cooperative responses to one of the world's longest refugee crises.

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