



Forced back to terror: Pakistan and Iran's mass deportation of Afghans

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Abstract: Pakistan and Iran are currently deporting thousands of Afghan refugees, which is rapidly tearing families apart and is displacing them to an unstable war zone—Afghanistan. This situation is creating poverty and fear among the migrants, and the absence of financial aid demands an urgent global action.

For more than four decades, Pakistan and Iran—the largest destination countries for Afghan refugees—have hosted millions of Afghans displaced by war and insecurity in their own country, according to [Amnesty International](#), [UNHCR](#), and the [Migration Policy Institute](#). During this time, many families established long-term residence, generations of children have grown up, attended school, and built communities that provided a sense of stability and belonging outside Afghanistan. Today, however, this situation is undergoing a significant shift.

Over the past two years, the tone in Pakistan has shifted drastically. Rising border tensions and periodic violent incidents between Pakistani forces and militants allegedly operating from Afghanistan prompted the country's government to adopt a more restrictive stance towards the Afghan nationals residing within Pakistan. These policies have had severe consequences for long-established

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Afghan communities in Pakistan, while the Taliban have consistently denied all the accusations of cross-border militancy.

As of May 2025, [more than 280,000](#) Afghans have been deported or pressured to leave Pakistan and [more than 256,000](#) Afghan nationals have reported having been returned to Afghanistan from Iran in June 2025. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) between 700 and 800 families are being forced to cross the border into Afghanistan each day, many of whom have not lived in the country for decades or have never lived there. This sudden wave of deportation is taking place at a time when both Pakistan and Iran are facing major economic challenges, including high inflation, political instability, and limited resources to support their population. Long-established Afghan communities are now experiencing heightened uncertainty and disruption.

At the [Torkham border](#), a major crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan, many Afghan families, including refugees, are being returned daily. Media reports describe long queues, crowded conditions, and people (also elderly and mothers with young children) carrying their belongings across the border. This includes children born in Pakistan who have little or no memory of Afghanistan, as well as elderly individuals and families who have lived in Pakistan for decades.

While inside the cities of Pakistan and Iran, the situation is similarly tense, with Afghan refugees facing significant threats to their basic rights. Many families report arrests during nighttime raids on their homes, often conducted without prior warning. [Refugees are frequently detained](#) without any access to legal support and may be separated from their personal documents. This goes beyond a routine deportation process; it represents a form of displacement that has disrupted individuals' livelihoods, compromised overall personal security, and contributed to family separation and broader socioeconomic instability.

The following sections present accounts reported by Afghan nationals who experienced deportation. Hashim, a 57-year-old man I interviewed, said he had spent the past 30 years in Peshawar raising his family and believing they were in a safe environment. One night in December 2024, the police gave him and others just two hours to vacate their homes. He has now returned to Afghanistan without employment perspectives, no housing, and no clear path how to rebuild his life. Salman, an elderly man from Dikundi Province, spent nearly forty-five years in Iran. When he was forced to leave, he returned to Afghanistan with his four children and only enough money to reach the border, with no access to secure food or shelter beyond that.

Stories of this nature are increasing rapidly daily, and they raise serious humanitarian concerns. Afghans returning home are not just stepping back into uncertainty, they are entering a humanitarian emergency. Afghanistan is currently ill-equipped to provide for displaced populations. According to the reports published by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), deported Afghans face extreme poverty, unemployment, and a lack of financial support from the state. These

challenges are largely attributed to ongoing violence and the scarcity of basic resources within the country.

Women and girls are currently the most vulnerable. Many are restricted from working, pursuing their study beyond grade six, or move outside without a Mahram (a male guardian, such as a father, brother, son, or husband). Ethnic minorities, human rights activists, and journalists are at heightened risk. For many returnees, Afghanistan is no longer, or never was, home. It is a land ruled by fear. In some cases, Afghans have reportedly been forced to sign return documents and then were left in remote areas, such as deserts, with no food or means of transport.

The [UNHCR](#) has indicated that an additional fund of [\\$258.6](#) million would be required to meet the basic needs of displaced people, including food, shelter, mental health support, financial assistance, and specialised care for children, women, and individuals with disabilities.

According to the local authorities in Afghanistan, the returnees have received a cash aid ranging from 4,000 to 10,000 Afghanis from the local governing body - a small sum that hardly [covers a week's survival](#). Even Taliban officials at the borders admit the strain. 'The arrival of people in such large numbers naturally brings difficulties', said [Bakht Jamal Gohar](#), head of refugee affairs at Torkham.

In Pakistan Afghans have been provided with [Proof of Registration](#) (PoR) cards and [Afghan Citizen Cards](#) (ACC). However, neither the PoR nor the ACC confers formal refugee status or long-term residency. These documents are temporary and shall be renewed upon expiration. Afghan refugees, even those holding valid cards, remain at risk of detention, harassment, and deportation, according to [The New Humanitarian](#). Concerns over PoR card expiration and uncertain extension have also been reported by [Dawn](#), while the [Express Tribune](#) noted the temporary halt on deportations for PoR holders. Overall, Pakistan's system offers a temporary residence permit but does not provide long-term legal protection.

Similarly, the Iranian government issues [Amayesh cards](#), which grant short-term residency and limited access to services. These permits need to be renewed annually and are also subject to policy changes, as reported by [Human Rights Watch](#). Employment, movement, and other legal rights are restricted, while for undocumented Afghans remain at substantial risk of deportation. Recent reports from [Amu TV](#) highlight ongoing confusion and policy shifts within Iran's Afghan refugees documentation system.

Pakistan and Iran rely on short-term, unstable documentation for Afghan population. The absence of formal refugee protection contributes to recurring vulnerability and displacement among these community. While there have been no legally binding international court rulings against Pakistan or Iran over the deportations of Afghans, they have been strongly criticised by the UN bodies and rights groups. For example, the [UNHCR](#) has called on Pakistan to exempt Afghans from forced return under the non-refoulement principle, and UN experts, including special rapporteurs, have publicly condemned forced returns in both countries.

[ECOI](#) reports indicate that such returns could constitute serious human rights abuses.

Collective international action is urgently needed. States and international agencies must step in to provide support and protection to affected populations. No one should be forced to return to a situation where their safety, livelihoods, and basic rights cannot be secured.

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