Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Past, Present, and Future

Masuma Hasan: This morning the Taliban declared that their military mission is over and their diplomatic mission has started. So many dramatic events have taken place in Afghanistan to the surprise of much of the world and the surprise of world leaders. The Taliban entered Kabul on 15 August this year and the Afghan National Forces collapsed or fled. There is a lot of irony in this situation. Yesterday’s designated terrorists became partners in the dialogue for peace, and the parties in Doha bestowed a kind of legitimacy upon the Taliban. How much control the Taliban exercise or will exercise in the future, not only in Kabul but throughout Afghanistan still remains to be seen. One thing is certain, however, that thousands of Afghans do not want to live under a Taliban regime, in spite of their assurances of moderation and the declaration of a general amnesty. We have seen the power of the media. We have seen their frantic efforts to flee on our television screens. It is said that more than 125,000 people have been evacuated from Afghanistan since 15 August. The United Nations estimates that 500,000 more will leave Afghanistan by the end of this year. The United Nations has also asked all Afghanistan’s neighbours to keep their borders open to meet this crisis of exodus.

The focus of this webinar today is Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Apprehending a crisis Pakistan had made it clear that it would not give shelter to any more Afghans and if they came at all, they would be restricted to camps along the border. Pakistan has fenced almost all its frontier with Afghanistan, more than 2,600 kilometres, and it has posted its army along the frontier. As we all know, Pakistan is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention 1951 or to its subsequent protocol, but for humanitarian reasons, it has hosted millions of Afghan refugees for more than 40 years. Some of them are registered and documented while others are not. These refugees and their families have spread beyond the refugee camps and they have impacted the economy and social life of Pakistan in various ways.

International pressure and the very unusual dynamics of the situation have compelled Pakistan to facilitate the evacuation from Afghanistan of foreign diplomats, members of UN agencies, aid giving

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* Dr Masuma Hasan, Chairman, The Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, and former Ambassador and Cabinet Secretary of Pakistan.
bodies and members of non-governmental organizations of some significance. They will transit through Pakistan for a few weeks before travelling to their ultimate destinations. The government has identified many hotels in Rawalpindi and Peshawar to accommodate thousands of people, we still have to see how that will work out. According to press reports, 40,000 evacuees will transit through Pakistan to be accommodated in Islamabad, Peshawar, Lahore and Karachi. These figures and details are still unclear. But these are high profile visitors and the real claims for entry will be at the border crossings in Torkham and Chaman. According to the Interior Minister, a couple of days ago 27,000 people have already entered. On the other hand, The Guardian newspaper numbers these refugees in many thousands, we do not have any definite figures.

To address these issues, we have three distinguished speakers: ambassadors Rustam Shah Mohmand and Aziz Ahmad and Saba Gul Khattak. The first speaker is Rustam Shah Mohmand. One of the most senior Pakistani diplomats, he is a well-known expert for Afghanistan and Central Asian affairs. He served as Pakistan’s Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2002 to 2005 at a critical time in the history of Afghanistan just after the 9/11 bombardments, and also held the position of Chief Commissioner for Afghan Refugees in Islamabad for a decade. He has also consulted with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for many years. He will speak on ‘Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: An Analytical Overview.’

**Rustam Shah Mohmand:** History has been made and incredible developments have taken place in Afghanistan; they have stunned the world and surprised even the Taliban themselves. The influx of the arrival of Afghan refugees in Pakistan also was an epoch-making event in the early 1980s. The setting was provided by the political upheaval inside Afghanistan which was a stable monarchy. The monarchy was an institution that was widely respected, but in July 1973 Sardar Daoud abolished the monarchy and seized power and he and Afghanistan had to pay a very heavy price. In 1978, the Saur Revolution took place and two pro-communist parties, Parcham and Khalq, took command of the country. That was unacceptable to many Afghans because it was counter to their beliefs and they started to pour into Pakistan and Iran in the early 1980s. And the mujahideen who created six or seven groups began to fight back.

In those days, when the refugees were coming into Pakistan, there was a widespread sentiment in the people to support them, to embrace them, and to help them. Because it was believed that these people had left their homes in order to protect their ideology, their Islam and their
faith. So the people were ready to help them; land was provided free, wherever they went. The military ruler of Pakistan then thought it was an opportunity he must seize to legitimize his government and he did exactly that. He became a darling of the West. The Americans and Europeans came in, and the United Nations came in a big way. We were there in the refugee commissionerate to set up camps and allow the refugees to settle wherever they liked. That was one of the fundamental policy decisions that we took because we were not in a position to provide all help to the refugees. So the refugees may go wherever they wished to go and we would look after them along with the United Nations to render critical help in terms of tents, food-aid, non-food aid, water supply, electricity.

This was a defining movement in Pakistan’s history and one of the high watermarks of the Pakistani nation, extending help to people in need on the basis of mutual faith and in the larger interest of good neighbourly relations. There was spontaneity in showing affection, embracing them and giving them land free of any compensation or cost, to begin with. There were no conflicts, no problems in settlements. It was amazing that hundreds of thousands of people settled in the Frontier and Balochistan in such large numbers, across the tribal area, across the settled area, without generating any hostility, ill will, or creating any problem. It was unprecedented in contemporary history.

So there we were. With the help of the UNHCR, we set up schools and dispensaries, water supply schemes and tube wells, built roads for them, and developed skills development centres. The WFP provided them with wheat and other commodities and food aid. There was no problem. Food security, protection as well as water supply and education were ensured. Nobody would die of hunger or be denied basic education, if they wanted to seek education. Primary schools and primary health centres were set up all over the camps, in a very comprehensive and systematic way. Other NGOs and organizations came to support and they all were properly registered. A commissionerate was established in Quetta and Peshawar to look after basic needs. A regular rapport was established with the refugee leaders. Camps were established from Chitral up to D.I. Khan and South Waziristan and across Balochistan in Dalbandin and other areas all along the border and even deeper into the hinterlands of the province.

There was this mutual respect between the communities and that came in a big way as a great help. The local community and the Afghans co-existed peacefully and happily, creating no problem for the administration. This went on and on. Then, of course, there were these phases of repatriation. Whenever the situation in Afghanistan improved,
people began to repatriate. And many of them repatriated, since the early settlement in the 1980s, in various phases. At the moment, of course, we have about 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees and a few, about 400,000 to 500,000 unregistered refugees. They are in Pakistan but now the help that they used to receive has almost stopped. There are more or less on their own, but some help in the form of education and health care is still being extended to them by the UN system, NGOs and the Pakistani government.

Now, in the wake of these developments in the last three to four weeks, there are reports that perhaps some more hundreds of thousands of refugees might cross over into Pakistan. I believe that this may not happen, because the Afghan Taliban are facing no resistance whatsoever. So the danger of the civil war in Afghanistan at the moment doesn’t exist. And after many years there is a government in Afghanistan which is not going to fight against any other rival or opposition. Secondly, there is this fatigue syndrome. People in Afghanistan are fed up of conflict and they want peace. And any government that will deliver peace will be supported massively by the people in Afghanistan. They believe that the Taliban can deliver peace as they did in the areas they controlled from 1996 to 2001. So these are two pluses. Of course, the challenges are formidable.

Some refugees might still try to come in, primarily because they have relatives here and because of the acute poverty now, which is not going to be resolved very easily. This year, in particular, there has been a terrible drought in Afghanistan and food production is down by almost 40 per cent. There were 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan before this. After these developments, there are about 400,000 more IDPs. Then, the pandemic also added to the suffering and miseries of the people in Afghanistan. Of course, more than 50 per cent of them live below the poverty line and unemployment is up to about 60 per cent in the country. Opium production has gone up to 7,000 tons. There are hundreds of thousands of drug addicts in Afghanistan. So the challenges for the new government to confront are formidable and would require not only massive support from the community but also from the international community. They have to align themselves with the international community and that is the reason for their trying to create an inclusive government that would seek legitimacy and recognition from not only the regional countries but also from the rest of the world. Because they would depend on manpower, technology, and resources of the international community to help them overcome the huge challenges that Afghanistan will confront in the coming days. More so, because the Americans have withheld the nine billion dollars in their banks, which is Afghanistan’s money. Perhaps it won’t be released soon and the World
Bank also is not going to release the 500 million dollars aid that they had offered to extend to Afghanistan, in the near future. That will compound the worries of the new government. Maybe Russia and China are going to help but I do not think that their help will be enough to overcome Afghanistan’s financial problems in the immediate future. They would have to reach out to the international community in a big way.

The Afghan refugees, if they decide to come here, will be in tens of thousands, not in hundreds of thousands. They can still be accommodated in the border areas by setting up camps with the help of UNHCR. Yesterday the Security Council passed a resolution asking the regional countries to open their borders for those who are going to leave Afghanistan. If Pakistan closes its border, it will run counter to the call from the UN for opening the borders. Other than that, it would be inhuman and unfair and affect the goodwill that exists in Afghanistan for Pakistan, whatever goodwill is left for Pakistan would be eroded. Because at this time of crisis, shutting the door on the Afghan refugees will be a step that the Afghans will never forget and forgive.

So if we could look after two million refugees for such a long time, we can also look after another 100,000 or 50,000 refugees for a shorter period of time. As soon as the opportunity arises and the work of rehabilitation begins and opportunities and jobs are created in Afghanistan, many refugees would be willing to go back. Because there is a deep yearning for returning to their motherland as soon as conditions permit. This was an event that was not anticipated. People inside and beyond Afghanistan thought that the Americans are there forever, they have taken over the country and the Taliban, the soldiers and the militia, just cannot confront the mightiest power on earth with their huge resources and awesome destructive power. So they thought that international support for the people was coming, and someone like Ashraf Ghani and Karzai would manage Afghanistan on behalf of the international community to the extent that they can, and that was Afghanistan’s destiny. They have been proved wrong.

A new Afghanistan has emerged on the political landscape of this region. In this historic setting, considering the many odds and the hardships that the Afghans faced, and considering the huge potential that lies ahead for Pakistan and Afghanistan, we should look at the long-term prospects and not lose sight of the benefits of a continuing long-term engagement with Afghanistan. We have to have the Central Asian countries in mind. Turkmenistan’s gas and Tajikistan’s electricity will come through Afghanistan. Pakistan is going to be a major beneficiary of the reconstruction and rehabilitation of that country. Pakistan can provide technology, resources, and human resources. The stakes for
Pakistan are high. Let’s not waste the goodwill that exists in Afghanistan for us by taking the short term decision of shutting our borders to the influx of more refugees.

**Masuma Hasan:** The next speaker is Saba Gul Khattak. She is a former member of the Planning Commission of Pakistan and was the executive director of the Sustainable Development for Policy Institute (SDPI), Islamabad, for many years. She specializes in comparative politics and her research interests revolve around the political economy of development, feminist and political theory, gender issues, public policy, governance, militarization, and refugee politics. She has worked with Afghan refugee women and will speak on the’ Impact of Afghan Refugees on the Economy and Social Life in Pakistan.’

**Saba Gul Khattak:** I need to thank Rustam Shah for making my presentation easy because he has said most of what I was going to say about refugees in Pakistan. I will just add a few more points. First of all, from my own Pakistan perspective, I just thought I would point out that to this day, despite having hosted millions of refugees (3.6 million at their peak), we still do not have any legal framework or policy for refugees, a formal one. Informally, of course, we have been doing so on an ad hoc basis. But Pakistan has neither signed any refugee convention nor any protocol. And nor is there a very clear cut refugee policy, though we do have SAFRON (States and Frontier Regions), the ministry that looks after refugees.

Given this situation, refugees have been living in a very uncertain climate, which is not very predictable, and although they were eventually given cards for registering themselves, yet because of the situation in which they have lived and the kind of situation Afghanistan was in, they have experienced a lot of instability. Therefore, for refugees, it has been a constant going back and coming back, over the last 40 years. In this context, of course, Pakistan’s attitude has also been changing with shifts in governments in Afghanistan as well as within Pakistan and the international climate. So to look at humanitarian issues without looking at the larger regional politics is not going to be a helpful way of doing things. We need to recognize that there is a larger regional and global politics attached to the entire situation which makes it even harder to talk about their impact on our economy and social life in Pakistan. I would just place it in that context and also highlight the fact that not all Afghan refugees are one and the same.

There have been different waves of refugees in Pakistan. Initially, after the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan, people who fled to Pakistan were very different from the ones who came when Najibullah’s regime
was replaced. They were refugees who came mostly from Kabul and other cities; they were mostly educated and urban and had very different skills set with them. And similarly, there were other refugees who fled the country because of poverty and environmental degradation; usually we call them environmental refugees. 9/11 and post-9/11, again a very different wave of refugees, including from Tora Bora where the US said that there were no human casualties but I have interviewed tons of refugees who came from there and had suffered great losses.

In this context, although the word is one, but ‘refugees’ are not all one and the same. They come with very different experiences and skill sets. So what has been the impact? In general, we have a negative attitude. We only speak about the negative impact of refugees upon our social lives. The kalashnikov culture, the gun and drug culture, are blamed on refugees, as if we had never heard of these things before. I feel that what we criticize as racism and xenophobia in Europe and the US are also displayed many times by us as well. It is just that we are not very self-aware. Something that most countries or people do when they see outsiders, they blame them for everything. And yes, there were certain pressure on cities, for instance in Quetta and Peshawar, when suddenly a million refugees were introduced. Obviously, the services available become scarce and there are pressures on the health systems and on transportation and roads. The burden of disease increases, new strains of diseases are introduced, and it is these issues people have been grumbling about.

But what we do not look at is the contribution made by refugees, the skills, labour and businesses they bring into the country and the economy. There is a lot of generation of income except that it is mostly in the informal sectors, so it cannot be precisely accounted for. We do not have any studies that have looked at the impact of refugees and many of the studies undertaken are with such a small sample size that one cannot generalize.

I would also like to point out that the construction industry in particular suffered when refugees went back, especially in KP and Balochistan. Also, Afghan refugee labour was employed at much lower rates than Pakistani labour. Of course, this created resentment among the Pakistani labour because they felt the refugees had stolen their work by working for much less. And it created resentment among the Afghans because they felt the moment the employers came to know that the person is an Afghan, they negotiated his wages downwards. This really did not help either side but the point is, overall, there was an injection into the economy which was not recognized. But when the refugees
started to go back, the vacuum was felt deeply in the construction industry.

Similarly, there were negative impacts on the environment because refugee camps needed to be made. Yes, there were pressures but, at the same time, there were skill building and massive projects. One of them, I still remember is a 67 million dollars’ project of the World Bank and UNHCR for skill building that provided women and men with work in nurseries to grow plants. There have also been reforestation initiatives. Overall, I feel refugees have continued to bring in money. We have large private hospitals where there are separate desks to deal with the Afghan refugees. There are Western Union machines at these hospitals in Peshawar, Islamabad and Quetta, where Afghans can be seen bringing in dollars, paying in dollars at these hospitals.

Even though we talk about Sohrab Goth in Karachi and the gun and drug culture, I feel that is a larger political issue of a whole war being financed by different countries through the opium trade, illicit of course, and other kinds of trade. So it is not just the Afghans who are responsible. Overall, Pakistan has been very generous in terms of its support for the refugees. Aside from receiving funding from different countries, Pakistan has also contributed significantly towards the refugees, especially over the last five to eight years when funding from other countries decreased drastically because the Afghan refugees were in a situation in which it was felt that they should either be integrated in Pakistan or they needed to go back. But Afghanistan itself was also having trouble reintegrating the refugees because their infrastructure was not quite ready for the influx that was taking place a few years ago.

The only part where I feel Pakistan has not done so well is in foreign policy and generating goodwill. Because we do not see an acknowledgement of all that Pakistan has done in terms of subsidizing refugees, accommodating them and welcoming them. Somehow that gets lost in the larger context of politics and Pakistan does not get the recognition that it should. I hope that both ambassadors who are panellists today can address the issue of how Pakistan ends up being the bad boy on the block all the time, and how we can do something to actually put attention on the good that we have done.

Masuma Hasan: The next speaker is Aziz Ahmad Khan. He was a career diplomat who served as Pakistan’s high commissioner in New Delhi for a number of years and also as Pakistan’s ambassador to Kabul when the Taliban formed their first government between 1996 and 2000. He was a brilliant spokesperson of the Foreign Office and also additional foreign secretary. He has been engaged in track two dialogues with
diplomats from India and Afghanistan. He will speak about the ‘Future of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan after the Taliban’s Takeover.’

**Aziz Ahmad Khan:** We have come full circle, having interacted with the Taliban during their first incarnation. Now, I can sit back and watch them in their second incarnation, and see how things develop and are going to be. As far as the question of the future of the refugees is concerned, I would concur with what Rustam Shah Sahab said, that this time one doesn’t expect that kind of influx of refugees. We have to compare the two circumstances. Again, as he explained very well in his intervention, the circumstances that led to the massive exodus of people from Afghanistan to Pakistan and the way we welcomed them, the way they were established and settled all over Pakistan, and our people have very strong feelings towards them. Over this period of time, although the people are not hostile towards the refugees, at the same time there is a feeling that it is about time that they went back to Afghanistan.

They have lived in Pakistan and are welcomed even today. But the problem is that such a large number of people, when they are in your country, they are in particular places. They are not receiving much financial assistance, they compete for jobs, and they have all entered the labour market, whether registered or unregistered. Pakistan is a labour surplus country, having its own problem of unemployment. These refugees compete with those who are working in the construction industry or as labourers, particularly. They compete for jobs and they are available for lower wages than the Pakistani labourers. So that, in a way, has created a certain degree of hardship for the local people.

Now, there are two aspects. First is the influx of new refugees and the second has to do with the refugees who are already present. As far as the influx of new refugees is concerned, this time round, we do not expect that kind of influx. Maybe a few thousand might wish to come over because of certain circumstances but otherwise a massive exodus will not take place, unless a civil war breaks out. For the moment, the kind of statements that the Taliban have issued, the way the Taliban have behaved and interacted with the international community, the media, the Afghan people, it appears that this is a changed lot and they have become more sophisticated and more realistic in their dealings with the world.

The very fact that they have been constantly reassuring the Afghans that they should not worry and that everything will be normal. For example, in their first time, there was no question of cameras being allowed or photographs being taken. Today, the TV cameras are roaming around, the TV stations in Afghanistan are open, and even their own leaders are giving interviews on these channels. This was something
unheard of at that particular time. They have reassured the Afghan population that women can work, and that people can return to their jobs. They would like all Afghans to stay behind and not emigrate. Because they need all those people who have certain expertise, as bureaucrats and as technocrats. I am sure that the Taliban would like very much that these people do not leave. Some may leave because of their past background or because of certain fears, particularly those who had worked for the Americans or foreigners as support staff, technicians or translators. A lot of them have left, some more may wish to go.

Apart from that, so far things as they appear, are settled, and going to move in a rational and disciplined kind of manner. Of course, difficulties will arise, if financial help does not come from the developed countries and the money that has been frozen is not released. Assistance needs to be given, so that jobs can be created for all those Afghans who had been working with the previous government and they should return to their work quickly so that they do not suffer any deprivation. Because it is economic hardships which will oblige the people to move out. Nobody wants to leave their own country or their own niche in society. So we have to make sure that the international community, particularly the developed countries, continue their interaction with the Taliban so that things settle quickly and, at the same time, the people feel reassured. The Taliban would need economic assistance because Afghanistan under the best circumstances cannot generate enough revenues to even run the government. It has always been dependent on foreign assistance and particularly now they will be needing it even more.

The international community also should increase their interaction with the Taliban so that, whatever kind of moderate policies we wish them to adopt, such interaction would encourage them. Once again, I will go back to the previous time. At a particular time in their first tenure, the Taliban were very anxious to interact with the international community. They had been talking about accommodating their concerns that they may even talk with the Americans. And the government of Pakistan facilitated a very high-level delegation of Americans to visit Kabul and they interacted with the head of the government and some other important Taliban leaders in Kabul. They were very satisfied with the assurances that the Taliban gave. But because of political reasons, and mostly American internal political reasons, there was no further follow up. So even in those days, when the Taliban were considered very harsh, there was a certain wish on their part to interact with the world. This time round, we have seen that they have made very categorical statements that they would like to interact with the world. So the world should interact with them.
Of course, all of us regional countries as well as the international community want the Taliban to live up to all the assurances they have given us. We have to wait. Perhaps in a day or two they would be announcing the kind of broad-based government, inclusive government that we have been looking for. Let’s see who joins that government. It is incumbent on important Afghan leaders like former president Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah and several other leaders, to interact with the Taliban and offer to join their government, and not create the kind of difficult situation which, like Abdullah Saleh, is trying to create, holed up in Panjshir Valley. He is not going to achieve much. Panjshir is not such a vast territory or such a large population that will make any difference to the Taliban. But this starting of resistance will just add misery to a small group of people who are living in Panjshir Valley and will not create a problem for the Taliban.

Yes, if the Taliban do not live up to their promises, there might be trouble. But once again, I feel optimistic and that they are going to be more accommodative and a little more sensible as far as governing is concerned. So that would make sure that there is not a large exodus from Afghanistan. As far as the presence of refugees is concerned, of course, first of all we have to record how many refugee there are. Rustam Shah Sahab talked about almost two million. Some of our leaders talk about three to four million. The exact number is confusing. Also, we need to interact with the international community and the Afghan Taliban government that circumstances should be created where jobs are created which will be an inducement for these refugees to go back to Afghanistan. They would want to go back to Afghanistan but, at the same time, it would be not that easy for them.

Until such time that such circumstances are created, these refugees can be sent back to Pakistan. We need to be a little patient with them. For example, government is already talking about that. We can register them and issue them a one-year residence card, renewable after one year, so that they can still live in dignity. Those undocumented Afghans who are already here should be documented and we should be generous with them. Since we have been generous with so many Afghans for such a long time, for a further short period of a year or two, we should issue residence cards to them so that instead of hiding like illegal people, they can live in dignity. At the same time, there are proposals that have been discussed about creating border markets and infrastructure along the border, where joint ventures can exist.

CPEC projects can play a very important role in creating such economic opportunities. CPEC can be extended to Afghanistan. China had already shown a lot of interest in economic projects in Afghanistan.
and promised 3.2 billion dollars for the Aynak copper mines. They are also interested in the large deposits of lithium that Afghanistan is supposed to have. These projects will generate so much employment that all these Afghans who are here, will also be happy to return to Afghanistan. So there is a need to generate economic activities. Russia can come with their projects, other countries can join them. The SCO, which is a very important organization, can also do some projects. Afghanistan has already shown interest in membership of SCO which can undertake some projects, specifically Afghanistan-specific projects, so that employment is generated and things settle down because a settled Afghanistan is the safest and securest Afghanistan.

A violence-free Afghanistan is in the interest of all the countries of the region, not only those who share borders with Afghanistan, but the broader region as well. Until such time, these refugees who are living in Pakistan and cannot return, should all be documented. We should reassure them that they do not have to fear anything. They can live here for a year and then come back for renewal, and depending on the circumstances we will renew their residence permits. Pakistan is a haven for illegal immigrants. Karachi is full of illegal Bangladeshis, Biharis, Rohingyas, and so forth. They should all be documented. It looks a little odd that your country can host so many undocumented people. When you cannot control the influx of people, at least take measures whereby you can monitor them and document them.

In conclusion, I would just say that I do not expect a large influx of refugees from Afghanistan. I feel that things will not get out of hand and now that America has spent a trillion dollars in destroying Afghanistan, they should spend some money in order to rebuild Afghanistan. The same holds true for the European Union countries. We hope that all this will create the circumstances in which the Afghan refugees living here would have the inducement to go back.

**Masuma Hasan:** So far as documenting Afghan refugees is concerned, it will be a very difficult process because they have settled far and wide in Pakistan. Mainly in the Frontier and Balochistan, but also in Karachi where they have merged with the population. So I do not know how easy it would be to register or document them. We have a number of questions for our speakers. There are two questions for Rustam Shah Mohmand. The first question is from Ali Zamin Turk. He says that Pakistan is already facing many social and economic issues and in these circumstances why should Pakistan welcome refugees?

**Rustam Shah Mohmand:** Yes indeed, Pakistan is facing many problems and challenges, but we are talking of a country that has been
wrecked by war and conflict for 40 years. A country that we have such a long border with, share ethnicity and history with, where we need to create and build goodwill for our own country. With these things in mind, if some refugees still want to come in, knowing that the atmosphere and climate are no longer conducive and favourable, and people will not welcome them as they did in the 1980s, and they are prepared to come and settle along with their relatives for a short period of time, it would be unfair to deny them entry into Pakistan. Particularly, when we are talking about just confining them to the border and also calling upon the international community to help. From a humanitarian angle, it would be unfair to deny them entry into Pakistan for a short period of time.

**Masuma Hasan:** The other question is also for Rustam Shah Mohmand from Henna Kamal: with Pakistan being constantly blamed by the former Afghan government, specifically by Ghani’s government and by the US for what went wrong in Afghanistan, do you really think there is goodwill among the people of Pakistan for the Afghans? She thinks that there is not as much goodwill as you believe, because it is said very often by people here that they should just go back.

**Rustam Shah Mohmand:** They are not going back because conditions are not conducive for their return. The infrastructure has been destroyed, in many cases schools and dispensaries do not exist. There are no jobs. Poverty is acute, alarming, and in many cases there are no facilities like electricity. Gas, of course, is just not there. And they have lived in this country for 30 years, in some cases for 40 years, and more than 20 years in some cases. In these circumstances even under international law you just cannot force anyone to return to his country, if he genuinely faces a risk to his life, health, safety and security. International law will forbid that: Pakistan has to consider that dimension also. To push them back into Afghanistan against their will, will be unfair. It will never be forgotten. You keep somebody for 10 years and then you kick them out. The last kick will be remembered for a long time but the hospitality that you extended will be forgotten. So why destroy whatever little respect and goodwill there is for Pakistan in Afghanistan? We have borne the brunt of this, and like Saba Gul Khattak before me said, the refugees have been making a contribution. She mentioned the construction industry. In addition, the refugees have been making a great contribution in the farming sector and transportation sectors. Many thousands of them went abroad and they have been sending remittances for many years to Pakistan. So this has not been a one-way traffic, although our lands and ecology have come under pressure. Of course, there has been pollution because of that, but there have been some other positive dimensions of their settlement also. We should incorporate all these in
our calculation before we formulate a vision or policy on whether we should accept more refugees or not.

**Masuma Hasan**: There is a question from Tanveer Khalid to any of the panellists. Maybe Saba Gul Khattak can answer it. She says that the economic impact of the control of Afghan refugees on transport, smuggled goods and labour is very strongly felt by Pakistani citizens, how can amends be made for that?

**Saba Gul Khattak**: Cheap labour is a contribution: I do not know why that is being made out to be a negative. The transport sector is definitely a contribution to the economy. They bring in their own capital; we are not providing them with any capital. Our banks are not lending them any money; they bring in their own money. They are also bringing in their own skills in the farming sector, definitely in orchards. The reason I had said that refugees come with their different skill sets. They were teachers and students. In fact, this time if we do get refugees, let us accept them instead of keeping them at the borders. Pakistan lost out on a lot of skills by refusing the equivalence of degrees and because of that many doctors, engineers, architects, nurses and so on were not allowed to work as legitimate professionals in Pakistan. This time, we should ensure that their degrees are recognized. Even smuggled goods, Pakistanis love them. Why should they be seen as negative? The Karkhano Market in Peshawar is very famous and everyone loves to go there, and the Bara markets are there in about every city. Maybe there is overall an impact in terms of missed out customs and taxes. Actually there are a lot of goods smuggled in from India via Dubai. There is an impact, I agree, but at the same time that’s on the government of Pakistan rather than on the refugees.

**Aziz Ahmad Khan**: First of all, about this problem of smuggling. It is not done by the refugees. It is done by Afghan businessmen in collusion with Pakistani businessmen in the name of transit trade and that is how smuggling takes place. In fact, all the negative things pointed out because of Afghan refugees have nothing to do with them. The transport business is owned by rich Afghans; it is a business investment. A lot of Afghans have bought property here, which is good for us as an investment in Pakistan. But it is not the refugees. So let’s not confuse the two. The refugees are not contributing to that. The only competition they have provided is in the form of cheap labour that is available. But then again, it adds to the economy. A lot of Afghan carpets are now being manufactured in Pakistan by Afghan labour and then are exported out of Pakistan and Pakistani carpet makers’ benefit from that.

**Masuma Hasan**: That was a very spirited defence of your stance. There is another question from Salman Ali Ibrahim who is one of our
researchers. He asks, how can the government of Pakistan respond to the influx of refugees in a humane manner while also mitigating the possibility of the arrival of al Qaeda and ISIS terrorists among the refugees? This is a question that has bothered many of us. How can we prevent terrorists coming in the garb of refugees?

**Rustam Shah Mohmand:** Some members of the TTP are remnants of al-Qaeda which does not really exist in Afghanistan anymore but there may be remnants. Some individuals connected with al-Qaeda, who may be hiding in some corners of Afghanistan, are smart enough to enter Pakistan as Afghan refugees even if there is a complete ban on the influx of new refugees. But these five, 10, 20,100, 200 people can find in their way. This is a very long border and to keep it guarded all the time, day and night, is difficult. So if they want to come, there are many other ways. But shutting our doors on the rank and file refugees would be unfair, as I said in the beginning. In the meantime it is for the government departments and agencies to swing into action and monitor the border very carefully. Also, to establish contacts gradually with the administration that the Afghan Taliban will set up in the border area to coordinate their activities and to share intelligence, in order to prevent the inflow of people who can create problems and strike targets in Pakistan. It will be a problem for some time, for a year or two, maybe three years.

This border was open and unmanned for 60 to 65 years, and everybody could cross it and nothing happened. But when the situation changed in Afghanistan and the government of Pakistan took a certain policy decision in 2001 by aligning itself with American objectives and goals, then things began to change. We have to pay the price for the policy of 2001. However, if normalcy is restored in Afghanistan and it becomes stable, there will be no room for these people. We have to wait and see and show patience. At the same time, we have to be alert in order to eliminate the possibility of these people coming into Pakistan in the guise and garb of Afghan refugees. But even now with the border having been fenced completely and nobody being allowed to come, other than at a few selected border crossings, same incidents are happening in Balochistan. There are many organizations within Balochistan which are anti-government or anti-government policies and they are carrying out these attacks. We have to be very careful and monitor the border very closely now. But at the same time, we must ensure that the genuinely needy refugees, who are desperate to come for one reason or the other, are not denied entry for a short period of time.

**Saba Gul Khattak:** This is a fair question. After 9/11, General Musharraf also had said that we will close our borders because terrorists
will come into Pakistan but then, under pressure, Pakistan had opened its borders. As a researcher, I can say very bluntly that the whole policy of strategic depth needs to be re-examined. People are not crossing only from one side; there are also crossings from our side. I have been interviewing refugee women since the 1990s, and even in the late 1990s refugee women would turn around and surprise me by asking me, if the Taliban are Afghans why do they speak Punjabi? There may not be a lot of Punjabi speaking Taliban but that sentiment holds a lot of coinage across the border. It is a two-way street and depends on how you define a terrorist. The US started off with trying to destroy al-Qaeda and the Taliban and today they have a peace deal with them. Changes according to politics are being played out on the regional and global fronts. We need to look at this as a two-way street and then try to understand its politics.

Masuma Hasan: A question for Aziz Ahmad Khan: what are your thoughts and views about Mullah Baradar who will probably be leading Afghanistan’s new regime?

Aziz Ahmad Khan: I personally do not know Mullah Baradar; whatever I have seen is published in the media. Mullah Baradar is one of the founding members of the Taliban. He has a very high and respected place and probably will head the administration or government in Afghanistan, but we have to wait and see. All I can say is that these are responsible people. Mullah Baradar, as we know, was arrested and was in jail in Pakistan for a long time and then he was released not too long ago. He will be wielding a lot of influence. His statements so far, or whatever we have heard from him so far, give reason for hope. We need to, at the moment, take the Taliban at face value and not go by what western propaganda is saying, but go by what the Taliban are saying. And make sure that they live up to what they are saying. That will be possible only when we interact with them, treat them as a responsible group, and make them responsible to live up to their promises and I am sure they will.

About the Punjabi Taliban, they are a reality. There were about 5,000 to 6,000 Punjabi speaking enthusiasts from Pakistan who had joined the Taliban movement and they were called the Punjabi Taliban. That was not a fiction and it was not that some Afghans had learned Punjabi and were called the Punjabi Taliban. They were Pakistani nationals who had joined the Taliban movement. There was a lot of enthusiasm for the Taliban in Pakistan at that particular time. I remember that I received a letter from an old woman in Murree who said that her son had disappeared and joined the Taliban. He was the only breadwinner, can I have him back because otherwise I will starve. We requested the Taliban and they traced him out and we repatriated him back to Pakistan and
told him to look after his family which was more important than joining the Taliban. So the Punjabi Taliban were there.

**Masuma Hasan**: A question for Saba: we have observed a sense of hostility towards Pakistan among Afghan students studying in public universities in Pakistan, often on our scholarships. What is the reason for this animosity towards the country and countrymen who are hosting them?

**Saba Gul Khattak**: As I said, this is one of our failures despite having hosted so many refugees in a manner that we could afford. The refugee camps were not luxury apartments; they were squalid places where no one would have wanted to live. So it was not a life of luxury that we gave the Afghan refugees, but it was whatever could be done. These issues created a lot of resentment in Afghanistan because of what many Afghans felt about instability in Afghanistan, just as we feel our security situation has been affected by what has been going on in Afghanistan. They felt that Pakistan had kept Afghanistan destabilized. There are many reason for that. Some may be propaganda and some are real. We need to understand the Afghanistan situation, to be more empathetic towards it, and to go towards a more peaceful future rather than dwell on resentments. I see a lot of students who are Afghans and contributing, whether they are teaching children karate in Kohat or Hazaras at some other places, and they are amazing. In another context, they do partially blame Pakistan for what has been happening in Afghanistan and so the resentment shows among the students.

**Masuma Hasan**: My question is about the Durand Line. What do you see in the future for the Durand Line considering that the Taliban have never recognized it?

**Aziz Ahmad Khan**: The Durand Line is an international border legally confirmed three Afghan governments since the time the border was demarcated. It is only the Afghans who do not accept it and they will probably never accept it. But we should not worry about that. The Durand Line is there. It is an international border between Pakistan and Afghanistan and it is there to stay. Like any Afghan, the Taliban will also not accept it. No Afghan will say that the Durand Line is an accepted international border. But we should just ignore that. The rest of the entire international community accepts the Durand Line as an international border and we should not worry about that at all. We should not even raise the subject. We should just take it as done. And if any Afghan raises it sometimes, we should just ignore it.
Masuma Hasan: Well, I am going to wrap up this session now. I would like to say that what has actually happened in Afghanistan lately, which has been a source of surprise to many people, will really be understood only in the long run when all the documents in the countries which were involved in the Afghan experiment, as you can call it, are declassified and that might take many years from now. Personally, I find it a little difficult to understand how somebody like Abdullah Abdullah, for instance, or Hamid Karzai, or people representing them can sit in an inclusive government which is going to be based on Shariah. Compromises will have to be made so that there should be an inclusive government, but there will also be a government based on Shariah which the Taliban leaders have emphasized again and again in all the interviews they have given to the international media. Rustam Shah said that there is no likelihood of a civil war in Afghanistan and I hope that there won't be a civil war. But, apparently, there is some disconnect between what the leaders say and how the fighters or commanders on the ground interpret it. Otherwise, there would not be so many instances of violence. You may say it is western propaganda, but there are so many instances of violence and so many women on different platforms saying they have been asked to stay at home.

As far as the impact of the Afghans on our national life is concerned, yes they have made a contribution, but also they have brought with them some very conservative values. That conservatism is reflected and displayed in the ways in which they live and uphold these values. On the other hand, we are a country which is, at least some sections of our country, trying desperately to modernize and reach a synthesis between modern and traditional values. I will end with a reference to Saddam Hussein precisely because of the surprise of the world at what has happened in Afghanistan lately. When Saddam Hussein was being interrogated by the CIA after he was arrested in Iraq, he told the person who was interrogating him, the CIA analyst: 'You will never succeed in Iraq because you know nothing about Iraq and you do not understand the Arab mind.' In fact, the person who was interrogating him, John Nixon, has written in his book, *Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein*, that he realized then that everything the Americans had assumed about Iraq and about Saddam himself was wrong. They did not really know anything. So it may also be true that the Americans and their allies simply failed to understand what was really happening on the ground in Afghanistan.