



CONSULTATION REPORT

AFGHAN PEACE AND RECONCILIATION: PAKISTAN'S INTERESTS AND POLICY OPTIONS

Report of PIPS Consultation-11 held on January 18, 2024



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Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS)

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Likewise, PIPS is thankful to all the learned resource persons who participated in this eleventh quarterly consultation and shared their expert knowledge on the subject. PIPS hopes to benefit from their knowledge and insights in the future too.



LIST OF PARTICIPANTS



Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)



Sabookh Syed (Moderator)



Allah Noor



Asad Khan Toori



Azaz Syed



Batur Khan



Dr. Samrana Afzal



Dr. Sobia Hanif



Elsa Imdad Hussain



Imtiaz Baloch



Jamaima Afridi



Kamran Yousaf



Moniza Kakar



Muhammad Akbar Notezai



Nargis Mansoor



Safiya Aftab



Seema Ilahi Baloch



Siyar Ali Shah



Tanzeela Mazhar





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pak Institute for Peace Studies convened its 11th quarterly consultation on “Afghan peace and reconciliation: Pakistan’s interests and policy options” in Islamabad on January 18, 2024. The consultation focused on two main themes: ‘The evolving security landscape: perspectives from women’ and ‘Emerging Pak-Afghan relations: insights from youth.’ Distinguished attendees included female experts, academics, former diplomats, journalists, youths, and policy analysts.

Participants emphasized the importance of sustained engagement between Pakistan and the current administration in Kabul, prioritizing Pakistan’s security interests while also advocating against endorsing the restrictive measures imposed by the Afghan Taliban on women.

The discussion during the first session predominantly delved into the changing security scenario, particularly from a women’s perspective, with a focus on Afghan peace and reconciliation. It emphasized the need for Pakistan to reassess its stance on women’s issues, incorporating human rights into the broader dialogue spectrum. The participants highlighted the challenges faced by women in Afghanistan, such as severe restrictions on education, business activities, and personal freedoms. They underscored the necessity for Pakistan to develop a dedicated policy framework for Afghan women and vulnerable communities, advocating for initiatives such as scholarships, online education, and vocational training to support their empowerment and inclusion.

The participants discussed at length the challenges faced by Afghan refugees including women and children, particularly those with expired documents who are unaware and have to return, highlighting the need for broader awareness and support for their rights. The discourse also touched on conversations about Sharia law and education for women under the Taliban government. Additionally, there was a mention of the complexities in the region, including Pakistan’s security concerns along the eastern border and deteriorating relations with Iran.

In the second session, the speakers discussed various issues related to cross-border terrorism inside Pakistan by the groups based in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s relations with neighboring countries and the policy options to improve Pak-Afghan ties. The participants highlighted the importance of avoiding reactionary measures, maintaining communication channels, and leveraging influence with Afghanistan through constructive engagements. Reflecting on past missed negotiation opportunities on issues like border management, terrorism, and human rights, the participants advocated for a patient and proactive approach to address existing problems in the region.

Most discussants agreed that the decision to repatriate Afghan refugees sparked social problems, along with putting strain on Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan.

The inconsistency in border policies and visa restrictions between Pakistan and Afghanistan was also discussed. The speakers expressed frustrations over border restrictions and visa policies, lack of clarity on Pakistan’s stance on TTP and Talibanization, and loopholes in border security that allow terrorists to evade justice.

SESSION ONE:

THE CHANGING SECURITY SCENARIO: WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

**Dr. Salma Malik, Assistant Professor, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad
(Moderator)**

Thank you all for being with us today. As you're aware, this marks the 11th quarterly consultation by PIPS on Afghan peace and reconciliation. This initial session has been uniquely designed to delve into the women's perspective regarding the escalating security challenges and the state of women's education in Afghanistan amid reported restrictions imposed by the Afghan government. I now invite Ms. Jamaima Afridi to provide her insights on the current challenges in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on the threats faced by women.

Jamaima Afridi, freelance journalist based in Peshawar

I have experience working with vulnerable communities, including journalists, students, and musicians, with a particular focus on women's issues. Addressing the situation in Afghanistan, it is disheartening to observe the harsh conditions faced by women. They are restricted from venturing outside for education and business purposes and even denied the freedom to visit salons, a matter of personal choice. This vividly illustrates the severe limitations imposed on women's personal decisions and fundamental rights.



JAMAIMA AFRIDI

Afghan women refugees find it nearly impossible to sustain their jobs and education. Artists among them struggle to showcase their work in Pakistan.

Shifting the focus to Afghan women in Pakistan, their plight mirrors that of their counterparts in Afghanistan, creating additional challenges as they seek refuge from the dire circumstances in their home country. Unfortunately, they encounter new difficulties, such as illegal entry into Pakistan. It's understandable that amidst the chaos of relocating from a conflict zone to a secure location, individuals may forget to collect essential travel and identity documents.

Due to these circumstances and the ensuing challenges, Afghan women refugees find it nearly impossible to sustain their jobs and education. Artists among them struggle to showcase their work in Pakistan. The deportation process exacerbates the plight of these vulnerable communities, including both male and female artists, journalists, and musicians. In my encounters, I've met a female musician deeply frustrated by the ongoing situation, and despite my efforts, I couldn't provide the assistance she needed. A similar scenario unfolded with a female journalist facing deportation threats.

As a journalist and a compassionate human being, I've sought ways to assist, connecting affected individuals with relevant contacts. However, this is not the case for every Afghan refugee. Working at the border, I encountered numerous Afghans with valid documents who did not know their cards were expired, and they had to return. The plight of these vulnerable communities underscores the urgent need for broader awareness, support, and coordinated efforts to ensure the protection of their rights and opportunities for a better future.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

Thank you, Ms. Jamaima, for bringing attention to the challenges faced by refugees and shedding light on the distinctive political dynamics in the [Pak-Afghan] border regions. Without delay, I would like to invite former ambassador Seema Ilahi Baloch to share her perspective.

Seema Ilahi Baloch, former ambassador of Pakistan

Thank you for granting me this opportunity. It is widely known that Afghanistan is currently grappling with the erosion of the positive strides made in women's rights over the past decade. Unfortunately, the situation for women in Pakistan has also been far from ideal. But with the Taliban assuming power in Afghanistan, there has been a significant regression, particularly in their stance on women's rights. The most severely affected aspect is women's education, as the denial of educational opportunities impedes their progress in various spheres. Despite some brave attempts by women to pursue education clandestinely, restricting them to only grade six limits their participation in the economy and other critical areas. I was looking at some health-related statistics which say that about 4 children born in every hour and these women have now less and less chance of accessing the health facilities. Considering that 49% of Afghans are women, the long-term consequences of this situation are not receiving adequate attention within the Afghan political landscape.

As neighbors, we must exercise caution, mindful of our own position at the bottom of the Gender Development Index (GDI). The question arises: should Pakistan actively engage

in the discourse, demanding that recognition of the Afghan government is contingent upon upholding women's rights? While avoiding direct involvement in the political debate, we should let the international community advocate for such principles, and we must safeguard our national interests.

I echo Ms. Jamaima's concerns regarding the plight of Afghan female refugees, both in their war-torn homeland and as displaced individuals in Pakistan. It is imperative for Pakistan to consider the challenges faced by Afghan women refugees.



SEEMA ILAHI BALOCH

I think the Taliban are outraged by returning refugees as well as by Pakistan's assertion that visa documents will be essential to cross the Torkham border. This perspective gains further complexity when viewed through the lens of women's rights.

In discussions with colleagues, I have reflected on the notion of repatriating Afghan refugees, previously leaning towards supporting it, albeit with proper timing and procedures. However, the current approach by Pakistan raises concerns from legal, political, and human rights perspectives. Legally, Pakistan is repatriating those deemed to be staying illegally, but the human rights perspective raises ethical considerations. Notably, while Iran and India closed their borders, Pakistan welcomed Afghan refugees, allowing them to settle across the country. Some of my colleagues say the first refugee camp was established in Wana, in South Waziristan tribal district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the Afghan refugees transformed it. We have such a barren land there, but Afghan refugees made it green and there is now agricultural activity. Therefore, it is also important to analyze the sociology of Afghan refugees returning to their homeland and staying in Pakistan.

I think the Taliban are outraged by returning refugees as well as by Pakistan's assertion that visa documents will be essential to cross the Torkham border. This perspective gains further complexity when viewed through the lens of women's rights. Recently, Afghan women delegates, including journalists and entrepreneurs, were compelled to travel to Pakistan with a male family member ('mahram'). These women reported that between September and October 2023, 75 Afghan women were granted scholarships to study abroad. However, upon reaching the airport in Kabul, they were denied travel without a mahram and were subsequently sent back. It is crucial to examine the challenges faced by Afghan women within the Pak-Afghan context, in addition to considering the broader perspectives of women's rights and human rights.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

Thank you, Ambassador Seema Baloch, for addressing crucial points. It's intriguing that

women's voices stand out distinctly in security discussions. However, it's essential not to generalize the visa issue, as many women successfully obtain it and travel. Ambassador Seema Baloch rightly emphasizes the Afghan government's significant role in this matter of travel restrictions.

Recently, a delegation of Afghan academics visited Pakistan following the visit of a similar governmental delegation of select Afghan educationists. All these delegates were men. Surprisingly, the Taliban's delegation explicitly mentioned instructing their daughters and sisters to stay home due to the non-compliance of the previous curriculum with Sharia. When questioned about their sons studying the same curriculum, their only response was the development of a Sharia-compliant education system for women on which they said their government was working.

Having witnessed the transformation of Islamabad due to the first wave of Afghan refugees, we now observe another wave of urban Afghans seeking asylum. These families, living in cramped conditions, face numerous challenges, including limited access to education for their children.

Beyond education and travel issues, Afghan women also grapple with various mental health challenges stemming from the evolving Afghan situation. Our purpose here is to strategize how the Pakistani government and women can aid Afghan women under the Taliban regime. Recognizing the regime's willingness for certain conversations, we propose exploring options such as offering Zoom or virtual classes for Afghan girl students, monitored by the Taliban for Sharia compliance. This could provide a potential avenue for these young ladies to continue their education using textbooks from Punjab or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. While this is just one suggestion, we encourage input from other participants for a more comprehensive discussion and exploration of alternative solutions.

Moniza Kakar, lawyer and human rights activist based in Karachi

During the Soviet-Afghan war, the state policy encouraged Afghan refugees to settle in Pakistan in substantial numbers. Ration cards were issued to them during General Ziaul Haq's tenure, and they received food packets at their doorsteps for an extended period. Many older generations among them still possess and display those ration cards. The Zia era policy has resulted in hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, seeking facilitation.

However, the current approach of deporting them, in my view, lacks justification. As a Pakistani woman, I believe that if I were to move to Canada or any other country and reside there for five years, I would rightfully seek nationality. Similarly, the Afghan refugees who arrived in Pakistan during the 1980s now have grandchildren born in the country. It has come to my attention, through recently deported Afghan refugees, that Afghanistan lacks any record of their existence, while Pakistan has registered data on them.

It is noteworthy that the Afghan government may view these individuals with suspicion, possibly identifying them as Daesh members. Consequently, they are required to

undergo screening to re-enter their own homeland. Ms. Ambassador, I would appreciate hearing your thoughts on this matter.



MONIZA KAKAR

During the Soviet-Afghan war, the state policy encouraged Afghan refugees to settle in Pakistan in substantial numbers. Ration cards were issued to them during General Ziaul Haq's tenure, and they received food packets at their doorsteps for an extended period.

Ambassador Seema Baloch

As mentioned earlier, the state policy of the 1980s was designed to attract funds, and it indeed served that purpose. To understand it properly, one must consider the historical context. While the refugees have been residing here for an extended period, there is a need for flexibility in our approach. However, the current deportation process is flawed. Forceful repatriation is unnecessary; instead, a more nuanced classification into categories should be adopted.

According to international laws, refugees can voluntarily return, but the challenges, especially for women, in returning to Afghanistan should not be underestimated. It is true that our policy needs revision. If individuals present ration cards from Zia's tenure, we must carefully consider whether to provide them with food support, particularly acknowledging the known flaws in Zia's policies. Nevertheless, it's crucial to recognize their contributions to the economy.

Implementing a well-defined policy is imperative. While I agree that the current timing for deportation, especially during winter, is inappropriate, the process itself needs refinement. However, it does not imply accepting all refugees without discretion, as uncontrolled acceptance could lead to an overwhelming influx, posing challenges for effective management.

Moniza Kakar

Can we develop a separate policy for the Afghans who are already settled in Pakistan and a separate policy for new migrants? We can enhance security at borders to stop others.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

I would like to highlight a specific scenario for consideration. Suppose I wish to travel to Pakistan, and after obtaining permission, I make my way there. However, two days later, you attempt the same process, only to be denied entry. Is this situation right or wrong?

The intricacies of such matters are numerous, and often, when we discuss them, we tend to oversimplify things. This oversimplification can lead us to emphasize the enforcement of policies rather than focusing on public education and discourse.

I acknowledge that our government might not excel in marketing. As pointed out by Ms. Seema Baloch, General Zia opened the borders for refugees with a political motive. The influx of Afghans into Pakistan in 1978, following the April Revolution in Afghanistan, brought about a complex situation. However, refugees are not meant to be permanent citizens of Pakistan, and the prospect of relocating them permanently to their homeland poses a significant challenge. While it may sound harsh, refugees need not become a burden. Pakistan, being not affluent, struggles to manage its population and cannot afford additional burdens. During the 'Afghan jihad,' UNHCR distributed ration cards, and financial contributions poured in for refugees, Pakistan, and the so-called 'jihad.' This influx of funds ended in 1987-89.

Given Pakistan's limited resources to sustain its own population, the question arises: who will provide for the refugees now? Unfortunately, there is a compounding crisis, particularly affecting women and children, and we must confront this harsh reality. Whether we argue that winter is not an ideal time for the deportation operation or that summer is worse, we need to consider if relocating refugees is the solution. Additionally, planning a viable program with the Afghan government for the refugees to return to their homeland becomes crucial in addressing this situation.

Ambassador Seema Baloch

I want to emphasize another crucial aspect. The Pakistani government finds itself in a challenging position due to the imperative of security. In recent months, the rise in TTP attacks has heightened security concerns, prompting Pakistan to insist on proper documentation for refugees through legal papers. Consequently, the government has implemented visa restrictions for all individuals. It is essential to recognize that security considerations play a significant role in driving the deportation campaign.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

Now I would like to ask Ms. Nargis if she has any comments or views to share.

Nargis Mansoor, Director, Afghan Women Association, Islamabad

Zia's policies were flawed, and it is imperative that we do not persist with them. The surge in refugees during that period can be attributed to the errors of the Pakistani government. This raises a pertinent question: why did Pakistan not revise its policies prior to August 15, 2021? The option to repatriate refugees, particularly those who were unregistered or had resided here for over 30 years, was a viable one. This task would have been more manageable before 2021 when Afghans were not as distressed and still had a degree of trust in their government in Kabul. During that period, Pakistan had the opportunity to adjust its policies and repatriate Afghan refugees. However, this course of action was not taken. Now, as a considerable number of Afghans find it challenging to live under Taliban rule, Pakistan has belatedly initiated a shift in its policies, opting to

repatriate all Afghans to their homeland.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

Ms. Nargis, I don't intend to contradict your perspective, but it's crucial to acknowledge that various Pakistani governments have made efforts to repatriate Afghan refugees. These attempts were made immediately after the Geneva Accords and also before the events of 9/11. Subsequently, there were plans to send them back, but these were thwarted by a massive earthquake in Afghanistan. Even during the Karzai government, Pakistan made endeavors to repatriate Afghan nationals. However, the Afghan government expressed its inability to absorb the returning refugees due to a lack of capacity. Despite these challenges, genuine efforts have been made on multiple occasions to address the issue of Afghan refugee repatriation.

Now I would like to request Ms. Safiya Aftab to share her views on the issue.

Safiya Aftab, Executive Director at Verso Consulting, Islamabad

During our recent work on the Afghan policy for women and girls' education with the Malala Fund, we uncovered some notable information. Pakistan's approach to Afghan refugees has been chaotic from the outset, lacking a comprehensive policy. Even the citizenship policy appears unclear.



SAFIYA AFTAB

It's crucial to recognize the diversity within the Afghan refugees; they cannot be viewed monolithically. Currently, there is an absence of a comprehensive policy to address these varying situations.

According to legal experts, if one is born in Pakistan, they are considered Pakistani, yet there is no dedicated refugee policy. This deficiency is disheartening given the prolonged refugee situation spanning 40 years. The refugees can be classified into various categories. Some impoverished families settled in Balochistan, swiftly integrating and contributing to the informal economy post-2021. Others, desiring to leave Pakistan for a third country, are presently residing in hotels in Islamabad with partial support from NGOs, some of whom have initiated work.

It's crucial to recognize the diversity within the Afghan refugees; they cannot be viewed monolithically. Currently, there is an absence of a comprehensive policy to address these varying situations. While repatriation has occurred before, it has not unfolded on a large scale. The current conditions in Afghanistan, especially for girls, are distressing. This is not merely a political matter but a security-related one, and the source of these

directives may not align with what is ethically right at this juncture.

Salma Malik (Moderator)

Thank you, Ms. Safiya, for your succinct insights. Now, we have Ms. Elsa with us, and I invite her to share her thoughts.

Elsa Imdad Hussain, Senior Coordinator at the Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) Islamabad

Thank you, I'll aim to be concise. We've extensively discussed the issues, and I believe it's crucial to shift focus towards resolving them. The UN has acknowledged the gender apartheid faced by women and girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban, with exclusion from education and public life. Human rights violations under the Taliban regime are widely known.



ELSA IMDAD HUSSAIN

The refugee crisis in Pakistan is a consequence of actions by the U.S. and its allies. To address this, I suggest proactive measures such as online education programs.

In my recent reports on Taliban rule, I discovered that the Taliban claims on economy, finances, and foreign relations may be explicable, yet significant concerns persist, particularly regarding the treatment of women. In times of crisis, women and children bear the brunt, evident in the current refugee crisis. Despite challenges, I propose an idealistic but necessary approach for Pakistan to formulate a refugee law that is human-centric and gender-centric, providing a framework for regulation.

The refugee crisis in Pakistan is a consequence of actions by the U.S. and its allies. To address this, I suggest proactive measures such as online education programs. Pakistan should seek collaboration with the U.N., U.S., and European countries for support. If repatriation is considered, planning for Afghan women and girls' education is essential. Leveraging existing technology, transitioning programs like scholarships to an online format could provide educational opportunities for women and girls in Afghanistan.

Dr. Salama Malik (Moderator)

Certainly, Elsa, your insights can serve as a specific lead. Thank you. Now, let's move forward, and I'd like to hear points from Dr. Sobia.

Dr. Sobia Hanif, Assistant Professor at Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi I've carefully listened to the discussions, and much has been shared about the distressing situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule. It's no secret that Afghan women, constituting about half of the population, are enduring severe human rights violations. The Taliban's actions, such as segregating and ultimately halting higher education for women, eliminating work opportunities, and restricting travel, have stripped away their autonomy and independence.

In the government sector, many women have been sent home, and those working with international NGOs and the United Nations have been silenced. The healthcare sector, too, is grappling with high maternal and infant mortality rates. The already challenging situation before the Taliban's takeover, with about 27 to 28 percent of women in the parliament, has worsened to the point of complete exclusion.



DR. SOBIA HANIF

I believe our initial step should be to avoid reactionary measures. It's crucial to recognize that we are situated in a challenging neighborhood along our eastern border, posing security concerns.

While seeking solutions, it's crucial to consider the broader context and potential reasons behind the Taliban's actions, such as limiting women's travel. This may stem from a desire to control their narrative globally and avoid negative perceptions. Addressing these issues requires foresight.

Observers rightly emphasize the security dimension of ongoing problems, including the refugee crisis. The increase in terrorist activities in Pakistan since the Taliban's ascent to power adds complexity to the situation. Pakistan initially extended humanitarian assistance and cooperation to the new regime, expecting reciprocal actions to counter terrorism. Unfortunately, the Taliban's reluctance to help Pakistan, especially in countering cross-border terrorism, has strained the relationship.

What could be our course of action now? I believe our initial step should be to avoid reactionary measures. It's crucial to recognize that we are situated in a challenging neighborhood along our eastern border, posing security concerns. The situation with Iran has recently deteriorated, making our surroundings even more complex. Can we afford an increasingly estranged and troubled neighborhood? I would argue against it. Pakistan must exercise patience and acknowledge the existing problems, resolving them through consistent and constructive engagements. Maintaining communication channels is vital, and we should leverage our influence with Afghanistan. In retrospect, we had negotiations with Afghanistan in the past. I sometimes question why we didn't initiate negotiations earlier, addressing issues such as border management, terrorism,

and human rights before their rise to power. Although we were aware of these issues, they were not brought to the forefront when we had greater leverage than we do now.

Nevertheless, it's imperative for Pakistan to reassess its current stance. When examining our approach to women's issues, we must consider both Pakistan's security and national interests and our perspective on human rights. Human rights issues should be incorporated into the broader dialogue spectrum. While the characteristic policy mentions inducements and incentives, there needs to be a human rights dimension to it. Addressing the plight of women, minorities, and people with disabilities requires a specialized policy in Pakistan. Offering scholarships, facilitating online education, and providing vocational training, including "training of trainers" programs for women coming to Pakistan and returning to assist others, can be instrumental.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

Thank you, Dr. Sobia, for sharing very good food for thought and I absolutely would love to get back on these points, a bit more. Now I would like to invite Dr. Samrana to share her point of view.

Dr. Samrana Afzal, Assistant Professor at Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi

Before delving into Pakistan's policy options concerning the situation in Afghanistan, it's crucial to address four key discussion points. First, the evolving security dynamics and current ground reality emphasize a shift towards non-traditional security issues. While the military remains significant, there is an increasing focus on social security. Secondly, Pakistan's geopolitical location and its collaboration with the Taliban are pivotal considerations when discussing policy options. The third point underscores the absence of a clear-cut policy in Pakistan regarding the recognition of the Taliban government. Lastly, recognizing that women constitute 50% of the global population is essential for a comprehensive understanding of international political situations and the pursuit of peace and security.

Turning to policy options, Pakistan is currently better positioned than any other regional or extra-regional country to influence Afghanistan, in adapting to international realities. Leveraging this special relationship requires an understanding of the importance of compromise. When the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, Pakistan advocated for external powers to engage with the Taliban, lift economic sanctions, and provide humanitarian assistance to Kabul. That should continue. Simultaneously, adopting a diplomatic approach and conveying messages to Afghanistan and the Taliban is vital, addressing governance demands and respecting basic rights and counter-terrorism commitments.

The second crucial aspect involves reminding the Taliban that their government's stability and domestic legitimacy hinge on effective governance and a willingness to compromise on international demands. The third point emphasizes, as cited earlier, Pakistan's focus on helping Afghanistan and for that purpose its internal security situation is very important. However, Pakistan should continue facilitating humanitarian aid and keeping all avenues open for international agencies and donors to reach out to Afghanistan.



DR. SAMRANA AFZAL

While the military remains significant, there is an increasing focus on social security. Secondly, Pakistan's geopolitical location and its collaboration with the Taliban are pivotal considerations when discussing policy options.

Finally, Pakistan must balance its security interests when dealing with the Taliban, refraining from endorsing restrictions on women's rights justified by a strict interpretation of Sharia. Maintaining a focus on these aspects is integral to advancing stability in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

Thank you, Dr. Samrana. I truly wish that your wishlist could come to fruition. However, there are a few unfortunate realities. When examining the entire dynamics, a peculiar notion arises that the Taliban may not necessarily require the legitimacy many are advocating for. They have already gained a level of legitimacy, thanks to the Doha process and the Americans seeking a secure exit. What about Pakistan? It was through the Taliban that the international forces facilitated their exit from Afghanistan. Contrary to early predictions that refusing to legitimize the Taliban would result in a lack of aid, Afghanistan hasn't crumbled into an uncovered space as feared. The Taliban's staggering control over security, which America spent two decades destroying Afghanistan for, has played a significant role.

Yet, amidst this, questions arise about how the Taliban sustains governance. While we discuss blocked funds in American banks, money continues to flow from sources where the dollar remains stable. These are lingering questions with no clear answers. We often talk about using leverage, but the Taliban appears unresponsive, understanding that leverage is the least of their concerns. This creates a problematic catch-22 situation where we desire certain outcomes, but those advocating for humanitarian assistance and human rights inadvertently contribute to the country's turmoil.

Addressing issues like women's rights and equality, while crucial for the immediate future, also impact the next 50 years in Afghanistan and beyond. If we fail to act against the suppression of women, it becomes a stark reality that will resonate for generations. Unfortunately, Pakistan finds itself in an unfavorable position as well.

Additionally, Dr. Sobia and others have rightly pointed out a significant constituency within Pakistan supporting the Taliban's mindset, further complicating matters. The repercussions of this securitized debate are evident in the suffering of women and children. Moving forward, I would like to invite Ms. Tanzeela to share a few words.

Tanzeela Mazhar, journalist, TV host & social activist

When addressing Afghanistan and Pakistan's policy options, it's crucial to move beyond clichés, conventional thinking, and slogans. The ground reality has undergone significant changes. I often observe that our intelligentsia and researchers sometimes fail to acknowledge these shifts, remaining entrenched in decade-old narratives.

The situation on the ground within both Pakistan and Afghanistan has evolved, influencing the regional dynamics. Pakistan must undertake concrete initiatives and steps in response. While I won't delve into the political motivations behind the chosen timeframe, it is imperative to question the necessity of the actions taken against illegal Afghan refugees in Pakistan.



TANZEELA MAZHAR

While some voices in Pakistan argue that the country cannot sustain a large number of Afghan refugees due to capacity constraints, the deportation decisions require careful consideration.

These introspective initiatives were long overdue and should have been implemented decades earlier, considering Pakistan's current economic challenges. Unfortunately, we have been inadequate in constructing and presenting our narrative effectively. Despite Pakistan's positive contributions to Afghan refugees, the Afghan government, and the peace process, the portrayal of these roles has been lacking. The decisions made by states may not be inherently flawed, but the problematic area lies in the implementation process. A more robust system and mechanism should have been in place, emphasizing a pre-decision consultative process rather than relying solely on post-decision consultations. The perception of hasty decision-making and suspicions of hidden agendas need to be addressed.

While some voices in Pakistan argue that the country cannot sustain a large number of Afghan refugees due to capacity constraints, the deportation decisions require careful consideration. Policies for those Afghan refugees already integrated into Pakistani society, economy, and system need to be formulated. Addressing the perception that Afghan refugees have overtaken our economic and demographic landscape is essential.

Pakistan should outline a clear policy roadmap at this juncture, avoiding the tendency to intentionally leave issues unresolved for future use. Specific policies for women and vulnerable communities, both for those returning and those integrated into Pakistani society, are imperative. This is an opportune moment to reflect on these matters and establish comprehensive, transparent policies.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

Thank you, Dr. Samarana Afzal. Now, I invite Ms. Nargis Mansoor to tell us about the situation of women rights and political situation in Afghanistan.

Nargis Mansoor

When discussing the rights of Afghan women, it is evident that their situation has been particularly challenging, both during the previous Taliban regime and once again following the fall of the country on August 15th, 2021. Having witnessed firsthand the treatment of women during the Taliban takeover in Kabul, I can attest to the violations they endured. Contrary to the Taliban's public assertions that they respect women's rights and dismissive claims that Afghan women activists are merely seeking Western opportunities, my personal experience contradicts these narratives. Colleagues and I were impeded from going to work, revealing a stark reality that contradicts the Taliban's portrayal.

The current restrictions on Afghan girls attending school raise serious concerns about the future. If educational opportunities continue to be denied, the potential repercussions include a dearth of female doctors, teachers, and educated women in Afghan society. This absence would leave a significant void in the nation's intellectual and healthcare capacities.

The Taliban's argument that certain curricula are incompatible with Sharia law raises questions about the practicality of implementing Sharia in fields such as medicine. It remains unclear how Sharia-compliant medical education would differ from the scientifically grounded medical instruction provided in colleges and universities. These unanswered questions highlight the need for a more nuanced and open dialogue.

It is regrettable that direct communication with the Taliban, who could provide clarification on their objectives, is currently unavailable. Despite the challenges, there is a pressing need for engagement and discussion to understand their intentions and work towards a more inclusive and equitable future for all Afghans.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

We share a common concern for the challenges faced by women, yet the dilemma lies in addressing the imperfect women's rights situations in both your host country, Pakistan, and your country of origin, Afghanistan. Navigating a way forward or formulating a roadmap amidst these imperfections poses a significant challenge. Ms. Safiya Aftab rightly pointed out that discussions on refugee rights necessitate a clear refugee policy, which currently seems absent. Notably, Pakistan's non-acceptance of the refugee convention, or its failure to ratify the basic convention it signed, leaves it without any legal obligation.

This lack of clarity leads to justifications, creating numerous ambiguous structures that obscure the issue in complete darkness. In such obscurity, men may find ways to navigate, but the ensuing consequences disproportionately affect women. The genesis of the

Taliban is rooted in patriarchal madrassas where they lacked female supervision. Many were orphans, with some having fathers who disappeared, or were complete orphans with entire families vanished. The absence of a woman's influence as a supervisor or teacher in their madrassa hinders their understanding of the struggles faced by the other half of the population.

The Taliban's failure to comprehend that neglecting the concerns of this 50% population will lead to a 500% setback for the country in the future is a critical oversight. Having highlighted these issues, it is imperative for us to collectively brainstorm potential solutions or implementable suggestions. Ms. Safiya Aftab, your insights could serve as a starting point in this important discussion.

Safiya Aftab

You mentioned the topic of Sharia, and I recently had a conversation with someone who has firsthand experience with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. He shared an illuminating anecdote about a meeting with a Taliban leader, emphasizing the challenges of conveying the importance of allowing women access to education and healthcare.

In the conversation, the individual made a compelling effort to explain to the Taliban leader the consequences of not allowing girls to study. He raised the point that without education, Afghan girls cannot become doctors, and in case of illness, he questioned how their women would receive medical attention. The Taliban leader acknowledged that they would take their women to doctors but insisted that the healthcare providers would be men.

Interestingly, the individual pointed out that the Taliban do not officially accept male doctors either. The Taliban leader, however, rationalized that taking women to male doctors is a lesser "*fitna*" (trial or turmoil that misguides away from the faith) compared to the greater *fitna* of educating women. This perspective underscores the Taliban's conviction that educating women is disruptive, and they prefer to avoid such changes in societal dynamics.

The Pakistani gentleman emphasized that, despite the official stance on Sharia compliance, the supreme leader of the Taliban, Hibatullah Akhunzada, is unequivocal about preventing women from receiving an education, viewing it as a *fitna*. It becomes challenging to engage with such a mindset that sees women's education as a threat to the established order. This insight sheds light on the complexity of addressing this issue and the need for nuanced strategies to advocate for women's rights in such contexts.

Dr. Sobia Hanif

When discussing the Afghan Taliban, it's important to recognize their diversity. While misogyny is prevalent throughout, distinctions exist between hardline and moderate factions within the group. In order to foster positive engagement, Pakistan has the opportunity to leverage its diplomatic influence with those elements or factions within the Afghan Taliban that demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to engage with the international community. Rather than addressing the Taliban as a monolithic entity,

strategic efforts should be directed towards engaging with specific factions that may be more open to dialogue and cooperation.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

There are factions that are flexible, but they are not the one who have the final say.

Safiya Aftab

Those having the final say in the Afghan Taliban, such as the supreme leader, have their own ideas.

Dr. Sobia Hanif

Pakistan's effective course of action lies in maintaining consistent engagement with the Taliban, fueled by a hopeful outlook, as it stands as the most viable approach in the current scenario.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

Another complicating factor in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations is Pakistan's consistent assertion of non-interference in Afghan affairs. However, when it comes to issues such as women's rights, this stance raises concerns about interference. Additionally, the presence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or sympathizers of the Taliban system within Pakistan further complicates the domestic landscape. Consequently, when engaging with the Afghan Taliban on matters like women's rights, the Taliban often retort by urging Pakistan to address its own internal challenges first before preaching to them. This unfortunate reality diminishes Pakistan's strength and authority in advocating for women's rights with the Afghan Taliban.

Dr. Sobia Hanif

Regrettably, in Pakistan, there are some who talk about cultural relativism versus human rights, leading to the endorsement of the Taliban's actions against women in Afghanistan. Some argue that these actions align with Afghan culture. It is imperative to challenge and rectify this narrative within Pakistan. International law holds precedence over domestic laws, and culture should not serve as a justification for violating human rights. This distorted viewpoint must be corrected, and zero tolerance for it should be upheld. Additionally, there are Taliban sympathizers in Pakistan with similar mindsets, raising concerns for the well-being of women within the country. The focus should extend beyond Afghanistan, addressing the problematic mindset within Pakistan as well.

Tanzeela Mazhar

Our capacity to influence positively is constrained by the inflexible regime in Kabul, with the Taliban officials showing no inclination to change despite enduring numerous conflicts. Despite these limitations, we must consider what actions to avoid. It is crucial not to become apologists, sympathizers, or endorsers of the Taliban and their policies. Our advocacy should be centered on promoting peace and stability, and not on supporting

the Taliban's non-democratic actions and violations of human rights. Pakistan needs to make a clear and unequivocal statement aligning itself with human rights and women's rights, distancing itself from the actions of the Taliban. Taking this stance is essential, as it reflects the best course of action for Pakistan as a neighboring country.

Dr. Salma Malik (Moderator)

During the Ashraf Ghani administration, a tragic incident occurred at the Kabul Mosque, where a young lady was stoned to death. It is essential to clarify that such incidents are not unique to Afghanistan; Pakistan has witnessed similar events. At that time, the presence of Americans in Afghanistan, backing the government, did not prevent such atrocities. The fear of fundamentalist groups restrained any effective action. We, in Pakistan, may find ourselves in a relatively better situation, but only cautiously navigate limited spaces available to us without clear knowledge of red lines, which are constantly shifting.

While we may believe we are operating within these constrained spaces, the reality is that the parameters are ever-changing, making negotiations challenging. However, the luxury of navigating such spaces is no longer available for Afghanistan and its women.

Colleagues who were once strong voices during their twenty years in Afghanistan, contributing significantly to their country, saw a shift in their tone when the Taliban took power. Although not endorsing the Taliban regime, they fell silent, aware that any outspokenness could lead to severe consequences for their family members in Afghanistan. This innate self-preservation instinct is shared by many, complicating the ability to expect others to raise their voices in adversity.

In this challenging situation, the disparity between state-level policies and human-level policies is glaring. Where possible, efforts should be directed towards promoting human-level policies, pushing back against ill-considered state-level decisions. Instances of positive stories, though overshadowed, deserve highlighting. By showcasing positive stories, we can create a space for dialogue, potentially influencing the Taliban's hardliners to recognize non-harmful interventions at the smallest levels. Any additional points or suggestions from the audience are welcome.

Jamaima Afridi

My first suggestion emphasizes the need to provide special consideration to the most vulnerable sections among Afghan refugees, particularly Afghan women. Beyond merely granting them refuge in Pakistan, there should be provisions for them to work and pursue education, recognizing the unique challenges they face in the current situation.

Secondly, given that Pakistan is not a signatory to the international convention on refugees, it becomes imperative to establish a comprehensive legal framework at the national level to address the growing refugee crisis.

Lastly, there is a crucial need to recognize the longstanding presence of Afghan refugees born in Pakistan, whose entire lives have been spent in this country and whose

generations have been raised here. Granting them Pakistani citizenship is a logical step, acknowledging their integral role as citizens who have contributed to and become a part of Pakistan.

Tanzeela Mazhar

I believe these suggestions are not only policy-oriented but also carry a profound humanitarian perspective. Worldwide, the norm is to grant citizenship based on the place of birth. Considering Pakistan's historical context as a delicate and accommodating state, it is crucial to align its internal policies with the evolving challenges it faces. This adjustment must be made sooner rather than later.

Elsa Imdad Hussain

When discussing Afghan issues, it's crucial to consider the nature of the stakeholders involved. Religious scholars can play a pivotal role in shaping perspectives. While it's unlikely that the entire clergy shares a unified stance, there exists a spectrum within this group. Some are more politically inclined and may express views to align with external expectations, while others adhere firmly to their beliefs.

Engaging with both segments of the clergy is essential, acknowledging the diversity of perspectives within this influential group. Continuous engagement with the Afghan Taliban is imperative, utilizing various channels such as track 1.5 or track 2 dialogues, and other forms of engagement at the track 1 level. Emphasizing religious diplomacy should be a focal point in these interactions to foster understanding and communication on critical issues.



SESSION TWO:

EMERGING PAK- AFGHAN TIES: YOUTH'S PERSPECTIVE

Sabookh Syed, Moderator (journalist and media trainer)

The focus of this session is on the evolving Pak-Afghan ties and the youth's perspective on it. Discussions will encompass the dynamics surrounding the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), border security concerns, and the refugee issue. Additionally, we will explore the emerging narratives on Pak-Afghan relations in social media and their impact. Initially, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan was characterized by cordiality and support, with Pakistan backing the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban's rise to power was celebrated in Pakistan, reflecting a desire for friendly government in Afghanistan. However, the situation has since changed, with Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan deteriorating. Maulana Fazl ur Rehman's recent visit to Afghanistan has sparked differing opinions; some believe he achieved progress, while others argue he returned empty-handed. To shed light on this complex scenario, we welcome Mr. Kamran Yousaf to discuss the missing link and the potential for improving relations to their former amicable state.

Kamran Yousaf, anchorperson & diplomatic correspondent at *The Express Tribune*

The Afghan issue is a complex one. It was mentioned that with the arrival of the Afghan Taliban in August 2021, many people in Pakistan were jubilant, believing that it would safeguard Pakistan's security interests. During the Ghani and Karzai administrations in Kabul, Pakistan used to blame Afghanistan for supporting and helping the TTP in collaboration with RAW and threatening Pakistan's interests. It is generally believed that Pakistan had very a close relationship with the Taliban and supported them for years to the point that that they were considered as Pakistan's proxies. Therefore, there were expectations that with the coming of the Afghan Taliban into power things will come out in Pakistan's favor.



KAMRAN YOUSAF

The Afghan Taliban's reluctance to act against the TTP, citing their focus on combating the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), mirrored Pakistan's previous stance with the Americans while citing its inaction against the Afghan Taliban.

Historically, Pakistan's Afghan policy has centered around avoiding a two-front situation, facing threats from both India in the east and Afghanistan in the west. The presence of a pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan was believed to significantly reduce external threats. Consequently, Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban, hoping for a favorable outcome. Initially, there was optimism that the Taliban's rise to power would eradicate groups like the TTP and resolve other issues. However, Pakistan underestimated the complexities of the Afghan Taliban's ideology and its relationship with groups like the TTP.

The Afghan Taliban's reluctance to act against the TTP, citing their focus on combating the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), mirrored Pakistan's previous stance with the Americans while citing its inaction against the Afghan Taliban. The Afghan Taliban, nonetheless, facilitated Pakistan's talks with the TTP that failed. Pakistan's stance on talks with the TTP has shifted due to changing leadership and institutional policies. Under General Asim Munir's leadership, Pakistan adopted a firm stance against engaging in talks with terrorists, labeling them as Kharijites. This stance created a deadlock, particularly regarding negotiations with the TTP. However, Maulana Fazl ur Rehman's visit to Afghanistan and his discussions with the Taliban leadership hinted at potential avenues for dialogue.

Pakistan remains steadfast in its refusal to engage in talks with the TTP, leading to a precarious deadlock. The possibility of military action, akin to recent airstrikes in Iran, looms, showcasing Pakistan's readiness. Despite efforts, the situation between Pakistan and Afghanistan shows little signs of improvement, with uncertainties surrounding the potential escalation of tensions.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Thank you, Mr. Kamran Yousaf. Now, I turn to Mr. Azaz Syed to delve into the complexity of the situation. Is it overly simplistic to attribute the challenges solely to the TTP, or are there deeper dynamics at play involving China, Russia, and America? Are terrorist activities simply a matter of infiltration from Afghanistan into Pakistan?

Azaz Syed, senior journalist based in Islamabad

What I'm about to share reflects my experience and is not a definitive statement. There

are journalists from FATA here, and I'm here to listen to them. But given my background from the Punjab province, I'll offer a perspective from that lens. Mr. Kamran Yousaf said that we thought that the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan would resolve our issues. The crucial question arises from the phrase "we were thinking" – who exactly are the "we"? Primarily, it's our military establishment that shapes Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly concerning Afghanistan. However, political parties are also complicit in their inaction on this matter.

During the Afghan crisis and the Doha peace deal negotiations, I probed various Pakistani political leaders including Bilawal Bhutto, Maulana Fazl ur Rehman, Ahsan Iqbal, and the then foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, among others, about their stance on their parties' Afghan policy. Regrettably, most remained silent or deferred any policy statements until the Taliban were firmly in control. This lack of proactive engagement signifies a broader absence of inclusive policymaking forums. The military establishment tends to consult with a select group of experts or insiders on Afghan affairs, often leading to flawed calculations, as seen in the case of Pakistan's expectations from the Taliban's rise to power in the 1990s and now in 2021.



AZAZ SYED

A more inclusive and transparent approach to policymaking is imperative, where politicians lead and the military establishment provides input, rather than monopolizing decision-making.

Pakistan's foreign policy narrative has long emphasized India's use of Afghan territory against Pakistan. Yet, when Ashraf Ghani was in power, Pakistan erected a fence along its border with Afghanistan without facing significant opposition. Moreover, Pakistan's support for the Taliban, evident through providing safe havens and logistical assistance, is not without suspicion. Despite past denials, the reality remains that the Taliban operated from Pakistani soil, casting doubts on Pakistan's role.

Following the Taliban's return to power, Pakistan proudly claimed credit for facilitating the peace deal in Doha. However, the subsequent release of TTP fighters by the Afghan Taliban, along with granting them ministerial protocols, underscores the complexities and contradictions of Pakistan's approach.

Political parties in Pakistan are culpable for their acquiescence to the military establishment's decisions, often echoing their sentiments without critical analysis. The recent flip-flopping on whether to engage in talks with the TTP exemplifies this. The military establishment's dominance in policymaking extends beyond security matters, encompassing economic, foreign, and regional policies, which may not always serve the nation's best interests.

A more inclusive and transparent approach to policymaking is imperative, where politicians lead and the military establishment provides input, rather than monopolizing decision-making. By opening avenues for trade and diplomacy, Pakistan can enhance its economic prospects while ensuring security concerns are adequately addressed.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Thank you, Mr. Azaz Syed. It is very important that the burden on security establishment, which is huge, is reduced so that many people could take part in policy discussions and policymaking. Now, I invite Mr. Imtiaz Baloch to tell us whether all aspects of Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan hinge on the TTP issue. Are there other areas of contention between the two countries beyond the TTP, and are Pakistan's border problems solely attributed to the TTP?

Imtiaz Baloch, research analyst at The Khorasan Diary

With the coming of the Taliban into power an incident occurred on the Afghan friendship gate which exposed the Afghan Taliban's intentions. Besides this, the sentiments of the Afghan people on Durand Line, especially those who have grown up over the past few decades of war, see Pakistan's role as negative. They think that governance and education in their country have been affected because of Pakistan's open support to the Taliban and its involvement in the fall of republic. Caroltta Gall has made these things clear in her book, *"The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan"*, with the claim that Pakistan provided even intelligence to the Taliban to escape Afghan military operations.



IMTIAZ BALOCH

Whenever tensions arise between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Torkham border or the Pak-Afghan friendship gate at Chaman is shut down, severely affecting the border communities on both sides.

Worryingly, the TTP is coming with a nationalist narrative which includes sympathetic statements for the Pashtin Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) as well as soft corner for the grievances of Baloch. Recently, a TTP podcast featuring the Wali of Makran emerged, indicating the TTP's attempt to lure Baloch individuals towards religious extremism. These developments are outcomes of Pakistan's actions or the seeds it has sown in Afghanistan. Another ongoing debate, underscored by a recent article by Ehsanullah Ihsan, suggests that Pakistan is harboring IS-K, with specific mentions of Bajaur where IS-K allegedly finds shelter. Al Mersad, the narrative-building organization of the Afghan Taliban, has echoed this sentiment, accusing Pakistan of supporting IS-K to gain leverage in a perilous game. While Pakistan may exert short-term pressure on the Afghan government, such actions could have detrimental long-term effects on Pakistan.

Pakistan's support for Daesh-affiliated groups in Balochistan, like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, created a breeding ground for extremism. Subsequently, these groups turned against Pakistan, with deadly attacks in Balochistan often attributed to IS-K. The presence of Tahreek-e-Jihad Pakistan in Afghanistan raises concerns, especially when former Interior Minister Sarfaraz Bugti implicated Afghans in many terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

There's a growing resentment towards Pakistan among Afghan youth, which Pakistan's policymakers have overlooked due to a lack of people-to-people engagement initiatives. Whenever tensions arise between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Torkham border or the Pak-Afghan friendship gate is shut down, severely affecting the border communities on both sides. The ongoing protests at the Pak-Afghan friendship gate in Chaman, where people express their grievances, could escalate into larger conflicts if not addressed promptly.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Thank you, Mr. Imtiaz Baloch, for highlighting the critical aspect of how people's grievances can manifest into larger problems if left unaddressed. Now, I welcome Mr. Akbar Notezai to shed light on whether or not the Afghan Taliban's apparent lack of control over the TTP is a straightforward issue. Additionally, we look forward to hearing about the current situation in Balochistan.

Muhammad Akbar Notezai, journalist based in Quetta

This question was posed by our delegates from Pakistan to the Taliban: why don't the Afghan Taliban take action against the TTP and Baloch separatists, considering their hideouts are in Afghanistan? In response, the Afghan Taliban pointed out that Pakistan also harbors militants, and if Pakistan, with its disciplined army, struggles to establish control, how can the Afghan Taliban be expected to do so? It's evident that we need to put our own house in order before demanding action from others.



MUHAMMAD AKBAR NOTEZAI

It's imperative for Pakistan to address its internal issues and ensure that the public's right to vote is respected, allowing genuine representatives to govern effectively. Souring relations with neighbors, especially Afghanistan.

The abrupt expulsion of Afghan refugees, who had been hosted by Pakistan for forty years, sends a negative message. Our perspective tends to be short-term rather than considering the broader or long-term implications of our actions. Let's consider the Durand Line, where Pashtuns have lived on both sides for centuries. Similarly, the McMahan Line in Afghanistan's Nimruz province and Pakistan's Chagai region is home to

Baloch communities. These borders were once open, allowing free movement between countries. However, recent events, such as the fencing of the border with Iran due to the Jundullah phenomenon, have sparked protests in Chaman against the new visa policy.

Decisions like these should involve a methodical process and consider the viewpoints of the people affected. Unfortunately, people's perspectives are often overlooked, particularly when decisions come from the security establishment and are implemented through force, leading to backlash. It's not just Afghanistan; Pakistan's relations with its other neighboring countries are also strained.

India is definitely our old enemy. Iran is our brother country as the Shah of Iran was the first head of a foreign country to visit Pakistan but what are we doing with Iran? Afghanistan is also angry with us and China has its own vested interests and she has been exploiting us. We don't look into these matters. We make short-term policies. For the last 70 years, Pakistan's foreign policy has not been in the hands of civilians. All governments including that of Benazir Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif, besides others, were sent home whenever anyone talked on foreign policy.

After the Afghan Taliban took control of Kabul, there was a belief that various issues, including the terrorist activities of the banned TTP and Baloch insurgents, had been resolved. Previously, blame had been placed on Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) for the turmoil in Pakistan, but with their loss of power, perceptions shifted. Discussions with security officials in Quetta revealed concerns that both the TTP and Baloch insurgents had felt secure under the previous Afghan government but now feel emboldened since the Taliban's rise to power. It's imperative for Pakistan to address its internal issues and ensure that the public's right to vote is respected, allowing genuine representatives to govern effectively. Souring relations with neighbors, especially Afghanistan, are concerning, and the situation seems to be deteriorating rather than improving.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Mr Notezai has rightly pointed out that the people are not getting the right information and thus discussion and analysis are not based on facts. When discussing Pakistan's strained relations with India, Afghanistan, and Iran, it's essential to recognize that the problems are not one-sided; they are mutual. Pakistan has grievances with its neighbors, and vice versa. I recall the Indian Prime Minister's statement questioning who they should talk to in Pakistan, which underscores a genuine issue. The root of the problem lies in our institutional policies being overshadowed by individual interests.

Pakistan's decision to repatriate Afghan refugees has indeed sparked social problems. The recent arrests in Islamabad, Peshawar, and Chaman reflect the complexities of this policy. While the goal was to repatriate them, the execution raised questions, especially since the decision didn't come from political leadership. Decisions made by political leaders often consider different angles and implications. When such matters are delegated to the police and army, their actions align with their training, sometimes leading to unintended consequences.

The refugee issue has left many returning home with a negative impression due to the flawed execution of the policy. There should have been a more thoughtful approach to their repatriation. It seems that Pakistan tends to do the right thing but in the wrong manner. What are your thoughts on the government's policy regarding the deportation of Afghan refugees?

Siyar Ali Shah, anchorperson at Khyber TV

We need to analyze the necessity behind Pakistan's policy of repatriating Afghan refugees and adopting strict measures. What options did Pakistan have to compel the interim Afghan government or influence rulers in Afghanistan to recognize Pakistan's leverage? It's crucial to recognize that the majority of Afghan refugees and the Afghan population harbor negative sentiments towards Pakistan, often expressed more openly upon returning to Afghanistan.



SIYAR ALI SHAH

The relationship between the TTP and the Taliban is rooted in tribal customs and Pakhtunwali, prioritizing tribal affiliations over the concept of a state. Asking the Taliban to act against the TTP disregards their tribal connections and the fact that they envision coexistence with these groups.

Currently, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan are deteriorating. Initially, with a democratic government in power and now with a Taliban-led administration, Pakistan has drawn a line, indicating that it will close its doors to Afghanistan if it fails to conform to the norms of international conduct. This stance has manifested in tough decisions regarding Afghan refugees, trade, and visa regimes.

The rationale behind these tough measures lies in the Afghan Taliban's reluctance, at Pakistan's behest, to act against militant groups like the TTP. The Taliban seek to establish their legitimacy as Afghan nationalists loyal to their land, hence their refusal to act against groups like the TTP under external pressure.

Additionally, the relationship between the TTP and the Taliban is rooted in tribal customs and Pakhtunwali, prioritizing tribal affiliations over the concept of a state. Asking the Taliban to act against the TTP disregards their tribal connections and the fact that they envision coexistence with these groups.

Given these complexities, Pakistan's response has been to introduce stricter deportation policies for Afghan refugees and implement a visa regime, closing borders for Afghan nationals without proper documentation. These measures reflect Pakistan's efforts to navigate its complex relationship with Afghanistan amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Pakistan's diplomatic ties with three key neighboring countries—India, Afghanistan, and Iran—are strained. Afghanistan, sharing borders with seven nations, showcases varied dynamics with its neighboring states. Since the Taliban's assumption of power, numerous Afghan expatriates residing in Pakistan and elsewhere, who dissent from the Taliban's ideology, have openly criticized and mocked Pakistan. These individuals now condemn Pakistan's approach to repatriating refugees, further fueling animosity between the populace of both nations. This discord has surged to the forefront of social media, with exchanges often devolving into name-calling and acrimony.

Asad Khan Toori, student activist and chairman of Paktun Student Council at Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU)

I am from Kurram district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, residing in a border area. To understand the current issues, it's crucial to consider their background. Baloch and Pakhtuns have been protesting against discrimination, yet their voices are often labeled as treasonous. It's encouraging to witness some shift in Punjab's perspectives.

The question arises: who shapes and enforces policies? While it's widely understood in Pakistan, I refrain from naming specific entities. We've learned that the state, akin to a mother, can also be unyielding. From the jihadist rhetoric during the Cold War to the era of Talibanization and the tragic incident at the Army Public School, the faces behind these issues persist. Yes, the main problem is the TTP, but we are acutely aware of the other forces at play.



ASAD KHAN TOORI

Our inconsistent border policies only breed discord and animosity, undermining relations with Afghanistan. The ongoing Pashtun sit-in at Chaman underscores frustrations over border restrictions and visa policies, yet it receives scant coverage in the media.

Politicians and assemblies hold little relevance to us. On the issue of Afghan refugees, it's difficult to comprehend abrupt deportations after decades of contribution to the economy. Our politicians have failed to address why Afghan refugees face forced expulsion, considering Afghanistan's proximity and shared Islamic identity.

Our inconsistent border policies only breed discord and animosity, undermining relations with Afghanistan. The ongoing Pashtun sit-in at Chaman underscores frustrations over border restrictions and visa policies, yet it receives scant coverage in the media. Pakistan's stance on TTP and Talibanization lacks clarity, leaving us perplexed.

While substantial budgets are allocated for border security, loopholes persist, allowing terrorists involved in heinous attacks to evade justice. The opaque policies on terrorism and border management breed uncertainty and ambiguity.

The initial jubilation in Doha, Kabul, and Islamabad over the Taliban's control of Afghanistan has given way to apprehension. The same individuals once celebrated are now viewed as troublesome. The integration of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into KP in 2018 lacked adequate preparation, resulting in a dearth of funds for the region.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Our state is advocating us to do good work but is not providing us ground and conducive atmosphere. Your talking points are important including ambiguity on policies.

Asad Khan Toori

As a resident of a border region, I recall a time of tranquility before 2005. The communities living along the Pak-Afghan border thrived in peace, bound by shared tribal systems, traditions, and language. It's the misguided policies of suppression and tyranny that sowed seeds of discord. We harbor no enmity towards India, Iran, or Afghanistan; instead, we advocate for trade and cooperation. By fostering economic ties and dialogue, we can thwart those seeking to exploit our region's resources.

The pervasive misery showcased on social media fuels resentment among both Pakistanis and Afghans, perpetuating a cycle of animosity. It's imperative to recognize the damaging impact of this mutual discontentment and work towards reconciliation and understanding.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

The challenge lies in the unresolved nature of these issues and the pervasive spread of propaganda. Let's delve into the complexities, particularly concerning the TTP and the refugee situation.

In Pakistan, there are assertions that refugees face deportation for several reasons. Firstly, concerns arise over their involvement in creating law and order disturbances. Incidents in Karachi, Sialkot, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) have seen individuals perceived as state assets targeted by hired assailants, with Afghan refugees implicated in these acts. Secondly, while millions of Afghans reside in Pakistan, only a fraction possess legal refugee status. The lack of registration leaves the government unaware of the activities of the unregistered population, raising suspicions about potential security risks. Thirdly, the presence of TTP hideouts in Afghanistan exacerbates tensions.

Allah Noor, Peshawar-based journalist

Let's begin with the Afghan peace process. Throughout the administrations of Presidents Hamid Karzai, Ashraf Ghani, and the Taliban, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan

have remained strained. It's evident that greater cooperation with the Ashraf Ghani government could have yielded a more favorable outcome today. Unfortunately, Pakistan has not taken significant steps to address current issues, and there seems to be a lack of seriousness from both sides.

Turning to the issue of the TTP, as a resident of North Waziristan, I have firsthand experience of their activities. TTP militants have expanded their reach to areas like Dera Ismail Khan, Lakki Marwat, Bannu, and Tank, in addition to South Waziristan. Despite extensive security measures, including numerous checkpoints and military deployments, the TTP operates freely in the region.



ALLAH NOOR

The TTP's influence in the region persists, with some fighters potentially returning from Afghanistan after military operations. However, many have remained entrenched in the area for an extended period.

Security forces have conducted operations against the TTP, resulting in the destruction of markets, mosques, and homes during Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan. However, the success in neutralizing TTP commanders has been limited, with only one being killed by security forces, while others had been targeted in US-led drone strikes. The escape of individuals like Ehsanullah Ehsan, the former TTP spokesperson, raises significant questions about collusion and deals made with militants.

The TTP's influence in the region persists, with some fighters potentially returning from Afghanistan after military operations. However, many have remained entrenched in the area for an extended period. There's a concerning trend of youth engaging with TTP fighters, unaware of the potential consequences. Security forces often track these interactions, yet incidents like the recent arrest and disappearance of Shamsur Rehman highlight the challenges in preventing youth from being drawn into extremist circles. It's imperative to address the allure of such groups among youth and implement measures to prevent their recruitment and radicalization. This requires not only robust security measures but also community engagement and initiatives to provide alternatives and opportunities for the youth.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Is the [Pakistani] Taliban's continued influence in Waziristan a result of their narrative rather than the fear of terrorism? There have been reports suggesting that the Taliban's sway has diminished over time.

Siyar Ali Shah

You've highlighted a critical aspect regarding whether the TTP is effectively propagating its narrative. In regions extending from Waziristan up to Tank and border areas, a significant portion of the population hasn't had the opportunity to visit cities like Peshawar or Islamabad, and unemployment is prevalent in these areas, making them susceptible to influence. If they were to receive messages from both the TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali and Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar simultaneously, it's likely that 99 percent would overwhelmingly resonate with Wali's message.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Please provide insights into the potential solutions to the discussed problems concerning Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Batur Khan, researcher & youth activist

The solution to this issue lies in the state's recalibration of its priorities towards serving the interests of the masses. This entails crafting policies that prioritize the well-being and protection of the people. In regions like the newly merged districts and other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), there exists a nexus between the military and *mullahs* (clerics), with the military providing financial support to them.



BATUR KHAN

It's imperative for the state to prioritize the interests of its citizens over those of external powers. A functional state is one that unequivocally serves the needs of its residents. Rather than targeting civilians, the focus should be on combating terrorist elements.

Historically, mosques served as platforms for resolving community issues through closed debates. However, this tradition has waned over time. Tragically, individuals like Mashal Khan, a student at Abdul Wali Khan University, faced violence for promoting enlightenment among students, sensitizing them to state policies, and advocating for a better understanding of governance systems. It's imperative for the state to prioritize the interests of its citizens over those of external powers. A functional state is one that unequivocally serves the needs of its residents. Rather than targeting civilians, the focus should be on combating terrorist elements.

In November 2021, the then Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Director General Faiz Hameed engaged in dialogue with the TTP during his visit to Afghanistan. The militant group presented two demands, including the reversal of the 25th Amendment, which merged the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with KP, and the removal of

security checkpoints. While the reversal of the 25th Amendment was not entertained, willingness was shown to remove security barricades.

The TTP maintains sleeper cells in KP and continues to receive funding, leading to increased activity in the region.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Please enlighten us on the solution. When the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, it sparked a significant debate. Acting Afghan Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani's clandestine visit to Pakistan, coupled with secret meetings during his four-day stay, initiated discussions among the top brass of the military. Subsequently, a 53-member Jirga, representing all political parties, convened, conducting an in-camera debate within the parliamentary forum.

Contrary to keeping everything shrouded in secrecy, there remains a lingering perception among the youth of policy ambiguity. It begs the question: Are these developments unfolding under coercion, or is there another explanation?

Kamran Yousaf

I believe coercion is indeed at play in the current situation. Recent escalations, such as those with Iran or strained relations with Afghanistan, have consistently been approached with a measured tone by Pakistan's Foreign Office, unlike with India. This cautious approach stems from Pakistan's awareness of the dire consequences of escalation, despite perceived pro-India leanings of past Afghan regimes under Karzai and Ashraf Ghani.

The Afghan Taliban's reservations are justified. Recently, Senate Standing Committee on Defence Chairperson Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed had gone to Tehran to attend a conference on Palestine issue and met with the interim Afghan foreign minister. The minister complained that Islamabad's 90 percent matters with TTP had been resolved and they were close to sealing a deal except there was deadlock on revival of FATA, but Pakistan backed out. In February 2023, a Pakistani delegation led by then Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif and represented by DG ISI visited Afghanistan. Afghan Taliban expressed their grievances regarding previous commitments made by the Pakistani establishment, contrasting with the current discourse.

Our problem lies in our inconsistent policies. The previous establishment oscillated between carrot-and-stick approaches, with General Qamar Javed Bajwa advocating for reconciliation with the militants as 'our children,' only to witness policy shifts with changing leadership.

Informal conversations with serving and retired diplomats often converge on the notion that Pakistan should treat Afghanistan as an independent and sovereign state. While Iran historically supported Pakistan, Afghanistan's historically hostile stance remains unchanged.

Adopting a stance of treating Afghanistan as a normal country and adhering to international protocols is advocated. A “single-document regime” for border crossings could be implemented, with allowances for the Afghan populace’s education and awareness gaps.

Looking forward, a silver lining may emerge with potential elections and the assumption of power by leaders like Nawaz Sharif, who historically sought peaceful relations with Pakistan’s neighbors. Economic revival and potential normalization with India could be pursued under such leadership, presenting a window of opportunity for improving relations with Afghanistan.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

What is the solution in one line?

Allah Noor

Pakistan should abandon negotiations with the TTP in Afghanistan and instead focus on devising a comprehensive strategy to deal with the group inside Pakiustan.

Siyar Ali Shah

The optimal solution lies in establishing a well-defined institutionalized policy toward Afghanistan, grounded in mutual respect for sovereignty between Pakistan and its neighbor.

Asad Khan Toori

We must prioritize our internal affairs and cease interference in Afghanistan’s internal matters. Afghanistan needs to determine its own future.

Batur Khan

The Pakistani state should base all decisions within the framework of its own laws and constitution. When addressing local issues, adherence to domestic legal norms is paramount. Regarding refugee matters, Pakistan must adhere to relevant international conventions. To progress in harmony with the global community, it’s imperative to abide by both local and international laws while safeguarding national interests.

Imtiaz Baloch

First, we should analyze how the present situation emerged, what are our fault lines, what are their reasons and who are responsible for the present fiasco. Then we should move forward for a solution. We should first clean our own house and bring to book those responsible for the present situation. Pakistan must stop treating Afghanistan as its fifth province.

Akbar Notezai

We have to put our own house in order. Pakistan will have to abandon interventionist policies that have been in place for the last 40 years.

Sabookh Syed (Moderator)

Pakistan has yet to officially recognize the interim Taliban government in Kabul, but foreign pressures persist for Pakistan to influence the Taliban's human rights policies. Islamabad attempted to engage through religious scholars, yet talks failed as the Taliban sought religious justification for their stance. Genuine and profound differences exist. Afghanistan perceives Pakistan's actions as attempts at control. The Taliban question Pakistan's intentions regarding education for girls and handling the TTP. Let Afghans determine their fate. The Taliban, after two decades of conflict, seek to establish an Islamic system according to their interpretation. Understanding their perspective is crucial for finding solutions.

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of Pak Institute for Peace Studies.

About this report

This report is outcome of the 11th PIPS-led structured consultation out of a series of twelve such events that have been designed to discuss and critically evaluate evolving aspects of Afghan conflict and political reconciliation and suggest policy options and strategies to the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan. To that end, PIPS has established a network of credible resource persons including former diplomats, academicians, government officials, and representatives of political and religious parties, security and law enforcement agencies, civil society, and media, as well as those living at the border including Afghan refugees. The underlying goal is to support Afghan peace and reconciliation and tackle its trickle-down effect for Pakistan including in terms of militancy and insecurity, among other things.

About PIPS

Established in 2005, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) is an Islamabad-based research and advocacy organisation. It offers a range of services through a combination of independent research and analysis, innovative academic programmes, and hands-on training and support that serve the following basic themes: Conflict analysis and peacebuilding; dialogue; prevent/counter violent extremism (P/CVE); internal and regional security; and media for peace and democracy. It also conducts frequent structured dialogues, focus group discussions, and national and international seminars to understand the issues listed earlier and strengthen partnerships. The outcomes of PIPS research and planned events have frequently and extensively been reported on media that adds to its credibility as an active, effective and well networked civil society organizations. Many of PIPS policy reports and recommendations have been credited and included in the state policy documents and discourses mainly those on security and CVE.



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