

An Unhappy Homecoming

Author: [Said Maruf](#)

The return of refugees is causing resentment among ordinary Afghans

They are young, well educated, bright and happy to be back in the country they were always taught was home. The last thing these Afghan returnees want is to become a source of friction.

Yet they have arrived so fast and in such numbers that this has been impossible to avoid. As the refugees flood into, they are pushing up rents, taking a lot of the plum jobs, and bringing modern, cosmopolitan attitudes into a very traditional society.

With entire districts now no-go areas due to mines and with huge numbers of buildings lying in ruins, the demand for safe and suitable accommodation has become intense.

Mohammad Humayoon is one Kabuli affected by the changes. "I used to live in Macrorayan and the rent of my house was 800,000 afghanis - about 20 US dollars - a month," he told IWPR. "Then the landlord raised the rent to three million afghanis and we were forced to leave for Kart-e-Naw, where we don't have drinking water or electricity."

Rents in the Afghan capital have risen to levels few would have believed possible a year ago, fuelled at the top end of the market by the thousands of foreigners working for non-governmental organisations and by the tens of thousands of returnees.

Many face an uncertain future. The UN Refugee agency, UNHCR, issues regular bulletins about harassment along the roads, and the problems of providing food and shelter for so many people. Thousands are now camped in tents dotted all over the country.

In spite of the warnings, Afghan roads are bristling with lorries from Pakistan carrying smiling refugees sitting on top of a mountain of personal possessions precariously tied together with rope.

They include a large number of Afghans who have learned English and gained business and computer skills during their years abroad. The majority head straight for Kabul to get jobs, and this can cause friction with the city's current workforce.

"Because I didn't have higher education, I was laid off along with many others when there were job cuts and we were replaced by our refugee brothers and sisters," said a 26-year-old teacher in Kabul. "The people who stayed in Afghanistan couldn't get higher education. Now, when the standard requirement for many jobs is English and computer skills, we are disadvantaged."

People from the diaspora are present at all levels of government. President Hamid Karzai is himself a returnee who spent spells in Pakistan and the US, as are several ministers, including finance head Ashraf Ghani. Refugees with fluent American English represent Karzai's office, the ministry of foreign affairs and other government bodies.

They are also well represented in international organisations, where salaries are typically five to ten times than those in the state sector. A translator or interpreter with English and basic computer skills can earn

around 250 dollars a month compared to 35-50 in the state sector.

“Many Afghans migrated to foreign countries and continued their education there,” said Zulmai Sherzad, director of the United Nations Drug Control and Crime Prevention agency, UNDCP, in Kabul.

“After the wars of 1992, most foreign organisations closed their local offices and moved to Pakistan where they hired educated Afghan refugees.”

As well as the practical problems caused by so many new people crowding the rental and job markets, the returnees also represent a different culture. Many families who fled Afghanistan as villagers have returned from Peshawar as urbanites, happy only to live in big towns and cities.

Many of the newcomers calculate currency in Pakistani rupees rather than afghanis. They are more likely to wear trousers than traditional clothes and are familiar with foreign music and films.

“I left Afghanistan when I was four-years-old,” said Najib Azizi, a returnee in his twenties. “Now that I have come back with the habits and even the proverbs and slang of the Pakistanis, I feel people don’t like me most of the time.”

One final year engineering student at Kabul university, who spent the bulk of his young life in Pakistan, says that when ever he gets the chance he surfs the internet and has online conversations with three of his cousins living in Peshawar, Lahore and London.

“I was born in a village in Logar. I like to go back for the weekend but I could never live there after my time in Peshawar,” he told IWPR. “No one there knows anything about the outside world.”

Said Maruf is an IWPR journalism trainee in Kabul

Location: Pakistan
Afghanistan

Focus: Afghanistan

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/unhappy-homecoming>