



## Pakistan's unwanted problem: Afghan refugees | By Ayaz Amir

Islamabad diary

The truth is that Afghans don't like Pakistan, considering Pakistan to be a Punjabi state. For reasons rooted in history they have viewed Punjab through a prism of hostility, not least because a Punjabi ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, defeated them in battle and took Peshawar from them. If Peshawar and the surrounding districts are a part of Pakistan it is because of this tangled past.

Small wonder Afghans have never recognised the Durand Line and were the lone country to oppose Pakistan's membership of the United Nations.

Yet despite this undercurrent of hostility Afghanistan and Pakistan remained at peace with each other when King Zahir Shah and after his overthrow his cousin, Sardar Daoud, ruled Afghanistan. Both our countries played a version of the Great Game, bribing the border tribes and jostling for influence, but that was it. Despite their differences they never went to war. During the Indo-Pak war of 1965 Zahir Shah caused no trouble for Pakistan.

It should also be mentioned that Afghanistan was close to India and the Soviet Union and Pakistan was in the Western camp. Pakistan inherited not only the outward trappings of the Raj. It also inherited many of Britain's prejudices and suspicions about Russia. As competing and sometimes colliding empires Britain and Russia had reasons to be wary of each other. We had no reasons to fear the Russians. But we looked at Russia through British eyes. Even today our failure to develop an adequate relationship with Russia is less because of India and more because of memories of the Great Game acquired at second hand from our former masters.

The so-called Saur Revolution of April 1978 shattered the uneasy but stable equilibrium we shared with Afghanistan. Pakistan could have reacted calmly. After all a communist takeover in Kabul was no threat to Pakistan. But General Zia, then uneasy ruler of Pakistan, had his own compulsions. He lacked political legitimacy. The treasury was empty and Zia had no friends abroad. The communist takeover came as a godsend. Even though the Americans were not greatly interested Zia started selling the line that the geopolitical map had shifted and the Soviet Union had its eyes on the Persian Gulf.

Events played into his hands. The Afghan communists were small men seeing themselves in Lenin's image. They rushed through reforms for which Afghan society was unprepared. There was discontent across the country. Pakistan's ISI also came into its own, stoking the fires of unrest and backing an armed insurgency against the communist regime.

There were also internal divisions among the Afghan communists. Afghanistan was thus slipping out of control and to save the situation and quell the insurgency, the Soviet Politburo, consisting largely of ageing figures well past their prime, ordered an occupation army into Afghanistan.

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Gen Zia was able to say, 'I told you so', overnight transformed from a pariah figure into a much sought after leader courted by the West (the same thing which happened to Gen Musharraf after 9/11).

Afghan refugees started streaming into Pakistan soon after the Saur Revolution. Far from regulating their entry, the Zia regime actively encouraged more and more of them to come, all in the spirit of Islamic brotherhood. The legend propagated was that Pakistan, Fortress of Islam and all that, was the Medina opening its arms to the Afghan people oppressed by godless communism.

Afghan refugees went to Iran as well, about a million of them, but the Iranians, less swept by sentiment and probably more aware of the dangers, kept them in camps under a strict regime. Pakistan operating on a higher plane – glory of Islam, etc – gave them the run of the country. They could stay in camps or they could stay outside. Today Afghans in unregulated numbers are to be found in every town and village of KP and Punjab, whole areas of Karachi and large stretches of Balochistan. And they are in no one's control...a floating mass of people, for all practical purposes outside the state's jurisdiction.

No one is bothered, certainly not the West which is in a crisis because of its own refugees but can't spare a thought for Pakistan, principally because Pakistan, for reasons hard to understand, has never spoken about this burden the way it should. Westerners come and offer us bland words and Pakistani officials, military and otherwise, swallow them and this problem is kicked down the road.

The time has come to tell the world, and principally our American friends, that Afghanistan is not our problem, the Haqqanis or other Taliban are not our problem, and the refugees are not our problem. The refugees should now go back to their country, all of them. Afghanistan is already suffering a brain drain, and a manpower drain. It needs help from its own people. The Afghans here should go back to help in the stability and prosperity of their country.

We needlessly made Afghanistan our problem. We need to get out of this foolishness. A Taliban Afghanistan or an Abdullah Abdullah Afghanistan is not our headache. Let Afghanistan prosper. Let it make strides to the moon. We should wish it well and that is about all.

Afghan ministries are packed with graduates from Pakistani universities. Kabul today is a city where Urdu is widely understood and spoken. Yet the paradox remains that the most hated and reviled country in Afghanistan is Pakistan. Afghans of all shades of opinion hold Pakistan responsible for their misfortunes. True, Pakistani generals and the ISI haven't helped matters by adopting a patronising tone towards Afghanistan and giving the impression that Pakistan seeks to influence events in that country. But Afghans are not babes in the wood. Their contribution to their own troubles is not small.

In any event, Pakistan has to look out for itself. Today the situation is that if the Pakistan Army tries to erect a barrier on this side of the Torkham border the Afghans react violently. The army hands over the Angoor Adda checkpoint to the Afghans and the Afghans, by way of thanks, close the border.

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There is no peace in Afghanistan and there will be none for a long time. There is nothing that we can do to help bring peace there. What should it matter to us who rules Kabul? No Afghan, whether Taliban or Tajik, is going to recognise the Durand Line. So why are we involved in all these complicated games? If Tata buses ply the roads of Kabul, if India builds infrastructure projects there, why should we lose any sleep? We should be worried about the Afghan presence in our midst. Afghanistan should sort out its own problems.

The CPEC can wait, India can wait. We must keep the Afghan civil war out of Pakistan, and for that it is absolutely essential that we ask our Afghan guests, whom we've long hosted, to leave.

Source:<http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/124038-Pakistans-unwanted-problem-Afghan-refugees>

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