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Expert Analysis

Water, climate, and refuge across Afghanistan and the sub-region

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Note: Views and opinions expressed in the expert analysis are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of ADSP, nor of its members.

Introduction

For over 40 years, Iran and Pakistan have been home to Afghan refugees. Today both countries host over 90% of the world's Afghan refugees and other migrants in refugee like situations (over 8 million people).² The region of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran also ranks as high or very high among countries at risk to impacts of climate change – where water, as a resource, is especially scarce. Afghanistan and Pakistan rank low on the capacity to deal with the impacts of climate change, whilst Iran is ranked as an upper-middle country.³ Any durable solution for Afghan displacement in the region must integrate concerns related to climate change, and resources, including – and especially – water.

This expert analysis draws from interviews conducted in Pakistan, expert opinions, media reports, policy reports, and secondary data and provides three country profiles for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Focused on climate, water, and Afghan migration, each section provides pathways forward for durable solutions for displacement, climate change, and water, with an emphasis on regional cooperation.

Key takeaway:

The management of Afghan returnees from Pakistan and Iran in Afghanistan and the handling of refugee issues in Pakistan and Iran are increasingly influenced by internal and regional **competition over resources, real and perceived**. Coupled with economic pressures, regional conflict, and international sanctions, these tensions may be more pronounced in the era of climate disasters. In this context, **any durable solution must integrate climate change planning**, especially the effects on water resources. **Environmental diplomacy** may also offer routes to regional cooperation, improved interstate relations, and avenues to circumvent the debilitating impact of sanctions on the region's capacity to adapt to climate change.

Summary of regional recommendations

1. Encourage pre-existing initiatives such as the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees and Regional Response Plan to integrate the effects of climate change into their frameworks.
2. Use environmental diplomacy to encourage negotiations and cooperation in the region, including on – but not limited to – issues of regional migration.
3. Facilitate technical support to municipal and local government departments and civil society actors, in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran to develop skills related to climate, water, and migration governance.
4. Encourage regional intergovernmental and international coordination, and communication on climate change, water management, and related impacts on internal and international migration trends.
5. Promote discussion of how sanctions on Iran and the Taliban leadership, now governing in Afghanistan, impact the effects of climate change management, including water related issues.
6. Encourage global and regional powerbrokers and international institutions to promote environmental initiatives in the region, which could fall under exemptions for humanitarian or agricultural sanctions and could incentivize cooperation and regional stability.
7. Facilitate private, governmental, and intergovernmental investment (training, grants, providing platforms/visibility) in local communities, non-profit organizations, entrepreneurs, lawyers, journalists and academics in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran that work to advance environmental solutions in the region.

A. AFGHANISTAN

Quick facts

- Afghanistan's average annual temperature increased by 1.8 degrees Celsius between 1950 and 2010, twice the global average.
- The largest rise was in the south (2.4 degrees Celsius).
- Drought affects 25 out of 34 provinces in the country.
- Changing weather patterns and rising temperatures also result in the melting of snowpacks and glaciers in Afghanistan's mountains that impacts river flows and overflows.⁴

1. An Economic, Humanitarian, Climate, and Water Crisis

Afghanistan faces a widespread humanitarian and economic crisis, which included acute food insecurity evident in some areas in 2022 and 2023, and acute levels of malnutrition entrenched across the country.⁵ In 2024, climate disaster and high food prices mean 14.2 million people (over a third of Afghanistan's population) are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity, which include 2.9 million people classified in a state of "emergency".⁶ **Water shortages** often contribute to such disasters, as 79% of the country engages in some form of agricultural farming for subsistence and water shortages may result in poor yields.⁷

The current authorities in Afghanistan are also not recognized by the international community and are subject to **sanctions**. Given that Afghanistan’s modern economy has long depended on foreign aid⁸ – something especially intense during the 2001 to 2021 U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan – **sanctions tend to inhibit the types of development initiatives** that can be undertaken. In other words, aid is coming into Afghanistan, but sanctions and new terms and conditions on donor policies mean the scope of possible activities need to be navigated with care. This is also shaped by the current Afghan authorities own restrictive approach to what aid, development, and private sector activities are considered acceptable. For those concerned with meeting the multiple challenges the country faces – from post-conflict reconstruction, to economic poverty, to water shortages, food insecurity, and climate disaster – understanding, managing, and resolving this tension is crucial.

1.1 Afghanistan is at high risk from climate-related disasters, even though it is not responsible for the global warming crisis.

Afghanistan ranks fourth on the INFORM Risk Index⁹ (very high) and 179 out of 185 countries on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index¹⁰ of countries most vulnerable to a warming climate and least prepared to adapt. **Pronounced climate hazards appear in the form of drought, floods (most notably flash flooding), warming, heat and cold waves, as well as other disasters, including earthquakes.** Their impacts are worsening on the backdrop of sanctions against the current leadership in Kabul and a lack of technical expertise within the political-administrative apparatus. In addition, tense regional interstate relations represent hindrances on much needed cooperation.

1.2 Afghanistan’s humanitarian crisis is also a climate and water crisis.

Afghanistan is not naturally stressed for water and has three main rivers, the Amu Darya, Helmand River, and Kabul River, that act as water resources as well as groundwater sources. 80% of Afghanistan’s water resources come from surface water that flows from snowfields and glaciers in the Hindu Kush and Himalaya mountains. Nonetheless, over 45 years of wars have contributed to water mismanagement and poor sanitation. The country has also faced repeated occurrences of flash flooding and periods of drought (1995-2003, 2008-2009, 2021-now). However, the current water crisis has intensified because of lack of capacities and poor decision making by the current authorities in Afghanistan – for example in 2021, the National Water Affairs Regulation Authority, an independent government body established not long before to improve the water stressors of the country, was abolished without planning for an alternative.¹¹ Experts say that, doing so, the current authorities have “further deteriorated the already critical situation.”¹²

1.3 Hesitancy over investment in Afghanistan because of sanctions intensifies an already dire situation.

Whilst the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted resolution 2615 on 22 December 2021 establishing a humanitarian exemption to the UNSC sanctions regime related to the Taliban leadership, reports show there remains hesitancy and a lack of willingness for the private sector to invest in Afghanistan, which is hampering much needed paths to Afghan economic recovery.¹³ Nonetheless, professionals in Afghanistan, the international aid sector, diplomats, as well as representatives of the current authorities themselves in closed door meetings, repeat how international aid and technical support is much needed to support the people of Afghanistan.¹⁴

Notably, sanctions are not the cause of Afghanistan’s climate and water stresses. However, they mean the current authorities in Afghanistan lack funds or capacity to respond to climate disaster or natural resources management effectively. Local actors and the international community should work on developing information campaigns and mechanisms on how to deliver humanitarian, agricultural, and environmental support in Afghanistan.

Water as a flashpoint or regional diplomatic opportunity? Afghanistan, Iran, and Uzbekistan

Regional tensions between Afghanistan and Iran have historically flared up around control over the Helmand River, the main river source being located in Afghanistan. The 1973 Helmand River Treaty is used to manage transboundary water relations between the two countries.¹⁵ Recently, Iran has alleged that Afghanistan is blocking the flow of water to Iran and not delivering the stipulated amount of water required by the treaty, while according to the current authorities in Afghanistan, low water flows reflect the drought.¹⁶ In 2021, the completion of the Kamal Khan Dam in Afghanistan, close to the Iranian border, gave Afghanistan more control over the Helmand River and in 2023 led to clashes between Afghan and Iranian border forces. Experts consider that the 1973 Treaty is “ill-equipped to address the current reality of evolving climate conditions” and other international water law solutions are needed.¹⁷

Afghanistan and its neighbours are not signatories to international water laws such as the Helsinki Rules of 1966, which provide guiding principles for the use, management, and resolution of disputes concerning international rivers, and the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses.

In order to deal with its water stress, the current authorities in Afghanistan are also pursuing a canal project that could negatively impact neighbouring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which is also leading to tense interstate relations.¹⁸

A positive nearby example: Analysts at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies outline how Iran and Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have recently started negotiating together on issues of regional environmental concern, which offers an important “potential for greater regional cooperation amidst widespread distrust”¹⁹ – an approach that could be learned from for Afghanistan and other states in the Central and South Asian region too.

Water crisis (macro level)

The impacts of **climate change, conflicts, and poor water management** translate into common flash floods and flooding of rivers, while underground aquifers are dwindling.

Growing population via natural population growth, internal displacement (including disaster-related), and refugee returnees from Pakistan and Iran are straining already overstretched infrastructure, nationally and in specific regions.

Lack of Afghan government’s long-term capacity to build sufficient infrastructure, water management and early warning systems to help the country – and, importantly, downstream neighbours like Iran, Pakistan and Uzbekistan – handle flash floods and spells of drought.²⁰ This is **worsened by current authorities’ poor decision-making** on water management.

Transboundary river disputes between Kabul and nearby capitals, particularly Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Tehran (Iran).

Water crisis in daily life (micro level)

In 2022, **80% of Afghan families lacked access to sufficient water** for their daily needs.²¹

93% of children in Afghanistan (15.6 million children) lived in areas of high, or extremely high, **water vulnerability**.²²

5 out of every 10 Afghan people did not have access to at least basic sanitation facilities.²³

Displacement and migration: The impacts of poor water access – coupled with localised political instability, economic hardship, and the effects of climate change – are contributing to increased levels of displacement, and migration to neighbouring countries and beyond – trends that will likely continue.²⁴ The impacts of poor water access disproportionately affect marginalised groups, including internally displaced persons and returnees.

2. Displacement Contexts and Tensions over Resources

The combination of wars, economic and ecological hardship have formed a sizable Afghan transnational displaced population dispersed across the world. Estimates show Afghans live as refugees, in a refugee-like situation, and/or are seeking asylum in 103 countries worldwide.²⁵

Today, **within Afghanistan the displacement crisis encompasses two main categories of status**. The first are the 6.5 million **internally displaced persons (IDPs)**, sometimes directly as a result of disasters and hazards,²⁶ the second are **Afghan returnees** who came back voluntarily or under pressure to Afghanistan. When the Taliban returned to power in 2021, some states stopped forcibly returning Afghan nationals, in line with a UNHCR non-return advisory to Afghanistan,²⁷ while others – in the region and beyond – did not.

The **impact of Afghan returnees on governance structures and basic infrastructure cannot be underestimated**. In 2023, in an interview with the International Crisis Group (ICG) a spokesperson from the authorities said, referring to the massive refugee returns and ecological crises: “We are grappling with empty hands and competing disasters”.²⁸ Although limited solutions were implemented for both IDPs and returnees in the past, previous Afghan governments under the administrations of President Hamid Karzai (in power 2002-2014) and President Ashraf Ghani (in power 2014-2021) attempted to integrate managing Afghan refugee returnees from Europe, Iran, Pakistan (and elsewhere) into broader governance practices. Unfortunately, this does not appear to have been adequately taken up by the post-2021 Afghan authorities.²⁹

2.1 In focus: refugee returnees, politics of water, and scarcity as a construct.

Scarcity reflects the notion that there are not enough resources to meet population needs. Scarcity is, however, largely socially and politically generated – it is a notion that allows individuals to focus their concerns on immediate access to a resource (or lack thereof) instead of considering the longer- and medium-term factors that may be shaping an inability to access resources. Often foreigners and refugee returnees become scapegoats for a perceived scarcity of resources.

Additionally, Afghan returnees from Pakistan and Iran are often described as Pakistani Afghans or Iranian Afghans in their country of origin.³⁰ Labelling them as outsiders also leads to tensions over resources, especially in areas that already face shortages of basic facilities such as housing, clean water and sanitation, as well as agricultural production space. Moreover, most Afghan returnees do not have high incomes. In late 2023, those returnees from Pakistan faced drastic limitations on the sums of money, cattle, or other property they could bring back with them, which also plunged people into poverty upon crossing the border into Afghanistan.³¹

“There was a neighbour of ours who, when he found out the returns were taking place, decided it was better to sell up all the belongings he had and take shelter in Afghanistan for a while. It was heart breaking, he lost so much money. But he said he will attempt to return to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as there is no future in Afghanistan for him.”

Interview with Samina*, 50-year-old, Pakistani university researcher. Peshawar, March 2024.

The mass returns of Afghan nationals from Iran and Pakistan (and from elsewhere at lower rates) are sometimes alleged to exacerbate water scarcity concerns for municipal, provincial, and national government officials, as well as local populations.

*Name Changed

In an interview, Mohsin*, a 33-year-old Afghan Pashtun national in Peshawar, who has a legal right to be in Pakistan, indicated that he went to Nangarhar, Afghanistan as he was worried about the levels of harassment Afghans were facing. Some of his friends and family members had to leave the country. Interviewed in Peshawar, Pakistan, in March 2024 (he went back when he felt it was safe to do so), he reflected on what he witnessed over the previous few months:

“In the informal housing areas in Jalalabad, the Afghans who do not have money and cannot go to Kabul have settled on the outskirts of the housing area. My family was able to move to our relatives’ homes, but others could not do this. The informal area is already overstretched. There are no water lines and sanitation systems and people were using the water from the mosque. When the new Pakistani Afghans arrived, I was asked, ‘Why have the Pakistanis come here? They should stay in Pakistan.’ It was not their fault, but people are worried about their own conditions too.”

2.2 Local solutions to water scarcity.

In response to water scarcity, local communities and neighbourhoods are reported to seek out low-cost “informal” solutions that are managed by the community.³² **There is a wide body of policy and scholarly works on informality. In brief, informality** is the attempt to distribute legal goods and resources through unregulated channels when official channels cannot or will not do so.³³ Whilst differences between residents, IDPs, and returnees are not absent, as detailed in other informal housing areas,³⁴ a need for survival and a shared resource (water), can, at times, propel community cohesion and mobilisation.

A 2022 study by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) in Herat showed how a low-income community displayed adaptability in responding to climate-induced water scarcity.³⁵ This included:

- Proactively investing in deep wells, including via financial maintenance of the well by residents and their households.
- Using water storage tanks over piped water sources to retain water.
- Using clay jars covered with linen to store water.

These acts show how local communities are central to immediate solutions at moments of climate risk and disaster and are able to produce, at low-cost, indigenous and ecological solutions that do not rely on local government officials or institutions. This self-sufficiency is also a pragmatic response to uncertain governance.

Meanwhile the HPG study in Herat also showed that IDPs and refugee returnees managed to reduce the labour of drawing water from wells by organizing themselves to collect “AFN 1,500 (approximately 20 USD) per house” to buy a solar panel for the well, reporting that “Now, we easily get water, and use that saved time to earn our meals.”³⁶ Other examples of local community and egalitarian/leaderless mobilisation included, pooling resources to buy a plastic water tank and dividing labour to refill the water tanks.

These solutions are crucial lifelines that show solidarity and the organising capacity of local communities. Empowering local communities for local solutions is a key route to climate adaptability. However, on their own, local communities will not generate long-term durable solutions to climate change, water scarcity, and interactions of poverty and displacement. In addition, often these solutions face a number of issues, including contaminated water supplies or not being available to all residents (refugee returnee citizens and non-refugee citizens).³⁷

3. Recommendations (Afghanistan): Dealing with Migration, Climate, and Water

Recommendation 1: The political isolation of the current authorities in Afghanistan poses challenges to Afghanistan receiving adequate aid and development funding for climate and water management. To circumvent this, **humanitarian actors and institutions should partner and coordinate with each other and with trusted local partners, individuals, and communities** for coherent and sustainable short-, medium-, and long-term approaches to migration, displacement, climate, and water. This includes local communities, civil society organisers, entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations, lawyers, journalists, academics, and scientists.

Recommendation 2: Acknowledging a cross-cutting dynamics between wars, climate change, and displacement at the national and international level is likely to provide a basis for improved coordination and communication across different government departments at the national, municipal, and local level as well as by the international aid and humanitarian sector.

Recommendation 3: Humanitarian and/or research organisations’ interaction with the current authorities in Afghanistan and local authorities is politically complex and challenging but **necessary**. Non-interaction is having a detrimental effect on the people of Afghanistan (noting that interaction is not the same as political recognition). To provide some level of support, the international humanitarian aid sector, climate change research agencies, as well as the private sector should engage with the Afghan authorities on: (a) Managerial/ governance support (that is how to plan for long-term water management in light of refugee returns and climate change); (b) complete data collection and share this information with the current authorities and wider aid sector; (c) technical/research support.

Recommendation 4: Regional coordination and environmental diplomacy on water is required particularly on: **(a) Improved management of transboundary rivers**, which requires the current Afghan authorities investing in expertise and technical skills development. Since the current government does not have funding for this, it should seek out funding partners and technical experts – and international partners and experts should be encouraged to support this. **(b) Coordination, developing legal agreements, and dialogue between the governments of Kabul, Tehran, and Tashkent.** This should be facilitated by diplomats

*Name Changed

within and outside of these countries, UN agencies, who should encourage adhering to/joining the UN Water Convention, which could offer pathways for long-term negotiations for transboundary river management.³⁸ **(c) Overall shared regional and environmental cooperation.**

Recommendation 5: Regional coordination on preventing involuntary returns of Afghans from Iran and Pakistan³⁹ will reduce unnecessary strains being placed on Afghan governance, thus limiting prospects for stabilization, and also improve the lives of Afghans in Iran and Pakistan. This requires the governments of Islamabad and Tehran, alongside UNHCR, to build, refine, and develop the regional response to Afghan displacement as outlined in the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR)⁴⁰ and the 2024-2025 Regional Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation (RRPAS),⁴¹ which include space for emphasis on: (a) Immediately putting a halt to any orders of return to Afghanistan; (b) Developing better communication and coordination on ecological migration stressors in border regions of Iran/Afghanistan and Pakistan/Afghanistan and Pakistan/Iran; (c) Encouraging a shared response for improved refugee/refugee returnees integration; (d) Providing greater resources (financial and/or skills) for local host communities in areas where refugees and refugee returnees are concentrated.

Recommendation 6: Integrating refugee returns into plans for water management, urban planning, and agricultural development in Afghanistan should be revived.⁴² International development and aid agencies should be encouraged to engage with local, regional, and international researchers and organisations on how to account for refugees in water management, urban planning, and agricultural development. This could include technical or financial assistance of independent actors and institutions who have experience in building water solutions for local communities in informal and urban areas in the region, climate change researchers and organisations, and water aid agencies.

Recommendation 7: Investing in community-based solutions for resource distribution will allow local actors to be key stakeholders in solutions to shortages of water. Already, local communities find innovative solutions to water shortages, housing, sanitation lines, electricity, and more. Whilst these local solutions should not be seen as a replacement for regulated government supported interventions, a key way forward is to provide local communities with support by trusted municipal authorities, water experts, government bodies, alongside broader technical support by the aid sector.

B. PAKISTAN

1. Resources: Climate Crisis and Water

Despite contributing very little to the global climate crisis, Pakistan remains an especially vulnerable country to the effects of climate change. Pakistan ranks 23rd on the INFORM Risk Index⁴³ and is ranked low (150 out of 185) on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index⁴⁴ of countries most vulnerable to a warming climate and least prepared to adapt.

Quick facts

- By 2090 Pakistan will face rates of global warming between 1.3°C to 4.9° over the 1986–2005 baseline.
- Sea levels are expected to increase by 60 cm, impacting low-lying coastal areas and the Indus River Delta.
- There is an increased frequency and intensity of extreme climate events (floods, drought, and cyclones).
- Projections suggest the next 60 to 70 years will see yield declines in key food and cash crops: cotton, wheat, sugarcane, maize, and rice.⁴⁵

Despite having Pakistan's Indus Basin Irrigation System, the largest contiguous irrigation system in the world, Pakistan is not a water secure country, and faces unequal access to clean water, and repeated floods and drought.⁴⁶ Part of this is shaped by tense interstate relations with India. The Indus River has four major tributaries that emerge from the Tibetan Plateau that have to either pass through Indian Administered Kashmir or India's Himachal Pradesh territories. Both countries are signatories to the 1960 Indus Water Treaty, however, in recent years, the Indian government led-by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has reneged some terms of the treaty.

Pakistan has not sufficiently invested in water infrastructure and has poor water governance.⁴⁷ Pakistan also mainly produces textiles and agriculture for export, using up to 93% of its freshwater supplies, meaning water is diverted from local populations to meet foreign export needs – something not sufficiently addressed in international development when confronting Pakistan's water crisis.⁴⁸ This is worsening with climate change.

Impacts of water scarcity on daily life (micro level)

- Pakistan's drinking water supply system covers 92% of the population, but only 36% of the water is considered safe for consumption.⁴⁹ This is a pronounced issue for poor and marginalised groups, including refugees and IDPs.
- Lack of access to safe drinking water is especially pronounced in Pakistan's megacities.
- Government run and public water lines are often obsolete for most of the population, so large numbers of people rely on private water companies. Water provided is often contaminated – estimates indicate that between 33% and 50% of water used for drinking is bacterially contaminated with E. coli at source, including piped water.⁵⁰
- Waterborne diseases are the primary cause of death for 15,000 people in urban areas and 25,000 people in rural areas.⁵¹

Floods in focus

The 2022 floods submerged a third of the country and displaced 33 million people.⁵² The province of Sindh was especially affected. The factors behind the floods are not simply about a "natural disaster" but linked to political choices past and present. The 2022 floods, for example, followed on from the massive 2010 floods, and showed that many lessons were not learned by the government and international actors.

This includes:

- Colonial legacies of river management are still in effect today.
- World Bank water management schemes failed to account for indigenous water management techniques.⁵³
- Cases are known of elite landholders having contributed to flooding poorer villages to save their own land.⁵⁴

2. Displacement Contexts

Climate induced migration is a feature of Pakistan.⁵⁵ Ecological disaster and water stresses such as the 2022 floods displaced 7 million persons.⁵⁶ After the deluge, many people could not return to their homes and have moved toward cities.

2.1 Afghan refugees have been living in Pakistan since the 1970s. Pakistan is also home to over **1.1 million IDPs**, and other nationalities of refugees, people seeking asylum, and migrant groups, including Rohingya refugees, Bangladeshi migrants, and Somali asylum seekers. Today 3.7 million Afghans⁵⁷ are estimated to live in Pakistan and are categorised in the following ways:

- (a) Registered refugees who have been issued a Proof of Registration (POR) ID card, overseen by the government and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Many have lived in Pakistan since the late 1970s and 1980s.
- (b) Afghan migrants with an Afghan Citizen Card (ACC), overseen by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- (c) Visa holders who are primarily Afghans who moved to Pakistan after the 2021 regime change in Afghanistan. Some were issued with transit visas to third countries, most of which have expired. This places them in especially vulnerable positions.
- (d) Undocumented Afghans, who do not have formal documentation deemed acceptable by the state.

All those categories of displaced people living in Pakistan are likely to be affected – at different stages – by the return plans announced in September 2023, if fully rolled out. Afghans in these different groups have also been affected by repeated climate related displacement within Pakistan, including floods in 2022 (and prior to that in 2010).

2.1.1 Perceptions: refugees as a “resource threat”.

The protection space in Pakistan is facing challenges, influenced by a logic of security threats. This trend also builds on a language of resource scarcity linked to climate disaster. Provinces like Sindh were devastated by the 2022 floods. Despite Afghans being a very small population in the province,⁵⁸ local Pakistani officials shifted some of the blame on the floods and general suffering of local Pakistanis onto Afghans⁵⁹ – this allowed the longer-term factors that left Sindh vulnerable to flooding to be ignored (see above).

2.1.2 Solidarity and allies.

Despite tensions, support continues to exist amongst local communities and neighbourhoods and support for an Afghan presence in the country varies in the public depending on location. In geographic areas where Afghans have been long-term residents, such as the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan and major cities like Karachi, there are numerous examples of solidarity and support. This takes various forms, including:

- (a) **Legal advocacy.** As the last wave of returns took place, especially impacting places like Sindh, civil society activists, human rights lawyers, and concerned observers mobilised to provide support.⁶⁰
- (b) **Local cooperation.** Local neighbourhoods organise to provide mutual aid, as seen in a small informal neighbourhood home to both Afghans and Pakistanis in Peshawar. The area has long faced challenges to water access, which the local community has resolved by making an agreement with a private water tanker to deliver water to the local mosque. This has still been financially maintained by residents of the area indicating a sense of community and a shared belonging to the space. It also means that in the face of return challenges, locals could be quick to work together to ensure people were not made to leave their neighbourhood. In an interview, a community member told:

“When the latest round of returns happened, Peshawar was not as bad as Karachi. We have lived with each other for a long time, as Pashtuns and neighbours. But we were worried for our neighbourhoods. Some people went to Afghanistan until the situation settled, others just kept low. But we looked out for each other.”⁶¹

3. Recommendations (Pakistan): Dealing with Migration, Climate, and Water

Pakistan’s context of internal displacement, returns of Afghans, and climate change and water scarcity pose a series of challenges for governance at the local, municipal, and national level.

Recommendation 1: Integrate Afghans into urban planning, disaster management, and water planning – instead of assuming that they are a “temporary population” under the auspices of refugee management – will protect these populations against the impacts of climate change, reduce narratives of scarcity, and allow government actors to be better prepared when trying to deal with urban planning, disaster management, and water planning. The SSAR and RRPAS better integrating regional cooperation on climate migration could help.

Recommendation 2: Greater area-based support for Pakistani host communities where Afghans live via national, municipal, and local government in collaboration with UN agencies working for Afghans in Pakistan, could ease the “scarcity” fears. This should be especially invested in flashpoint areas such as Sindh, which has historically received little funding for refugee affected areas rehabilitation projects. This could be bolstered by:

- (a) Meeting funding gaps for institutions working for and with refugees in those areas;
- (b) Providing greater resources (financial and/or skills) for local host communities;
- (c) Offering community-based approaches in “hotspot” areas where refugee populations are located.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen human rights actors and civil society in Pakistan to help the legal integration of Afghans in Pakistan. This could come in the form of greater funding, technical support, and training to legal aid support teams and human rights activists. Programmes that could be supported include:

- (a) Technical and skills training;
- (b) Research and data collection;
- (c) Comparative case studies and input from lawmakers and civil society actors where refugee integration has taken a more positive approach, such as local and municipal approaches in East Africa (especially Kenya and Uganda).

C. IRAN

Iran faces a challenging socio-economic situation that is underpinned by long-standing international sanctions and continued regional instability exacerbated by the conflict in Gaza. Prospects of unilateral sanction relief are slim. As of November 2023, Iran's inflation rate stood at 45.5%, marking the fourth consecutive year where inflation has exceeded 35%.⁶² Coupled with this are growing climate change stressors on the country that are contributing to internal migration, outward migration, and further economic vulnerability.

1. Resources: Climate Crisis and Water

Iran is in the world's top ten carbon-emitting countries – even though its emissions are a fraction of those of the largest emitters, China and the United States.⁶³ The government is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but international sanctions mean the country cannot increase technical capacity and energy efficiency. Sanctions and their wider impacts on Iran mean it is reliant on trading oil with Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan – all countries that are highly dependent on Iran's electricity, gas, and oil. **Sanctions impact the region as a whole, as neighbouring countries lack the incentives for a more environmentally sustainable economy.**

Iran ranks 28th on the INFORM Risk Index⁶⁴ (high) and 83 out of 185 countries on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index⁶⁵ – the latter placing it in an "upper middle" category to deal with the impacts of climate change. Iran is especially affected by drought, floods, and extreme weather events, including paralyzing heatwaves.

1.1 Water

Iran has long struggled with water availability, but the situation has intensified over the past ten years and as temperatures in the country soar. Experts believe Iran's vulnerability to climate challenges are linked to short-term livelihoods and business approaches adopted in the past, as well as challenges in accessing relevant technical capacity. According to one environmental scientist, Iran faces challenges such as "drying rivers, vanishing lakes, shrinking wetlands, declining groundwater levels, land subsidence, sinkholes, desertification, soil erosion, dust storms, air, water and waste pollution, biodiversity loss, deforestation and wildfires".⁶⁶

Others emphasize especially how prolonged droughts and advisories about suffocating dust storms are becoming a norm.⁶⁷

Iran uses 90% of its freshwater for agriculture, but this only accounts for 13% of the economy as Iran's agricultural production is enshrined in the 1979 constitution as a means to "self-sufficiency". However, too much agricultural production without returns is also leading to water shortages and deterioration of soil – which will ultimately also reduce output from the agriculture sector.

Iran relies on dams (there are 188 dams in Iran) that might contribute to challenges in access to water, across the country and in the region.

2. Displacement Contexts

2.1 Climate migration. Iran faces increased climate migration, this is evident via increased internal movements from drier areas (central Iran) to cooler areas (north Iran) and via displacement from flash floods, such as in 2019 when 520,000 people were displaced.⁶⁸ Notably, however, movement restrictions on Afghans (as well as Iraqis and other migrants in Iran), mean they may be confined to climate vulnerable areas.⁶⁹

2.2 Afghans in Iran. Since the late 1970s Iran has been home to millions of Afghans. Today Iran hosts 4.5 million Afghans and 12,000 Iraqis.⁷⁰ These displacement trends are the result of war and conflict, but also ecological and economic crises and many are also affected by Iran's ongoing climate stressors.

Afghans living in Iran can be split into the following categories:

- (a) **Refugees and those in refugee like situations** who number 3.7 million persons. These are individuals who have been issued with documentation by the Iranian government, including the Amayesh card,⁷¹ residence permit and family passport holders, and some 2.6 million Afghans recorded under the Government's 2022 headcount who were issued with documentation valid until April 2023 (since then extended) resulting in a temporary arrangement providing protection from refoulment.⁷² Since late 2023, the Government of Iran has been issuing so-called "Smart ID Cards" to unify all previous existing form of documentation, including Headcount registration slip.
- (b) **Undocumented Afghans** who number between 500,000 and 1,000,000 fully undocumented persons.⁷³

2.2.1 Perceptions: Afghans in Iran as a "drain".

Although Iran has long been a major host country for Afghan refugees and migrants, they face levels of hostility, sometimes being racialized and portrayed as scapegoats by mainstream media and society for the country's broader political, economic, and now, ecological issues.⁷⁴ Resource scarcity has, at times, contributed to difficulties in Iranian-Afghan interstate relations. Moreover, Iranian authorities have adopted stricter measures for returns of irregular foreign nationals, including Afghans.⁷⁵

3. Recommendations (Iran): Dealing with Migration, Climate, and Water

Recommendation 1: Regional coordination should build on environmental models of diplomacy for water management. This should include actions such as: improved dialogue, coordination, and management of dams and transboundary rivers with Afghanistan (see above Afghanistan section).

Recommendation 2: Increase regional coordination that integrates climate change via the SSAR and RRP. This must include space for:

- (a) Greater communications and coordination on ecological migration stressors and potentials especially in border regions;
- (b) A shared response with greater emphasis on refugees integration.
- (c) Provision of greater resources (financial and/or skills) for local host communities in areas where refugees are concentrated.

Recommendation 3: Greater support for local Iranian government's capacity building and data collection for governance, where refugee and host communities live, should be encouraged by the national government in collaboration with the international agencies working for Afghans in Iran. This should especially invest in the central Iranian belt that is climate stressed but also in northern Iran where more and more migrants are settling.

Recommendation 4: The Iranian government is, in part, working toward a more constructive attitude towards Afghans which should be encouraged to continue by focusing on Afghan economic contributions, building on Iran's status as signatory to the UN 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, its own asylum laws, the Global Compact on Refugees, and working to invest in solutions to alleviate social tensions with Iranians. Additionally, the UN agencies in Iran, especially UNHCR should advocate against returns and fulfil its supervisory role. Foreign governments with diplomatic relations with Iran should use diplomatic channels to call for reinforcing respect for International Refugee Law and human rights principles along with providing much needed responsibility sharing.

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About the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform

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Drawing upon its members' operational presence throughout Asia, and its extensive advocacy networks, ADSP engages in evidence-based advocacy initiatives to support improved outcomes for displacement-affected communities. As implementing agencies, ADSP members work closely with displaced populations and the communities that host them and are therefore able to contribute a distinctive, field-led, perspective to policy and advocacy processes which can sometimes be removed from on-the-ground realities, and, the concerns of those living with and in displacement.

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