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Book Review

Sanaa Alimia, **Refugee Cities: How Afghans Changed Urban Pakistan**, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2022, pp. 228, \$39.95, ISBN: 978-1-51282286-1

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“For many Afghans the cities of Pakistan are home” (p. 150).

Sanaa Alimia offers valuable insights into the microhistory of Afghan migration to urban Pakistan since the 1970s. She explores urban identities that are less concerned with nationality, ethnicity, and “imagined communities” than with *Insani Haquq* (basic human rights). The book explores how Pakistan’s changing geopolitics affected Afghans’ livelihoods and their sense of identity and belonging during four decades of violence in Afghanistan through oral histories of Afghan migrants in Karachi and Peshawar, two of Pakistan’s main cities. Alimia adopts the term “informal sphere” to characterize the situation of Afghan refugees and Pakistan State’s management of its citizens and noncitizens with regard to access to rights, resources, and social welfare, but with which they are unable or unwilling to actively deal. Refugees’ reliance on the informal sphere is a crucial aspect of daily living. The informality refers to “the production of legal goods and services that are not formally provided, protected and regulated by the state (p. 2).”

Alimia examines the history of Afghan migration to Pakistan during two major invasions: the Cold War period, the Soviet’s invasion in the 1980s when Afghans were welcomed, and the War on Terror (WOT), which began in 2001 when Afghans were unwelcomed. Alimia argues that during the latter period, Pakistan, in cooperation with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), encouraged Afghans to return home. She also highlights the fact that Pakistan is home to one of the highest numbers of refugees, undocumented migrants, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world. There are one million low-skilled undocumented migrants from Bangladesh living in Pakistan in addition to a substantial number of Rohingya refugees, migrants from Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. Additional five million people have been internally displaced due to conflict, natural disasters, political persecution, and economic gains. The author uses an extensive multi-sited methodological approach that covers Pakistan’s two major cities, Karachi and Peshawar. The book is the outcome of eight years of fieldwork that includes over 500 interviews with low-income persons, daily wage laborers, small enterprise owners, and people working in the handicraft world (p. 9–10). Additional data was gathered through ethnography

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and archival analysis to support the interviews. The richness of the data is clear in the case studies from Peshawar and Karachi. Alimia was able to record every detail of her conversations with the people she interviewed during her field research.

The historical background of colonial and postcolonial Pakistan is briefly discussed in the introduction, which also sets the tone for the remainder of the book. Alimia critically analyzes the role that Afghan refugees, how they were used as political tools during the Cold War, and how the global war on terror changed the narratives between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The author skillfully structures her arguments into three parts with five chapters. Chapter 1 of Part I covers the Afghan question in Pakistan, as well as the geopolitical game played between the two neighbors during the Cold War and the WOT. The Durand Line, the Pashtun Question, and the tension that these two events created between Afghanistan and Pakistan are central in this section. The author argues that the Afghan state used the separatist Pashtunistan movement to pressurize Pakistan, while Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) supplied weapons in 1975 to Panjshir province in Afghanistan to overthrow the Afghan state.

Part II, consists of chapters 1–4, reconstructs the microhistories of low-income urban neighborhoods in Karachi and Peshawar. To determine whether Pakistani citizens are treated differently from noncitizen Afghan refugees in informal settings, the author also looks at Pakistani low-income citizens. In these chapters, Alimia critically highlights the collective actions of Afghan refugee and low-income Pakistani communities by bringing them to the fore, and, how these two communities fight to secure basic rights and resources. Through these shared actions, Alimia argues, an urban identity is constructed across ethnic and nationality lines. These chapters artfully unfold community mobilization and resilience against state power and relations. The power of middlemen in distributing politics between the state and (non)citizens is central to the debate in these chapters.


Chapter 5 of Part III discusses the new geopolitical game that emerged after 9/11 and a change in Pakistan's approach to managing Afghan migration. After 2001, in the post-Taliban era, Afghan refugees had to deal with sterner monitoring, documentation, detention, and deportation schemes. Return migration became a central part of Pakistan's new policy after the U.S. ousted the Taliban for harboring Osama bin Laden in 2001, who was later found and killed in Abbottabad in 2011. In this chapter, Alimia mentions the presence of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan without exploring the role of the ISI in providing sanctuaries to the leader of Al-Qaeda. By way of conclusion, the author reflects on the meaning of refugee status, citizenship, border-making, and geopolitical games. She concludes that Afghans have been an integral part of Pakistani urban settings. They have contributed to Pakistan's urban transformation. Some refugees might have returned to Afghanistan or migrated further to Europe due to the increasing hostile environment

in Pakistan, but the cities of which they have been part remain sites of attachment—in memory, identity, and emotions—as well through remittances, visits, return, cultural practices, and social relations (p. 149).

The book is a total masterpiece about the situation of low-skilled Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The voices of ordinary Afghan refugees and Pakistanis are hyper visible throughout the entire study. The author undertakes a bottom-up methodology to look at bigger national, regional, and global geopolitics and their impact on the day-to-day lives of low-income communities. The structure of the book, the quality of the writing, and the details explored in each chapter are all excellent. The analytical view of each case study Alimia has presented is commendable. The author makes it evident that she did not cover the military takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021 and its impact on future migration. She, however, states that Pakistan has offered itself as a transit for Afghans who wish to migrate further to Europe and the Americas.

I would have liked to have seen more about the role of Pakistani's ISI in using some of the formal and informal refugee camps in Khyber Pashtunkhwa and Balochistan as breeding grounds for international terrorism. The fight during the Cold War was not termed as "terrorism," but the process of radicalization and militarization of Afghan refugees and refugee camps started during the Cold War and shifted to religious schools during WOT. Two major educational centers emerged during two defining moments of the Afghan conflict that produced millions of refugees. First, in Hayatabad in Peshawar, where the author spent time during her fieldwork, the University of Dawat-ul Jihad was run by one of the most notorious Jihadi leaders under the patronage of Pakistan's ISI during the Cold War. Second, Darul Uloom Haqqania, some 60 km east of Peshawar, is known as the "University of Jihad" and is home to 4,000 students, mainly from refugee communities. The latter played a significant role, particularly during the WOT, but the author makes no mention of the latter. Additional information on the role of madrassas and their impact on geopolitics would have added extra lenses to the analysis of the WOT and Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Despite these few criticisms, I highly recommend this book as an excellent source for researchers and migration studies scholars, policy makers, international relations experts, and non-governmental organizations that work with Afghan refugees and hosting communities in Pakistan. Alimia offers a unique perspective on the concepts of inclusion and exclusion in her valuable contribution.

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