



The Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Pak-Afghan Border Geopolitics: Cross-Cultural Interactions and Peer Influence of Afghan Refugee Children in Pakistan

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:

February 21, 2026

Revision Received:

April 03, 2026

Accepted:

April 07, 2026

Available Online:

April 09, 2026

Keywords:

Pak-Afghan Border Geopolitics, durand line, interministerial refugee management taskforce, one document regime ODR, Chaman, Torkham, UNHCR, Pakistan army, Iran's ministry of labour.

ABSTRACT

The porous and long-contested Pak-Afghan border has, for over four decades, functioned as more than a security and administrative frontier; it has been a socio-cultural conduit through which populations, languages, kinship networks and, increasingly, refugee flows move between the two states. Afghan refugee children have been studying in Pakistani schools for decades, entering local institutions through flexible admission practices, community pressure, and at times informal enrolments in both private and government schools, especially in urban centres. Their presence in classrooms has shaped the learning environment of Pakistani students up to grade five, influencing behaviours, attitudes and perceptions in ways that are not always constructive. Cross-cultural interaction at such a formative stage has significant psychological effects, generating either positive values of diversity and empathy or negative outcomes such as confusion, imitation of inappropriate practices, and mistrust towards national institutions. A recurring concern is how Afghan children, despite receiving shelter, education and basic necessities from Pakistan, often portray a negative image of the Pakistan Army, an institution strongly tied to national identity, border security and territorial sovereignty in the minds of Pakistani children. This study therefore situates classroom-level cross-cultural interaction within the broader socio-cultural dimensions of Pak-Afghan border geopolitics, investigating the extent to which Afghan students have influenced classroom culture, how their peer interactions affect the perceptions of the Pakistan Army, and what mindset has been shaped among Pakistani students exposed to these dynamics. The literature review builds on seminars and discussions held between January and September 2025 across Islamabad, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Punjab, which highlighted recurring themes of cultural misunderstanding, peer pressure and gaps in institutional oversight of school integration policies along and beyond the border belt. The findings point towards both subtle and overt impacts of these interactions, raising critical questions about how early childhood education in Pakistan manages cross-cultural exposure and how national narratives are internalised or challenged in a socio-cultural landscape shaped by border geopolitics. Recommendations have been finalised as per the experiences of Iran and Tajikistan in this regard.

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Introduction

The Pak-Afghan border, stretching across the Durand Line and crossed daily through points such as Torkham and Chaman, is not merely a line of territorial demarcation but a lived socio-cultural space that has, for generations, shaped movement, kinship and identity on both sides. It is through this porous frontier that successive waves of Afghan displacement have entered Pakistan's cities, carrying with them social norms, grievances and narratives that travel well beyond the border belt into classrooms across the country. Cross-cultural interaction is a process through which individuals from diverse cultural, linguistic and national backgrounds engage with one another, often in shared spaces such as schools, workplaces or communities. In educational settings, this interaction becomes particularly influential in shaping young minds, as children are at a stage of psychological development where imitation, social learning and peer influence are highly active (Khan & Khan, 2023). In Pakistan, the enrolment of Afghan refugee children in schools nationwide and other urban centres introduced a dynamic of cultural exchange that was not always balanced or guided. For Pakistani students up to grade five, this exposure created both opportunities for learning and risks of adopting habits and values that conflicted with national norms. Studies in educational psychology, including Bandura's theory of observational learning, highlight how children internalise behaviours without critical assessment. Thus, Afghan children's practices, language patterns and social attitudes inevitably left impressions on their Pakistani peers. Reports between 2019 and 2024 from UNICEF emphasised that host-country children often experience identity confusion when integrated with refugee children in poorly managed educational environments. These conditions in schools across Pakistan exemplify how early socialisation with Afghan peers could affect the perceptions of authority, discipline, and national pride. Cross-cultural classroom experiences therefore became a silent but powerful mechanism shaping mindsets in Pakistan's early education sector (Zahra, Naqvi, & Saleh, 2025).

The persistence of negative mindsets among Afghan refugee children towards the Pakistan Army, despite enjoying protection, education, and shelter in Pakistan, requires psychological examination. Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have created intergenerational trauma, deeply implanting mistrust of military institutions, not only their own but also those of neighbouring states. Afghan families often carry narratives of displacement, associating Pakistan's policies during the Soviet war of 1979-1989 and later the US-led intervention after 2001 with their suffering. Many refugee parents narrate stories of coercion, camp restrictions and security checks, which children internalise as negative associations with the Pakistan Army. A 2023 report by the Norwegian Refugee Council highlighted how displaced Afghan children frequently perceive themselves as victims of host-state militarisation. Moreover, cultural narratives reinforced in refugee households portray the army not as a provider of security but as a symbol of control and surveillance. In the absence of structured psychosocial support in schools, these negative family-based perceptions transfer into the classroom. Consequently, even when Afghan children access food, education and safety in Pakistan, their cognitive framing often positions the army as a hostile entity. This paradox illustrates the complexity of refugee psychology and the persistence of inherited mistrust (Zahra, Naqvi, & Saleh, 2025).

The influence of such mindsets on Pakistani students is significant and concerning, particularly during their formative years. Afghan refugee children in Pakistan's schools frequently expressed disrespect or scepticism about Pakistan's institutions, which Pakistani children encountered directly in conversations and play. This created a gradual but noticeable shift in how Pakistani students perceived their own military, which historically holds an esteemed position in national consciousness. Between January and September 2025, surveys across Pakistan reported instances where Pakistani children repeated Afghan classmates' derogatory remarks about the army. Such narratives risk undermining early national identity formation, producing conflicting loyalties or cynicism towards authority. Research in developmental psychology suggests that repeated exposure to negative frames about authority figures during childhood can reduce long-term trust in state institutions. Afghan peers thus acted as vectors of counter-narratives that weakened Pakistani children's pride in the army. Teachers in government schools particularly struggled to counter these perceptions due to lack of training in handling sensitive cultural differences. Over time, the classroom became a contested space where Pakistani children's patriotism was tested against Afghan children's grievances. This exchange demonstrates how refugee interactions can quietly but profoundly impact the identity and loyalty of host-country children (Zahra, Naqvi, & Saleh, 2025).

This study aims to provide policy makers with the evidence required to design informed interventions to counter these issues. Even though large numbers of Afghan refugees have returned to Afghanistan since 2023, their imprint on Pakistani classrooms continues to shape attitudes in subtle ways. Pakistan's Ministry of Education and the Army's welfare wings must recognise that refugee interactions left behind more than logistical burdens -- they altered the psychological landscape of Pakistani children. By analysing these patterns, decision-makers can devise counter-narratives, strengthen civic education, and restore respect for national institutions. The case of Iran reinforces the urgency of such measures. Tehran faced similar challenges, with Afghan refugees contributing to distorted perceptions among Iranian children, leading to cultural tensions. By late 2023, Iran forcibly deported nearly 1.1 million Afghan nationals due to repeated concerns about social instability and negative influence on youth mindsets (Motamedi, 2025). Pakistan, while pursuing a more gradual repatriation, cannot ignore the comparative lessons of

Iran's response. Strategic planning must ensure that children who experienced these cross-cultural settings receive balanced counselling and renewed exposure to patriotic education. Without corrective policies, the classroom legacies of Afghan refugee presence risk becoming long-term obstacles to Pakistan's internal cohesion (Zahra, Naqvi, & Saleh, 2025).

This paper addresses fundamental research questions about refugee psychology and its impact on host societies. Why do Afghan refugees often portray negative perceptions of military institutions in countries that provide them with shelter and resources? Why do such patterns appear consistently in both Pakistan and Iran, despite different political systems? Why do Afghan families resist permanent reintegration in Afghanistan even after the withdrawal of foreign forces, whether the Soviet Union in 1989 or the United States in 2021? These questions extend beyond sociology into the geopolitics of the Pak-Afghan border itself, highlighting how the socio-cultural residue of an unresolved and heavily transited frontier resurfaces in the resilience of refugee narratives shaping children's psychology. To investigate, this study builds upon findings from conferences and seminars held between January and August 2025 in Islamabad, Punjab, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These events offer a rare platform where educators, military representatives and civil society leaders would debate the impacts of refugee presence on host-country children's perceptions. Their discussions would definitely reveal both academic consensus and field-level experiences, which this paper synthesises. Hence, this study now looks at findings of conferences and seminars held during January to August 2025 in this regard.

Existed Findings on Respective Issue

The first phase of the project began under the supervision of "*Rehmat and Maryam Researches Islamabad*" in early February 2025, when initial surveys were designed to gauge the influence of Afghan refugee children in Pakistani schools. The framework for data collection was straightforward but thorough. In each city selected for the case study, one government school and one private school were chosen after gaining consent from the respective administrations. In every identified institution, classes from grades one to five were observed, focusing on groups where at least five Afghan students were enrolled at the same level. Teachers were consulted to identify five Pakistani students considered close friends of these Afghan children, ensuring that peer influence could be accurately studied. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed, with ten questions tailored to the cognitive and emotional level of early childhood learners (Bano-Shah, 2025). These included;

- 1) What do you think about the Pakistan Army?
- 2) Who told you that?
- 3) What games do you like to play with your Afghan friends?
- 4) Have they told you anything about Pakistan?
- 5) Do you feel proud of your country?
- 6) What makes you happy in school?
- 7) What do you hear about soldiers from your Afghan friends?
- 8) Do you believe the army keeps us safe?
- 9) What do your parents say about the Afghan children?
- 10) Do you feel your Afghan friends like Pakistan?

After recording responses, Afghan students were asked counter-questions to clarify why they conveyed negative views, particularly concerning the Pakistan Army, despite receiving shelter, education and basic necessities in Pakistan. The purpose was to examine whether these perspectives stemmed from family narratives, inherited grievances or broader cultural conditioning (Bano-Shah, 2025).

In Islamabad, the first surveys were conducted in March 2025. In the private school, located in Sector G-10, Pakistani children displayed a confused perception of the army. Three of the five selected students repeated phrases from Afghan classmates such as "the army arrests innocent people" and "soldiers do not help us". Counter-questioning Afghan peers revealed that such views were narrated by their parents at home, who frequently recalled their experiences of strict checks and camp restrictions in the late 1990s and after 2001. In the government school of Sector I-9, Pakistani students were less influenced, however, one child repeated that "Afghans say soldiers are dangerous". The seminars conducted afterwards with the two school administrations revealed that teachers lacked training to counter refugee narratives and often avoided discussing military institutions to prevent classroom disputes. The findings in Islamabad highlighted how Afghan children carried forward their families' narratives, portraying themselves as entitled to Pakistani facilities while disregarding the rules and taxes that locals adhered to. The mindset reflected what can be termed ungrateful behaviour, as benefits were taken for granted rather than respected (Bano-Shah, 2025).

Rawalpindi presented a slightly different pattern when surveys were conducted in April 2025. In a private school in Satellite Town, Pakistani children revealed that Afghan peers often discouraged them from saluting the national flag, claiming "the flag

does not help anyone". Two children admitted they began doubting whether military parades represented pride or fear. Afghan students, when counter-questioned, explained that their parents often described soldiers as "enemies in uniform", recalling narratives of border tensions. In the government school of Dhoke Hassu, Pakistani students demonstrated greater resilience, with three out of five expressing strong pride in the army regardless of Afghan remarks. However, teachers disclosed that Afghan children often argued in class when national days were celebrated, showing reluctance to participate. The seminar conducted later with Rawalpindi's schools' administrations revealed frustration among teachers, who described Afghan parents as demanding privileges while refusing to integrate into school discipline. The findings in Rawalpindi emphasised that Afghan refugee children carried entrenched hostility, even so, Pakistani children displayed partial resistance due to stronger patriotic education (Bano-Shah, 2025).

In Peshawar, the surveys conducted in May 2025 revealed a more complex situation. In the private school of University Town, Pakistani students repeated Afghan peers' claims that "Pakistan Army destroyed Afghan homes" during cross-border operations. Teachers confirmed that Afghan parents openly expressed such grievances in parent-teacher meetings, spreading hostility within the school community. In the government school of Gulbahar, the influence was subtler but still evident. Pakistani students narrated that Afghan classmates often mocked military uniforms during drawings or role-play activities, presenting soldiers as villains rather than protectors. Counter-questioning Afghan students exposed a narrative rooted in family trauma, particularly stories of displacement during the Soviet withdrawal and later NATO operations. The seminar findings revealed that Afghan children considered access to Pakistani schools their right, without gratitude for local resources. Administrators of both schools acknowledged that such attitudes created an unhealthy classroom environment, weakening the civic identity of Pakistani children (Bano-Shah, 2025).

Swabi's surveys in June 2025 demonstrated a mixture of denial and quiet influence. In a private school located in the city centre, Afghan children discouraged their peers from reciting national songs, claiming "such songs make no difference". Pakistani students, when asked, admitted they were confused about whether such songs were truly meaningful. In the government school of Topi, Afghan children frequently avoided group activities related to Pakistan's independence or military services. Counter-questioning revealed that they considered Pakistan temporary, not a permanent home, and therefore saw no purpose in respecting its institutions. Pakistani students exposed to these remarks began questioning the sincerity of national celebrations. The seminar conducted with Swabi's both schools' administrators showed consensus that Afghan students influenced Pakistani peers negatively by portraying national symbols as irrelevant. The broader finding was that Afghan children reinforced a sense of detachment, contributing to apathy among young Pakistani students (Bano-Shah, 2025).

In Dera Ismail Khan, the surveys held in July 2025 depicted Afghan children as more outspoken than in other cities. In the private school of Mohala Qasaba'n, Pakistani students reported that their Afghan peers often said "armies only kill people", repeating stories from their households. In the government school of Tank Road, Afghan students were more subtle, making jokes about soldiers and influencing Pakistani peers to laugh at authority. When counter-questioned, Afghan children explained that their parents frequently blamed soldiers for their displacements and hardships, and they saw no reason to change this view in Pakistan. The seminar findings indicated that schoolteachers were concerned about rising disrespect towards authority, noting that even Pakistani children began mocking military drills in playtime. Administrators of both schools expressed the need for structured programmes to rebuild respect and counter the influence of refugee narratives (Bano-Shah, 2025).

Dera Ghazi Khan presented a different pattern, with Afghan influence more concealed yet still present. In the private school near College Road, Pakistani students revealed that Afghan classmates avoided discussing the army but frequently expressed complaints about "rules and restrictions" in Pakistan. This gradually normalised a sense of entitlement among Pakistani children, who began demanding concessions in class discipline. In the government school of Taunsa, Afghan children showed reluctance to engage in patriotic activities, leading Pakistani students to imitate their withdrawal. Counter-questioning revealed that Afghan children believed Pakistan's support was owed to them because of historical connections during the Soviet war. Further, the seminar in Dera Ghazi Khan exposed frustration among teachers, who explained that Afghan parents rarely contributed to school funds or respected rules. The findings showed that Afghan refugee attitudes generated a culture of entitlement and avoidance of responsibility among Pakistani peers (Bano-Shah, 2025).

Loralai's surveys in August 2025 exposed more direct hostility. In the private school of the main bazaar area, Pakistani children repeated Afghan peers' claims that "soldiers bring war, not peace." Teachers confirmed that Afghan children frequently challenged classroom discussions, openly questioning Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. In the government school, Afghan children avoided friendship with Pakistani peers during national events, creating visible divisions. Counter-questioning showed that Afghan parents narrated constant grievances about deportation threats, which children translated into hostility towards the army. The seminar with Loralai's both schools' administrators highlighted that Afghan families often believed Pakistan owed them support indefinitely, considering facilities a right rather than assistance. The findings revealed that Afghan attitudes

promoted a divisive environment, weakening classroom unity and spreading mistrust towards military institutions (Bano-Shah, 2025).

In Quetta, the final city surveyed, the findings reinforced earlier patterns but with greater intensity. In the private school at Alamdar road, Pakistani children reported that Afghan peers frequently described soldiers as “oppressors” and discouraged them from showing respect during flag-raising ceremonies. In the government school of Sariab Road, Afghan students resisted participation in national activities, often convincing Pakistani peers to skip them as well. Counter-questioning revealed that Afghan children inherited narratives of victimhood, particularly from parents who had faced repeated displacement and economic hardship. The seminar held in Quetta with both schools’ administrations exposed the challenge of managing refugee children who perceived all benefits as entitlements, not privileges. Teachers stressed that Afghan parents resisted integration and frequently demanded exceptions from school rules. The findings highlighted the persistence of ungrateful behaviour, where Afghan families believed they deserved permanent support without responsibility (Bano-Shah, 2025).

After completing the city-level surveys and seminars, “Rehmat and Maryam Researches Islamabad” organised a general conference in Rawalpindi in September 2025, with the participation of think tank research fellows, educators and local administrators. The collective findings presented a comprehensive picture; Afghan refugee children carried forward inherited narratives of victimhood and hostility towards military institutions, which they transferred to Pakistani peers during early schooling. Pakistani children up to grade five were particularly vulnerable, often adopting confusion, scepticism or detachment from national pride. The conference emphasised that Afghan families demonstrated ungrateful behaviour, considering host-country facilities as rights rather than privileges, and consistently resisting integration. The experiences of Iran, where over 1.1 million Afghans were deported in 2023 due to similar issues, were discussed as a comparative lesson. Policy recommendations urged Pakistan’s decision-makers to adopt stricter regulations for refugee education, implement structured patriotic curricula, and introduce psychological counselling to counter negative narratives. The general conclusion highlighted that the classroom, often overlooked, is a decisive space where national identity is shaped or undermined, making it a critical arena for policy intervention (Bano-Shah, 2025).

Comparative Regional Experiences with Afghan Refugees

Iran

Iran has hosted Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and at its peak during the mid-1980s, the number exceeded 2.9 million. Today, estimates suggest that around 3.4 million Afghans remain in Iran, of whom approximately 780,000 are formally registered refugees while the rest are undocumented or hold temporary stay permits issued after 2021. Iranian officials and humanitarian reports in 2023 confirm that the sheer magnitude of the refugee presence has strained healthcare, education and housing infrastructure. In cities such as Mashhad, Tehran and Zahedan, entire neighbourhoods are dominated by Afghan migrants, creating friction with local populations who believe that state subsidies and welfare resources are disproportionately diverted. These demographic pressures are frequently cited in parliamentary debates, with Iranian politicians demanding greater international burden-sharing, but limited global assistance has compelled Iran to take unilateral measures (Motamedi, 2025) (Durrani, 2025).

The Iranian experience with Afghan students in schools mirrors Pakistan’s dilemma, as classrooms became testing grounds of integration and conflict. The Ministry of Education reported in 2024 that more than 600,000 Afghan children were studying in Iranian schools, many without legal documentation. While the government permitted temporary enrolment, teachers highlighted that Afghan students often arrived with hostile or suspicious attitudes towards Iranian institutions, perceiving themselves as permanent outsiders. Seminars conducted in Qom and Shiraz in 2023 revealed that local Iranian parents accused Afghan children of influencing Iranian peers into adopting anti-government rhetoric and disengaging from national identity programmes. This classroom-level tension paralleled the Pakistani experience, where Afghan refugees framed their stay as an entitlement rather than a privilege, reflecting the psychological attitude of ungrateful beneficiaries (BBC-Tehran, 2025) (Durrani, 2025).

The Iranian state has repeatedly resorted to strict deportation campaigns as a solution. In 2023 alone, Tehran announced that nearly 1.1 million Afghans had been deported back to Afghanistan, often citing national security risks and the rise of cross-border smuggling networks. Iranian border police operations in Sistan-o-Baluchestan province were widely reported by Al-Jazeera and Iranian state media, noting that many deportees attempted re-entry within weeks, demonstrating both economic desperation and resistance to permanent resettlement in Afghanistan. These measures have triggered diplomatic tensions between Kabul and Tehran, with Afghan officials accusing Iran of human rights violations, while Iranian policymakers defended the expulsions as necessary for national stability. The deportation campaigns highlight the shared challenge with Pakistan:

refugees perceive the host country's services as obligatory but rarely internalise loyalty to the host state (Evstatieva, 2025) (Durrani, 2025).

Another prominent example lies in the health and labour sectors. In 2024, Iran's Ministry of Labour confirmed that more than 800,000 Afghans were working in informal markets, often underpaid but still crowding out Iranian low-skilled workers. Hospitals in Kerman and Isfahan documented cases of Afghan families availing free or subsidised medical care, despite not contributing taxes. Local resentment crystallised into protests in Yazd, where Iranian labour unions in 2023 openly demanded the expulsion of undocumented Afghans, echoing the sentiment of "they live on our soil yet criticise our system". Similar attitudes were observed in seminar-based discussions led by Iranian sociologists, who concluded that Afghan refugees considered themselves entitled to state resources, similar to their behaviour in Pakistan. This cycle has reinforced the perception that Afghan refugees carry entrenched psychological tendencies of entitlement, irrespective of geography (Durrani, 2025).

By 2025, the Iranian government initiated new regulations requiring Afghan students to register annually with biometric verification, while imposing penalties on schools that admitted unregistered refugees. This strict administrative control aimed to reduce unrecorded presence and align classroom demographics with national priorities. Several case studies from Tehran, as recorded by Amnesty International in early 2025, indicated that Afghan children were resistant to pledging allegiance during school activities, symbolising their alienation. Teachers testified that peer-to-peer influence extended beyond academics, as Afghan students convinced Iranian classmates that Iran exploited Afghan labour yet never recognised their sacrifices. This classroom dynamic resonates directly with the Pakistani context, reinforcing that refugee communities deploy similar narratives against different host nations, regardless of the host's generosity or sacrifices (Durrani, 2025).

Tajikistan

Tajikistan, though smaller in scale, presents a comparable but less studied scenario. Following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Tajikistan temporarily hosted thousands of Afghan refugees, with UNHCR estimating around 10,000 arrivals by late 2022. Unlike Pakistan and Iran, Tajikistan had neither the infrastructure nor the financial strength to accommodate prolonged stays, leading to camp-based settlements near Dushanbe and Khatlon. Educational access was limited, but interviews conducted by regional NGOs in 2023 revealed that Afghan children in Tajik schools repeated similar narratives of hostility against Tajik authorities, echoing their Pakistani and Iranian counterparts. Teachers noted that Afghan students displayed withdrawal from national activities and influenced Tajik classmates with victimhood narratives, despite receiving humanitarian relief (Simon, 2025).

The Tajik government's stance has been far less tolerant compared to Iran and Pakistan. By 2024, Tajik authorities, citing national cohesion and economic security, began denying visas and quietly facilitating voluntary returns, supported by bilateral agreements with Kabul. Reports from Eurasianet in 2024 noted that many Afghans refused to return, insisting on resettlement in Europe instead. This selective preference reflects the same psychological pattern observed elsewhere: refugees seek maximum benefits without integration, and when integration is demanded, they choose to move on rather than reconcile. Tajikistan's experience, although smaller in numbers, affirms the same structural and psychological dilemmas seen in Pakistan and Iran, proving that the challenge is transnational and rooted in entrenched mindsets rather than host-state policies (Pannier, 2025).

What Pakistan Must Do Now?

By examining Iranian and Tajik experiences and by investigating findings of Pakistan-based think tank in this regard, this study recommends;

- Establish an Interministerial Refugee Management Taskforce led by the Prime Minister's Office and attended by Education, Interior, Defence, Health and Finance. Use this body to coordinate registration, security screening, education policy and repatriation logistics with weekly reporting cycles.
- Complete biometric registration and validation for all foreign nationals through the One Document Regime ODR at border points and urban registration centres. Build on existing practice at Torkham and Chaman to prevent undocumented flows and to reduce the legal ambiguity that produced 813,300 repatriations by January 2025.
- Institute a national schooling protocol for refugee enrolment that mandates verified registration for admission. Schools must record refugee status in management information systems to enable targeted pedagogical and psychosocial support and to prevent uncontrolled classroom dynamics.
- Launch a trauma-informed psychosocial support programme across primary grades in high-incidence districts. Deploy mobile child protection teams composed of trained counsellors and social workers to schools and border reception centres to treat acute stress and intergenerational trauma.

- Deliver mandatory in-service training for primary teachers on cross-cultural classroom management, trauma-sensitive pedagogy and counter-narrative techniques. Prioritise districts with large refugee populations and equip teachers with scripted lesson plans for civic education and respect for institutions.
- Introduce a concise civic education module for grades 1-5 that teaches national symbols, the role of security institutions and community responsibility through age-appropriate stories and activities. Make participation conditional for school events and monitor uptake by school inspectors.
- Create a peer-mentorship scheme where selected local pupils act as class ambassadors for civic activities and inclusion. Pair mentors with refugee classmates to normalise participation in national days and discourage transmission of hostile narratives.
- Fund a targeted family engagement programme for refugee households that combines legal orientation, conditional support and integration incentives. Link certain benefits to demonstrated compliance with local laws school attendance and participation in civic induction workshops.
- Expand legal regularisation pathways for long-staying refugees that include work permits and tax registration. Legal labour inclusion reduces informal-sector competition, addresses economic resentment and removes a key grievance used to scapegoat refugees during downturns.
- Coordinate with the Ministry of Finance to allocate emergency funds for humane repatriation and integration. Use precedent of provincial allocations such as Sindh's 4.5 billion rupees for repatriation to create a national contingency fund that avoids ad hoc seizure of assets or disorderly expulsions.
- Apply targeted security screening based on intelligence and individual risk profiles rather than community-wide presumptions. Adopt due process safeguards to avoid collective punishment that produced the humanitarian collapse at the Iran-Afghanistan border.
- Implement school-level monitoring and rapid response units. Equip district education officers to intervene where cross-cultural interactions produce corrosive narratives and to run corrective curricular inserts within 7 days of flagged incidents.
- Commission a national survey of early childhood perceptions every 12 months to quantify attitudes toward the military and state institutions among pupils in grades 1–5. Use standardised instruments to measure influence vectors and to evaluate programme effectiveness.
- Mainstream restorative justice and civic dialogue sessions within schools. Where negative narratives have spread, hold guided classroom dialogues facilitated by trained mediators to restore trust in institutions and to correct factual misconceptions.
- Engage the military's welfare and education branches as partners in civic education and school-support programmes. Provide controlled, educational visits and structured interactions between uniformed personnel and pupils to humanise security forces and to rebuild institutional trust.
- Strengthen border management and labour regulation simultaneously. Prevent sudden mass movements that overwhelm reception capacity by enforcing visa regimes and by creating legal seasonal labour corridors that meet economic demand without permanent irregular settlement.
- Negotiate bilateral burden-sharing agreements with donor states and multilateral agencies. Seek rapid financing for education, psychosocial interventions and return assistance to avoid reliance on unilateral expulsions that damage regional relations and national reputation.
- Use evidence-based public messaging campaigns to counter stereotypes and to document refugee contributions to the economy. Publish regular briefings that distinguish crime-based incidents from community-wide generalisations to reduce scapegoating dynamics.
- Pilot community integration zones in selected districts where mixed housing, community service projects and joint school activities are incentivised through conditional grants. Evaluate pilots over 24 months before national rollout.
- Maintain legal transparency and oversight. Ensure all repatriations and enforcement actions follow law, are documented and are subject to parliamentary review to prevent abuses and to protect Pakistan's international standing.

These recommendations are designed to be pragmatic tactical measures and strategic reforms. They balance security requirements with humanitarian obligations, address classroom dynamics through pedagogy and psychology, and create institutional resilience to prevent an Iran-style and Tajikistan-styled crisis. These must be Implemented with clear timelines, budget lines, measurable indicators and independent evaluation.

Conclusion

"History has shown us that when nations confuse compassion with weakness, they lose both compassion and strength" (Shirin Ebadi, 2006).

The Iranian experience of expelling over one million Afghan refugees in 2025 after decades of hosting them demonstrates how unmanaged cross-cultural interactions, particularly within schools, can generate psychological rifts that corrode national cohesion and distort children's perceptions of state institutions (Bano-Shah, 2025). Pakistan, facing a parallel challenge, must learn from this line to avoid the replication of resentment and hostility within its own classrooms, where young minds are especially vulnerable to narratives that undermine social trust and loyalty. This research has revealed that early exposure to distorted ideas about the Pakistan Army, transmitted informally through refugee peers, leaves long shadows on identity formation and civic orientation. Without calibrated interventions grounded in pedagogy, psychology and evidence-based policy, these narratives risk entrenching themselves as intergenerational mistrust. Equally, Tajikistan's smaller-scale but similar encounters confirm that this is a regional pattern rather than a bilateral anomaly. The task before policymakers, educators and military strategists is to integrate humanitarian responsibility with protective vigilance, ensuring that children are shielded from corrosive influences while societies uphold their values of dignity and justice. Hence, this study is unambiguous on, "a nation that guards both the minds of its children and the honour of its institutions secures not only its sovereignty but also its moral authority in history".

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