

Pakistan as a Return Migration Destination

Insights from the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration'

Return migration to Pakistan is diverse. It ranges from return mobilities of naturalized citizens and those born abroad to so-called 'voluntary assisted returns' and deportations of migrants without regular status. Pakistan receives returnees from the Middle East, as well as from Europe and North America, which reflects broader Pakistani migration patterns. This policy brief explores the multiplicity of return migration to Pakistan. From a return destination perspective, it presents some of the dilemmas faced when governing return migration.

Brief Points

- Return migration to Pakistan is extremely diverse; legal status and citizenship are important distinctions among returnees.
- Pakistanis abroad account for about 4 per cent of the total Pakistani population of 185 million. Most migrate to the Middle East. Remittances are key to migration's salience as a societal concern in Pakistan.
- Pakistan as a return destination is characterized by instability and socioeconomic stagnation but also future potential.
- The governing of return migration to Pakistan is complicated by the multiplicity of return.

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The global Pakistani diaspora

Migration and remittances are important in the Pakistani context. With estimates ranging from 8 to 10 million people, the global Pakistani diaspora accounts for about 4 per cent of the country's population, estimated at 185 million. Key destinations for Pakistanis include the Middle East, as well as North America and Europe. The UK is a key hub, but Pakistanis in Europe are also scattered across many countries beyond, including Italy, Greece, Spain, France, Germany, Norway and Denmark; destinations in Asia include China, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Thailand.

Migration from Pakistan can be categorized geographically by destination, as well as by temporal perspectives. Pakistani migration to the Middle East comprises temporary labour migration, usually on two- or four-year fixed-term contracts, and more permanent migration. Along with the community found in the UK, the Pakistani diaspora communities in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates comprise the largest diaspora hubs worldwide. Migrants who go to the Middle East to work are typically men whose levels of education are above the national average. Many return within four or five years.¹ Cross-border mobility with Iran and Afghanistan, where local residents have visa-free mobility, presents another dimension to migration in Pakistan.

The return context

Emigration from, and return to, Pakistan should be seen within the context of the country's contemporary situation. Reflecting the strains that surround legal mobility for Pakistani citizens, the Visa Restrictions Index (2014) ranked Pakistan at 92, above only Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan.² Pakistan's deteriorating security situation is reflected in the Global Peace Index, where it is ranked 154 of 162. General living conditions, moreover, are very poor, as indicated in the Human Development Index, where Pakistan is ranked 146 of 187. The UNHCR reports more than 30,000 asylum claims from Pakistanis in 2013, part of the last few years' steady increase in asylum applications from Pakistani citizens³.

At the same time, Pakistan is a nation where the middle class has grown significantly since 2000, and it is seen as having substantial

unrealized economic potential. Developments over the last few years – including a deteriorating security situation, protracted energy crisis and political instability – have not, however, helped tap this potential. Nevertheless, remittance inflows to Pakistan have increased annually, resisting effects of the global economic crisis. In the financial year 2014, Pakistan received 18.4 billion USD, a 16 per cent increase from the previous year and an amount equivalent to the nation's foreign exchange reserves.

The context for return migration to Pakistan is thus characterized by, on the one hand, instability, and on the other, future potential. It is also a context where there is substantial reliance on remittances, disproportionate to the number of international migrants. This, in turn, has implications for how migration is seen, in general, as well as for perceptions of different kinds of return migration, including the implications of return migration for returnees' family and extended kinship networks in Pakistan and the diaspora.

Irregular status, deportation and 'assisted voluntary return'

Pakistani migrants have limited opportunities for legal immigration if they have no employment contract arranged in advance or other grounds for obtaining a visa, such as education or family ties. Pakistanis have in recent years been arriving in greater numbers in Greece, Italy and Spain. These are countries which are relatively easier to access, but to different degrees provide opportunities for regularizing status. Increased migration to these countries reflects the lacking opportunities for Pakistani migration, other than involving irregular status. However, such status is commonly seen as a temporal strategy towards a regularized status in the future.

Pakistanis, notably in Greece, have been returning through so-called 'voluntary assisted return' programmes managed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). These programmes are offered to migrants who have exhausted their options for appeal with regard to claiming legal status, thus being the last resort before deportation. In 2013, half of the nearly 5,000 individuals who took voluntary assisted return from Greece returned to Pakistan. More than 8,000 Pakistani migrants without regular status were

deported from EU states in 2013. Return migration to Pakistan therefore includes migrants who do not freely choose to go back, but rather are left with no legal options in Europe.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that nearly 400,000 Pakistani migrants were deported to Pakistan in the period 2007-2013.⁴ Iran, Oman and Turkey are among transit countries deporting Pakistanis. These three countries, together with the destination countries of Spain and Greece, are the five countries with most reported deportations to Pakistan. The deportations and voluntary assisted returns represent return migration flows that contrast sharply with the freely chosen return mobilities of Pakistanis who are naturalized citizens of destination countries.

Return mobilities and transnational living

Our research participants interviewed in Pakistan who had returned largely from Norway and the UK were mostly holders of, respectively, Norwegian and British citizenship. Return migration to Pakistan was for some characterized by lifestyle choices, notably for those who were returning after retirement or on career breaks. These return migrations were often characterized by a back-and-forth mobility between Pakistan and their European country of residence, and were seen as open-ended rather than permanent return migration. Return mobilities between Pakistan and European countries were contingent on holding permanent residence, and usually citizenship, in Norway or the UK.

Return mobilities were individually motivated – as life-style choices – but they were also often embedded within transnational kinship networks and related to obligations towards family members in Pakistan. Care work, in particular, was important, usually involving elderly parents or parents-in-law. While relatively unusual among Pakistani origin populations in Norway or the UK, some migrants also went back with their children for a period of time. Mothers usually returned with their children, whilst their husbands remained abroad earning a living to support the family. Remittances were sent to the family still residing in Pakistan.

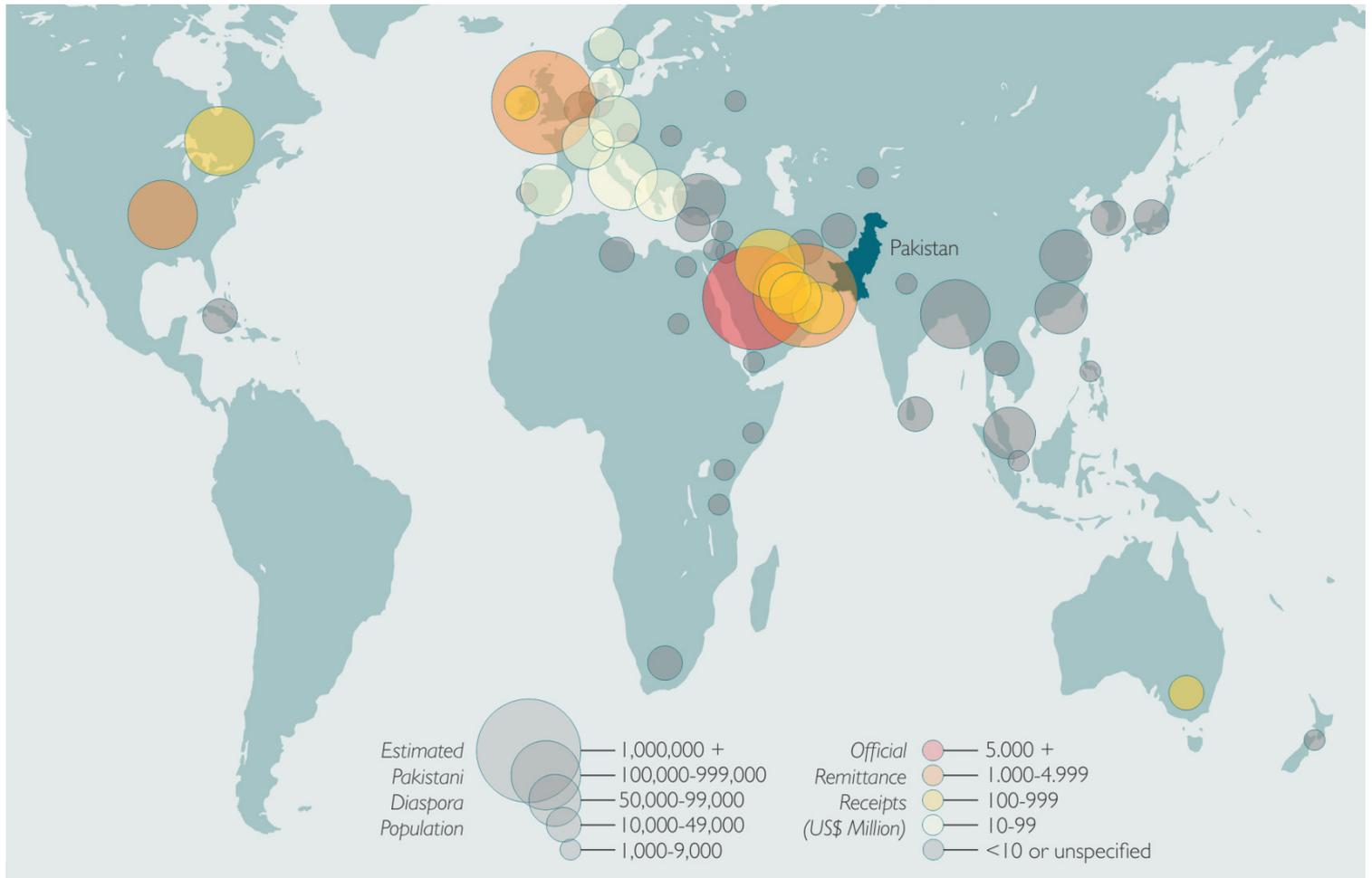


Figure 1. Pakistani overseas populations and remittance receipts

Diaspora population estimates use inconsistent definitions (Source: Wikipedia compilation). Remittance receipts are for FY 2014-15. (Source: State Bank of Pakistan).

Such transnational living arrangements, allowing for mobility back and forth, were explained both in terms of family obligations and as means to better acquaint children with their ancestral language and culture. For some, the religious environment was important. These return migrants rarely saw their move to Pakistan as permanent, but rather one instance of mobility on a trajectory of back-and-forth mobilities. Many European return migrants in this category lived in secluded property developments with other international migrants and well-off Pakistanis in cities, such as Lahore and Islamabad. Their interaction with Pakistani authorities was often quite limited, as they largely did not depend on government-provided services.

Return migration, development and trust in the government

The desire to contribute to development in Pakistan at an individual and family level is reflected in the volume of remittances sent. There are, however, also collective efforts to contribute to development, and in these endeavours return migration plays a role. Development efforts in local communities and through organizations are planned out, initiated, run and followed-up during return visits and periods of longer return mobility. Some migrants with European or North American citizenships also choose to settle more permanently in Pakistan and work professionally in development. These efforts are usually organized privately through NGOs or as part of religious networks.

Reflections by Pakistani migrants with Norwegian citizenship who were living in Norway or engaging in sustained mobility to Pakistan revealed how lack of trust in the Pakistani government shaped their views on permanent settlement in Pakistan; they saw it as, in a word, difficult. The lack of trust was specifically about national-level politics and state institutions as well as the general functioning of local and regional politics and institutions, with a particular emphasis on corruption and nepotism.

The clash of malfunctioning institutions and people's perceived need to rely on corruption was clearly articulated. When corruption was mentioned, it usually referred to bribing and using the 'backdoors' made available through personal contacts, for instance, to obtain

permissions and documents needed in everyday life or for business. Many migrants sought to minimize their interaction with government institutions during their stays in Pakistan.

Meanwhile, those engaged in development efforts frequently sought cooperation with local municipal- and district-level government to increase the sustainability of their engagements. Yet, local authorities often appeared to lack authority and capacity to engage in such development initiatives, thus foregoing opportunities for positive local development or leaving them to private efforts. This pattern has led to piecemeal societal development. For instance, a public school may close down, leaving teachers unemployed, while a new private school with modern facilities opens up nearby. Despite good intentions, local authorities lack the capacity to coordinate a plan ensuring the best interests of all parties. The result is inefficient use of resources, frustration and deepening distrust of the state.

Governing return migration

Governing return migration to Pakistan is complicated by the multiplicity of return and many related factors including differing legal and citizenship statuses, varying timeframes and scope of governance. Whilst the Pakistani state has dealt with labour migration for decades – including the management of temporary labour migration to the Middle East – its broader diaspora policies are more recent. Their main emphasis of targeting overseas Pakistanis has been increasing remittances, specifically the proportion sent through the formal banking system. Rising remittance levels and use of formal transfer mechanisms suggests that the Pakistani Remittance Initiative has been successful.

In terms of policy, the focus on return migration has mainly been on short-term labourers returning from the Middle East, who comprise the majority of such migrants. Little attention, though, has been given to the return of other overseas Pakistanis. The Pakistani state's interests in return migration are mixed, arguably because of the heavy reliance on remittances. Thus, there are inherent dilemmas to governing migration from the state's point of view. The contrasting needs of return migrants, with different legal and citizenship status and varying timeframes of temporary or permanent return to Pakistan, also confound coherent policy development. Bilateral agreements with other states on the deportation of Pakistani migrants add another dimension to governing return migration.

Furthermore, the scope for governance is relevant to consider. First, government capacity at national, regional and local levels is limited. This has implications for the effectiveness of policy implementation and for the development of new policies. This is a more general constraint, but also has implications for efforts to govern return migration. Second, people's generally low levels of trust in government and public institutions are a challenge for governance, including of return migration.

Pakistan is a country of emigration, transit and immigration. But as for many other states, there are severe constraints on the state's control over migration. Given the multiplicity of return migration to Pakistan, coupled with weaknesses in the state's capacity to perform governance nationally and locally, the dilemmas remain largely unaddressed. Conversely, the potential for socioeconomic development – including as a positive by-product of migration – stays untapped and deprives Pakistani society.

For further reading

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- Erdal, M.B. (2014). The social dynamics of remittance-receiving in Pakistan: Agency and opportunity among non-migrants in a transnational social field, in Rahman, M. (eds.), *Migrant Remittances in South Asia Social, Economic and Political Implications*. London: Palgrave Macmillan pp. 115-134.
- Erdal, M.B., Amjad, A., Bodla, Q. Z., and Rubab, A. (2015). Going back to Pakistan for education? The interplay of return mobilities, education, and transnational living. *Population, Space and Place*, DOI: 10.1002/psp.1966.
- Koser, K. and Kuschminder, K., (2014). *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants*. Geneva: IOM.

Notes

- 1 Arif, G. M., (2009). Recruitment of Pakistani workers for overseas employment: Mechanisms, exploitation and vulnerability. Geneva: International Labour Organization. 2 Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index. 3 The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Pakistan was 750,000 in 2014. Pakistan also counts approximately 1.6 million Afghan refugees and 2.2 million Afghans without refugee or regular status. 4 UNODC (2015). The socio-economic impact of human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Pakistan. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

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THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is part of the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration' (PREMIG), a large-scale research project that explores return migration from Norway and the United Kingdom. The project is led by Research Professor Jørgen Carling. For more information, see www.prio.org/premig.

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