**[Godspeed Afghans](https://www.dawn.com/news/1791127/godspeed-afghans)**

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THERE is no getting away from them. Love them, do not love them, cannot ignore them? From the attacks across the Khyber Pass by the marauders of yore, to Bacha Khan’s burial in Jalalabad, to Irfan Pathan’s dance celebrating the Afghan cricket team’s victory, they are part and parcel of our geo-emotional ecology. A part we seem eager to parcel out to a broader set of actors responsible for the situation. Unlike Iran, Pakistan did not restrict Afghan refugees to special zones for political expedience. The ummah vs the nation-state narrative made the naturalisation policy, passport, visa, etc, look like mere formalities.

Karachiites and the rest of Sindh have reasons to feel differently about repatriating Afghan refugees. In Karachi, the Afghans you see do odd jobs that the middle class with a voice feels no competition with. In rural Sindh, the Afghans take up jobs that locals are not averse to, and the nationalist leadership with a voice amplifies their concerns. Their continued presence, even in Karachi, tilts the ethnic scale in a direction that does not suit the PPP or the nationalists. Even the ‘liberal-progressive lot’, who usually coalesce around issues despite parochial differences, seem divided.

Some find sympathy for the Palestinians and support for undocumented Afghan refugees’ repatriation hypocritical. This ignores the fact that we do not share a 2,600-kilometre-long festering wound called the Durand Line with the Palestinians. They also did not oppose our entry to the UN, nor do they claim a good chunk of Pakistan as theirs.

Pakistanis who expect gratitude from Afghans for more than four decades of hospitality must realise that things do not work this way. If you are made to feel beholden to someone, it foments resentment. It is human nature. No one likes to be the object of sympathy. Similarly, our Afghan friends, who think Pakistan benefited from their misery and the international aid it received by becoming a ‘bulwark against communism’ or a ‘front-line state’ in the war on terrorism, must know that the very fabric of Pakistani society is inexorably fraying by the unending war in Afghanistan. Whatever monetary benefits accrued, they were pocketed by those with a monopoly over the Afghan, Indian, and nuclear policy. When Afghan citizens could not benefit from trillions of dollars pumped directly into the country by the US and its sundry allies, how can their Pakistani counterparts benefit from the indirect largesse of these masters of proxy wars?

It is time they went home.

Despite our obeisance to Iqbal and his to Nietzsche, we insisted on gazing into the abyss of ‘strategic depth,’ which is staring back. Afghanistan is a sovereign state that cannot be anybody’s backyard. Pakistan must let Afghanistan be. The Afghans can decide to befriend whomever they want. We cannot tell Afghanistan how many Indian consulates general it can host. If we feel threatened by it, we must safeguard our interests from our side of the border, not through proxies. Pakistan must tell Afghanistan clearly that it does not owe us anything, and we do not owe it anything. Friends do not give because they owe; they give because they want to.

That there are racial and ethnic affinities on both sides of the Durand Line is a hugely complex issue that cannot be addressed through force. Political parties can be banned, militias can be disbanded, but one can’t proscribe dreams. If some people dream of an Afghania or a Pakhtunistan, labelling them traitors and jailing them on unsubstantiated charges does not make the dream go away. Talk to them, respect them, give them rights over their resources; prove the trade-off impractical, if you can, and its benefits to be insignificant compared to what Pakistan can offer. Ditto for Mehran and Bolan. Ethnic ties do not trump the basic human need for dignity, safety, and prosperity. Hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis do not migrate to Canada, Australia, Europe, etc, because they feel a cultural affinity with the people there.

Our Afghan friends must know we don’t harbour ill-will towards them. It is time they went home and played a role in putting their house in order. Whoever desires to rule Afghanistan must know they will have to shoulder full responsibility, which includes the homecoming refugees. Pakistan needs to focus on minding its own business. A house divided can’t even be a good neighbour. Some elements cite the unconducive human rights and security environment in Afghanistan as a reason to extend the refugees’ stay in Pakistan. In the earlier part of the 20th century, at the height of the Khilafat Movement, the Darul Harb vs Darul Aman theory was tried with catastrophic results. A state struggling to protect its citizens cannot be expected to provide for refugees.

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