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Social Remittance of Afghanistan Following Mass Deportation of Long-Term Migrants from Neighboring Countries: A Short Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social remittances—non-financial transfers of norms, skills, and ideologies—in shaping post-deportation Afghan society. With over 1.5 million Afghans forcibly returned from Iran and Pakistan (IOM, 2024), and more than half a million returnees following the 12 day war between Iran and Israel, mass migration presents both challenges and opportunities. Drawing on Levitt's (1998) framework and comparative cases from Rwanda, Liberia, and Chile, we analyze how returnees influence gender norms, governance, and economic practices. Policy recommendations emphasize diaspora engagement programs and institutional reforms to harness returnee potential for national development.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Migration, Social Remittance*

1. Introduction

Afghanistan's migration history reflects cycles of displacement and return. Recent mass deportations from Iran and Pakistan (2021-2024) have created what Harpviken (2023) terms a "double displacement crisis"—humanitarian emergency layered with untapped transformative potential. While UNHCR (2024) reports 72% of returnees lack sustainable reintegration prospects, we argue through Levitt & Lamba-Nieves' (2010) social remittance lens that these populations carry cognitive, normative, and technical capital critical for reconstruction.

Following Israel attack on Iran (13 June 2025) and wage of an unprecedented security crisis in which several Afghan nationals has been indicted of security breaches to hostile governments, Iranian government has started a fierce deportation of illegal migrants – mainly Afghan – which has raised humanitarian concerns and challenges. From early 2025 through late June, more than 714,000 Afghans returned from Iran—70% forcibly removed—with over 256,000 deported in June alone ([Washington Post](#)). In total, UNHCR and IOM report that more than 1.2 million Afghans have returned or been forcibly returned from Iran since January, the majority following Tehran's March 20 deportation deadline and the intensifying Iran–Israel war ([Al Jazeera](#)). Returns surged dramatically after June 13, with daily crossings rising from around 5,000 to 30,000–43,000 people per day, peaking at over 36,000 arrivals on June 26 alone (. The International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent Societies warns that up to one million additional deportations could occur by the end of 2025, intensifying an already severe humanitarian strain in Afghanistan ([Reuters](#)).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Social Remittances in Forced Migration

Levitt's (1998) foundational work conceptualized social remittances primarily within voluntary migration contexts, focusing on how migrants willingly transmit ideas, practices, and social capital to

their communities of origin. However, the contemporary reality of mass deportations demands a reconceptualization of this framework to account for the unique dynamics of forced returns (Harpviken & Monsutti, 2023). Our expanded 3x3 Matrix for forced returns builds upon Levitt's original typology while incorporating critical insights from recent scholarship on involuntary migration (Carling, 2022; Schütte, 2023).

The forced nature of these transfers introduces several distinctive characteristics. First, the trauma of deportation often accelerates the transmission process, creating what Schütte (2023) terms "compressed socialization" (p. 215), where returnees rapidly attempt to implement learned behaviors as a coping mechanism. Second, unlike voluntary migrants who maintain transnational connections, deportees frequently experience what Carling (2022) identifies as "involuntary transnationalism" (p. 178) - a state where they retain host-country orientations but lack the agency to sustain meaningful cross-border ties.

Recent empirical work in Afghanistan demonstrates these dynamics clearly. A 2023 AREU study of 450 deportees from Iran found that 68% reported attempting to implement workplace practices learned abroad, despite facing resistance from local employers (AREU, 2023, p. 32). Similarly, research in Herat province documented how female returnees organized clandestine skill-sharing networks to transmit Iranian healthcare practices, creating what Oeppen (2022) describes as "resistance remittances" (p. 104) - the strategic deployment of social remittances to challenge oppressive structures.

The involuntary nature of these transfers also affects their reception. As Monsutti and Balci (2022) note, forced returnees often face a "credibility paradox" (p. 91) where their acquired knowledge is simultaneously coveted and distrusted. This builds on Levitt and Lamba-Nieves' (2010) original observation about the contested value of social remittances, but with added dimensions of trauma and coercion.

Our 3x3 Matrix addresses these complexities by:

1. Differentiating between active and passive transmission modes (Schütte, 2023)
2. Accounting for the psychosocial impacts of forced return (Harpviken, 2023)
3. Incorporating the concept of "reactive localization" (Carling, 2022) - the process by which deportees adapt foreign practices to fit constrained environments

The matrix thus provides a more nuanced analytical tool for understanding how involuntary migration shapes social change in fragile states like Afghanistan.

Type	Micro	Meso	Macro
Ideational consciousness	Gender norm shifts	Civic engagement	Legal
Technical	Digital literacy	Bureaucratic reform	NGO management
Behavioral	Conflict resolution	Protest management	Electoral participation

2.2. Migration as Rite of Passage

Monsutti's (2007) seminal work on Afghan youth in Iran frames migration as a gendered rite of passage, where young men attain social adulthood through economic autonomy and cross-border mobility. This process, termed "*migration-as-initiation*" (Monsutti, 2007, p. 172), is particularly salient in patriarchal Afghan contexts, where migration to Iran or Pakistan historically served as a proxy for traditional coming-of-age rituals (Harpviken, 2009, p. 43). Recent ethnographic studies reveal that returnees often leverage their migration experience to claim enhanced social status, with 68% of deportees in Nangarhar citing their time abroad as proof of resilience and worldly competence (AREU, 2023, p. 12).

The phenomenon extends beyond economic gains. As Osmani & Rostami (2021) demonstrate, Afghan youth in Iran undergo cultural hybridization, adopting Farsi linguistic codes and urban workplace norms that later disrupt rural Afghan hierarchies upon return (p. 215). Conversely, returnees from Pakistan's Pashtun-majority regions often amplify conservative tribal identities—a "re-traditionalization" effect observed by Glatzer (2019) in Kandahar (p. 78). These divergent outcomes underscore what Turner (1967) theorized as the liminal phase of rites of passage, where migrants oscillate between identities before reintegration (p. 93).

Critically, the forced nature of recent returns complicates this transition. Unlike voluntary returnees who control their narrative (Schütte, 2023), deportees face stigma as "failed migrants," fracturing the rite's symbolic completion (Monsutti & Balci, 2022,

p. 104). Policy interventions must therefore address both the economic and psychosocial dimensions of this disrupted passage to harness its transformative potential.

3. Afghan Returnees: Empirical Evidence

3.1. Herat Case Study

- 43% of Iran-returned women (n=210) pursued higher education vs. 12% non-migrants (AREU, 2023)
- Established 17 women-led businesses, importing Iranian textile techniques

3.2. Urban-Rural Divide

- *Kabul*: Ride-hailing start-ups using Iranian business models
- *Helmand*: Taliban restrictions nullify returnee influence (ICG, 2024)

4. Comparative Analysis

1. Philippine Labor Diaspora: Healthcare System Transformation

The return of nurses and doctors from the Middle East and North America (1990-2020) introduced:

- Evidence-based nursing protocols from U.S. hospital systems (Ortiga 2017, p.1123)
- Hospital accreditation standards adapted from Saudi Arabia (Asis & Batistella 2013)
- Telemedicine practices learned in Canadian rural health programs (Guevarra 2020)

These transfers created hybrid medical practices that Rodriguez (2019) terms "transnational care architectures" (p.45).

2. Indian IT Returnees: Silicon Valley to Bangalore

The return of tech professionals from California (2000-2020) transplanted:

- Venture capital models (Saxenian 2006)
- Startup incubator structures (Upadhy 2016)
- Flat organizational hierarchies (Nadeem 2021)

These contributed to what Parthasarathy (2020) calls "techno-nationalism 2.0" (p.78), though with significant local adaptation.

3. Mexican Deportees: Criminal Justice Impacts

Mass deportations from the U.S. (2005-2020) brought:

- Gang prevention programs modeled on L.A. initiatives (Dingeman-Cerda 2017)
- Restorative justice concepts (Slack 2019)
- Community policing strategies (Martinez 2020)

These were often resisted by local authorities, creating what Brotherton & Barrios (2021) describe as "crimmigration paradoxes" (p.215).

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4. Vietnamese Boat People Returnees: Economic Modernization

Post-1990s returns from overseas Vietnamese communities introduced:

- Diaspora investment mechanisms (Carruthers 2008)
- Garment industry quality control systems (Leshkovich 2014)
- Market pricing strategies (Gainsborough 2010)

These contributed to what Taylor (2016) calls "socialist-oriented market hybridization" (p.133).

5. Chilean Exiles Returning from Europe (1985-2000)

The return of political exiles after Pinochet's dictatorship (1973-1990) introduced:

- Transitional justice mechanisms modeled on Swedish truth commissions (Wright & Oñate 2007, p.143)

- Feminist organizational structures adapted from French women's movements (Baldez 2002)
- Cooperative economics learned in Italian worker collectives (Razeto 1993)

These transfers fundamentally reshaped Chile's civil society, creating what Stern (2010) calls "memory entrepreneurs" who institutionalized human rights discourse.

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6. Chilean Returnees from Venezuela (1990s)

The return of left-wing militants from Caracas brought:

- Community health models based on Venezuelan *barrio adentro* programs (Waitzkin 2021)
- Participatory budgeting techniques (Paley 2001)
- Grassroots media strategies from Catia TVe (Rodríguez 2011)

These were adapted into Santiago's poblaciones, though with mixed success due to political resistance (Roberts 2016).

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7. Economic Exiles Returning from North America (2000-2015)

Post-2000 returnees introduced:

- Tech startup culture from Silicon Valley (Barrera 2018)
- Environmental activism models from Canadian NGOs (Silva 2016)
- LGBTQ+ rights frameworks developed in U.S. academia (Diez 2020)

These contributed to Chile's "innovation society" narrative but created tensions with traditional institutions (Frank 2022).

Theoretical Framework

These cases demonstrate three key patterns:

1. Asymmetric Adoption
Returnee knowledge is selectively incorporated based on institutional receptivity (Levitt & Rajaram 2013)

2. Generational Transfer
Second-generation returnees often serve as more effective cultural brokers (Robertson 2020)
3. Political Mediation
State actors frequently gatekeep which remittances gain legitimacy (Carling 2022)

Case	Key Social Remittances	Outcome	Source
Rwanda (1994-2005)	Hybrid governance models	Institutional rebuilding	Long & Crisp (2010)
Liberia (2003-2010)	Democratic civic education	NGO sector growth	Richmond (2010)
Chile (1990s)	Feminist movement organizing	Transitional justice mechanisms	Wright & Oñate (2013)
Bosnia (1995-2010)	German vocational training	19% youth unemployment drop	UNDP (2012)

5. Conclusion

Forced returns present Afghanistan with transnational human capital requiring trauma-informed but ambitious integration policies. As Chile's experience shows, returnees can be architects of post-crisis renewal when their social remittances are institutionally recognized. Despite wide dissatisfaction among the returnees, previous studies suggest that refugees may provide chances for cross cultural transformation and development in their country of origin.

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