

Split Return: Transnational Household Strategies in Afghan Repatriation

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ABSTRACT

Split return is a common strategy of repatriation among refugees and migrants. Facing great uncertainty, both economically and security-wise, households disperse in two or more locations in order to minimize risk. The phenomenon is well-known in migration studies and in studies of return from the distant diaspora, but is studied less among the overwhelming majority residing in countries neighbouring their own. This article draws on experiences from Afghanistan, comparing split return to similar strategies in migration generally and in refugee situations specifically. It suggests that while splits are conceived as a temporary measure, they often become a lasting form of life. Opportunities for split return are often crucial for the willingness to start repatriation, as well as for the sustainability of the household's economy upon return. The article develops the concept of split return in relation to contextual factors, intensity of networks (at origin and in exile) and household composition.

Why do households split when returning from exile to their country of origin, keeping some members behind while others start rebuilding their lives at home? Conceived as a temporary measure to smooth the transition, such split returns have been a common strategy for Afghans returning from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. The prevalence of split returns raises a number of questions: Under which circumstances do households split up in the course of return and what are the various patterns? When is splitting the household a conscious decision made prior to starting repatriation, and when is it simply the unforeseen result of factors beyond the control of the household?

This article contends that split return is a conscious strategy in response to insecurity and economic shortcomings, and that splits easily become long-lasting, despite being intended as a short-term precautionary measure. This contention challenges conventional conceptualizations of the refugee cycle, where exile from and reintegration into the country of origin are seen as two distinct states, separated by a time-limited and unidirectional period of "return" (Black and Koser, 1999). The article takes the household as its primary unit of analysis, and depicts ways in which households develop strategies in order to minimize risk both to the collective and its individual members alike. Hence, it builds on, yet moves beyond contributions that nuance our understanding of return by implicating individual-level long-distance transnationalism (Iaria, 2013; Sinatti, 2011).

Rooted in interviews with prospective returnees and members of returned households, complemented by insights from other empirical studies, the article aspires to develop a concept of split returns along relational and temporal dimensions. It starts with a condensed analytical framework, looking at household strategies for limiting insecurity, economic uncertainty and informational shortcomings in the process of return. Following a short overview of Afghan refugee migration, it

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moves on to illustrate how split return has taken shape in refugee repatriation to Afghanistan following the 1992 abdication of the Afghan communists and the 2001 intervention that dethroned the Taliban regime. Lastly, the article provides some implications of this analysis for theory and policy, before offering a few concluding remarks.

ANALYTICAL FRAME

Refugees move under the extreme circumstances of armed conflict, and there is a set of legal and institutional mechanisms that aim to safeguard their rights. Even so, the category of “refugees” (or the considerably broader “forced migrants”) forms part of the larger universe of human migration. The following draws extensively on insights and advances in the study of migration and transnationalism, with a particular emphasis on the ways in which constraints and opportunities – be that in the domain of security, economy or information – are mediated by social networks. Insisting on the role of agency, networks and experiential trajectories in war-related mobility, the article also takes issue with the persistent separation between refugee or forced migration studies, on the one hand, and migration and transnationalism studies, on the other.

This article looks at return decisions among refugees within a larger context of migratory decision-making. The field of “refugee studies”, or the increasingly common and more encompassing “forced migration studies”, overwhelmingly assume a causal force so strong that there is little to draw from its mirror image, migration studies (Zetter, 2007). My basic assumption is that all migration entails an element of force, so that the study of moves under extraordinary circumstances such as war, forms part of migration studies at large, and can benefit enormously from this. By extension, refugees’ return decisions can be constructively analysed alongside other migratory decisions, including the often dramatic escape decisions in situations of war (Jeffery and Murison, 2011).

“Split household” strategies are well established in migration research (Agesa and Sunwoong, 2001; Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Pessar, 1997). Grasmuck and Pessar (1991) have studied Dominican migration to the USA, based on data both from origin and destination. They found that in the Dominican case, many households have one or several members who spend long periods in the USA to earn money, returning regularly but for relatively short periods, while the bulk of the household stays behind. Households with migrants often adapt and make changes to their lifestyle that cannot be sustained without remittances from family members in the USA, and what was first seen as a temporary household strategy consequently takes on a permanent character. The result is the development of truly “transnational households” (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Vuorela, 2002). Similarly, Michael Douglass (2006) has coined the concept “global householding” to capture the ways in which expectations for economic improvement and social security are met through strategic spread of household members.

In contexts where there is, or has been, armed conflict, the nature of the society one returns to may be particularly challenging. Introducing the concept of “transnational returns” in her study of repatriation to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Eastmond (2006:144) suggests that a “growing number of studies show that return is not necessarily a single and definitive event and that returnees may still need to secure options in different places.” Sørensen (2004) talks of return to Somaliland as “staggered”, finding that the ability to maintain high-status citizenship in a distant country of asylum motivates a diversified household strategy. Focusing on migration among the Afghan Hazara, Monsutti (2010) argues that their wartime transnationalism reflects a conscious adaptation of longtime mobility patterns, fundamentally challenging the juxtaposition of refugees to migrants. The main emphasis in these studies is on households that are part of a distant diaspora (see also Long, 2012). Yet they all point towards the need for a broader, principled framework for analysing how households

collectively decide to split between different locations in order to maximize opportunities and safeguard themselves and their individual members against uncertainty.

Split household strategies in flight, while sparsely discussed in their own right, provide an interesting comparison to return decisions (Harpviken, 2009). Split flight strategies may be motivated both by security and economic concerns, often by a mix of both. When the security domain provides low predictability, dispersing the household between two or more different localities is a sensible insurance strategy. Similarly, great uncertainty in the economic domain makes it entirely rational, from a household perspective, to diversify. A classic situation, I would argue, occurs when the household possesses what Williamson (1981) has, in a different context, referred to as “site-specific resources”. Typical examples are agricultural land, housing, and certain types of business infrastructure, which less exposed members of the family may stay behind to protect, maintain or keep operational (Haug, 2008). In real life, security and economic concerns, alongside a number of other issues – including access to education, identifying candidates for marriage, options for migration to other parts of the world – inform the household’s assessment of whether or not a split strategy makes sense and, if it does, who should stay and who should go. Once initiated, the split takes on a life of its own, and over time various members of the household – depending on threats and opportunities at origin and in exile, combined with life course changes for the individual and the household as a whole – move between the nodes of the household’s circuit.

Return decisions are not necessarily very dissimilar from escape decisions. I have argued elsewhere that escape decisions are often longer in the making, with a more proactive character, than is commonly assumed (Harpviken, 2009: 99-103). Even so, most return decisions are taken in contexts that are less dramatic. Relatedly, prospective returnees most often have solid access to information about the state of affairs at their destination, particularly if they have been able to cultivate ties to stayers-behind, to visit, or if they have kept members of the household there. Both return and flight decisions are driven by a range of factors, but whereas security concerns tend to be more important than economic ones when considering flight, this is often reversed when it comes to return. Especially when exile has been protracted, most families find their economic sustenance to be a critical challenge when contemplating return, which mean considerable hesitation, but also rapid response if and when new opportunities arise. A peace treaty or a regime change could trigger rapid return, as individuals and households with the right contacts and competence go back to tap fresh opportunities. Security still matters, however, and concerns about deteriorating security would make a household particularly prone to maintain a foot in exile, not only to shield those family members especially at risk, but even more importantly to maintain a safe haven that other members can return to if necessary.

Decisions to return are made in the context of larger collectives, not unlike the situation before escape, when people join “flight collectives” which gather information, plan, and possibly travel together to an exile location (Allen and Hiller, 1985). Also during return, people may go as part of a larger collective that includes members of the extended family, former neighbours, and sometimes persons and families they got to know only while in exile. Return collectives are mostly based on cohesive ties (Harpviken, 2009; Koser, 1997). There seems to be a significant difference in size between flight collectives and return collectives, however. Return travel is generally better planned, with a clear destination, and with risks perceived to be more manageable than in a situation of flight. Traveling together is less of a necessity, but for security reasons it is important – particularly for the early returnees – to know that they are not alone, but rather belong to a returning community. Most contexts that refugees return to are characterized by security challenges and no effective state, and security is regularly a reflection of being able to link up with larger collectives, extending well beyond the household. Successful linkages to protective networks at this level do not in any way preclude split strategies at the household level.

The pattern of split returns varies with both the composition of the households and the circumstances of the return. Household size, age distribution and gender composition, as well as the skills

and work opportunities of individuals, are all important factors. Gender relations can be quite different in exile from what they were at origin, either out of sheer necessity, or because of exposure to a different society. A power shift from husband to wife, for example – not uncommon among Afghan refugees – may mean return is tempting for the former, but less so for the latter. Generational differences may be equally dramatic, particularly when exile has been protracted, so that the younger generation has few memories of home, holds preferences that are more easily met in exile, and even lacks the skills and networks necessary to succeed at origin. For all of these reasons decision processes may be highly conflictual within the household. What seems rational for the household as a whole does not necessarily coincide with what is attractive to the individual.

Split household returns are most often intended as a necessary transition measure, perhaps painful, but of limited duration. Once a split has been instituted, however, it easily takes on a life of its own, particularly in conflict and post-conflict contexts where economic and political progress may be unexpectedly slow, or where there are major setbacks such as the recurrence of war. When households come to keep one foot in exile, of course, it may be exactly to safeguard themselves against such negative developments, keeping up an ability to shift all or most of the household back to the safety of exile if the need should arise. This is a sensible risk management strategy, and for some, the opportunity to maintain a foot in exile may in fact be a prerequisite for contemplating a partial return (Iaria, 2013). Likewise, the opportunity to compensate for economic problems at origin by continuing to tap into the exile economy, even responding to unexpected setbacks, may be precisely what is needed to make return possible. The longer it takes before conditions become conducive to return, and the longer the split lasts, the less likely is it that the intended reunification of the household ever takes place.

THE AFGHAN CASE

Starting in 1978, armed conflict in Afghanistan led to the largest coerced movement of people in recent times. At the peak of the conflict, in the beginning of the 1990s, an estimated 7.5 million people were displaced: 3.2 million were registered as refugees in Pakistan; the government of Iran reported 2.35 million; and perhaps 2 million were internally displaced within Afghanistan (Knowles, 1992). Repatriation started after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, but only became substantial after the fall of Najibullah's government in April 1992, with around 1.4 million refugees returning during the remainder of that year. Renewed conflict between the factions of the so-called *mujahedin* government reduced the pace of repatriation in 1993, and by 1994, the number of newly displaced outweighed the number of returnees.

During 1996–2001, the period when the Taliban was the country's *de facto* government and in control of most of its territory, there was a steady flow of people from Afghanistan's major cities, as well as a dramatic exodus from a few distinct areas of protracted fighting. The US-led Coalition Campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in October–December 2001 brought another round of displacement in certain regions, before the installment of an internationally backed transition regime in December 2001 triggered a massive repatriation movement, with an estimated 2.3 million returning in 2002 alone (UNHCR, 2002). By early 2013, the UNHCR estimates that some 2.7 million Afghans are in refuge in the immediate neighbourhood. The agency acknowledges massive reintegration challenges for those that have returned, and are concerned about increasing internal displacement (UNHCR, 2013).

Afghanistan's wartime migration is not only the most voluminous of recent times, it is probably also the one that is studied the most (Centlivres, 1993; Harpviken, 2009). While the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by analytically innovative studies based on qualitative data, the period after 2001 has fostered a new library of methodologically solid (often survey-based) studies (see

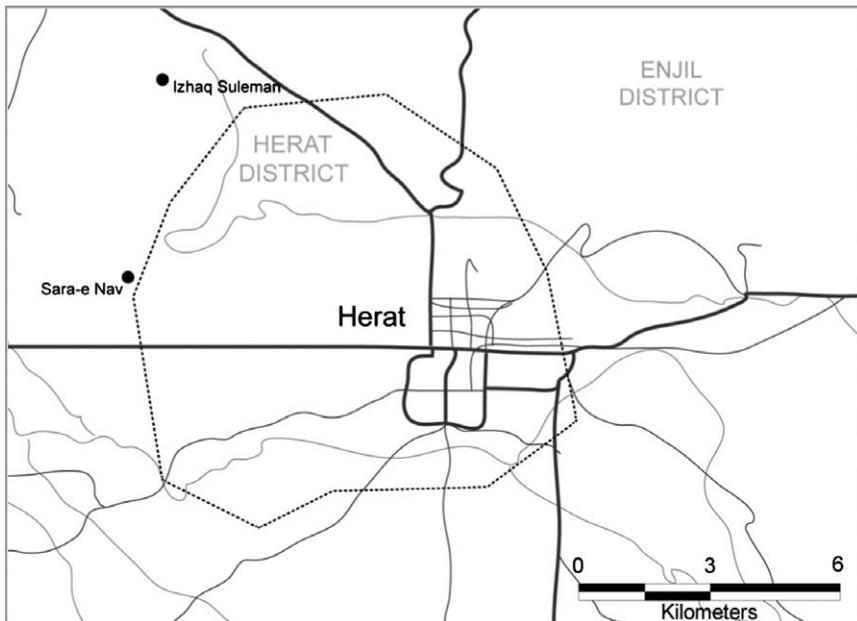
e.g. Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2005; Saito, 2009). From the vantage point of 2013, it is also a case of rapidly declining interest, not only to a global popular audience, but also to students of migration (Monsutti, 2013). The sheer scope and complexity of Afghan migration, as well as the wealth of previous analytical work, is such that the larger field of study has much to gain from a continued scholarly engagement (Centlivres, 2010).

In this article, I explore two rounds of return – in 1992-1993 and 2003-2004 respectively – between Iran and two villages in Enjil district close to Herat in Northwestern Afghanistan, based on data from my own fieldwork (Harpviken, 2009). As a contrast, I draw on Glatzer's (1990, 1992) comparative analysis of return from Pakistan to two regions of eastern Afghanistan in the early 1990s. Through this comparison of widely different cases at various points in time, we bring out a wide spectrum of split return strategies.

SPLIT RETURN PATTERNS TO HERAT

Enjil district, surrounding the major city of Herat in Afghanistan's northwest, was more heavily hit by the war in the 1980s than most parts of the country. I have focused on two villages which fared very differently through the past three decades of war (Figure 1). In one of them, Izhaq Suleiman, the villagers' dominant response as war escalated from 1978 onwards was to ally with – and to supply militia forces for – the Soviet-oriented regime of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA, in power 1978–1992). Simultaneously, the villagers cultivated contacts with the resistance. In the other village, Sara-e Nau, the majority of the inhabitants joined the armed resistance, and the village became a target for the Kabul regime's military activities. The different choices of the two villages had deep implications for their displacement patterns, for the degree of physical

FIGURE 1
FIELDWORK AREA IN ENJIL DISTRICT, HERAT PROVINCE, NORTH-WEST AFGHANISTAN



destruction they underwent, for their relationships to later regimes, and for their chances of recovery. The impact on split return patterns is only marginally different, with returnees to Sara-e Nau being more dependent on continued income earners in Iran than returnees to Izhaq Suleiman.

My most intensive fieldwork in both villages took place in 1999, when the Taliban was in power. Over a period of three months, I engaged in multifaceted data-gathering. Including a pilot study in 1997, I undertook a total of 165 interviews (both open and semi-structured; about two thirds were with local respondents), as well as observation and examination of relevant secondary sources. I also paid four shorter visits over the following eight years, the final one in 2006. By combining various means of gathering data, I sought to map the various strategies pursued by individuals and households in coping with war, focusing on social networks as a resource and an area of strategic investment, and I wanted to look at how networks changed. The environment in Herat in the late 1990s, when communities reluctantly sought to accommodate their Taliban rulers, was highly charged, and fieldwork conditions were challenging. Yet, extremely helpful door-openers, hospitable residents, and a studied gradualist approach to fieldwork (being prepared to reorient or abort fieldwork at short notice), made it possible to gain a reasonable understanding of people's wartime migration strategies.

The overall pattern of repatriation to Enjil is similar to that of the rest of Afghanistan, with a major peak in 1992 and substantial homeward migration also in the following year. From 1994 onwards, the flow of repatriates was small – probably equalled or surpassed by the rates of new out-migration – before a new peak appeared in 2002–2003, following the defeat of the Taliban, the formation of a new transitional authority in Kabul, and the reinstatement of former governor Ismael Khan in Herat. Throughout the whole period, repatriation to Enjil, as well as to the larger region, was almost exclusively from Iran. Despite significant obstacles to travel, there was frequent exchange of people between the communities in Western Enjil and the exile locations in Iran. The share of the population from Western Enjil in exile by 1992 was extraordinarily high, estimated to represent 90% of the pre-war population (UNHCR, 1990). While in Pakistan, a decision for a family to return was seen as easily reversible, border controls and the associated costs of getting to Iran were of such a scale that it would be difficult for the whole family to get back to Iran after a return. The fact that the consequences were greater partly explains why the repatriation from Iran picked up more slowly than that from Pakistan.

While repatriation in 1992 was an almost immediate response to the regime change, in 2001–2002 it was more considered and gradual. In 1992, there was virtually no time to plan the return, since the regime change coincided with the start of the migration season. In 2002, however, there were some three to four months to get ready; nevertheless, many decided to wait yet another winter before returning. There may be several reasons for this contrast. For one, having a few months to reflect may have served to temper the immediate impetus to pack up and leave. Furthermore, the fact that many considered their repatriation in 1992 to have been a failure may have had an impact, not only on those who had actually tried to repatriate once before but also by discouraging other refugees. Most importantly, however, the refugees remaining in Iran by 2002 were different from those returning in the early 1990s. Their affiliation with people at home was already weaker in 1992, and had withered further during an additional decade in Iran. This has a range of implications, in terms of economic opportunities and access to information, but perhaps most importantly for the sense of security upon return.

Just as in the departure decision, security considerations clearly figure as the main factor in the decision to return. Security has a network dimension, particularly in the absence of a functioning state, in that people's primary protection stems from their association with groups considerably larger than the household or the extended family. Risks are great for those who return first, particularly if they go to depopulated locations. In such situations, security will not appear satisfactory unless returnees are confident that many others will come back more or less simultaneously. Members of refugee populations, however, may be nested into different types of networks, and hence

may read the security prospects differently. A wave of return that attracts some may not appeal to others, and we may get successive thresholds in repatriation.

People in Izhaq Suleiman and Sara-e Nau understood well why many of their former villagers have chosen not to return. No one morally condemned those who did not return – neither those who have stayed on at origin throughout the whole war period nor those who have been in exile and have returned to resettle. In their understanding of why others chose not to return, most people referred to their own economic situation. Many of the optimists returning already in 1992 or early 1993 soon found out that economic survival in Afghanistan was more difficult than they had expected. In 1999, most households were split and relied on the income from one or several family members working in Iran. On top of all this, large parts of the country – the Herat region included – were already well into a second year of drought, with devastating effects on the local economy. All of this, of course, was well known by most refugees in Iran, who received regular news about the conditions at home. Despite the grim economic picture in Enjil, however, there was a trickle of people returning from Iran, including families who returned of their own volition and with the intention of staying.

The return decision is not about security alone; it is also about how the economic conditions in exile compare with those in the country of origin. The prospective returnees' assessment of economic conditions at home does not necessarily focus only on daily income opportunities, but may also take into account site-specific assets in the form of property, or what the market opportunities are for individually held competence.

Competence developed during exile may help in acquiring an income upon return (Massey and Espinosa, 1997). Not all competence is equally transferable, however. In the late 1990s, for example, when there was minimal construction activity in Herat and the surrounding areas, all skilled construction workers had problems finding work. Trained gypsum decorators seemed to be particularly disadvantaged. The result was that gypsum decorators – of whom there were quite a few from Izhaq Suleiman – did not return. Many households pursued a split strategy because some of their male members had acquired a competence that was in demand in Iran but not in the home country, and because these households had access to networks that were helpful for finding work in Iran.

The availability of site-specific resources (mainly land) also proves to have a decisive influence on decisions to return. Owners of land and other fixed assets are among the first to return, and may be much more willing to accept tall security challenges. Those with little or no property – who therefore have to rely on their education, skills, labour power, experience as traders, or accumulated mobile capital – are likely to delay their return until the government in their home country is able to safeguard the general functioning of the economy. Families whose properties had been destroyed or had fallen into disarray, of which there were many in Sara-e Nau, proved no slower in returning, but they would rely more on maintaining incomes from Iran. I did not come across one single significant landowner who had chosen not to return, although many landowning families continued a split strategy to complement their income by sending young men of the family to Iran for work. Land ownership breeds identification, it provides a sense of security for relatively stable long-term income, and it gives work to all resident family members, but it does not provide quick substantial income.

After years in exile, many Afghans found that their expectations – economic and otherwise – had changed. This was more conspicuous for refugees in Iran than in Pakistan, since the difference between living conditions in Afghanistan and Iran was much greater than that between the two sides of the Afghan–Pakistani border. Although Afghans in general were economically discriminated against in Iran, and benefited only partially from that country's development, their expectations for a better life were boosted by their exposure to a much more developed economy and welfare system. Many returnees from Iran complained about the lack of gas, electricity, and tap water in Afghanistan. Abbasi-Shavazi and associates (2005), when interviewing Afghans in

Teheran, were told that some returnees had experiences being coined *Irani gak* by people who had not been in exile, a term denoting people with an Iranian lifestyle. The split-household strategy meant that expectations developed differently among members of the same household. Several female returnees reported that they found daily life – carrying water, collecting firewood – very hard in comparison with life in Iran, but got little sympathy from their husbands. Even more dramatically divergent expectations can be found among the younger generation who had grown up in Iran. These often find it extremely difficult to adapt to the conditions in rural Afghanistan.

Return decisions are generally less reactive; less “forced”, than flight decisions, and therefore allow more time for the gathering of information. In contrast to escapes, most returns are also planned with the expectation of staying indefinitely at the destination. Consequently, the need for information about conditions at the return location is greater than the need for information about the destination of an escape. Trust in the sources of information is therefore a more critical factor than in the exile phase. People contemplating a return are likely to lean on dense ties for such information (Harpviken, 2009). Furthermore, when planning their return, the information they need is highly specific, about the state of their house and property, access to production facilities and markets, and so on. Such information cannot be provided by government agencies or unknown brokers. People rely on their close associates or, when possible, on personal visits.

This does not mean that the refugees always had the information they needed. Even when there are multiple sources of information, many feel that they know too little to take the risky decision of returning with the whole family. They prefer first to gather more specific information from a trusted envoy or to go in person. One example is Gul Ahmad (pseudonym), a man in his early 30s, whom I met in Sara-e Nau in December 2002. Gul Ahmad had been sent home by his family to assess the situation. He had stayed for a month and a half and had used family savings made in Iran to purchase a piece of land in Herat city:

I will soon have to go back to Iran, talk to my father, my brothers, then we will make a decision. ... I have two brothers (one married, one not), two sisters, and my parents there. I am married, and have a wife and two children. The most important issue is security, and then we look for economic opportunities, if we can survive here. ... Many of my relatives have asked me to write a list of the prices of commodities to see what the cost level is here. In the area we live, there are thirty-five families from Sara-e Nau, and four of them are close relatives of ours.

Gul Ahmad was in regular contact with people traveling between Iran and Sara-e Nau, but he and his family wanted more specific information – about the state of their small landholding in the village and the economy in the Herat area. He ended up investing the family savings in a rather attractive part of the city, effectively taking a first step in the family’s return – and in upward social mobility. He also served as a scout, collecting information for his extended family network. In itself, the trip was a considerable investment, both in terms of time (two to three months) and financial outlays (travel expenses plus cost of passport/visa or help from smuggler).

In his work on Mozambique, Koser (1997) found that information to potential returnees is most often mediated through brokers. This is very different from my findings, where most respondents report that the bulk of the information comes from family members and other close associates. Brokering ties dominate only when access to the home location is extremely difficult, when it has been depopulated, or when polarization between various groups from the same location runs so deep that one group monopolizes all the information. Furthermore, when people have stayed in exile only for a short period, the development of multiple information channels may have been prevented and the dependence on brokers may increase. When a large share of households are split, and remain so for a long time, as was the case with Afghans in Iran, the main sources of information are within the household. In effect, this also means that the space for manipulation by various types of local patrons or migration brokers is limited.

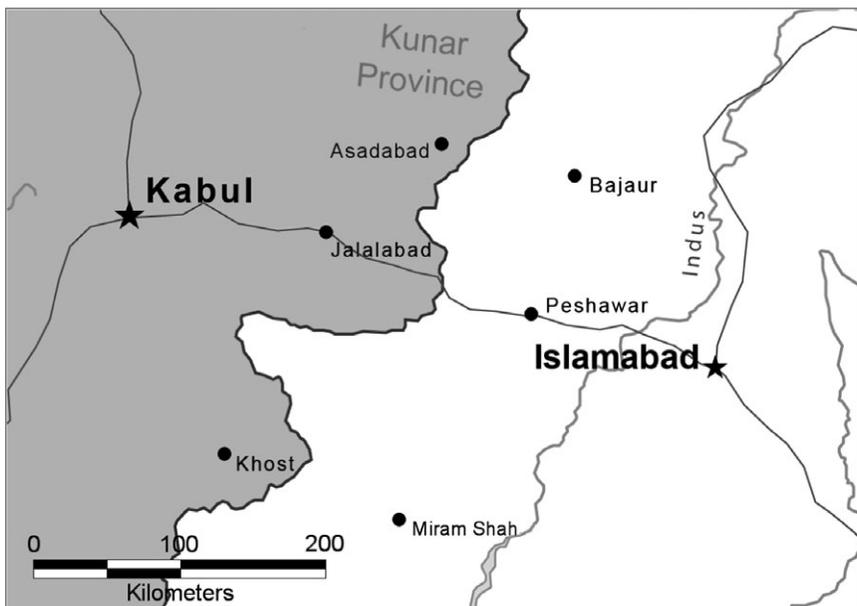
RETURN FROM PAKISTAN

My experiences from the two Enjil villages made me reexamine the work by the late German anthropologist Bernt Glatzer, who registered that patterns of repatriation from Pakistan varied widely in the aftermath of the 1989 Soviet withdrawal (Glatzer, 1990, 1992). Glatzer conducted interviews among refugees from Kunar province staying in Bajaur agency of NWFP, and among refugees from Khost province who stayed in and around the city of Miram Shah (Figure 2). At the time of his data collection, return to Khost was well underway, whereas those originating in Kunar were holding back. Both groups of refugees had left in the early 1980s, in response to the intense armed campaigns in the provinces bordering on Pakistan.

When the residents of these areas left, they went to areas that they knew in advance. For most of the Pashtuns living close to Pakistan, the border was hardly an obstacle: they were used to traveling across it, they had longstanding ties with the people living on the other side, and border control was weak. Pre-war patterns of interaction carried over into the refugee situation, and the exiled Kunaris solidified their existing integration with the Bajauris, whereas the Khost exiles in Miram Shah interacted much less with local residents. This was paralleled in the degree to which the two exile groups maintained relations with those who had remained behind, with a gradual withering of ties for many of the Kunaris in Bajaur, but strong maintenance of ties to those at origin for the Khost exiles in Miram Shah. The latter frequently visited their home region, often for weeks and months at a time, taking part in the fight, cultivating the land. With the tribal system virtually intact, the Khosti exiles maintained their positions in the communities of origin throughout the war.

Yet both groups made return visits, and access to information was not a constraint. Nor did there seem to be any significant difference between the two groups in the ability to mobilize economic resources. Both exile locations offered only modest employment opportunities, and many had to

FIGURE 2
LOCATIONS IN GLATZER'S COMPARATIVE STUDY OF REPATRIATION



travel to the larger cities to seek employment. At home, the economic basis was severely disrupted by war, but there was also considerable reconstruction activity, including international assistance. The information on economic resources is limited, but there are no indications of significant differences between the two locations that could explain the widely different levels of repatriation.

Security also emerges as a key factor in Glatzer's studies. Not surprisingly, he finds that return was less likely if the security situation back home was bad. More interestingly, however, he also finds that people see security as something that emerges from their integration in larger collectives acting together. One of Glatzer's (1990) interviewees in Bajaur expresses his feelings in the following way:

There is neither government nor police to protect us. I look forward to returning home, but only together with all my relatives and neighbours.

The interplay between repatriation and security creates a vicious cycle, underlining the criticality of what I have referred to as a return collective. Glatzer reflects:

Because in Kunar there are too few people it is unsafe, because it is unsafe, more people don't come. This circle cannot be broken by individual decisions to go back, but only by an organized mass return. (Glatzer, 1990)

In Khost, on the other hand, the larger collective, consisting of returnees as well as those that had stayed behind, joined hands to set up a tribal militia (*arbaki*), in a clear demonstration of resistance to the organizational forms and legitimizations applied either by the resistance or by the government.

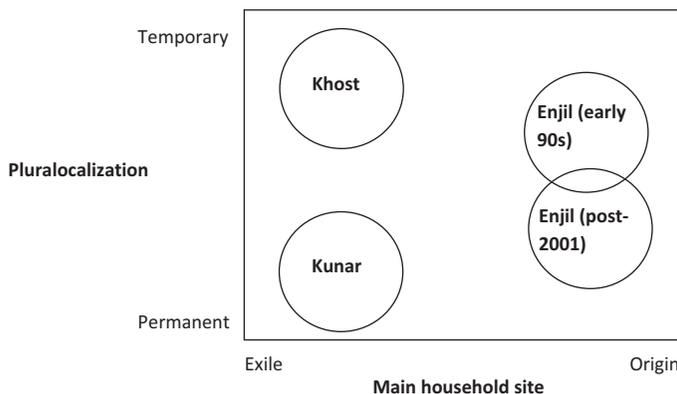
It is clear that reintegration strategies within these two groups differ. The Miram Shah group gradually returned shortly after the mujahedin took power in their home areas in Khost province in 1991, whereas the Bajaur group held back even when the government withdrew its forces from Kunar in 1988 (Glatzer 1990, 1992). This difference may be explained in part by mujahedin infighting in Kunar, and in part by the fact that the people from Bajaur were highly integrated in Pakistan, where they had enjoyed close ties with the local population long before the war. It is interesting to note how these refugee populations, in different ways, staged their gradual reintegration with the use of a split-household strategy. The households from Miram Shah were split during a limited transition phase. The households from Bajaur split more permanently; and even two decades later, a large share of the Afghan refugee population in Bajaur remains.

For both the Khost and the Kunari refugees, most return decisions were based on information collected during personal visits by the head of the household. The place of origin was only a few hours away, the border was easy to pass, and most people felt that it was safe enough to return for shorter visits. Hence, going on an assessment mission was considerably easier than for the Enjil refugees in Iran. The latter therefore seem to have sent a representative of a larger family group rather than just a representative for a single household. In the area of Mozambique studied by Koser, such temporary returns were not possible, so most people had to base their return decision on information acquired through kin or more distant information brokers. With such obstacles to communication – hence also to interaction and mobility – split households may not have appeared as an attractive strategy.

IMPLICATIONS

Stepwise returns, in which one part of the household remains in exile while the other moves back to start rebuilding a life, are well known among Afghan refugees. In Pakistan, most of the

FIGURE 3
PATTERNS OF HOUSEHOLD SPLIT



household remains behind, while one or a few grown-up males go home to rebuild their house and start cultivating the land. The pattern among those returning from Iran is the opposite: most of the household returns, while one or a few male breadwinners stay behind (Monsutti, 2008). Here, the risks inherent in stepwise migration are greater than in Pakistan, as a second escape across the tightly controlled border is generally more difficult. If local conditions are not as good as hoped, households may end up in stepwise repatriation inadvertently, or they may have to live as a split family for much longer than expected.

In the flight phase, split household strategies are mainly driven by security concerns. When return is contemplated, security continues to play a critical role for whether or not return is initiated, but the main factors driving split return strategies seem to be economic ones. People who held property at the place of origin are overrepresented among the early returnees to Enjil. Those who have been unable to maintain their property during the war, which was the case for many of the people from Sara-e Nau, also returned early. Even during low agricultural income periods due to drought, property-holders persisted in showing greater propensity to return than others. Commonly, however, economic downturns were compensated by male members of the household going to Iran to work. For many, the ability to continue tapping into the Iranian labour market was a prerequisite for an economically sustainable return.

In the post-2001 climate in Herat, the main household site was at origin (Figure 3). For those returning from Pakistan, there was the opposite tendency. These differences relate to several issues. Firstly, the Iranian border, while at a close distance, is much more difficult, hence also more expensive, to cross than the Pakistani one. Secondly, families remaining in exile in Pakistan, at least in the first half of the 1990s, had access to refugee relief. Thirdly, refugees in Pakistan did not feel alienated by the host population and the administration in the same manner as in Iran. Fourthly, life in Iran is considerably more expensive than life in Afghanistan, whereas differences vis-à-vis Pakistan are small. In both cases, people from the border zones, where the migration frequency has been extremely high over the past two and a half decades, have the contacts required; what differs is the way they use them to ease reintegration.

In this manner, the continued access to labour markets in neighbouring countries has become an integral part of people's reintegration strategies, and may remain so for the foreseeable future.

As Monsutti has pointed out, the basic assumption informing much of policy and practice is that "solutions are found when movements stop". But, says Monsutti, a comprehensive understanding is needed, "which takes into account the full range of strategies and responses...including the

back-and-forth movements between Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and beyond” (Monsutti, 2008: 58). If the borders were closed effectively, so that Afghans could not be active in the labour market of their former host states, this would seriously undermine the process of Afghanistan’s reconstruction. It would probably also hurt the economies of Iran and Pakistan (UNHCR, 2003). Ultimately, one may even ask if the expectation of a closed border makes some prospective returnees considerably more cautious about returning than they would otherwise be.

The split-household strategy remains important in the reintegration phase. The primary motivation for keeping some family members in exile is economic. Security considerations may also play a role, as keeping a foothold in exile makes it easier to escape should the security situation at home again deteriorate. While split households are seen generally as a temporary coping strategy, they often become quasi-permanent, when reintegration proves more challenging than expected. The split households illustrate how large-scale refugee situations trigger social change, which also renders any “return to normal” strategy unrealistic.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the Afghan case, split household returns have been the rule more than the exception. The patterns found in Afghanistan are unlikely to be unique. Both economic and security concerns are driving forces in split returns. On the economic side, the household economic base at home may be destroyed or even non-existent. Many returnees see the continued access to labour markets – or to humanitarian aid – in a neighbouring country as a prerequisite to reintegration. On the security side, to maintain parts of the household in exile serves as a safety valve for the others. When security threats are person-specific – as in the case of conscription, which targets only men within a certain age group – this can also motivate a split. If the household holds site-specific assets at origin, such as land or immobile business infrastructure, the need to run or maintain these assets may also motivate a split.

Split returns seem most often to be the outcome of a conscious decision-making process within the household. Given the uncertainty, a split seems preferable to its alternatives. The consequences of a split, however, are not easily foreseen. Whereas people in general expect splits to be a temporary measure with a short duration, it often becomes a lasting lifestyle. Whether most of the household members remain in exile or settle at home seems to be driven primarily by economic concerns – job opportunities, living costs, access to relief – and may also vary over time.

The larger the obstacles to return – in the form of strict border controls, loss of rights (such as refugee status or citizenship), or excessively high travel costs – the less prevalent are split household strategies. This may be interpreted to mean that the opportunity to split encourages a strategy of leaving some behind, thereby reducing the overall volume of repatriation. It may also be interpreted to mean that the opportunity to split enables early repatriation, and perhaps also enables the gradual repatriation of households who would otherwise not have returned at all. In the Afghan case, the overall tendency is that split returns have eased repatriation, both in the post-1992 and the post-2001 periods, thereby contributing significantly to the massive rates of return.

The initial insistence, in this article, that refugee migration ought to be understood as a form of migration, where there is always a mix of structural constraints and micro-level agency, proves analytically fruitful. It compels us to draw on insights from the broader literature on migration and transnationalism when studying wartime migration. In the study of return, it is an invitation to compare return with refugee migration more broadly, as well as with other forms of return migration. Ultimately, the split return mechanism also demonstrates how wartime migration can result in new competence and new networks, producing “migratory social capital” essential to households’ survival strategies.

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