In armed conflicts where one or several of the parties have built a group in exile, there is a need to carefully consider how the timing of return will impact stability, both in the short- and the long-term. Identifying exile mobilization can be difficult due to the reluctance of most actors (i.e., host states, organizations assisting refugees) to openly discuss it, yet it is fairly straightforward. The sharp separation between repatriation programmes and other efforts to rebuild functioning states after war is in itself a challenge. The whole area of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), for example, is most often pursued in full separation from repatriation, even in instances, such as Afghanistan from 2001 onwards, where the main political-military organizations are based among the refugee populations in neighbouring countries. While the main concern here is with the risks emanating from the return of individuals and groups built in exile, there are other ways in which massive return movements affect stability, which merit attention. Refugees who were not politically or militarily engaged in exile may yet become so upon return, particularly if political or economic opportunities are missing, or their security is threatened. Alternatively, refugees, or militant groups based in exile may find it more opportune not to return, but to continue their struggle from exile. And, as we saw with the Taliban in Afghanistan post-2001, the regime that leaves office may flee the other way, shifting their main presence to exile, from where they become the armed opposition.

At a generic level, repatriation is a desirable aim, first and foremost for those who are in refugeehood and return. Yet, repatriation – groups who are eager to assert their own influence. The common insistance, by practitioners, policy-makers and analysts alike, that refugees and rebels are distinct, is not meaningful as it is in the context of upholding the instruments of protection, effectively suppressing an important debate. We know that in a significant share of the world’s refugee situations, there are rebels who actively engage within the refugee population. To some extent, this has been recognized by practitioners in the field, even if not widely discussed. The implications for repatriation, with its obvious importance for post-conflict stability, merit much more attention than they received in Afghanistan from 2001, and across a range of other cases. [1

Notes


‘Voting with Their Feet’ or Returning to Fight?

Afghan Repatriation in the Wake of the 2001 Intervention

A large share of the Afghan fighters that constituted the ground forces in the 2001 US-led intervention in Afghanistan were returning from exile. Militant groups operating in refugee environments were integral to any understanding of Afghanistan’s conflicts. Yet, there was no debate of the possible challenges of staying an intervention, and subsequently, a new regime, on militant groups returning from abroad. Using the return in Afghanistan post-2001 onwards as an example, this policy brief casts light on militant returns. Armed groups use the unique qualities of exile environments to build organization, develop a resource base, and garner support by offering security, while socializing fighters and supporters alike. We look at the long trajectories of armed groups in exile, which often include roots that predate the exile, and likewise continuities that survive return with important effects on their accommodation. The immediate implication is to acknowledge the challenges of return from militarized exile environments. Each case is different, calling for a fine-grained analysis of the constitution of the groups, the political context, and possible post-return scenarios. As a consequence, states, multilateral agencies, and other actors will need to look at the interaction between refugee return and a number of other measures, such as demilitarization, political participation, or economic sustenance. Sustainable return is an important goal in all peace processes, but peace and stability, as well as return and reintegration, will be much more likely when the underlying tensions are acknowledged and addressed.
From the vantage point of early 2016, few would argue that the international intervention in Afghanistan – and the state-building project that followed – was an astounding success. On the reasons for failure, however, there are many competing theories. 1 One factor which does not crop up on the list of candidate explanations is the impact of the rapid repatriation in the aftermath of the US-led international intervention. That intervention, though, incorporated as a major element the ground-fighting capacity of a number of Afghan opposition groups – all of whom were wholly or partly based in exile at the time – in order to bring down the Taliban.

In the early years after 2001, the general sentiment concerning Afghanistan was a celebratory one. On refugee repatriation, the mood, if anything, was particularly positive. The Economist, in an article published on 7 October 2004, explicitly wrote that ‘Afghans are voting with their feet’, as the Economist put it. Its insistence on a return home was, however, qualified with the ‘twists and turns’ that ‘it cannot be held without reflecting on the refugee movements that have resulted, and the particular ways in which Afghans decided to return to their country after years of exclusion. There were a few weeks – in the aftermath of 9/11 – building a coordinated ground forces capacity. There were a few military leaders being replaced by new ones, not because it was not a major element of the effort, but rather because of the sensitivities in relation between states, and with regard to refugee rights.

Even so, a majority of those fighting for the coalition had been fighting from the same locale that came back from the two neighbouring states, hosting the bulk of Afghan refugees, Pakistan and Iran. Thus, the reintegration that took place in Afghanistan, neither in or in the Gulf, others again from as far afield as Australia, Germany or the United States. In exile, they had been active in various military, political organizations. Many had taken part in various rounds of fighting in Afghanistan over the previous two and a half decades. Significantly, in the ‘War on Terror’, the warriors returning from exile were equipped with money, weaponry, communications gear, as well as military support. Most importantly, though, the returning fighters – and their leaders, not all of whom were battlefield commanders, even if they led a military-cum-political organization – knew this was too good an opportunity to be missed. Political power in Afghanistan was being reshuffled once again, and those who were part of the armed camp would be likely to benefit from the contest is one of violently claiming space in the future polity of the country (security may be existentially threatened in exile too, but for other reasons). In the early phase, where the governing structure seemed uncertain, and where military capacity was in the hands of various groups, the latter was also the only possible source of protection. The seeming unpredictability of international forces, particularly in Taliban heartlands in the south and east, also called for affiliation with an armed group, preferably one with political agility (not that most people were in a situation where they could choose between several groups). It was exactly this combined security failure – where groups certified by the government pursued their specific interest with arms in hand, and international forces pursued a poorly informed anti-Taliban campaign with ‘the kind of basis for a rapprochement of Taliban forces from 2003–04 onwards. Indeed, in many parts of the country, the situation was such that in individual families, and families with no connections to a military-political leader would feel extremely vulnerable.

Socialization: In refugee contexts where militant groups operate, they will seek to influence attributes of their members in ways that include military training or otherwise. The socialization institutions do not travel easily (although schools, teacher collectives or curricula may be ‘repatriated’). The result is that in exile, they may travel far better. In protracted refugee situations, where rebel leaders pursue systematic socialization to get the base and degree of selectivity – the former quite beyond the Afghan context we see this most clearly, among the Islamist radicals (such as Gulbad- din Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami) and those of a more principled orthodox orientation (such as the Taliban). While very different in recruitment base and degree of selectivity – the former quite exclusive and elitist; the latter recruiting more broadly – both ended up in violent opposition to the attempts to build a more broadly inclusive government in Kabul. Socialization alone does not explain this, but when linked to a coherent organizational structure, it serves as an important ingredient in the mix that sustains a violent engagement, even years and years after return.

A Larger Agenda

Amongst all those who returned to Afghanistan in the context of the 2001 intervention, those who did so with a view to partake in the fighting, and the new political opportunities, were only a minority. Even so, the immediate return was an integral part of the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan. In exile were systematically sought after to constitute its ground forces, and the promise of generous compensation and future opportunities was explicit. Existing groups that opposed the Taliban were signed up for the effort, while a variety of recruiters would activate networks of former mujahideen, and even of armed conflict. As always, those who returned did so for a combination of reasons, and the variation between returnees is large. Immediate motivations included the possibility to offer one’s military competence, new political and economic opportunities, the attraction of returning to one’s native land, the influence of others who decide to go, the push from increasingly inhospitable host authorities, and a range of other factors. Yet, all who returned in 2001 and in the few years thereafter would be conscious of the fact that it happened in the context of the intervention and the building of a new political regime. More importantly, however, for long term stability, is that the rooting of a new political system, in a more principled orthodox orientation (such as the Taliban). While very different in recruitment base and degree of selectivity – the former quite exclusive and elitist; the latter recruiting more broadly – both ended up in violent opposition to the attempts to build a more broadly inclusive government in Kabul. Socialization alone does not explain this, but when linked to a coherent organizational structure, it serves as an important ingredient in the mix that sustains a violent engagement, even years and years after return.
From the vantage point of early 2016, few would argue that the international intervention in Afghanistan – and the state-building project that followed – was an astounding success. On the reasons for failure, however, there are many competing theories. 1 One factor which does not appear on the list of candidate explanations is the impact of the rapid repatriation in the aftermath of the US-led international intervention. That intervention, though, incorporated as a major element the ground-fighting capacity of a number of Afghan opposition groups – all of whom were wholly or partly based in exile at the time – in order to bring down the Taliban.

In the early years after 2001, the general sentiment concerning Afghanistan was a celebratory one. On refugee repatriation, the mood, if any, was particularly positive. The Economist, in an article published on 7 October 2004, actually three years after the intervention started, is quite representative:

“...Afghans are voting with their feet. Since the fall of the Taliban, more than 3m refugees have returned from neighbouring Iran and Pakistan—something they dared not do while the Soviet Union battled the ethernet, or in the Gulf, or in wars involving the defeated the Russians, were rocketing Kabul, or while the Taliban, who drove out the warlords, were playing out their medieval religious fantasies while turning their country into a training camp for al-Qaeda. In 2004, a majority of those fighting for the coalition was for fighting power, the warrior returning home...”

As Australia, Germany or the United States. In the ‘War on Terror’, the warriors returning from exile were equipped with money, weapons, communications gear, as well as military support. Most importantly, though, the returning fighters – and their leaders, not all of whom were battlefield commanders, even if they led a military-cum-political organization – knew this was too good an opportunity to be missed. Political power in Afghanistan was being reshuffled, and those who were part of the armed campaign would be likely to benefit the most.

The Role of Exile Fighters

The story of Afghanistan’s war from the initial 1978 coup to the present is a complex one, with many twists and turns. It cannot be told without reflecting on the refugee movements that have resulted, and the particular ways in which Afghans rebel organizations have operated amongst refugees. By focusing on one particular turn in Afghanistan’s recent conflict history – the 2001 intervention – and its aftermath, this policy brief illustrates a more general dilemma in situations where regime change goes hand in hand with large scale repatriation from and/or ideologically exiled communities. The similarities to 1992, when the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) imploded, followed by an ugly fight between the formerly exile-based resistance parties, are many.2 Yet, there are also fundamental differences between 1992 and 2001, not at least in that the latter took the form of an intervention, internationally sanctioned, backed by major powers, and having significant international state-building projects.

There are a variety of factors that are at play in exile-based militant mobilization, which remain relevant when exile-based militants return home.3 What is the shape of the organization in exile, and will it persist after return? Where did the militants get their resources in exile, and can these sources be maintained? Where does the political motivation come from? Where did formerly exile-based militants can maintain, even expand, their support base by providing security for their kin, and how resilient are the political convictions and the fighting skills built have for whether or not there is a willingness to get terms with a new political power structure? Organizational: A range of political-cum-military organizations have been built in exile in the 1980s, particularly in the Afghan refugee environment in Pakistan, but also in Iran. Some had maintained tight organizational coherence, some had virtually dissolved, in between we find all those where networks were sufficiently solid to lend themselves to reactivation. The call in autumn of 2001 was for fighting power, the ticket to infla...
In armed conflicts where one or several of the parties have built a group in exile, there is a need to carefully consider how the timing of return will impact stability, both in the short- and the long-term. Identifying exile mobilization can be difficult due to the reluctance of most actors (i.e. host states, organizations assisting refugees) to openly discuss it, yet it is fairly straightforward. The sharp separation between repatriation programs and other efforts to rebuild functioning states after war is in itself a challenge. The whole area of disarmament, demobilization and reintegrations (DDR), for example, is most often pursued in full separation from repatriation, even in instances, such as Afghanistan from 2001 onwards, where the main political-military organizations are based among the refugee populations in neighboring countries. While the main concern here is with the risks emanating from the return of individuals and groups built in exile, there are other ways in which massive return movements affect stability, which merit attention. Refugees who were not politically or militarily engaged in exile may yet become so upon return, particularly if political or economic opportunities are missing, or their security is threatened. Alternatively, refugees, or militant groups based in exile may find it more opportune not to return, but to continue their struggle from exile. And, as we saw with the Taliban in Afghanistan post-2001, the regime that leaves office may flee the other way, shifting their main presence to exile, from where they become the armed opposition.

At a generic level, repatriation is a desirable aim, first and foremost for those who are in exile, but also for host states, for prospective third countries, for organizations mandated to assist refugees, and at least in principle for the refugee’s country of origin. Yet, repatriation may have unintended consequences, such as fostering future conflict, even violence, through bringing back individuals and political – not rarely militant – groups who are eager to assert their own influence. The common insistence, by practitioners, policy-makers and analysts alike, that refugees and rebels are distinct categories, is meaningful as it is in the context of upholding the instruments of protection, effectively suppressing an important debate. We know that in a significant share of the world’s refugee situations, there are rebels who actively engage with in the refugee population. To some extent, this has been recognized by practitioners in the field, even if not widely discussed. The implications for repatriation, with its obvious importance for post-conflict stability, merit much more attention than they received in Afghanistan from 2001, and across a range of other cases.

Notes

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The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.