

BOOK REVIEW

Review of Sanaa Alimia, *Refugee Cities: How Afghans Changed Urban Pakistan*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022, 248. ISBN: 9781512822861
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Sana Alimia's *Refugee Cities* is essential for all interested in questions of belonging, citizenship, and migration in urban Pakistan. *Refugee Cities* shows how Afghan refugees constituted urban life in Pakistan and, in turn, how this experience has come to shape their own identity. Through this process, Afghans emerged as urban citizens of Pakistan, even without legal citizenship. *Refugee Cities* brings an empirically rich investigation of issues central to urban spaces in the Global South—including property relations, informality, and precarity—into conversation with broad political questions concerning identity and citizenship. Alimia deftly moves between the scale of the urban neighborhood and the complex geopolitics of a contentiously bordered world within which Afghans live and move while never collapsing the texture of the multi-ethnic city with its cross-cutting solidarities.

A significant intervention of *Refugee Cities* is demonstrating how Afghans are not outsiders to Pakistan's social and political landscape but integral to its making. Refugees do not exist in isolation but within a complex and internally differentiated urban world. The political implications of this insight should not be under-emphasized: Afghan refugees are far from a drain on their host countries. They make the places they live in. Yet, Alimia's story is far from a triumphant tale of resilience. Alimia's nuanced rendering of the paradoxes of citizenship foregrounds the limitations of legal conceptions of belonging, namely through official, state-sanctioned channels. At the same time, *Refugee Cities* provides an ethnographic account of precisely how legal recognition, or the lack thereof, bears upon refugee lives. Most profoundly, the absence of legal citizenship limits refugees from returning to cities like Karachi or Peshawar, which they consider home.

Refugee Cities foregrounds the role of paper documents in informing the multifaceted ways that Afghan refugees create a sense of belonging. This account is especially intriguing because, in some cases, belonging is limited by and works *through* documents. Alimia describes how Afghan refugees' sense of belonging differs, at times, based on their differential status. One interlocutor, Safdar, describes himself as Pakistani because of his documentary status: "We come from Afghanistan . . . but we have all of the documents to say we are Pakistani. We are Pakistani" (84). Here, *Refugee Cities* prompts further questioning into the role that documents and legal status, even if precariously and provisionally acquired, play in generating claims of belonging and shaping identity. What are the precise social and affective processes by which the acquisition of "paper citizenship" transforms how refugees claim belonging?

As Alimia describes, the regimes of paper citizenship are entering a new era of technological capacity. There have been significant transformations and, indeed,

ruptures in how Afghans experience their place in Pakistan—particularly after 9/11, as the politics of the Global War on Terror changed Pakistan’s attitude toward Afghans as well as the technologies used to surveil their mobility within and across borders. In the first chapter, “Ghosts of Empire,” Alimia argues that these contemporary conditions cannot be understood without also understanding colonial governance practices, particularly on the frontier (18). Colonial-era tropes about Pashtun violence and fanaticism played a critical role in how the U.S. and Pakistani states justified and conducted military interventions.¹ Yet, as Alimia points out, territorial ambiguity was a defining characteristic of the colonial frontier and “buffer” between Afghanistan and colonial India.² However, in the post-9/11 period, the Pakistani state amplified border control on the Durand Line. Further, it also uses its internal and securitized technologies of governance, such as the Proof of Registration (POR) card, aimed at the repatriation of Afghans, to control Afghan movement through acts of what Alimia terms “border performativity.”

In this way, Alimia’s historical attention to the shifts through the Afghan-Soviet war, and ultimately into the post-9/11 securitized context, can lead the reader to a different conclusion: toward not the continuity of the colonial but the ruptures within the postcolonial period. It can lead one to question *which* sites the ghosts of empire continue to haunt. While the impact of South Asia’s colonial inheritance is undeniable—in the long postcolonial life of the Frontier Crimes Regulation, postindependence nationalist politics, and the Durand line itself—Alimia’s rigorous analysis can lead scholars of Pakistan to yet another productive line of questioning. What are the specific and potentially emergent logics of the Pakistani state that disrupt its inherited colonial modes of governance? These new techniques of governance and control may not be emancipatory but still indicate a different relationship to the colonial in the present. This line of inquiry could, in turn, help us articulate the ways that the Pakistani state is accountable for the *compounded* forms of marginalization it produces.

Refugee Cities raises compelling and urgent questions and concerns because of the clarity with which the book is researched, conceptualized, and written. It combines unflinching political critique with a nuanced examination of various governmental regimes’ contradictory natures. It weaves complex historical context into a study of contemporary conditions, all in incredibly lucid prose. Last (but not least), Alimia brings her positionality and experience as a researcher in Pakistan into her insights into the particular forms of marginalization faced by Afghan refugees in Pakistani cities. In so doing, *Refugee Cities* is a model for Pakistan scholars in many ways.

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¹ Sana Haroon, *Empire of Faith: Islam in the Anglo-Afghan Borderland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

² Benjamin Hopkins, “The Frontier Crimes Regulation and Frontier Governmentality,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 2 (2015): 1–21.