

Relations between Poland and Afghanistan:

Selected Aspects

Introduction

The current crisis in Afghanistan and the takeover of Taliban will impact future relations between Poland and Afghanistan. This paper will provide an outlook of past relations between both countries on several key matters (economic, education, and social affairs) and will discuss the consequences of the seizure of Afghanistan by Taliban from a Polish perspective. Regarding this issue, we will discuss the migrant crisis and the management of the repatriation of people based in Afghanistan to Poland.

As of 2021 the presence of Poland in Afghanistan is due to the role of the Polish Army during the Afghanistan conflict (2000-2020). The Polish army, through thirty thousand soldiers was present in Afghanistan from march 2002 till June 2021 due to the conflict between Taliban and State Organizations.¹ The presence of the Polish Army was a consequence of the formation of an international coalition following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The victory of Taliban in August 2021 will set up a new ground for relations between both countries.

Background of Polish-Afghan Bilateral Relationships

The history of Polish-Afghan relations began with the official signing of a treaty of friendship between Poland and Afghanistan on November 3, 1927. In 1938 the Afghan government issued a permission to establish the Polish diplomatic representative based from Teheran in Iran. Respective embassies in Kabul and in Warsaw were opened in 1961. Polish diplomats were present in Kabul till august 1992. Meanwhile diplomats were forced to leave Afghanistan due to the internal war in this country. Starting from this moment, Polish affairs in Afghanistan were managed from the Polish Embassy in Islamabad in Pakistan. The Polish embassy in Kabul was reopened in March 2007.² On August 14, 2014, Radoslaw Sikorski, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, decided upon the closure of the Polish embassy in Afghanistan for economic and political reasons. Its economic and consul activity in Kabul was definitely suspended on December 31, 2014. The costs of maintenance of the embassy was the official justification for the closure of the Polish embassy in Afghanistan.

¹ „Za rok Afganistan będzie w lepszej sytuacji niż dziś. Zależy nam na współpracy z Polską” [WYWIAD] 2021.

² Stosunki dyplomatyczne Polski, S. 2010: 11.

Meanwhile, however, thanks to the efforts of the Hamkari Polish-Afghan Cooperation Association, in 2013 a Polish-Afghan Parliamentary Group was established in the Polish National Assembly and its counterpart in Afghanistan.

Economic Cooperation

From an economic perspective according to latest data from 2016, the trade turnover between Poland and Afghanistan remained at a low level and amounted to USD 6 million. Poland recorded a trade surplus of USD 5 million. The largest share in exports to Afghanistan belonged to food products (USD 3 million). Afghanistan is mainly exporting aluminum to Poland. There are no newest data regarding bilateral trade between Poland and Afghanistan in spite of the presence of the export of Polish cosmetics to Afghanistan, for instance through the Polish company Irena Eris.

It must be also noted that, Marcin Krzyżanowski, a former consul to Afghanistan (2008-2011) created two companies dealing with trade between Poland and Afghanistan. One entity is a consulting company named Harekat Consulting (<https://harekat.pl/>), the second one is a trading firm entitled Ariana Trade Group (<http://www.ariana-trade.com/>).³ Furthermore, in January 2020, the Polish Security Printing Works won a tender for the production of four denominations of banknotes for the Afghan Central Bank for a total value of EUR 110 mln. In the current context, the realization of this project seems to be jeopardized.

Humanitarian Cooperation

Poland has been involved in providing aid to Afghanistan since 2002. In 2002–2009, over 150 projects were implemented in Afghanistan under the Polish foreign aid program, for a total amount of approx. USD 50 million. Poland allocates funds mainly to strengthening the structures of the state and civil society, creating jobs, education, health protection and provincial development. The Polish support was especially dedicated to the development of the Ghazni province and city (localized 150 kilometers south from Kabul). Between 2007 and 2014, several events remembered the Polish presence in Afghanistan. The Hamkari Polish-Afghan Cooperation Association organized a Polish Day in Ghazni on February 23, 2012. The aim of the celebrations was to promote Polish culture and the Polish Military Contingent in Afghanistan. Earlier, the Association organized the Polish Film Festival in Kabul (2006), which met with great interest among Afghans.

³ *Polskie firmy w Afganistanie i Iraku. "Cokolwiek się przywiezie, to się sprzeda"* 2015.

Education cooperation

The first agreement on any education cooperation between Poland and Afghanistan was signed on the 19 September 1960. It led to various education exchanges between both countries. For instance, Jolanta Sierakowska-Dyndo the current of the Department of Oriental Studies of the University of Warsaw, made two research internships in Kabul in 1977 and 1978. Furthermore, the Polish government sponsored several times the education of young Afghan citizens. In 2005, 16 students from Afghanistan came to Poland to study. This figure decreased to three students in 2006 and increased to fifteen students in 2007. Afghans are usually studying medicine and technical fields, however some completed a degree of international relations at the University of Warsaw. Some of them came back to Afghanistan where they worked in the Afghan diplomacy. In 2007 and 2008, representatives of the young diplomatic staff from Afghanistan took part in training courses organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Polish Institute of International Affairs. Additionally, in 2008, 47 representatives of the private, state and non-governmental sectors from Afghanistan came to Poland for training for specialists. The program was aimed at providing information on the relationship between security, economic development and the creation of a democratic society.

The Issue of Refugees

The refugee matter is essential when talking about bilateral relations between Poland and Afghanistan, Afghan refugees came to Poland mainly in the years 1996-2000. Meanwhile the number of applications for granting the refugee status were submitted by around 500 Afghan people on a yearly basis. After 2000, this figure increased by 100 applications on a yearly basis. For instance, in 2020 120 applications from Afghan citizens were received by the Polish Office for Foreigners. Eleven applications were related to women and hundred-nine to men. This represents 4.3% of all demands. In comparison, there were 61 requests from Afghan people in 2019. One from a woman and sixty from men. This represented 1.5% of all demands. We can differentiate two waves of Afghan migrations to Poland.

The First Wave of Afghan Migration to Poland

The first wave of the Afghan migration to Poland took place in the early 2000's. Afghans who arrived in Poland after 2001, were people who fled the internal war in Afghanistan. The Afghan refugees in Poland are usually belonging to the Hazara ethnic group, a Shiite Muslim

minority group.⁴ From the gender perspective, men are predominating Afghan refugees in Poland. From the economical perspective. Afghan refugees usually do not speak English and are not educated. That is why, there are high needs in Poland regarding Pashto or Dari interpreter. If Afghans refugees obtain a protection in Poland, they try to bring their remaining family in Afghanistan. Later, they try to obtain a statue of permanent residence. Refugees from Afghanistan are usually working in low-cost workplaces in Poland. However, there are some other kinds of good examples. There is a refugee who intensively learned the Polish language during one year, completed a welder course and has been working in the profession for several years, or a former translator of the American forces, who, after coming to Poland, quickly started learning the language and began studies, additionally acting as a volunteer in an organization helping foreigners.

The Second Wave of Afghan Migration to Poland

The second wave of migration occurred after the beginning of the occupation of Kabul by Taliban in August 2021. Its social structure is highly different from the first wave. Most of Afghans who were evacuated from Afghanistan to Poland are representatives of the elite from Kabul and Ghazni. They collaborate with the Polish contingent in Afghanistan. They are educated people who speak several languages. Among them there are representatives of the army and uniformed services - including high-level officers, but also, officials, journalists, employees of universities and of the Kabul Museum. There are also some representatives of the local business - including a telecommunications company, and heads of non-governmental organizations. It must be noted, that some Afghan collaborators to Poland, were currently denied an access to Poland and remained in Afghanistan. Those who were evacuated to Poland were placed under quarantine due the COVID-19 Pandemic. At the difference of the first wave, some of these afghans want to remain in Poland. However, the majority would like to move to a different country. Unfortunately, some young migrants of this second wave passed away after picking and consuming some uneatable mushrooms in the area of their refugee camp in Otrębusy (Otrębusy is localized twenty-seven kilometers south from Warsaw).

⁴ Modrzejewska-Leśniewska 2010: 20-21

3. Future Expectations and Implication

In this part we will analyze the impact on Polish-Afghan relations due to the takeover of the government by the Taliban.

Firstly, the primary issue to solve is the repatriation of those who were living in Afghanistan and are connected to Poland. Starting from mid-August, there were several flights from the city of Kabul to Warsaw, which took Afghans on board who were cooperating with Poland for years during military missions. A total of forty-four flights were carried out, over 1,100 people were transported, of which 937 people are Afghan citizens who have cooperated in the last twenty years with Polish troops or with Polish diplomacy. This does not include 300 children, who were also brought to Poland. As of now, the main issue is now related to their future in Poland, which is barely accepting non-European migration.⁵

Secondly, recently, from a different perspective, Poland has some issues with hundreds of migrants from Afghanistan and Iraq, who are stuck at the Polish-Belarusian border. Recently the EU administration settled several sanctions toward the Belarusian leadership due to the contested reelection of the President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko. As an answer, the Belarusian head of state let refugees from the Middle East to reach its Western border with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. As of now, several hundreds of migrants from Afghanistan and Iraq are living at the Polish border for the past two weeks. Poland is refusing to take responsibility for them. Polish governmental authorities implemented a state of emergency at the border with Belarus on September 2, 2021. This state of emergency will forbid the presence of non-governmental organization within this considered border.

⁵ *Ostatni samolot z ewakuowanymi z Afganistanu wylądował w Warszawie 2021.*

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