retical thinness. Nevertheless, for students of Afghanistan, this book is essential reading. It critically interrogates a still-mysterious, insurgent-political movement, opens new avenues for research on the Taliban, and offers recommendations for a broader international community that is still unsure how to deal with the de facto authorities in Kabul. One hopes that in a future project Abbas will take up the research *problematique* deftly introduced in Chapter Four – an intellectual history of the Taliban and political Islam in postcolonial Afghanistan – for there lies a project with the potential to reshape how we understand not just the Taliban, but Afghanistan itself.

Mujib Abid

Sanaa Alimia, *Refugee Cities: How Afghans Changed Urban Pakistan.* 248 pages, €50.95. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5128-2279-3

Hosting one of the world's largest refugee populations – around 1.7 million registered refugees as of late 2024, most of them from Afghanistan (UNHCR.org) – Pakistan provides the complex setting for Sanaa Alimia's work on *Refugee Cities*, a topical and compelling examination of Afghan migration into Pakistan and the ensuing socio-political transformations within Pakistan's urban spaces. The author not only explores the challenges of forced migration and displacement but also illustrates how Afghan refugees have reshaped Pakistani cities like Peshawar and Karachi, embedding themselves in urban life despite facing severe exclusions.

Moreover, the book opens the perspective more widely: it highlights shared migration challenges across South Asia and reflects on the policy frameworks that shape urban refugee lives in the region. Examining both the commonalities, divergences, and unique approaches in South Asian responses to forced migration, *Refugee Cities* adds an important layer to our understanding of migration policy and urban integration across this geopolitically complex region. Alimia's research is grounded in an ethnographic approach, emphasising direct interactions and the lived experiences of Afghan refugees. The author draws on extensive ethnographic accounts of the urban poor, Afghan refugees and undocumented migrants mainly in Karachi and Peshawar, thus effectively including refugee voices in academic discourse.

Alimia situates Afghan migration within a broader history of displacement, drawing on the Soviet-Afghan War, regional Cold War alliances, and the more recent "War on Terror" to illustrate the complex drivers behind Afghan mi-

gration. The influx of Afghan refugees has strained Pakistan's urban centres, which have often treated these populations as temporary and undeserving of the same rights as native citizens (p. 10). This predicament resonates with, among others, India's experience in receiving refugees from Bangladesh, Tibet, and Sri Lanka. Each of these populations has established long-standing communities within India, yet often without the legal rights that could provide lasting security.

While India and Pakistan have both managed migrations through ad-hoc policies, their approaches diverge significantly. Except for Afghanistan in 2005, none of the South Asian countries is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol. There are no national policies on refugees in these countries, nor does any regional framework or initiative exist, leaving refugees perpetually vulnerable (Abrar 2001, D'Sami 2024).[1] Pakistan's response to Afghan refugees has been shaped by geopolitics, with initial acceptance shifting to suspicion after 9/11. Pakistan has a specific economic and migration-related policy prerogative of actively utilising emigration to reduce domestic unemployment and increase remittances through formal channels. India, by contrast, in terms of foreign policy and diplomacy, has followed a more flexible stance, often employing a more state-centric, security-focused approach for managing cross-border issues and internal migration. In recent years, these policies could be considered reactive to specific crises, such as the influx of Rohingya refugees. The lack of regional cohesion in refugee policy across South Asia – which Alimia indirectly highlights – limits meaningful integration for displaced populations, thus failing to consolidate human security dimensions, leaving migrants vulnerable to challenges throughout the subcontinent.

A central theme in Alimia's analysis is the concept of "urban citizenship," a status informally claimed by Afghan refugees as they establish lives in Pakistani cities despite lacking official recognition. By creating informal settlements and developing infrastructure such as water access and drainage in cities like Peshawar, Afghan refugees assert their belonging in Pakistan's urban centres (p. 32). This informal claim to the city, achieved through social and economic contributions rather than formal citizenship, parallels the experiences of migrant and refugee communities in Indian cities. In *Cities and Citizenship*, Appadurai and Holston (1999)[2] argue that rapid urbanisation and the emergence of marginalised peripheries give rise to new forms of "insurgent citizenship".

These movements, rooted in struggles over urban space, challenge traditional citizenship structures by claiming rights to the city and access to basic resources, thereby reshaping citizenship in response to entrenched inequalities

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1   C. R. Abrar (2001): Legal Protection of Refugees in South Asia. *Forced Migration Review*, https://www.fmreview.org/abrar/ (accessed 16 October 2024). Bernard D'Sami (2024): South Asia's Refugee Crisis. *Deccan Herald*, 16 February, https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/south-asia-s-refugee-crisis-3192048 (accessed 28 November 2024).
2   James Holston (ed.) (1999): *Cities and Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

(Holston 2009).[3] Similarly, large Indian metropolises such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata have witnessed informal settlements by migrants from rural areas and neighbouring countries, which often develop into self-sufficient neighbourhoods. In a broader transregional context across South and Southeast Asia, for example, the Bangladesh government has granted refugee status to only 30,000 of the approximately 1 million Rohingya currently living in the highly congested camps in Cox's Bazar and on the island of Bhashan Char (UNHCR 2023).[4] The UNHCR and other UN aid agencies consider repatriation, third-country resettlement, and local integration as components of a broader durable solution, whereas strategic decision-makers in Bangladesh view repatriation as the "principal" component of a durable solution for the Rohingyas (Ashraf 2021).[5]

However, the constraints faced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan are compounded by a legal framework that systematically excludes them. Alimia documents Pakistan's strict policies, which prevent Afghans from owning property and accessing certain public services, thus painting a picture of a state resistant to integration. Conversely, while India's urban migrant communities face similar challenges related to housing and informal livelihoods, the Indian state has generally tended to overlook these communities rather than actively obstruct their settlement.

A powerful theme throughout *Refugee Cities* is the exclusionary nature of citizenship policy in Pakistan and the precarious position it creates for Afghan refugees. This extends beyond a simple citizen/non-citizen dichotomy, as the book examines the complexities, negotiations, proximities, and hardships faced by a population subjected to "ethno-racial and ethno-national hierarchies" (p. 7). As the author argues, borders are not merely predefined lines on a map; they are actively produced through "border performativity" (p. 30). She further contends that these refugees inhabit a state of "quasi-belonging", accepted by local communities yet legally alienated by the state (p. 39).

This duality of belonging and exclusion mirrors India's experience, where refugees are tolerated within certain social and economic spheres, yet remain excluded from citizenship. Both countries reflect a broader South Asian hesitation to extend formal citizenship to displaced populations, thereby treating refugees as "temporary" residents who are ideally expected to return to their countries of origin. This reluctance to grant citizenship aligns with the region's emphasis on preserving national identity through ethno-national frameworks. Yet the depth of Pakistan's policies on forced repatriation and exclusionary legal frameworks presents a starker contrast to India, where refugees are often

3   James Holston (2009): Insurgent Citizenship in an Era of Global Urban Peripheries. *City and Society* 21(2), pp. 245–267. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-744X.2009.01024.x
4   UNHCR (2023): Global Trends Report 2023. UNHCR – The UN Refugee Agency, https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023 (accessed 16 October 2024)
5   A. S. M. A. Ashraf (2021): Humanitarianism, National Security, and the Rohingya Refugee Policy of Bangladesh. *Strategic Analysis* 45(3), pp. 184–206. https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2021.1918953

excluded indirectly through a lack of policy rather than directly through active repatriation efforts.

These national-level divergences underscore the fragmented nature of refugee governance in South Asia, prompting reflection on how countries in the region might work together to address migration more collaboratively. The region's shared history and experiences of partition-induced displacement and trauma (especially from the 1947 Partition), issues with managing large-scale refugee influxes, and cross-border migrations have had an impact on their respective population. Yet, South Asia's refugee and migration policies remain fragmented. The absence of regional frameworks for refugee protection leaves displaced populations – such as the Afghans in Pakistan – in uncertain situations, marked by protracted displacement and legal limbo, reflecting broader anxieties over migration that transcend national boundaries. A key argument in Chapter 4 highlights how the state relies on the informal sphere to manage populations it prefers not to directly govern (p. 108). Alimia's study thus underscores the importance of pursuing collective solutions to migration challenges; a need that is increasingly urgent as climate change and political unrest exacerbate migration pressures in the region. In this context, Alimia challenges the ethno-national idea of home, suggesting it can extend beyond the nation-state to encompass a city's people, spaces, and places – often a new location where refugees have "built their homes with their own hands" (p. 145).

What sets *Refugee Cities* apart is its nuanced portrayal of the urban refugee experience, bridging a gap in the literature that typically focuses either on camps or national-level policy rather than the detailed urban context Alimia examines. While her work is grounded in migration and urban studies, it also contributes to broader discussions on resilience, survival, and informality in urban spaces – a field that is still developing within migration studies. *Refugee Cities* reflects many of the socio-political dynamics observed in other South Asian cities, where displaced communities similarly establish forms of urban belonging through resilience and adaptation. The study underscores the urgency of addressing migration challenges in ways that transcend national borders, encouraging South Asian nations to reconsider their approaches to citizenship, migration, and the rights of urban inhabitants. Alimia's work is an essential interdisciplinary reading for international migration scholars, social anthropologists, human and urban geographers, and policymakers focused on border studies and South Asian politics. Although its academic tone may limit accessibility for a general audience, her emphasis on the intersection of informal economies, social networks, and urban governance provides a valuable perspective on how refugees navigate and shape urban spaces within the specific Pakistani context.

While the book provides valuable insights, a potential limitation is its comparatively narrow analysis with other refugee contexts. Its focus on the signifi-

cance of urban belonging challenges policymakers to reconsider citizenship in ways that accommodate the socio-economic realities of migrant populations without conflating them with security risks. This shared challenge, addressed differently across the region, reflects a broader struggle in South Asia to balance national identity with the humanitarian needs of displaced populations, ultimately underscoring the need for more inclusive responses.

Alimia's argument for understanding "urban citizenship" through the lived experiences of Afghan refugees resonates with broader regional struggles over displacement and identity, highlighting how informal communities actively shape cities despite lacking legal recognition. By examining Afghan refugees' contributions to Pakistani urban life, *Refugee Cities* indirectly questions the efficacy of South Asia's exclusionary citizenship frameworks. The study stresses the potential of urban centres to foster inclusion, even when national policies continue to resist the full integration of displaced populations.

Shulagna Pal

SYED IRFAN ASHRAF, *The Dark Side of News Fixing: The Culture and Political Economy of Global Media in Pakistan and Afghanistan*. (Anthem Global Media and Communication Studies). 240 pages, $125.00. London, UK: Anthem Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-8399-8137-1

In *The Dark Side of News Fixing: The Culture and Political Economy of Global Media in Pakistan and Afghanistan*, Irfan Ashraf poses a critical question: "Why does a local journalist in a war zone rush toward a site that others are fleeing for their own safety?" (p. 171). His answer centres on the structural inequalities of the global media system, which exploits and devalues local labour while generating surplus capital for media corporations. The author traces how Pashtun knowledge workers in the Pashtun Belt become "fixers" within power relationships shaped by international journalism and the 24/7 news cycle. He connects this contemporary devaluation of Pashtun knowledge – and lives – to British colonialism, which constructed the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region as a frontier space, subjecting Pashtuns to the violent control of multiple sovereignties.

Divided into eight chapters, the book unfolds in two parts. Chapters one through three offer theoretical and historical analysis of the "fixer", rooted in colonial legacies and racialised knowledge production. Chapters four through eight trace the local media landscape from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 through the U.S.-led war on terror. Drawing from interviews with senior Pashtun journalists and his own experiences, Irfan Ashraf contends that the