How does Coethnicity with Refugees Shape their Reception? Evidence from Afghan Refugees in Pakistan*

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Abstract

How does coethnicity shape host attitudes toward refugees? Existing research often assumes that refugees who share the ethnic or cultural background of host populations will face less backlash. We test this assumption in Pakistan, where both refugee and host communities include substantial Pashtun populations. Drawing on original survey experimental, observational, and qualitative data, we find that while coethnicity increases refugee acceptance on average, this result masks sharp internal variation. Coethnic hosts who live in provinces where they are ethnic minorities are far more likely to express inclusive attitudes than those living in their ethnic homeland. The impact of coethnicity therefore depends on local context: in settings where ethnic identity is politically salient and shaped by marginalization, coethnicity with refugees can carry both instrumental and symbolic value. These findings complicate standard assumptions about the primacy of cultural threat and underscore the need to attend to subnational variation in refugee-host dynamics.

Keywords: refugees, migration, ethnicity, survey experiment, conjoint, Pakistan, Afghanistan, South Asia

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A vast literature on refugee reception tends to assume that cultural similarity is preferred over dissimilarity.[1] Meta-analytic estimates of shared culture – including when cultural closeness is measured through coethnicity – find support for this intuitive claim (Aviña et al. 2024).[2] However, most studies are conducted in Global North settings, even as the majority of forced migration occurs between neighboring countries in the Global South. These are precisely the contexts where – unlike majority non-white refugees entering Western Europe and North America – host citizens and migrants frequently share coethnic ties. Does coethnicity promote solidarity and inclusion in such cases?

Few direct tests of coethnicity's impact have been conducted in Global South settings, and existing studies provide conflicting evidence on the cultural animus frame that dominates the study of migrant reception. For example, shared religion between hosts and refugees has been shown to matter in fostering inclusion in Turkey (Lazarev and Sharma 2017), and cultural similarity outweighs both egocentric and sociotropic economic concerns among host communities in Jordan (Alrababa'h et al. 2021). At the same time, coethnic hosts in some African contexts have sought to distance themselves from refugees due to concerns over economic competition (Adida 2011).

We test these competing hypotheses in Pakistan, where there is significant ethnic overlap between largely Pashtun Afghan refugees and Pakistani host communities (Kronenfeld 2008; Alimia 2022). The UNHCR estimates that 86% of registered Afghan refugees are Pashtun, and the prototypical refugee in the public eye is of Pashtun background. Pashtuns are also the second largest ethnic group in Pakistan, make up about 18% of the country's native population, and form the majority in the north-western areas of the country that border Afghanistan (Mir and Siddiqui 2024).

Pakistan has hosted a large refugee population for decades, beginning with the first

[1]This manuscript reports results from a pre-registered study.

[2]Aviña et al. (2024) note that there are too few estimates from the Global South to make definitive claims about the impact of cultural similarity in these contexts.

wave of arrivals after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the most recent wave arriving after the August 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. However, in October 2023, the Pakistani state instituted the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) and has since then undertaken one of the largest mass deportations in recent history (Meena 2025). As of mid-2025, Pakistan hosts over 3.5 million Afghans, comprising both officially registered refugees and undocumented individuals (Bariz 2025).

Despite hosting one of the world's largest refugee populations, the Pakistani case remains understudied in political science. Using a multi-method research approach combining qualitative interviews and focus groups with experimental and observational data from a face-to-face survey of 3500 Pakistanis in refugee-hosting districts, this study examines attitudes towards Afghan refugees and support for inclusive migration policies among Pashtun and non-Pashtun Pakistanis.

We offer three key findings. First, a conjoint experiment shows that host citizens prefer coethnic refugees when forced to choose between two hypothetical refugee profiles. This result is reinforced by observational analyses: Pashtuns are, on average, more likely than non-Pashtuns to express inclusive attitudes toward Afghan refugees. Second, despite these average differences, large majorities of Pashtuns hold exclusionary views and support a range of punitive state policies targeting Afghan refugees. Priming shared ethnicity through an audio survey experiment does little to shift these attitudes among Pashtun respondents. To reconcile these findings, we present a third result: when Pashtun respondents are disaggregated by whether they live inside or outside the Pashtun ethnic homeland, stark differences emerge. Pashtuns residing as minorities in non-Pashtun provinces are significantly more likely to express tolerant and empathetic views than those living in the majority-Pashtun province. These majority coethnics are even *more* exclusionary towards refugees than non-coethnics on some dimensions.

These results highlight the limitations of an either/or approach to the potential of shared ethnicity in promoting inclusion. They suggest the need to unpack the mech-

anisms through which coethnicity might foster positive attitudes toward refugees and migrants. Much of the literature focused on the Global North implies that the "cultural threat" posed by refugees who are ethnically, culturally, or religiously different from the host population is a prime determinant of host attitudes. In contrast, our results show that political factors matter in shaping attitudes even when hosts and refugees share linguistic, religious, cultural, and ethnic ties. Pashtuns living in minority-Pashtun provinces are more likely to express solidarity with coethnic Afghan refugees, motivated by both instrumental and social-psychological considerations – each shaped by their community's subnational position vis-à-vis the state.

This paper makes a number of additional contributions. First, it adds to a burgeoning literature exploring the reception of migrants in low- and middle-income contexts, where host–refugee cultural similarities are often greater than in well-studied Western settings (e.g. Adida 2011; Alrababa'h et al. 2021; Cogley, Doces, and Whitaker 2019; Holland, Peters, and Zhou 2024). Second, this paper brings the literature on refugee reception into conversation with the study of ethnic voting, where coethnicity shapes preferences not through cultural similarity per se but through its interaction with instrumental incentives (e.g. Posner 2005) and social-psychological attachments (e.g. Cammett et al. 2021). Third, it adds to a small but growing literature that systematically unpacks variation *within* ethnic groups, as well as how ethnic demography shapes this variation (e.g. Ahuja 2019; Jefferson 2023; Kasara 2013; Thachil 2014). Finally, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the American exit from the region, and Pakistan's recent wave of mass deportations have created a major humanitarian emergency. Examining responses to this refugee crisis is thus of prime importance to policymakers.

Coethnic Solidarity or Coethnic Resentment?

Do hosts prefer coethnic refugees over non-coethnic ones? Extant literature points us in different directions about the possible effect of coethnicity on the reception of refugees.

On the one hand, a superordinate shared identity should lead to more welcoming attitudes and promote inclusion based on social-identity theories of in-group favoritism (e.g. Gaertner and Dovidio 2000; Turner, Brown, and Tajfel 1979). Indeed, in the context of migration, studies in Côte d'Ivoire, Turkey and Jordan find that host citizens were more supportive and empathetic to refugees due to shared cultural, ethnic, or religious similarities (Alrababa'h et al. 2021; Cogley, Doces, and Whitaker 2019; Lazarev and Sharma 2017). Due to these similarities, host populations may worry less about how migrant flows could alter the national culture. Further, evidence suggests that political elites are more likely to enact liberal asylum policies when their coethnics in neighboring countries are marginalized (Blair, Grossman, and Weinstein 2022).

Coethnicity may also overlap with other conditions shown to promote inclusion. For example, ethnic enclaves are coethnic neighborhoods that offer migrants with access to employment, loans, social networks, sector specialization, and other opportunities; prominent examples in the sociological literature include Cubans in Miami, Jewish boroughs in New York, or Chinatowns in various North American cities (**wilson1980immigrant**; Light and Paden 1973; Portes and Zhou 1992). Living together in these enclaves means that coethnic host citizens may naturally have more opportunities for intergroup contact with refugees. As opposed to contact interventions that show mixed effects (e.g. Mousa 2020; Zhou and Lyall 2025), this type of natural day-to-day contact through housing, schools, hospitals, and the workplace may be more likely to reduce prejudice (e.g. Allport and Kramer 1946; Andersson and Dehdari 2021; Weiss 2021).

Moreover, cultural similarity could serve as a proxy for political alignment: for example, Cogley, Doces, and Whitaker (2019) find that respondents in Côte d'Ivoire were more likely to support the naturalization of an immigrant who intended to vote in future elections when that immigrant shared their religious faith, suggesting that they were viewed as political allies. Finally, coethnicity might engender solidarity through a belief in *linked fate* – i.e., the recognition that what happens to the group in general also

affects the individual personally. In the U.S., Dawson (1995) observed that race-based inequalities and oppression led to African-American group consciousness and political mobilization under the Civil Rights Movement. Scholars have since identified additional dynamics of linked fate in many other contexts (e.g. Gay, Hochschild, and White 2016; Sanchez and Vargas 2016; Chan and Jasso 2023; Kim et al. 2024).

On the other hand, coethnic citizens may have reasons to reject their connection to refugees and express exclusionary attitudes and policy preferences. First, coethnic citizens may experience greater economic competition if refugees are accessing similar (informal) labor markets. In West African trading communities, Adida (2011, 2014) finds that host citizens will espouse exclusionary attitudes to protect their *indigenous economic advantages* and prevent migrants from assimilating or passing as indigenous. In post-World War II Europe, population transfers of migrants into Poland and West Germany were meant to reunite coethnics, and yet these migrants were met with distrust and suspicion by natives, leading to less local cooperation for public goods provision (Charnysh 2025).

Additionally, if refugees are marginalized by the state – for instance, if they are framed as security threats – coethnic citizens may fear that they might unwillingly be profiled as migrants. In this environment, being mistaken as a migrant, or *migrantized*, can have negative consequences. Members of other ethnic groups, like those in the majority, may paint them with the same prejudicial brush. State actors, like the police, may end up arresting and detaining coethnic citizens because they assume they are refugees. Negative beliefs about migrants could bleed into prejudice and discrimination for all individuals who share their ethnicity. Hickel et al. (2020), for example, find that a sizable minority of Latinos seek to distance themselves from undocumented coethnics to avoid being stereotyped themselves.

Based on qualitative interviews and focus groups we conducted to inform our survey instrument, we found suggestive evidence of both dynamics – coethnic solidarity and

coethnic resentment – in our study context. We therefore describe the following two competing hypotheses:

H1 (a,b). Compared to non-coethnics, host citizens who share the same ethnicity as refugees will be more/less supportive of inclusive policies for refugees and express more negative attitudes towards refugees. We use a conjoint experiment and observational analyses to test these two competing hypotheses.

Regardless of whether coethnic citizens are more (H1a) or less (H1b) supportive of refugees, can messages that leverage different dimensions of coethnicity increase support for, and inclusive attitudes towards, refugees? Experimental studies have found that emphasizing shared family histories, shared religion, or providing personal narratives about shared opposition to terrorism can generate empathy and reduce prejudice against refugees (Audette, Horowitz, and Michelitch 2025; Dinas, Fouka, and Schläpfer 2021; Williamson et al. 2021; Bandiera et al. 2024). For example, Lazarev and Sharma (2017) find through a survey experiment in Turkey that a prime on shared religion improves citizens' attitudes and generosity toward Syrian refugees. While these messaging interventions have largely been aimed at host citizens at large, we seek to contribute to this literature by focusing and tailoring our messages to coethnic citizens. Compared to a generic positive message (in our case, about refugee gratefulness), we hypothesize that messages highlighting either socio-cultural ties or the political and economic benefits of coethnicity will increase support for refugees among coethnic citizens. Thus, we hypothesize that for coethnic (Pashtun) citizens

H2. Messaging based on (i) the *socio-cultural benefits* and the (ii) *instrumental benefits* of coethnicity will be effective at increasing support for refugees compared to no messaging or generic positive messaging. We test **H2** through a radio messaging survey experiment.

Finally, our interviews indicated that the relationship between coethnicity and refugee reception may vary subnationally. Pashtun Pakistanis are a majority in the province of

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (henceforth KP) – one of Pakistan's four provinces, each of which is associated with the dominant ethnic group residing there. However, nationally, the Punjabi ethnic group is the largest and most politically dominant ethnic group, and the relationship between Punjabis and other ethnic groups – including Pashtuns – has often been strained.[3]

While Pashtuns within KP enjoy considerable autonomy, those outside their 'ethnic homeland,' are a minority and treated as such by the state. Thus, they may have greater instrumental and symbolic incentives to show coethnic solidarity with Afghan refugees, whose presence boosts their numbers. Hence, we hypothesize:

H3. Among coethnics, host citizens residing outside their ethnic homeland will be more supportive of inclusive policies for refugees and express more positive attitudes towards refugees than those residing within their ethnic homeland. We use observational analyses and qualitative evidence to test **H3.**

Regional Background

We test our hypotheses in the context of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The movement of people across the contemporary Afghanistan-Pakistan border – known as the Durand Line – has a long history that predates the international border. Much of this migration was seasonal and caused little upheaval, in part because of its contained and cyclical nature and supposedly in part due to shared (Pashtun) ethnic ties across the border (Borthakur 2017). It was not until the late 1970s that the first of four major waves of what are designated as refugee flows occurred (see Figure 1).

The first wave took place soon after the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979, when an estimated 5 million Afghans fled to neighboring Iran and Pakistan (Amnesty International 2019). During this time, large amounts of aid were available to distribute to

[3]We provide further detail on this interethnic dynamic among the native Pakistani population in the following section.

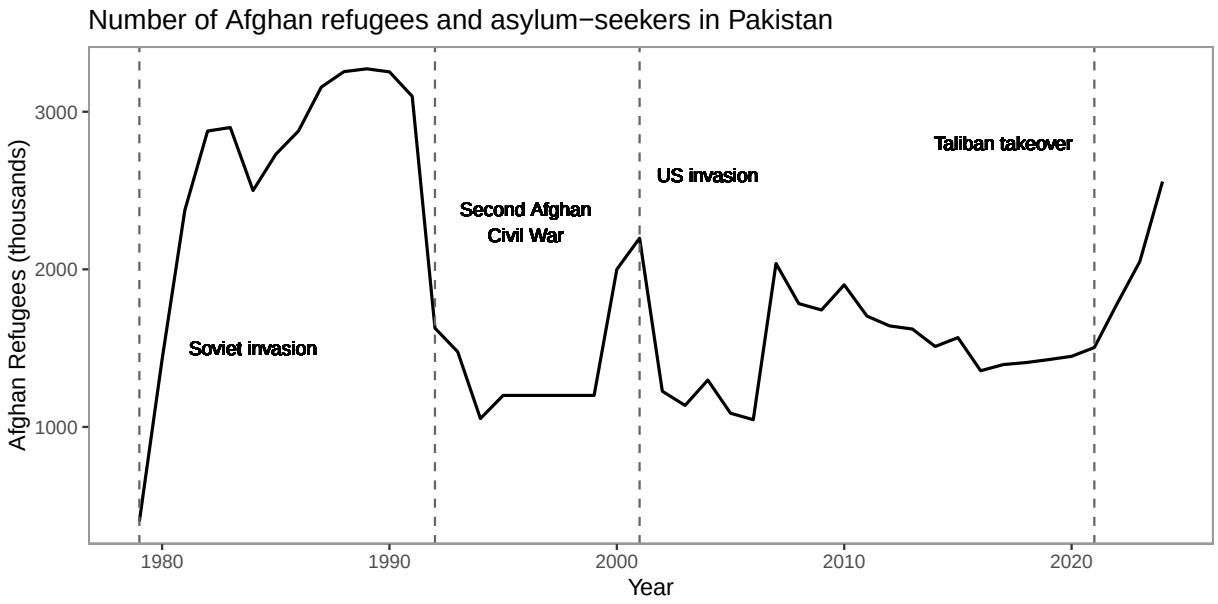

Figure 1: Number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan (Source: UNHCR)

Afghan refugees, in part because of the Pakistani government's involvement with the American Cold War effort. However, rising numbers of refugees meant that the supply of aid was eventually unable to keep up with the demand (Alimia 2022). Nevertheless, government assistance to refugees was relatively generous and refugees were allowed to work freely during this initial period. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, it is estimated that around 2 to 3 million Afghan refugees returned from Iran and Pakistan back to Afghanistan (UNHCR 1999).

The second wave of refugees began to arrive in the early 1990s due to the civil war that erupted in Afghanistan between different *mujahideen* factions. It is estimated that 2 million refugees came to Pakistan during this wave, adding to the already substantial refugee population (Borthakur 2017). Many of the displaced Afghans lived in crowded refugee camps, while others moved to urban areas where they integrated into local economies despite challenges in accessing services. Although the end of the Cold War brought with it reduced foreign aid, Afghans generally continued to be able to enter Pakistan relatively freely and were not systematically targeted for forced repatriation during this time (Borthakur 2017).

The third wave of Afghan refugees followed the US-led invasion into Afghanistan in 2001. The post-2001 period, in general, marked a significant turn away from Pakistan's earlier, relatively welcoming refugee policies. Concerns around labor market competition, security, and pressures on public services coupled with a decrease in international aid led the government to restrict refugee rights (Borthakur 2017). After 2004, Afghans entering Pakistan were no longer considered refugees, but rather undocumented economic migrants (Alimia 2022). This exclusionary stance culminated in a recent policy of mass expulsion following the fourth wave of Afghan migration to Pakistan, which came after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban re-takeover in 2021.

Today, there are 3 categories of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The first is those who have a proof of registration (PoR) card, which indicates that they have registered with the government and are in the country legally. UNHCR estimates that as of 2021, there are 1.28 million PoR card holders in the country, about half of whom are in the province of KP – the Pashtun-majority province that borders Afghanistan; close to 90% of Afghan refugees are also Pashtun. In addition, there are about 840,000 refugees who maintain Afghan citizenship cards (ACCs), which entitle its bearers to stay temporarily in Pakistan without granting them official refugee status. Finally, there are refugees who are entirely undocumented. The UNHCR suggests that one family may have both registered and unregistered refugees, making distinct policies on both sets of refugees difficult. And while Pakistan's constitution grants citizenship at birth, this right has not been extended to Afghan refugees' children. Indeed, Afghan refugees have no legal pathway to citizenship. Reports suggest, nonetheless, that some Afghan refugees have managed to get national identity cards through irregular means (Hafeez 2023).

In October 2023, the Pakistan state ordered a crackdown on over 1.7 million unregistered Afghans, citing increased security concerns in the regions bordering Afghanistan. For those who do not voluntarily leave, the government has threatened arrest, detention, and forced deportation under the *Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan* (Al Jazeera 2023).

Even for the 1.4 million registered Afghan refugees, the Pakistani government delayed their renewal last year, heightening uncertainty over whether even they would be permitted to stay (Gul and Zaman 2023).

Journalistic reports indicate that public and media attitudes echo the government's harsh stance (Z. u. Rehman 2021; Z. U. Rehman 2021). Yet despite the longevity and severity of the refugee situation in Pakistan, there is little systematic data on host citizen attitudes and whether they can be moved to facilitate refugee acceptance and integration. In particular, how coethnic Pashtuns Pakistanis – who have historically maintained strong ties with Pashtuns on the other side of the Durand Line – react to Afghan refugees is an open question. Not unlike other state boundaries, the Durand line was largely arbitrary, cutting across Pashtun tribes and family ties.

Within Pakistan, Pashtuns are geographically concentrated in the province of KP. However, there are also sizable percentages of Pashtuns outside of KP, especially the capital city of Quetta in the province of Balochistan, as well as in the city of Karachi in Sindh province. The Pashtun community has suffered discrimination at the hands of the Punjabi-dominated state, particularly in the state's pursuit of broader foreign policy goals related to the Global War on Terror. In 2014, a movement which ultimately became known as the *Pashtun Tahafuz Movement* (PTM) was formed to advocate for the rights of Pashtuns. The movement gained nationwide recognition when a 27-year old Pashtun man was killed extra-judicially by police in Karachi in 2018. Because the group criticizes the country's powerful military, it has faced both state repression and receives limited traditional media engagement (Amnesty International 2024).

Mirroring the debate in the theoretical literature discussed earlier, these features of the Pakistani context generate competing expectations of how shared coethnicity between Pashtun Pakistanis and Pashtun Afghan refugees affects refugee reception. For example, Pashtun Pakistanis may be more welcoming towards coethnic refugees, in part because both Pashtun Afghans and Pashtun Pakistanis often face ethnic profiling at the hands

of the Punjabi-dominated military apparatus. Conversely, Pashtun Pakistanis might feel that Afghan Pashtuns increase their chances of such profiling – i.e., of being *migrantized* – and seek to distance themselves. But not all Pashtuns are equally positioned vis-a-vis the state, with important differences between those who live in Pashtun-dominant province of KP and those who live elsewhere – a point to which we return in further detail later.

Data Collection

We use a multi-method research design for this study. First, we carried out 29 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with members of international NGOs, national civil society members, politicians, journalists and academics in Islamabad and Karachi. Second, we conducted 4 focus groups of 6-8 participants each, with the help of the Pakistan Institute of Public Opinion (an affiliate of Gallup International in Pakistan, and hereafter Gallup Pakistan) in December 2022. Two of these focus groups were conducted with Afghan refugees (one group which had migrated within the past 5 years, and the other having lived in Pakistan over 5 years), while two were with Pakistani host communities (split by gender). Both our focus groups and our qualitative interviews were critical for the design of our survey instrument, hypotheses, and experimental vignettes. Appendices A through D provide further information the study timeline, ethical considerations, and qualitative data collection.

Our host community survey of 3500 respondents was implemented in the summer of 2024 and was also carried out by Gallup Pakistan, by enumerators trained by us.[4] This survey was designed to be host-community representative, focusing on areas that actually host Afghan refugees. Thus, we conducted the survey in the 15 largest refugee hosting districts as per the latest available UNHCR data. We amended our initial sample following a deterioration in the security situation that made fieldwork infeasible in

[4]Respondents had the choice to take the survey in either Urdu or Pashto. 47.75% of respondents took the survey in Pashto; the rest chose to take the survey in Urdu.

the least populous districts of Lower Dir and Hangu. The respondents that would have been surveyed in these districts were then redistributed to the remaining districts where Pashtuns form a majority. This sampling strategy allowed us to have a majority Pashtun Pakistani sample (i.e. coethnic host citizens) in order to answer our main research question; our sample consisted of 2275 Pashtuns, 65% of our total sample. Appendices E and F provide further sampling details and a power analysis.

During the introduction and informed consent portion of the survey, enumerators checked for respondent eligibility (18 years or older and citizen of Pakistan), asked about mother tongue and tribe, age, occupation and household head's occupation, and media and social media consumption. The rest of the demographic questions were asked at the end of the survey. Respondents were provided a token of 100 rupees ($.40 USD) in the form of a mobile top-up in exchange for taking the survey.

Experimental Evidence on the Role of Coethnicity

Conjoint Experiment

To test **H1a** and **H1b** we embedded in our survey a conjoint experiment in which respondents were asked to choose between two profiles of Afghan refugees.

Now I will show you two profiles of Afghan refugees. These two Afghan refugees are not registered in Pakistan, but they both want to stay here. After I tell you some details about each of these two Afghan refugees, I want you to pick which one you would prefer to stay in Pakistan.				
Ethnicity	*Pashtun (50% prob)*	*Tajik (25% prob)*	*Uzbek (25% prob)*	
Gender	*Male*	*Female*		
Occupation of the Head of the Household	*[Respondent's head of household's occupation]*	*Daily Wage Laborer*	*Small Business Owner/Trader*	*Farm Worker*
Time family has resided in Pakistan for approximately	*3 years*	*15 years*	*40 years*	

Table 1: Conjoint Experiment attributes

The conjoint experiment setup in Table 1 shows two profiles of hypothetical adult Afghan refugees who are not registered but want to stay in Pakistan. Each profile displays four attributes – ethnicity, gender, occupation of the household head, and time the family has spent in Pakistan – in random order. Enumerators showed the profiles to respondents on a screen and were trained to slowly read each attribute aloud, repeating them as needed. Each respondent evaluated three refugee pairings.

We limited the conjoint design to four attributes for two reasons. First, in a low-literacy context like Pakistan, pre-testing showed that limiting the number of attributes was essential to minimize cognitive overload and prevent survey satisficing.[5] Second, some attributes commonly used in other immigration conjoint studies were unnecessary in this context. For example, studies often vary the reason for migration to test whether humanitarian motivations elicit more public support, or vary the religious background of migrants. Since our profiles all describe unregistered Afghan refugees in a context where natives and migrants are overwhelmingly Muslim, our design holds refugee status and religion constant to focus instead on how coethnicity shapes reception.

For the ethnicity attribute, the experiment was programmed to assign Pashtun 50% of the time, and Tajik and Uzbek 25% each, reflecting the demographic reality that most Afghan refugees in Pakistan are Pashtun. Second, we explicitly tested for the salience of direct labor competition by using the respondent's household occupation as one of the attribute levels.[6] Whereas many immigration conjoint studies proxy economic threat

[5]Pre-testing also showed that respondents found ranking multiple rounds of paired profiles to be too cognitively taxing, necessitating a forced choice conjoint design.

[6]To ensure plausibility in the local context, the occupation was always assigned to the household head rather than to the individual profile, in order to avoid attributing male-dominated occupations to female refugees. This approach reflects prevailing gender norms and labor force participation patterns in the refugee population, where women are rarely primary earners in the occupations included in our experiment.

by comparing respondents' education or income levels with those of hypothetical immigrants, our approach allows for a more direct test of a potentially relevant mechanism in low-income labor markets. The other occupational categories – daily wage laborer, small business owner/trader, and farm worker – represent common occupations of Afghan refugees, according to a recent UNHCR report (UNHCR 2022).

Finally, we manipulate the time the refugee's family has resided in Pakistan, a dimension that emerged as salient in our qualitative fieldwork. Respondents expressed greater tolerance toward refugees who arrived in earlier waves. This intuition is consistent with broader findings from the literature, which suggests that in long-term refugee-hosting contexts like Pakistan, "compassion fatigue" may reduce public sympathy toward more recent arrivals (Banulescu-Bogdan, Erdoğan, and Salgado 2024).

We report the results from the conjoint experiment in Figure 2, which show a clear preference for Afghan refugees that are ethnically Pashtun. While this preference is stronger among coethnic Pashtun Pakistanis, a slight preference exists among non-Pashtuns as well. For non-Pashtuns, Pashtun refugees are culturally closer and more familiar than Uzbek and Tajik refugees, as Pashtuns are the second largest ethnic group in Pakistan. Tajiks and Uzbeks are Central Asian ethnic groups that are not native to Pakistan. Overall, respondents were 9.5 percentage points (pp) more likely to prefer a Pashtun refugee to an Uzbek or a Tajik. Pashtun Pakistanis were 12.6 pp more likely to choose a Pashtun refugee compared to an Uzbek, while non-Pashtun Pakistanis were 3.7 pp more likely. This difference is statistically significant. We interpret this as evidence for **H1a** over **H1b**.

Unsurprisingly, respondents also expressed a stronger preference for those refugees who had been in Pakistan longer. However, contrary to existing literature, there was no preference expressed for refugees based on their gender. The vast majority of work on refugee and migrant reception has found that respondents prefer female to male refugees (Aviña et al. 2024), making this a surprising finding. In the context of Pakistan too, the state narrative around refugee return has focused on how their presence exacerbates

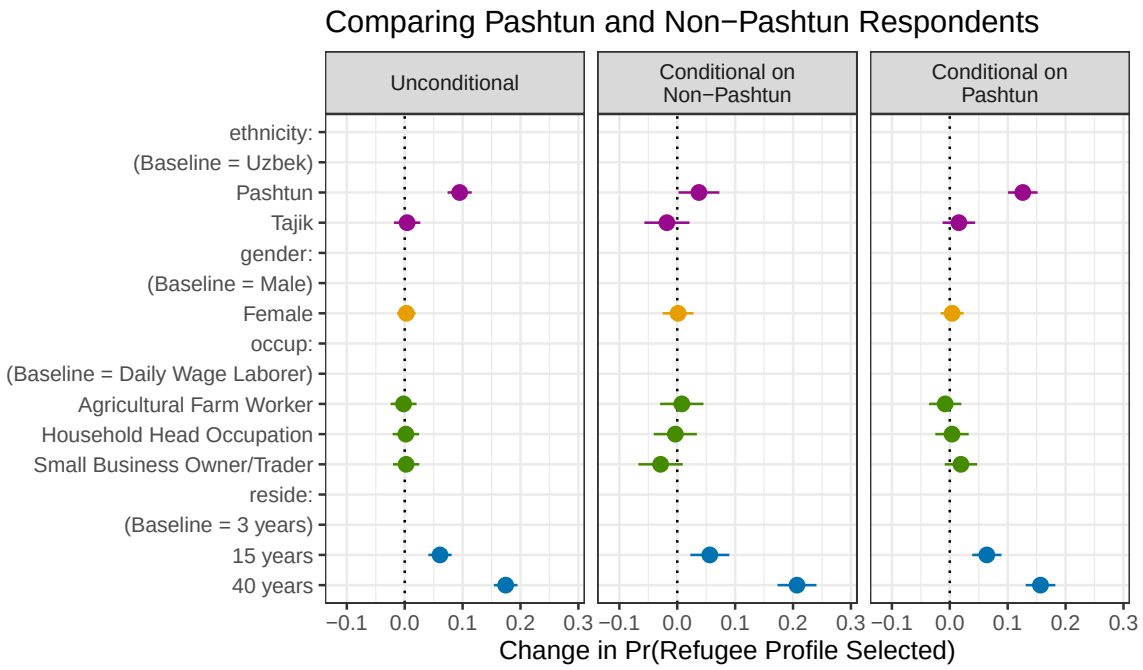

Figure 2: Conjoint analysis showing AMCE estimates with 95% CIs for all respondents (left), conditional on non-Pashtun respondents (center), and conditional on Pashtun respondents (right).

insecurity in the country, with the 2023 Illegal Foreigner Repatriation Act ostensibly intended to fight growing terrorism in the country (Fahrney 2023). Because the vast majority of militants in Pakistan are male, we might expect gender to capture respondent concerns with security and terrorism. While not a direct measure of security concerns, this null result on gender is consistent with our focus groups, during which the topic of insecurity or terrorism was never raised by participants.

Similarly, the conjoint experiment shows that economic competition did little to affect respondent attitudes towards refugees. Even when the hypothetical refugee shared his/her occupation with the respondent or respondent's head of household, respondents did not alter their preference towards the refugee. While economic competition has been highlighted as one possible explanation for animosity towards migrants, this finding is in line with other work—even in developing country contexts—which has found that hosts do not tend to evaluate migrants through the lens of egocentric economic concerns, but

focus instead on sociotropic concerns (Weber et al. 2024).

This finding is consistent with some of our focus group evidence, which highlighted how economic concerns could affect host communities in ways other than direct economic competition, by, for example, driving up rent or by diverting civil society resources away from Pakistanis. One woman complained in a focus group that, "When the [refugees] came here, the rent went up. Our house has just two rooms, there is no gas, or electricity, and we pay 10,000 in rent, and it's an un-cemented house. It doesn't have a concrete roof. When the Afghans were not here, the rents were lower comparatively." Another focus group respondent spoke about how certain medical centers – likely those run by international organizations – only served Afghans. This sentiment was widely shared, with about 60% of our survey respondents also believing that refugees had better access to healthcare services than Pakistanis.

A final important, and unexpected, finding was a significant percentage of respondents (20.4%) who refused to answer or said they "don't know" in response to the forced choice design. Figure K1 in the appendix shows the those who skipped the conjoint exercises were more likely to be male and have lower income. There are no differences based on ethnicity, whether the respondent was in KP or outside, or any of our other covariates.[7]

Radio Messaging Survey Experiment

The conjoint experiment results suggest that, when forced to decide between two refugees, Pashtun respondents prefer coethnic refugees over non-coethnic ones. This suggests that coethnicity can potentially be leveraged to increase openness towards refugees. In our embedded radio experiment, we sought to test whether emphasizing coethnic benefits of refugee presence could improve tolerance towards refugees and support for inclusive policies (**H2**). We randomly assigned respondents to one of four audio vignettes – three

[7]For our other outcomes, the proportions of "don't know" are all under 5%.

treatments and one placebo.[8] Our qualitative interviews and focus groups informed the creation of these vignettes, and we used some real quotes from our focus groups in the audio stories. We piloted the survey, with a specific focus on how respondents were receiving these messages, lending us further confidence in the credibility and realistic nature of the primes. The messages – one set in Urdu and another in Pashto – were then recorded by two male Pakistani journalists.

Each radio story begins with the following enumerator introduction: "Now I will play you a short radio news story where a journalist is interviewing some people. Please listen carefully. If you have trouble understanding it, please tell me and I will play it again." The first treatment was a *coethnic socio-cultural treatment*, which highlighted what Pashtun Pakistanis and Pashtun Afghan refugees have in common in terms of their ethnic identity, language, customs, and culture. For example, the radio message stated: "One [Afghan refugee] said, for example, "They are Pashtuns and so are we [...]" Another said: "[...] If 5 Afghans and 7 Pakistanis come together, they can even perform someone's funeral rites together and there would be no difference. We look the same and speak the same language."[9]

The second *instrumental treatment* described how increasing the overall number of Pashtuns in a particular constituency could be helpful for gaining resources for the Pashtun community, or could help bolster its economic and political power. It stated, for example: "The presence of Afghan refugees could potentially bolster the political and economic position of Pashtun Pakistanis, because it adds to the overall number of Pashtuns in the population. According to some residents and members of political parties, if Afghan refugees are allowed to stay and legally become citizens of Pakistan, their

[8]To prevent against ordering effects, we randomized the order of the conjoint experiment and the radio messaging experiment and outcomes.

[9]These are direct quotes from an Afghan refugee focus group. The complete text of the treatments are provided in Appendix Section A7.

presence could be helpful for the census, leading to more public resources allocated to Pashtun areas." These two treatments reflect what are commonly theorized as the two main aspects in which coethnicity is beneficial – through social-cultural ties or through instrumental concerns linked to changing demographics.

These first two treatments were intended to increase tolerance specifically among Pashtun hosts. As a benchmark, we included a third *gratefulness treatment*, which is framed for a national audience and seeks to counter the negative stereotypes of ungratefulness on the part of refugees. It includes the following excerpt, for example: "We spoke with some Afghan refugees this past summer to ask them what their experiences have been like in Pakistan. Many expressed their gratitude for the hospitality that the country had showed them over the years. They also found Pakistan to be a safe refuge for them and their families." We chose this gratefulness message as a benchmark because this is the typical standard messaging from media (e.g. op-eds) and local humanitarian organizations that are supportive of refugees.[10]

The control group received a placebo radio story discussing Pakistan's zoos. After each treatment, we asked a single question pertaining to the radio story in order to justify playing the story for respondents. The placebo group was asked whether they plan to visit a zoo sometime this year. The gratefulness group was asked, "Do you think Afghan refugees are grateful to be here?" The instrumental coethnic group was asked, "Do you think that Afghan refugees and Pashtun Pakistanis share many coethnic ties?" and the socio-cultural coethnic treatment group was asked,"Do you think the presence of Afghan refugees improves the political & economic position of Pashtun Pakistanis?"

Our outcomes measured three distinct concepts related to support for refugees. Our primary outcomes ask host citizens about their support for inclusive (e.g. path towards regularization) vs. exclusionary (e.g. detention) policies on a scale of 1-5 from strongly

[10]Alrababah et al. (2022) tested a similar message in Jordan but found null effects, potentially due to lack of statistical power.

disagree to strongly agree (see Table 2). These questions were asked on a scale of 1-5 from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with the exception of the outcome on to registered refugees, which was measured as a binary choice. We also included a behavioral measure, asking respondents whether they would contribute a message on Afghan refugee policy to be shared with policymakers.

Our second set of questions related to tolerance towards Afghan refugees – for example, willingness to have Afghans as neighbors, friends, or family members, as well as a feeling thermometer. Finally, our third set of outcomes pertain to perceptions of the economic and social impact of the presence of Afghan refugees on Pakistan, for instance whether their presence has increased crime or affected the economic situation. Appendix A8 reports the text of these measures.

Variable	**Survey Question**
policy support	The government has ordered all illegally residing Afghans to leave Pakistan. Some people think that ordering the illegally residing Afghans to leave the country is a good move, on part of the government. While some people have a negative opinion of this. According to them, this is not a good move at all. To what extent do you think illegally residing Afghans should be forced to leave? Do you strongly agree they should leave, somewhat agree, feel neutral, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?
policy thoughts	Would you be willing to contribute an anonymous message about your thoughts on policies towards Afghan refugees? We will summarize all the messages to create a policy report that will be read by officials in the government.
registered policy	We just asked about illegally-residing Afghans. But now we want to ask about registered Afghans. Do you think registered Afghan refugees should be able to stay in Pakistan or go back to Afghanistan?
ban entry	The Pakistani government should ban the entry of new Afghan refugees wanting to come to Pakistan. (Strongly Disagree... Strongly Agree)
regularize	If some illegally residing Afghan refugees want a way to become registered with legal status, the government should give them a way to do so. (Strongly Disagree... Strongly Agree)
spouse policy	Afghan refugees who have married Pakistanis should be allowed by the government to stay. (Strongly Disagree... Strongly Agree)
born policy	Afghan refugees who were born in Pakistan should be allowed by the government to stay. (Strongly Disagree... Strongly Agree)
detain policy	It is okay for the government to arrest and detain Afghan refugees if they do not have the proper documentation. (Strongly Disagree... Strongly Agree)

Table 2: Survey Questions measuring Policy Support Outcomes

Figure 3 shows the experimental results for our primary outcomes.[11] The benchmark *gratefulness* treatment shifted some attitudes towards greater refugee acceptance among the full sample. Those who received this treatment were significantly more likely to disagree that illegally residing Afghans should leave the country, as mandated by the government, and were more likely to agree that registered refugees should be permitted to stay in Pakistan rather than go back to Afghanistan. They were also more likely to agree with the possibility of regularizing undocumented refugees and permitting refugees born in Pakistan to stay. This is an important finding. Refugees are regularly accused of being ungrateful in many settings (Buxton and Gibney 2024), and this is a salient aspect of anti-refugee discourse in Pakistan. Our treatment results show that light-touch interventions to change the perception of refugees on this dimension can work to shift attitudes. Importantly, the quotations used in this treatment were directly drawn from sentiments expressed by refugees themselves in our focus groups.

The coethnicity treatments, on the other hand, produced largely null results on our primary outcomes among both the full sample and among Pashtun respondents, with the exception of one outcome: Pashtun respondents who received either of the coethnicity treatments were more likely to agree that registered refugees should be allowed to stay in Pakistan. In addition, along our secondary outcomes measuring tolerance, Pashtuns who received the coethnicity treatments were more likely to feel warmly towards Afghans and were more willing to accept Afghan refugees as neighbors, although there was no effect on willingness to accept refugees as friends or family members.[12] Finally, there was no effect on any of the perceived economic and social effects of refugee presence. Overall, it appears that messaging focused on socio-cultural ties or instrumental benefits of coethnicity had a muted effect on most outcomes of interest.

[11] All regression tables are in Section A13 of the Appendix.

[12] There was correspondingly no change on any tolerance or economic/social effect measures for non-Pashtun respondents.

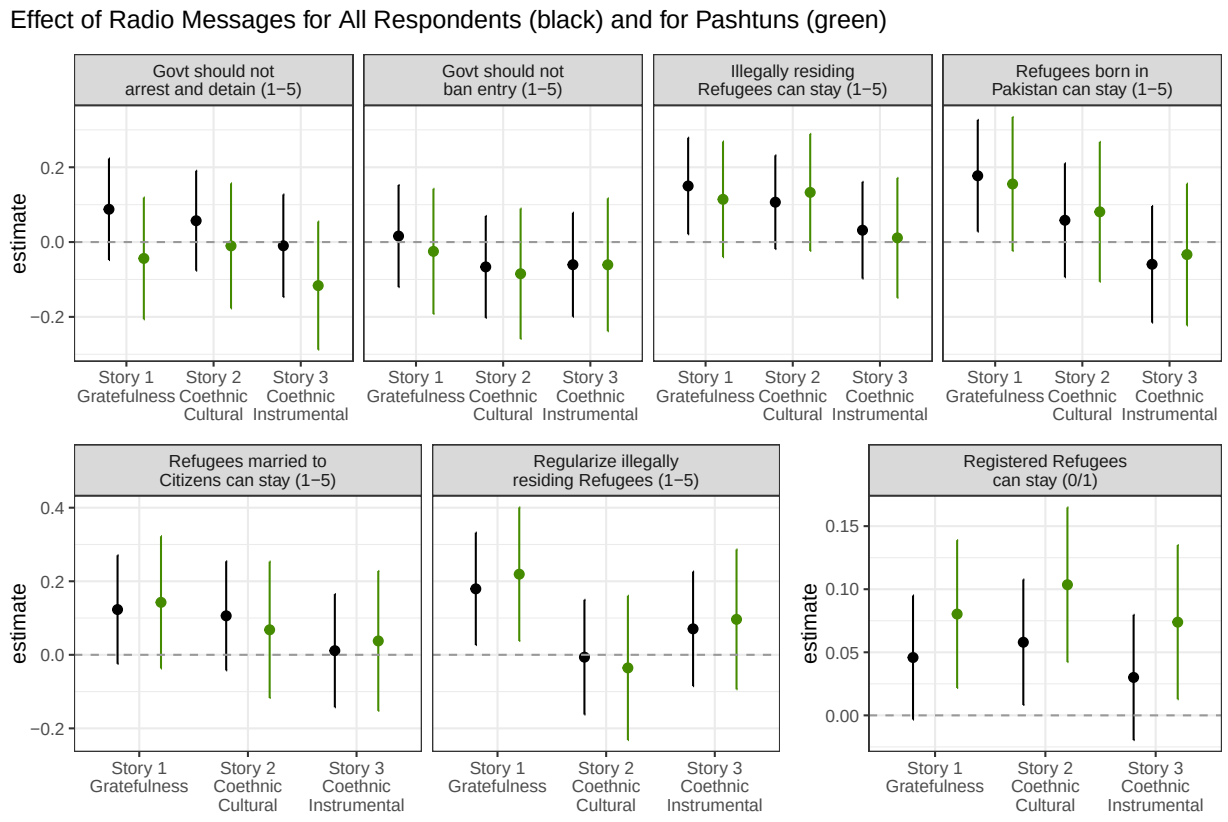

Figure 3: Radio Experimental Results for all respondents (black) and Pashtuns (green). Effects are shown as differences from the baseline Placebo story. All models are OLS and interact the treatment variables with demographic covariates to demean them (Lin 2013). Estimates show 95% CIs.

While we cannot rule out the possibility that our null results are an artifact of our research design, that our design was informed by qualitative and focus group research lends us confidence in the specific messaging we used. Thus far, the conjoint and survey experimental results suggest that shared ethnicity is not straightforwardly associated with greater support for refugees, contrary to common assumptions. Coethnicity appears to matter when respondents are forced to choose between two refugee profiles; it can also potentially be leveraged to increase support for protection from deportation for registered refugees, and may enhance feelings of warmth and willingness to accept refugees as neighbors. However, for the vast majority of outcomes – including attitudes toward a number of harsh government policies – coethnic priming had no effect

on respondent attitudes, including on attitudes that were successfully shifted in a more inclusive direction through the *gratefulness* treatment.

In the next section, we draw on observational evidence to further unpack the relationship between coethnicity and attitudes toward refugees. In particular, we show that our null results are unlikely to be driven by baseline attitudes among coethnic hosts being already relatively open toward refugees. To the contrary, large majorities of coethnic hosts hold a variety of exclusionary attitudes towards refugees. That said, the role of coethnicity differs sharply in areas where host coethnics are a minority – i.e., settings in which the symbolic and instrumental dimensions of shared ethnicity are more salient.

Observational Evidence showing Within-Coethnic Differences

Qualitative interviews we conducted with civil society members, journalists, and politicians prior to fielding the survey frequently raised the possibility of Pashtun reception of refugees varying by whether they were themselves the ethnic minority in their region (**H3**). Our pre-analysis plan discussed these patterns by noting that "the relationship between Afghan refugees and Pashtun hosts is potentially very different in KP province (where Pashtuns are a majority) versus in Sindh and Balochistan (where they are a minority). This may be due in part to political reasons where the size of the Pashtun constituency (whether Afghan or Pakistani) matters for collective action purposes, or because of the way in which identity manifests can differ based on overall demographics. To investigate these claims, we subset our data to the 2275 Pashtun respondents in our sample. 303 of these respondents live outside of KP, while 1972 live in KP.[13]

Table 3 shows the basic descriptive patterns of attitudes towards refugees among these two groups of coethnic host citizens, alongside the averages for Pashtuns and

[13]Appendix A10 conducts equivalence tests of covariates between these two groups, as well as between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, to test how these populations compare on various dimensions.

non-Pashtuns. For most outcomes, the differences between KP Pashtuns and non-KP Pashtuns are substantively large – often much larger than the differences between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns.[14,15] For example, 71.6% of Pashtuns and 74.9% of non-Pashtuns would be unwilling to have an Afghan refugee as a family member. Yet, *within* Pashtuns, only 50.9% of non-KP Pashtuns compared to 77.7% of KP Pashtuns are unwilling. Additionally, 57.9% of Pashtuns and 56.8% of non-Pashtuns think even registered Afghan refugees should go back to Afghanistan – again, they are almost indistinguishable from each other. However, within Pashtuns, only 35% of non-KP Pashtuns think registered Afghan refugees should go back to Afghanistan, compared to 65% of KP Pashtuns. On these preferences, KP Pashtuns (i.e. coethnics living in the ethnic homeland) are *less supportive* of Afghan refugees than even non-Pashtuns (i.e. non-coethnics).

Figure 4 plots the results from OLS analyses comparing the two groups of coethnic host citizens; for these models, we subsetted to Pashtun respondents only and include demographic covariates and radio experiment conditions as controls.[16,17] The results

[14]Appendix A12.1 shows the conjoint experiment results by subsetting the sample to only Pashtuns and comparing KP and non-KP Pashtuns. We do not find statistically significant differences between these subgroups, but we also caution that the sample sizes may be too low to discern differences.

[15]Appendix A12.3 repeats the analyses in this section but with the full sample, comparing Pashtuns with non-Pashtuns. It shows that in general, Pashtuns are more supportive of Afghan refugees than non-Pashtuns, which is in line with the previous sections.

[16]The demographic covariates are gender, age, marriage status, years of formal education, news from social media, Sunni sect, whether the respondent voted in the last election, support for the main opposition political party, and previous exposure to violence. We do not control for income bracket, even though we had planned to in the pre-analysis plan, due to high missingness in this variable.

[17]We opt for this method because it allows us a larger sample size to analyze the results and because the experiment had mostly null results. Nevertheless, the results are

	Non-Pashtuns	Pashtuns	KP Pashtuns	Non-KP Pashtuns
Unwilling to have Afghan refugee as...				
Neighbor	44.4%	39.7%	43.6%	25.3%
Friend	49.3%	44.5%	49.0%	24.8%
Family member through marriage	74.9%	71.6%	77.7%	50.9%
Government ordered illegally residing Afghans to leave Pakistan.				
% that somewhat or strongly agreed	79.7%	71.1%	78.3%	60.9%
Do you think registered Afghan refugees should go back to Afghanistan?				
% that said go back to Afghanistan	56.8%	57.9%	65.04%	35.4%
Pakistani government should ban entry of new Afghan refugees.				
% that somewhat or strongly agreed	76.7%	66.7%	71.6%	66.7%
Government should provide a way for illegally residing Afghan refugees to get legal status.				
% that somewhat or strongly disagreed	42.9%	32.7%	34.2%	34.5%
Afghan refugees married to Pakistanis should be allowed to stay.				
% that somewhat or strongly disagreed	29.6%	27.4%	30.1%	17.8%
Afghan refugees born in Pakistan should be allowed to stay.				
% that somewhat or strongly disagreed	38.2%	28.6%	30.9%	21.8%
It is okay to arrest/detain undocumented Afghan refugees.				
% that somewhat or strongly agreed	74.9%	69.6%	73.6%	63.9%
N	1225	2275	1972	303

Table 3: Social and Policy Attitudes towards Afghan Refugees By Group

are similarly striking, with very large substantive differences between the two Pashtun communities. Across six of the eight policy measures (top row), KP Pashtuns were statistically less supportive of pro-refugee policies. Similarly, KP Pashtuns reported – across the board – less warmth for Afghan refugees (but not for other Pashtuns), greater social distance, less empathy, and a lower sense of linked fate toward refugees (middle row). They also perceived more negative social and economic effects of refugee presence than non-KP Pashtuns (bottom row). Available data do not allow us to establish whether these perceived costs reflect objective conditions or motivated attitudes rooted in prior biases against refugees. Prior work in a comparable context has shown that the negative economic impact of refugees can be outweighed by cultural similarity (Alrababah et

substantively consistent with running the analysis on only the placebo group.

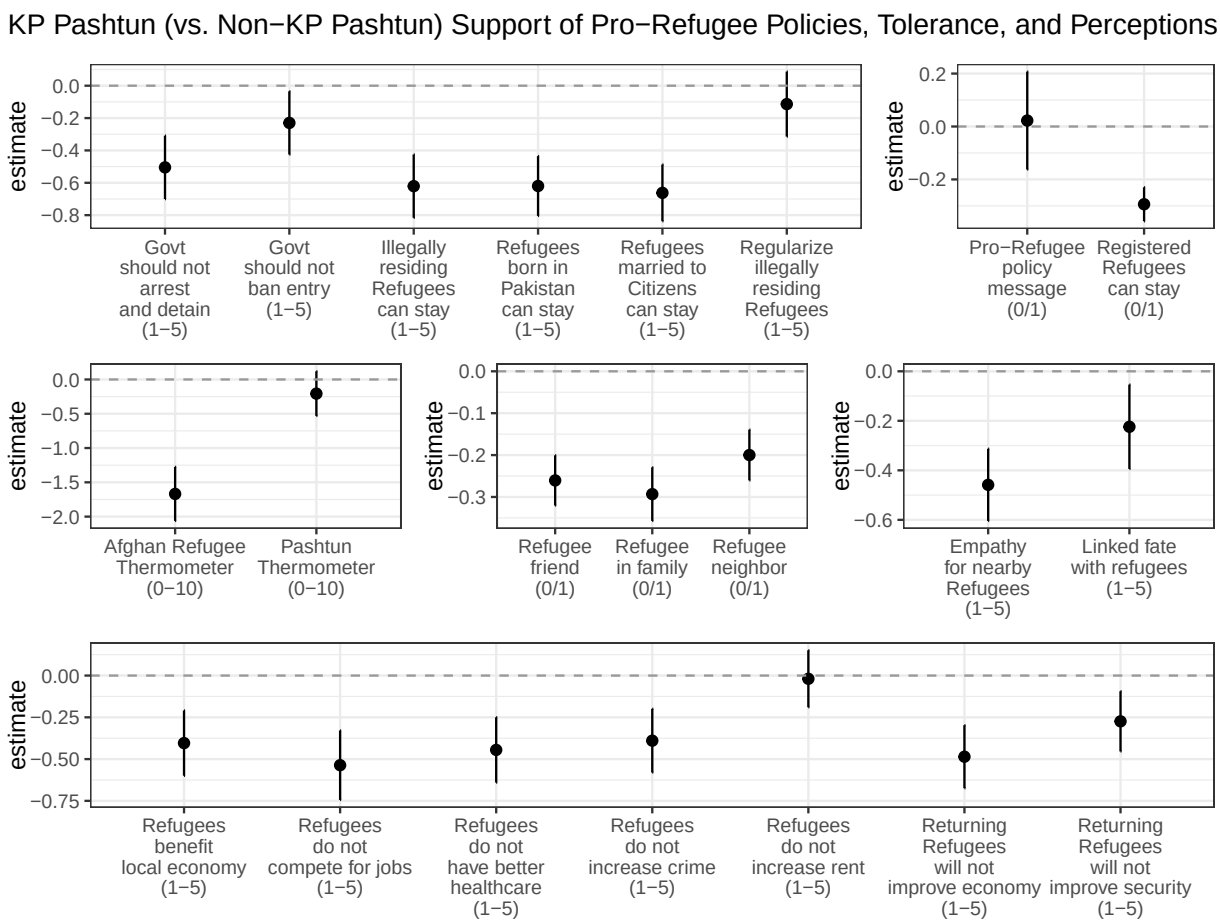

Figure 4: Observational within-Pashtun descriptive analysis, comparing those in KP to Pashtuns living elsewhere. The estimates capture differences in support for pro-refugee policies, warmth toward Afghan refugees, tolerance measures, and perceptions of refugees' social and economic effects. All outcomes were recoded so that higher values indicate more positive attitudes toward refugees. Models control for demographic covariates and experimental radio treatments. Estimates show 95% confidence intervals.

al. 2022), and data from Europe show that repeated refugee crises and their associated economic burden did not diminish support for welcoming Ukrainian refugees (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2023). It is therefore puzzling that coethnicity does not mitigate the impact of real or perceived economic costs among KP Pashtuns.

Why do we see such large differences between these two Pashtun communities? Our qualitative interviews suggested that *where* the Pashtun respondent was based mattered for attitudes towards refugees because the role played by Pashtun ethnicity – and, by

extension, coethnicity – in that local context varied.[18] These interviews emphasized both instrumental and symbolic/social identity-based explanations as to why Pashtuns in minority districts may be more welcoming towards Afghan refugees and supportive of pro-refugee measures. We discuss qualitative and observational evidence for each of these mechanisms below.

First, studies have demonstrated that the political salience of Pashtun ethnicity in Pakistan varies by whether the Pashtun are the majority or minority in that region (Siddiqui 2022). In KP, where Pashtuns comprise over 80% of the population as per the 2023 census, ethnicity takes a backseat to tribal affiliations in the political realm. There is little evidence that political party candidates in KP make ethnic appeals exclusively to a subset of voters, or mobilize Pashtuns at the expense of another identifiable ethnic group. Rather, voters are "bound by considerations of local power structure in term of caste, biradri, and tribe" (Ahmad 2010, 351). Because Pashtuns form an overwhelming majority in KP, and because political competition is not primarily structured along ethnic lines, there are fewer incentives to welcome and integrate coethnic refugees for instrumental reasons.

In contrast, outside of KP, Pashtun ethnicity does form the basis of political competition in certain districts. In multi-ethnic areas such as Quetta (Balochistan province) and Karachi (Sindh province), for example, Pashtun nationalist parties regularly compete for office against political parties affiliated with non-Pashtun ethnic groups.[19] Pashtun nationalist parties, such as the Awami National Party (ANP) and the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), have been reported to benefit from the presence of Afghan refugees, sometimes through allegations of facilitating illegal National Identity Cards (NICs) for refugees to bolster their voter base.[20] A journalist told us, for example, "There were some serious allegations against few Pashtun nationalist parties that they obtained

[18]Interviews, June-July 2022, Islamabad.

[19]Our survey includes Pashtun respondents from both of these areas.

[20]Interview, journalist, July 4, 2022.

illegal National Identity Cards (NICs) for Afghan refugees to increase their bank in their respective constituencies, particularly in Pashtun part of Balochistan." It is impossible to verify whether these allegations are true, but Pashtun nationalist parties were the only parties to vocally oppose the government's policy of deporting Afghan refugees (Daily Excelsior 2023).

In addition to these instrumental reasons, non-KP Pashtuns may perceive their ethnic identity to be of greater personal significance – given their minority status outside of KP – leading to greater solidarity with coethnic refugees. Outside of KP, Pashtun citizens' interactions with the state – including those that are discriminatory – are more likely to involve non-Pashtun state agents, due to both demographic dominance by other ethnic groups and the provincial control of many state institutions. For example, in Karachi, where the police force is dominated by Sindhis, Pashtuns expect non-coethnic officers to treat them less fairly than coethnic ones (Lyon and Malik 2023). In Lahore and other cities in Punjab, Pashtuns report being racially profiled as Afghan, particularly in the wake of the state's anti-terrorism and anti-refugee policies (Ali and Jabeen 2017). These everyday negative encounters with non-coethnic state agents may deepen the salience of ethnic identity and strengthen solidarity with coethnic Afghan refugees.

To test whether this mechanism may be operative, we perform several additional tests with our survey data shown in Figure 5. First, we check to see whether non-KP Pashtuns identify with their ethnic identity more than KP Pashtuns. We asked respondents to allocate 10 tokens into 6 different bins (ethnicity, sect, national identity, gender, occupation, and"just me") on the basis of how important that identity was to them. Non-KP Pashtuns were significantly more likely than KP Pashtuns to place more tokens in the ethnicity bin. Second, non-KP Pashtuns were also more likely to report supporting the aims of the Pashtun nationalist Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which – as discussed earlier – rose to prominence after a young Pashtun man was extra-judicially killed by a police officer in Karachi.

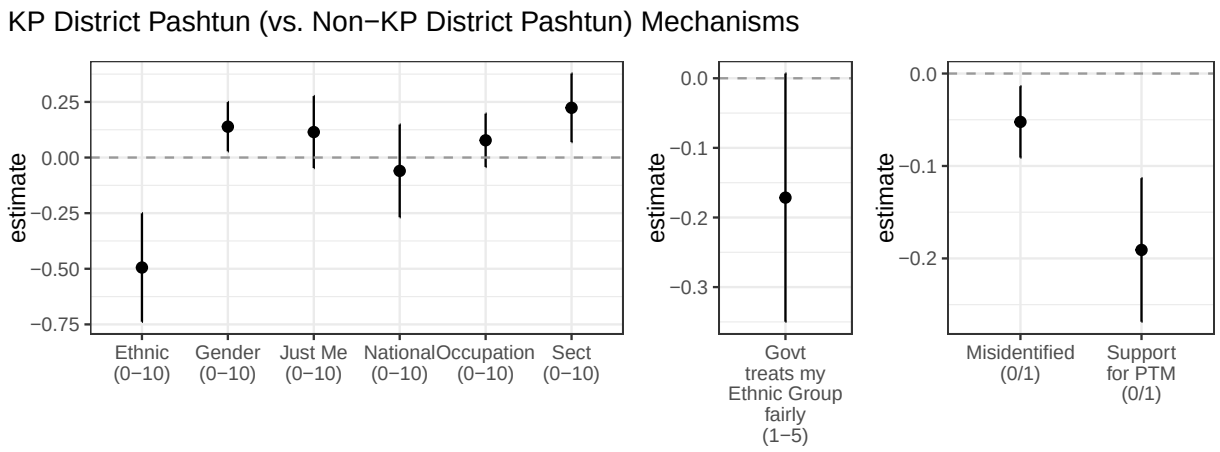

Figure 5: Observational descriptive analysis of mechanisms: within Pashtun respondents, compared to those living outside of KP, the difference of KP Pashtuns' levels of identification, belief that their ethnic group is treated fairly by the government, support for PTM, and likelihood of being misidentified as a refugee. All models control for demographic covariates and experimental radio treatments. Estimates show 95% CIs.

Third, non-KP Pashtuns were slightly more likely to be misidentified as Afghan refugees, although the absolute number of people who reported this experience was small (186 respondents, or about 5.5% of our sample). That non-KP Pashtuns were more supportive of Afghan refugees despite this greater likelihood of misidentification suggests that fear of being migrantized is unlikely to be the primary mechanism shaping their attitudes in this context. Instead, it may be that migrantization – when combined with an already tense relationship with non-coethnic-dominated state institutions – generates greater empathy and linked fate with refugees. This interpretation is consistent with findings from other studies showing that empathy is a key predictor of support for hosting forcibly displaced populations (**peisakhin2024etal**), and that perspective-taking – such as imagining oneself in a refugee's position – can increase pro-refugee attitudes (Adida, Lo, and Platas 2018). Finally, while KP Pashtuns were less likely than non-KP Pashtuns to believe their ethnic group was treated fairly by the government, this difference is not statistically significant.

Taken together, qualitative evidence from our fieldwork and observational evidence from the survey data point to how a combination of instrumental and social psycho-

logical factors may contribute to greater acceptance of coethnic refugees among non-KP Pashtuns. These findings complicate the usual either/or distinction made about coethnicity in the existing literature on attitudes towards migrants. Rather than functioning as a consistent basis for in-group favoritism due to cultural similarity, coethnicity appears to be mediated by local demographic and institutional context – a finding in line with the literature on ethnic voting and ethnic demography (Kasara 2013; Ichino and Nathan 2013; Cammett et al. 2021; Posner 2005), as well as work that finds that Latinos who identify less with their ethnic identity are more restrictive on immigration policy in the US (Hickel et al. 2020). Among Pashtuns living as ethnic minorities, shared ethnicity with refugees may carry both strategic instrumental value and deeper symbolic resonance. Among those in majority settings, by contrast, coethnicity appears less politically salient and less likely to generate solidarity. These patterns underscore the importance of disaggregating host populations and examining how the meaning of shared ethnicity varies across space.

Conclusion

A vast body of literature on attitudes toward immigrants and refugees has underscored the importance of concerns about the cultural impact of primarily non-coethnic migrants settling in the Global North (Aviña et al. 2024). While few conjoint studies directly manipulate the ethnicity of hypothetical migrants, the implication of this work is that refugees who share the ethnic, religious, or cultural background of host populations—a common occurrence in many Global South contexts—should face less backlash. This assumption also appears in popular discourse; for example, some have speculated that Ukrainians were welcomed by many European publics because they are white and more culturally similar than, for instance, Syrians (Zaru 2022).

We test this idea by focusing on the case of Pakistan—which has hosted one of the world's largest refugee populations for decades, but remains conspicuously understud-

ied in the literature. Drawing on original qualitative, experimental, and observational evidence, we show that while coethnics are on average more accepting of refugees, this result obscures more than it reveals. On average, large majorities of coethnic host citizens still hold exclusionary attitudes – in fact, we find that coethnics who live in the ethnic homeland are sometimes less supportive of refugees compared to non-coethnics. Priming shared ethnicity does little to shift those views. To reconcile these patterns, we highlight stark differences between coethnics residing in their ethnic homeland and those living as minorities elsewhere. Coethnic hosts who are themselves local majorities (minorities) are significantly more likely to express exclusionary (inclusive) attitudes toward refugees.

These findings challenge the assumption that shared cultural ties inherently reduce threat or foster greater acceptance. Instead, we show that the political meaning of coethnicity is shaped by local demographic and institutional contexts. When coethnic hosts are a local majority and embedded in power structures, shared ethnicity does not meaningfully increase support for refugees. But when coethnic hosts are minorities – particularly in contexts marked by marginalization or discrimination – shared ethnicity may take on symbolic or instrumental value. This helps explain why coethnicity sometimes produces solidarity, and at other times, indifference or resentment.

This insight may travel to other contexts where refugees share ethnic or cultural ties with segments of the host population, including Turkey, Colombia, and parts of Europe. In each, early solidarity based on perceived similarity gave way, at least in part, to ambivalence or backlash, as in Pakistan. Our results suggest that while coethnicity can function as a resource for inclusion, its political significance is highly contingent. Future research should examine how the salience and consequences of shared identity vary across space and time, rather than assuming it exerts a consistent effect. Finally, while we offer suggestive evidence for both instrumental and social psychological logics underpinning coethnic solidarity, further research is needed to disentangle these mechanisms and assess their relative strength across settings.

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