

# A Look at the Conditions of Border Couriers (Kooleh-bars<sup>1</sup>) in Iran

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Border Couriering is a profession that some individuals on border regions resort to for making a living. Border couriering is a term used for the job in which people carry goods on their back. Civil institutions in Iran have always warned about the terrible conditions of border couriers. To-date many border couriers have lost their lives on treacherous and dangerous routes on the border regions. And threats such as landmines leftover from the Iran-Iraq War, mountainous dangers such as landslides and avalanches and or confrontation with border guards always threaten these individuals. Even though the Iranian government has prohibited firing on border couriers but in many instances it is difficult for border guards to distinguish border couriers from terror groups, particularly Iranian border couriers who prefer to move across the border at night.

A major part of border couriering activities is concentrated in regions away from official customs and points of entry, and according to the government's definition, border couriering is deemed as smuggling. The carrying of contrabands by border couriers and transporting contraband on backs of horses and mules from rough border region terrain into bordering cities and villages is one of the common methods for smugglers to transport their contraband goods.

According to assessments, approximately 3 billion dollars' worth of contrabands are smuggled through 12 unofficial points in four provinces of Kermanshah, West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Sistan and Baluchistan into Iran annually. According to the statistics of the director general of the Planning and Supervision of the Processes Bureau for the Office of Combat against Smuggled Goods and Currency, 90 percent of the profits from border couriering goes in the pockets of professional traffickers and 10 percent is distributed among 70 to 80 thousand active border couriers on the borders of the country.<sup>2</sup>

## Border Couriering and Violation of Human Rights within Iranian Laws

Border couriering threatens the human rights and right to life and right to employment. The border couriers' lives on dangerous mountainous routes are continually under threat. Furthermore, having a suitable job for border couriers is a very important human rights concern. All this is while Iranian laws clearly recognise the right to employment.

For example Article 77 of the Citizen's Rights Charter consider it the citizen's right to choose the job they like freely and without discrimination. No one can deny them this right on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender and or differences of opinion in political and or social views.<sup>3</sup>

### Organizing Border Couriering

In the smuggling process, border couriers a large volume of importing consumer goods into the country, spending a considerable amount of national income on smuggled items instead of leading the financial flow into production cycle. The profit which goes into the smugglers pockets, at the expense of others. This issue and the

bad conditions of the border couriers, is the violation of their basic rights by traffickers and leads to the sufferings of these couriers while crossings borders, therefore the government decided to address their situation and the cabinet of ministers' guidelines on the "addressing the exchanges in border temporary markets" was approved on 23 August 2017, and its generalities received the initial approval of the Parliament.<sup>4</sup> The cabinet's decision to organize the condition of border couriers<sup>5</sup> is something that some interpret as the official recognition of smuggling, but Ibrahim Zareiee, the director general of the Bureau for Planning and Monitoring of Customs, Trade and Economy Processes for the

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Office of Combat against Smuggled Goods and Currency, says that the aim of this new government policy is for the reduction of smuggling and registration of imported goods by border couriers and the separation of border couriers from smugglers.<sup>6</sup>

To address the situation, the government has made two series of decisions:

#### *a) New Government Decisions*

١ – Border couriers can sell goods that have entered the country through official border checkpoints in border markets, up to a specific value limit, and put the profits from the imports in their own pocket and not of smugglers.

٢ – Implementation of the "Border Street vending Trade" Plan with regards to dwellers in border regions of 4 provinces which results in border couriers to as well

as continuing their work as small traders, to import goods from the southern ports and benefit from customs and excise discounts by using “street vendors’ clearance credit card”.<sup>7</sup> (By replacing the word border courier with the word street vendor, the authorities are trying to give a status to these individuals and turn them into traders from carriers of goods.) This results in eliminating the expenses of storage, transport and customs, because now, with the implementation of the Border Trading Guidelines, customs and excise discounts from the imported goods are paid to the street vendors. In this plan the street vendors are a go-between traders and bazaaris.



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٣ – Creation of a safe path for border couriers to prevent these individuals from crossing dangerous and rough terrains.

٤ – Creation of markets on the border areas with customs and excise management. In this plan individuals who have 3 years of residence and are at least 20 kilometres from border’s ground zero in West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan and Kermanshah Provinces and also at least 50 kilometres from border ground zero in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, are eligible to receive trade discounts.

According to the guidelines approximately 500 thousand border region dwellers or 110 thousand households are included in this plan. Also according to the approval of the cabinet of ministers, border couriers who live in villages in the border regions of 4 provinces, per household will benefit from trade profit discount of the maximum of 28 million Rials per month.<sup>8</sup> One of the important advantages of these guidelines is facilitating internal transit. In fact the transfer of border dwellers’ needed goods are permitted from origins to bordering markets will lead to notable reduction in the final cost of items.

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#### ***b) Comprehensive Sustainable Development of Border Regions Draft Legislation***

In the Iranian Fifth Development Plan draft legislation and for the provision of sustainable security on the border regions and effective control of cities, the Interior Ministry has been tasked to draft a comprehensive plan on sustainable security on the border regions with the cooperation of Economic Affairs and Treasury, Justice, Information Ministries and the police force and other relevant ministries and organizations and have it approved by the National Security High Council, in a way that until the completion of the Plan, programmes adopted for controlling and monitoring the borders are fully implemented.

According to one of the articles of the Development Plan, any action taken at the borders and border regions will take place according to the programmes and indexes

that are included in this Plan. This Border Region Sustainable Development draft legislation has been designed by the Interior Ministry and is currently being reviewed by the cabinet of ministers' special commissions.

The draft legislation monitors the sustainable development of all border regions of the country. The realisation of this legislation and the sustainable development of border regions is dependent on the performance of the government and the overall economic growth of the country.

Challenges of the New Policy of the Government for Border Couriers

a) One of the most important challenges of this Plan is the opportunities created for smugglers by full implementation. Some border couriers are encouraged by smugglers to carry illegal goods into the country to receive higher payment, goods such as drugs, alcoholic beverages, weapons and ammunition, explosives. These border couriers who choose dangerous pathways and or endanger their lives by carrying illegal items from inaccessible regions face dangers such as falling off mountains, or getting caught in snowstorms and avalanches, risk of hitting landmines left over from the War, and in instances border couriers are mistaken for terror groups and might come under fire from border patrols, because telling border couriers apart from terror groups in rough mountainous terrains is very difficult, particularly at night.

b) Critics also raise the question that what solution has the government considered for ordinary people to be able to make a living without getting involved in security issues?

## Conclusion

In spite of technical and implementation challenges "Addressing Border Couriers' Conditions Plan" can be an effective action for the improvement of the living standards of border couriers and protecting their human dignity. Unfortunately, the return of United States' economic sanctions threatens the implementation of this Plan. Due to security conditions of borders of Iran and the continued attacks of terror groups, implementation of the plan by the government is not easily possible. Addressing the conditions of border couriers has been one of the demands of the people and civil institutions in Iran in the recent years, demands that can be a positive process for the removal of the border couriers' problems. Problems which not only undermine the human dignity of border dwelling Iranians but also affect their right to development.

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1-Those who carry goods on their backs illegally across borders

2-<http://www.ghatreh.com/news/nn43721926/%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B2%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B4-%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AF-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B2%DB%8C>  
<https://shahvand-newspaper.ir/1296/19/Main/PDF/13960519-1194-4-40.pdf>

3- <http://citizensright.ir/home/document/4765>

٤- <http://yon.ir/qJp5E>

٥- <http://yon.ir/DTKMN>

6 - <http://yon.ir/W7jRc>

7- <http://yon.ir/08QBR>

8 - <http://yon.ir/mr7m7>

9- <http://yon.ir/u5hJI>