

# The Impact of Sanctions on Refugees and Migrants in Iran

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The Impact of Sanctions on Refugees and Migrants in Iran

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*As part of our ongoing efforts to shed light on and challenge the systematic human rights violations of the most vulnerable people in Iran, due to unilateral/multilateral coercive measures, Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) has published a series of reports on the ways in which economic sanctions negatively impact the daily life of the civilian citizens in this country. **The first** volume in the series addresses the detrimental consequences of the imposed economic sanctions on “patients and the process of the production and distribution of medicines in Iran”; **the second** volume discusses “corruption and money-laundering” as a result of sanctions; **the third** volume centers on the economic sanctions forced upon Iran and its people, particularly by “banks and other financial institutions;” **the fourth** volume focuses on “the humanitarian consequences of sanctions”; and this issue as **the fifth** volume explores “the impact of sanctions on refugees and migrants in Iran”.*

# **The Impact of Sanctions on Refugees and Migrants in Iran**

## **A Brief about the Return of U.S. Sanctions on Iran**

1

Despite several IAEA reports on the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program, in May 2018, the US President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal which was signed in July 2015, between Iran and China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United State and the European Union (p5+1); and reinstated all the nuclear-related sanctions the US had committed to lift as part of the deal That is resolution 2231, was never implemented by the United States.

The renewal of sanctions against Iran raises the necessity of examining the human rights' impact of such restrictive punishments. The Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) has published various reports on the impact of sanctions on the economy, human rights, health, development etc. But this report deals with an issue that has received little attention from experts. That is, the impact of sanctions on livelihoods, health,



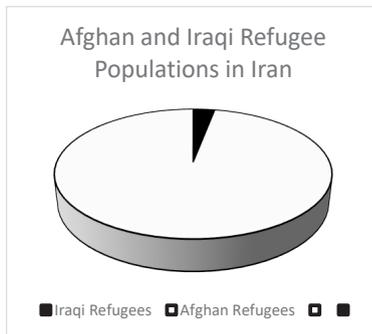
and education of immigrants and refugees who reside in Iran. The community who have been hosted in Iran for more than four decades are now under increasing pressure because of unilateral sanctions and severe human rights consequences.

## A Short Review on Refugees and Migrants in Iran

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The policy of open doors and facilitating laws made it possible for the Islamic Republic of Iran, to host one of the largest refugee populations in the world. Due to this policy, Iran has been generously hosting millions of refugees for the past four decades, mainly from Afghanistan and Iraq, and it is considered as the sixth largest protracted refugee hosting countries in the world.

According to the released statistics there are about one million Afghan and Iraqi registered refugees in Iran and around two million undocumented or unregistered ones (mainly Afghans). Most refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran reside in urban areas, and only 3% of them are resident in 22 refugee settlements (camps) in different provinces. As part of the government's efforts to regularize the documentation status of the Afghan population in Iran, an identification exercise was



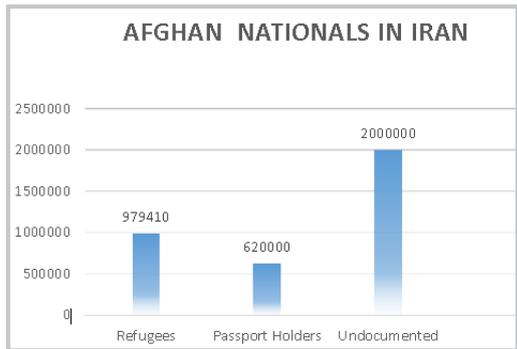
initiated in January 2017, gradually targeting different categories of undocumented Afghans. A complementary identification exercise for Afghans holding expired documents started in August 2017, in which approximately 800,000 individuals were identified.

The global economic downturn resulted by economic sanctions by the US against Iran since years ago have caused hyperinflation, and affected the delivery of basic services, which resulted in a dramatic rise in living costs in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

But the question is, what are the sanctions consequences? Why are refugees and immigrants more affected

than others? In what areas are refugees and immigrants most affected by the sanctions? and what are the implications for the host country in delivery services to these groups and vulnerable ones?

The current situation of refugees and migrants, residing in Iran, shows that the sanctions has imposed further pressure on them, and affected their ability to receive international refugee aid which some of them are highlighted below.



## The Impact of Sanctions on Refugees’ Right to Health

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Rights to healthcare and social security are guaranteed by the Article 29 of Iran’s Constitution, according to which refugees and migrants have been benefited from available health services. In recent years, Iran has provided free primary healthcare throughout the country and improved the quality and quantity of health services to a great extent. However, health insurance system of Iran has not provided a universal coverage yet. Most of uninsured people are from the lowest income groups. Given that the Iranian government is struggling to cover the health of its citizens, the problems of refugees and immigrants have naturally multiplied. In these circumstances, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) signed an agreement with the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Iran Health Insurance Organization, to provide insurance for around 92,000 refugees in 2019 in order to benefit from affordable health care. This refugees’ insurance programme which is one of the support-treatment programmes and provides help to vulnerable refugees in the past five years ago, does not include all vulnerable refugees and more than a double are excluded from this program. In spite of all the efforts made above, vulnerable people, especially



refugees and immigrants, are the most important victims of economic sanctions. With the expansion of the US economic sanctions against Iran, although the US claims that humanitarian items as well as medicines and medical equipment are exempted, but medicines prices in Iran have risen sharply due to Iran's financial and banking sanctions. This increase in prices has had a negative impact on immigrants more than anyone else. Due to banking exchange problems, Iran has faced challenges in importing

many emergency medicines. Unfortunately, in spite of all the efforts made, many refugees suffering from cancer diseases are not included in the health insurance plan implemented by UNHCR and Iran government. Therefore, medical treatment of these people has been challenging and their lives are at risk because of the rising costs of medicines and medical treatment. In the meantime, neither international organizations have been able to assist them, nor domestic hospitals.

The UN special rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures. Idriss Jazairy said:

*These unjust and harmful sanctions are destroying the economy and currency of Iran, driving millions of people into poverty and making imported goods unaffordable [...] The current system creates doubt and ambiguity which makes it all but impossible for Iran to import these urgently needed humanitarian goods. This ambiguity causes a 'chilling effect' which is likely to lead to silent deaths in hospitals as medicines run out[.]*

# The Impact of Sanctions on Refugees’ Livelihood

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The living standards, level of income and modest savings of Afghan workers, remitting money back to their families in Afghanistan, were severely affected by the hike in inflation, the rise in consumer prices and the devaluation of Iran currency. Due to this situation, wages have gone down since the beginning of new sanctions. It is difficult to determine the exact current amount of remittances, but according to the UN in 2008, the remittances sent from Iran amounted to US\$ 500 million, accounting for six percent of Afghanistan’s GDP .

Unsettled economic conditions and hard livelihoods in Iran have further affected Afghan immigrant families. According to the released report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2019, this organization is projecting a return of over 570,000 returnees from Iran due to ongoing economic challenges. Also, according to the another released report by IOM, from 1st December 2017 to 1st December 2018, total of 721,633 Afghans returned from Iran. Undocumented returns from Iran in particular are seeing a massive increase over previous years, largely driven by recent economic issues in Iran including massive currency devaluation. Given Afghanistan’s lack of infrastructure to

accommodate this large number of returnees, many refugees and immigrants are willing to migrate to European countries. This raises the risk of their detention and forced deportation as well as endangering their lives and property during the trip.

Due to this dramatic situation and decreasing demand for Afghan labor



in Iran's informal economy which had drastically fallen, vulnerable Afghan workers who cannot afford to return home or seeking to enter Turkey to reach Europe have to work even with lower salaries than before. Therefore, their living conditions in Iran are getting worse and worse and they are getting poorer

and poorer than they were before the sanctions.

As all Afghans typically send home their earnings in the form of monthly remittances, the Afghan economy itself, already evident in the drought affected provinces of Herat, Badghis and Ghor, is suffering direct and immediate effects.

On the other hand, the international assistance by the international

organizations decreased significantly. In this light, Secretary-General of Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Jan Egeland said: “Humanitarian organisations are left hamstrung by politically motivated sanctions that now punish the poorest. We have now, for a full year, tried to find banks that are able and willing to transfer money from donors to support our work for Afghan refugees and disaster victims in Iran, but we are hitting brick walls on every side.”

“ The Trump sanctions will put the Iranian economy into a void, and is doing that. (The people) who will first lose a grip on their existence are the Afghan registered and unregistered refugees and migrants,” he added.

“Refugee families are already skipping meals due to the growing economic crisis. They are selling the few assets they have to cover basic costs. Many Afghans that had some work in tailoring have been laid off because of sanctions that lead to workshop closures,” he added. “Our cash assistance programme allows thousands of families to cope with this worsening situation. This lifeline cannot be discontinued.”

## The Impact of Sanctions on Refugees’ Education

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With the efforts of NGOs and relevant authorities with the order of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Afghan refugees’ children’s rights to education in Iran has been confirmed.

With the decree of the Supreme Leader with regards to no Afghan child must be denied education in 2015, the opportunity for the education of Afghan children up to high school diploma was created. The annual education costs for these children is around 150 million US dollars, a tiny portion of which is provided by international organizations. But because of the US sanctions and the diminishing financial power of the Iranian government, it is expected that education services to foreign nationals will be severely affected. Although with the assistance of various international organizations such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), to an extent some of the educational problems, especially problems related to the most vulnerable refugees and migrants are resolved, but these assistances do not cover all refugees in all fields. For example, around 420,000 Afghan refugee children are able to enjoy state-run education system in the country.



Photo by Mandi Fakhrazadeh

National NGOs as well as the UN Refugee Agency, the families of refugees and foreign immigrants, prefer their children to work to help them with the cost of living, rather than continuing their education, because of the financial pressure imposed by US sanctions. Therefore, child labour among foreign nationals has increased dramatically, as a direct result of economic sanctions. The situation loads various governmental and non-governmental

organizations active protection of vulnerable groups particularly child labourers in Iran with more work.

In accordance with the official statistics, at the present time 85,000 children labourers, children with disabilities and their families receive different educational and health services via 500-day care centres. One third of street children and child labourers are girls and two thirds are boys. Also less than one third of them are Iranian, and more than two thirds of them are foreign nationals who do not have residency permits.

Iran government, with support of NGOs, has a variety of programs in place to support these children, including vocational training for children to empower them and provide them with access to formal education. However, the US unilateral sanctions on Iran make the programs face financial problems. Because of these pressures, government and NGOs may not be able to cover all immigrant children who are forced to work for various reasons.

## Conclusion

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Afghan refugees and immigrants in Iran make up the largest group of foreign nationals in the country. These people are forced to stay in Iran because of economic and security problems in their country as well as the intensification of border laws in Iran and prevention of their departure to Europe. They do not also receive direct financial assistance (such as the Iranian government's targeted subsidies) and the expansion of the US sanctions has directly threatened their livelihoods, and the continuation of the economic crisis created by these sanctions, has forced the refugee community to seek bitter solutions to resolve their economic problems. These solutions include denying children education and denying the wish for a better living for the third generation of refugees in Iran, places the third generation of migrants into working class, limits their access to medical care, reduces the purchasing power of the refugee community and their access to basic items including medicine, food

and clothes. In fact, the economic problems caused by sanctions deny a vast number of Afghan refugees of their basic rights such as the right to access job opportunities, the right to education, the right to health and even the right to food. Unfortunately, the number of these vulnerable individuals increases on a daily basis. Also, various studies show that the majority of Afghan refugees and migrants in the country are willing to tolerate the difficulties rather than trying to get to Europe. However, the low number of acceptances of Afghan refugees from Iran by Europe, the economic pressures in Iran and the lack of ways for the repatriation of those immigrants who prefer to move to Europe, will result in their being forced into illegal migration, which will most certainly cause dangers for them and their families.

## Recommendation

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While condemning unilateral sanctions, particularly those that directly and indirectly affect health and medical treatment, education and livelihood of refugees, migrants and civilians, ODVV makes the following recommendations:

- All aid organisations that are impacted by the consequences of existing sanctions, should be exempted and be able to continue delivery of their services to refugees and vulnerable persons.
- While appreciating the aid provided by the available active UN agencies, international organizations and donor countries including the EU, Japan, Norway, Belgium, France, Germany and Russian Federation in support of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran, we believe that it is necessary that these donors increase their support for the Afghan refugee and migrant community in Iran particularly in the field of health and medical treatment, education and livelihood.
- The U.S. and European donor governments must find ways to enable humanitarian organisations to operate. We need clear arrangements that will assure banks that they can move donor money into Iran for humanitarian purposes without fear of unlawful penalties.

- We call upon refugee host governments to increase their acceptance of Afghan refugees, particularly the most vulnerable groups in Iran.
- We call on the international community to support the reconstruction in Afghanistan to create a better basis for the repatriation of refugees to their country as a lasting solution.

## Sources:

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. For further information please see the following reports on the impact of sanctions published by the ODVV:

Report no. 1: Sanctions as Blatant Violation of Human Rights, September 2017

Report no. 2: Sanctions Crippling Human Rights, March 2018

Report no. 3: Economic sanctions, September 2018

Report no. 4: Humanitarian Consequences of Sanctions, March 2019

. Based on government figures 22% of refugees are vulnerable and in need of assistance. While, there is no statistic about undocumented ones.

. United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner website: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23469&LangID=E>

. 'Afghan Remittances from Iran Total \$500 Million Annually, Says UN Report', UN News Centre, 7 December 2008, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=29218#.V8lsXa1y4IQ>; cf.

Alessandro Monsutti, 'Cooperation, Remittances, and Kinship among the Hazaras', *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 2 (June 2004): 219–40, doi: 10.1080/0021086042000268183

. NRC website: <https://www.nrc.no/news/2019/august2/aid-work-in-iran-at-risk-due-to-u.s.-sanctions/>



