



**Refugees' Newsletter Issue No. 1**

**A Look at the General Situation of Afghan  
Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Migrants in  
the Islamic Republic of Iran**



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**ORGANIZATION FOR DEFENDING VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE**

**[www.odvv.org](http://www.odvv.org)**

## Introduction

As a non-governmental, non-political and non-partisan organization the Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) is in Consultative Status to ECOSOC<sup>1</sup>, and began its activities in 1988. In view of its membership in various international coalitions and networks that include IRCT and towards its mission, this NGO has always strived to include all groups of society in its working agenda, without discrimination and away from political environments, the ODVV supports these groups which include Afghan refugees and migrants. To achieve this objective, the ODVV has conducted various project over the years in support of this group, independently and also within the framework of bilateral and trilateral agreements.

Therefore, to this aim and for further introduction to the situation of these groups, the ODVV intends to study Afghan refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants conditions in Iran, so that a full picture of their conditions, for better and more effective support for these groups.

In the first issue of this analytical newsletter, the general conditions of Afghan refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in Iran and their living conditions will be discussed and reviewed and in future issues of this newsletter their cultural, social, political, economic and etc. conditions will be discussed and reviewed in more specific terms.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council

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## **1 – Arrival of Afghan Asylum-Seekers in Iran**

The geographical position of Afghanistan is in such way that this country has always been struggling with wars, political developments and insecurity. This problem has for years on end created displacement for millions of the citizens of the country and their refuge in other countries, namely Iran and Pakistan. The Islamic revolution in Iran and the adoption of open door policy and facilitating laws has resulted in Iran, today, to be the fourth most refugees' accepting countries in the world<sup>2</sup>, and the first country with the longest history in being host to refugees. The lack of noticeable improvement in the security, political and economic conditions of Afghanistan and also the return of

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<sup>2</sup> Considering undocumented Afghan refugees and those who have recently participated in the government's comprehensive census plan. Also, considering that the statistics have not been officially announced yet, this ranking is constantly changing.

the Taliban to power has resulted, with the passage of years has resulted 780thousand official refugees<sup>3</sup> and nearly five million undocumented Afghans to still reside in Iran.<sup>4</sup> The housing of around 96 to 97 percent of Afghan refugees in urban and rural areas and just around 3 to 4 percent of them in 22 refugee settlements is one of the most notable characteristics of the Afghan refugees in Iran.

The arrival of Afghan asylum-seekers in Iran can be broken down to the following periods:

- First period: Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the conflict from 1979 to 1989.
- Second period: beginning of the civil war in Afghanistan from 1989 to 1997.
- Third period: the emergence of Taliban from 1996 to 2001.
- Fourth period: US military attack against Afghanistan and fairly huge American presence in the country from 2001 to 2005.
- Fifth period: emergence of ISIS in the region and to an extent the rise of Taliban from 2006 till February 2022.

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<sup>3</sup> Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA) of Iranian Ministry of Interior (BAFIA)

<sup>4</sup> Although recently census has begun on the undocumented Afghan community in Iran, and Afghans participating in this programme receive six-month residency documents.

- Sixth period: Americans abrupt leaving of Afghanistan and re-emergence of the Taliban in the country, from early February 2022 onwards. In this period at some points between five to ten-thousand asylum-seekers entered Iran on daily basis. According to this report more than 70 percent of this population are from ethnic Hizara and Tajik, and the rest are other ethnic groups who are residing across Iran.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> UNHCR 2014



## **2 – Afghan Refugees and Asylum-seekers Issues in Iran**

Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers in Iran are faced with various cultural, social, political and economic issues which will be briefly looked at in this newsletter and in future issues of this newsletter each of these issues will be discussed deeply in more detail.

### **Cultural field**

The presence of Afghans in the cultural field with consideration of its meaningful diversity is very different. Cultural safety in fact is the immunity of the individual or community from any form of invasion and threat to the community's customs, beliefs and values. Considering the importance of this point, the preservation of cultural values has always been a priority.

In view of the strong commonalities between Afghan and Iranian cultures, there are lesser challenges in this field. But when it comes to Afghans marrying Iranians, due to the existing legal registration problems in the country we see that undocumented children are born into these marriages can create various identity, legal and social problems. One of these problems is the issuing of IDs, education, employment, national military service, driver's license, and dozens of other social problems. Each of these problems will be discussed in more detail in the future issues of this newsletter.

## **Social field**

The distribution of Afghans in cities has caused choosing to be separated from the rest of the population of many provincial towns around Tehran and other big cities in Iran. Migration has always caused various mental and psychological problems for not only the host society but also the migrants themselves. The concentration of migrants in impoverished regions and outskirts of cities mostly cause some social problems and crimes and also drug trafficking.

One of the most important problems in the social field is the expansion of living on the outskirts and the alteration of the population composition of the host society, particularly in villages and sparsely populated regions. Due to low income, Afghans cannot live in urban parts of cities and as a result mostly live on the outskirts of cities



and or remote areas and villages near cities, regions that do not have full city access. As a result the population density in these regions rises, the hygiene and medical treatment situation is undermined, measily jobs increase and as a result crimes and other illegal activities go on the rise.

## **Political field**

Throughout various periods and in view of the various crises that have occurred in Afghanistan, from the Soviet invasion to the Taliban retaking power, Iran has been host to a vast number of the citizens of this country. This means that there is a meaningful time symmetry between crisis in Afghanistan and increase in volume of continued migration. Therefore, in each point in time, migrants have carried a level of the political crisis and thus have had a role as the transferor in the levels of Afghans' migration to Iran. One of the most important of these crises which has resulted in the migration of Afghans to Iran, particularly in the post-Iranian revolution period, has been the Taliban taking power, their defeat and their continued presence and surfacing in Afghanistan's political scene. Thus the Afghans' migration flow, particularly to Iran is the result of this issue. Furthermore, the change of Iran's approach from open doors to restrictions on the entry of Afghan refugees into the country and limited rehousing of Afghans in other countries has not only not worked, but has caused in the growth of human trafficking networks

and increase in the problems of this group which as a result the figures for these migrants have become less clear. Also the ideological differences between the migrants and host country can create political problems for the host country.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, one of the main indicators of the new migrants' arrivals in Iran and their population composition in the last year, in proportion single person migration numbers are much higher than family migrations. Therefore, this population characteristic, has created various problems such as political ones.

All domestic decision makers and decision setters stress on the point that the illegal presence of Afghans in Iran can create various repercussions and challenges, particularly in the security area. The rise in the number of Afghan illegals in the country for various reasons such as not having full control of the border, visas running out and or failure to renew Amayesh Cards<sup>7</sup>, has resulted in the continued involuntary deportation of Afghans from Iran is another one of set programmes. Because of this, from 2005 till 2014, five million Afghan illegals alone were deported from Iran.<sup>8</sup> These deportations have often been without the approval of Afghans. In some instances, the men have been deported without their families, which not only fuelled the disapprovals, but also these deportations

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<sup>6</sup> Zarghami and Mousavi 18: 2022

<sup>7</sup> The card that Afghan refugees living in Iran receive and these cards are renewed annually by the Iranian government.

<sup>8</sup> Ekhlasipour, 146: 2016

have not been effective, because these individuals have done everything possible to illegally enter the country. This is while in view of these deportations, currently it is estimated that there are currently five million Afghans with various legal statuses in Iran which include undocumented ones.

### **Economic field**

In the economic field, as well as the importance of the existence of God-given resources and wealth, justice and fair distribution of wealth among the people is deemed as an important factor. Nevertheless and with the application of justice in the economic field, the important instability and insecurity factors, particularly in the financial aspect which is the general dissatisfaction will disappear.<sup>9</sup>

The economic sector of Iran in view of the Afghan community in the country and also this community's need for work and earning a living can be another of the important impacts of their presence in Iran. Considering that several refugees' repatriation programmes have taken place and the necessary conditions and facilities from the three sides i.e. the Iranian and Afghan governments and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) have been created for these repatriations and also services and aid continues, it seems that Afghan refugees in Iran who are approximately one million in number do not intend to

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<sup>9</sup> Jamshidian, 88: 2000

leave the country. Particularly that a notable number of them have spent over three decades in Iran and have found ways to make a living. Furthermore, the situation of Afghans undocumented or in the process of identification whose figures have still not clearly been announced, is not very clear. Therefore, in view of the repatriation of Afghans (not the illegals) has always been under the supervision of the UN, has been voluntary. It is estimated that there are no clear perspectives for their repatriation, particularly the fact that most of these refugees are second or third generation Afghans in Iran, and most of them have not even seen their homeland once in their entire lives, and do not have the inclination to return. The review of the various aspects of the impact of the presence of refugees in the country and such as their share in the economy, the basis for their more suitable integration, a minority group in Iran will be formed it can be said, will be facilitated. Something that the Iranian government has still not made a decision about.

A point that can be reflected upon is the livelihood and employment of Afghans in Iran the share of the employed youth compared to the past. Some figures indicate that the Afghan youth workforce has doubled over the past years. This is while these individuals are not much interested in working in arduous jobs like their fathers.

With a glance at figures and also the Afghan community in Iran and their geographical distribution it can be concluded that this distribution is not unison. This is while even in some villages and even city outskirts this dis-

unison is more visible. Furthermore, although the Statistics Centre of Iran in a general census of people and housing, has published notable figures, but due to various reasons such as distinction between registered and unregistered Afghans or in other words legal and illegal ones, these figures have made the assessment of the impact of the presence of Afghans in the Iranian economy more complex. Furthermore, the shortage or even lack of figures related to the employment of foreign nations income levels, lifestyles, consumer models have all added to this complexity. In the recent years the Iranian government has tried to through the organization of work permits to refugees, to remedy this problem. Nonetheless, in view of imposed restrictions on the employment of refugees in Iran has the right to reserve, practically a large number of them are not interested in working in jobs specified in the work permits or are not able to work in these jobs or not inclined to work in these fields. Therefore, these work permits in often cases are only imposed on the provinces as task and has brought a direct cost on the refugees also.

Low wages, the hard laborious work of migrants and refugees and in many instances the use of these workers for insurance coverages are some of the instances which bring down the total cost of production and the investment risks for production work have been reduced through the use of the refugees' workforce. The impact of this can be seen in the advancement of projects such as the

construction of municipal sewage/drainage system, dam construction and property development.

But in spite of these explanations and the said impacts, in the recent years, especially with rise in inflation, drop in Rial value and the imposed sanctions, the country faced different challenges, which also had an impact on refugees. These issues even at times was implemental in the rise in the number of Afghans returning to Afghanistan.

In view of the expansion of America's unilateral sanctions against Iran, exclusion of refugees in support programmes and government aid, and also their low wages compared to Iranians, the refugees' economic conditions have become more fragile than before. Perhaps at first glance their low wages can be deemed as one of production factors, but the fact is this cannot be seen as zero or one-hundred. In advanced lower income have big impacts on all costs and as a result the full price, but this issue cannot be generalized in all production parts in developing countries. For example, although jobs such as farming, brick baking and dairy farming, wages make up most part of expenses, but in property development, road construction and similar jobs, often it is refugees who are employed in these jobs, the impact of wages is not really noticeable to notably reduce the full cost of these services. This impact in view of the at least doubling of prices, particularly in the recent years and the relative stagnation of wages has become lower. Furthermore, since often Afghan workers are in unskilled jobs, the impact of this

difference in wages compared to Iranian workers again becomes lower. Therefore, these low wages although are effective in production but in view of the appearance of a large number of unemployed workers in the country and also most refugees not having any skills, their employment in the present conditions cannot make much impact on production. Particularly in a country which is facing sanctions and most small and large factories have been forced to shut down. Furthermore, due to their measly wages and also high inflation, the refugees' livelihood conditions have greatly been impacted. Which might lead to their unemployment and as a result poverty. Although, there are no clear figures regarding the employment rate of refugees in the country, but evidence shows that a major part of the employment of Afghans in Iran is first, in the construction industry, then farming and after that, municipal services and ultimately industry. In the recent years one positive change has helped increase various livelihood opportunities for refugees for their empowerment to achieve a worthy living and positive participation in the society that they live in through the passage of time the employment of refugees in skills and livelihood opportunities to find a sustainable solution for their conditions in their countries and or other countries (third countries).



### 3 – Recommendations

The reasons and factors in the migration of Afghans to Iran which was reviewed in this analytical newsletter, vary. These differences have caused the movement of various groups of Afghans into Iran which by being aware of them, better planning can be made in the social, economic and political fields. But beyond these factors it seems that the Iranian government has still not managed to reach a sustainable point for the presence of foreign nationals in the country. With regards to a permanent solution for refugees' issues what has officially been presented by UNHCR is: 1) voluntary repatriation to original country, 2) local integration, and 3) resettlement (sending refugees to a third country). Although these three proposals are faced with some problems the officials have made UNHCR to further deliberate, but in any event currently it seems that these three traditional solutions, if implemented correctly, can to a notable extent solve the



problems, although their success is dependent on the implementation of these solutions.

From the outset the Iranian government has viewed the presence of Afghans in the country as a temporary issue. Therefore, the government stresses on their repatriation more than any other proposed solutions. Therefore, one of the current situation reasons and rise in the number of illegal immigrants cannot be searched within this policy. But at the same time resettlement is one of the policies which the government approves and stresses on. But in view of lesser requests of refugees taking western countries, this solution has still not been implemented as a comprehensive solution and in practice this method does not lift the burden off the Iranian government's shoulders. But the other solution, local integration in other words, which Iran is not much inclined to implement, can perhaps be stressed on being the most applicable solution. A method which seems to creation opportunities is more than its challenges. In comparison with the other methods, local integration has had some repercussions for Iran and also bring about some concerns. Nonetheless hundreds of refugees for various reasons such as marriage have been granted Iranian citizenship and are accepted as Iranian citizens. But it is understandable in the event of the expansion of this plan and in view of the vastness of the border, this plan will also create unpredictable consequences. It is because of concern of these consequences that Iran still does not have a set and solid policy in confronting the migration phenomenon.

Organized granting of citizenship to Afghans especially to the group who have been educated in Iran and have been empowered, while benefiting from their services, the waste of financial resources which have been spent on their empowerment can be prevented and acquire a relatively cheaper workforce in comparison to Iranian citizens. Also, while paying income tax, these individuals can help the Iranian government in current harsh economic and sanctions conditions. Achieving these conditions and the presence of foreign nationals being in the country in an organized way and benefiting from the conditions of this presence requires concentrated and comprehensive planning which will not happened unless it is under the supervision of a large organization with full control who can identify all opportunities and challenges of this presence, and make planning for them. But in view of the complexity of the situation of foreign nationals in Iran, for planning and organizing of their presence the experiences of other countries can be benefitted from. Aside from the aforementioned issues, the passage of time will result in change in conditions and therefore planning must be made in proportion with the current times. Presently, America and other countries' policies, have an impact on Iran's plans and policies. For example, America's unilateral sanctions against Iran on one hand, and the creation of conditions for the reappearance of the Taliban on the other hand, all have resulted in Iran to take a cautious approach with regards on planning for refugees. The reduction of America's unilateral and illegitimate

sanctions against Iran can bring about a brighter future for Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers in Iran.



## 4 – Conclusion

Over consecutive years of civil and international wars, the presence of superpowers and extremism in Afghanistan has caused for the exodus of its citizens from the country in every period of time, and their entry into other countries such as Iran. These factors have resulted in Afghanistan being known as “migrant exporter” country today, and our country’s authorities and even the EU have been forced to reduce the number of refugees they are willing to accept. The presence of Afghan migrants in Iran has been so prolonged that a new world record has been broken, and Iran is known as the country for being host to refugees for the longest time. Just in one period in time between 2002 and 2007 – following the defeat of the Taliban – Afghan refugees returned to their country in masses. But after a couple of years, slowly the hope for the return of refugees faded away and in view of inadequate reconstruction of

Afghanistan and also failure for the realisation of their expectations, not only this trend reached a very low point but the return was reversed. This shows that the unsuitable political, economic and social conditions of Afghanistan and the stark difference of living conditions in Iran. For this reason, some of the critics are opposed to any supportive programmes for refugees in the country, they believe that any form of support inside the country is an obstacle in the way of the refugees' return to their country and their presence in the country will increase security, social and economic problems. This issue alongside the disheartening of those who had returned to their country, resulted in the vast illegal entry to Iran. This wave of returnees to Iran continued from 2007 to 2010, to an extent that nearly 2 million illegally entered the country. This is while the government could not have expanded security control over them. These issues resulted in the population density in some regions to get out of control and even in some instances the Afghan population was more than the local Iranian population. This trend increased between 2021 and 22 with the re-emergence of the Taliban, which impacted the cultural, political, economic and social conditions of Afghans in Iran.

At the end it can be said that the migration issue extensively in all the subjects which was referred to, have impacted Afghans in Iran in an uneven ups and downs way, which will be discussed separately in detail. Therefore, it is necessary that each of these fields to be separately and expertly discussed and reviewed so that

both Afghan nationals' problems in various economic, social, cultural, and political fields are reduced also the Iranian government is able to make better planning in this regard and also other national and international partners provide better support for the government and Afghan nationals in Iran.

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