

**A Glance at Livelihoods Situations of
Afghan Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and
Immigrants in Iran**



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ORGANIZATION FOR DEFENDING VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

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Foreword

The Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) is a non-governmental, non-political, and non-profit organization in special consultative status to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) and was established in 1988 in Tehran. Due to its membership in a few international coalitions and networks and in line with its main mission, this organization has always strived to include all groups of society in its working agenda, without discrimination and away from political environments. Therefore, it has offered support to all such groups, including Afghan asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants. To achieve this goal, the organization has conducted various projects over the past years, both independently and within the framework of numerous bilateral and trilateral agreements, to support such groups.

For this end, and to shed lighter about these groups, the ODVV is planning an expert study of conditions that govern Afghan asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants in Iran. The main goal is to come up with a complete analysis of their situation to provide such groups with better and more effective support.

In the first issue of this analytical booklet, the general conditions of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran and their living conditions are discussed and reviewed; in the second issue of this newsletter, the education of these groups was reviewed and, in the 3rd, issue the health and

treatment conditions of Afghan asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants in Iran was reviewed. In this issue also their livelihoods situations are discussed and reviewed.

Introduction

Iran has always been one of the largest refugee populations host in the world, that is, the Afghan refugees with the longest refugee history that dates back even before the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

Despite all the efforts made both at the level of international organizations such as United Nations agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations and at the level of intergovernmental cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and other involved countries, the socio-economic conditions in Iran as well as some foreign sanctions have caused Afghan refugees and immigrants in Iran face various challenges to benefit from job opportunities. On the other hand, these conditions have caused an additional burden on the Iranian government to provide for their needs. In this situation, refugees and especially asylum seekers and immigrants, as foreign nationals in general, are more at risk of not having equal access to available services and facilities, including job opportunities, loans, credits and other financial support that can lead to their poverty.

Therefore, in this booklet, an attempt has been made to discuss various aspects of this case and the problem of the residence of foreign nationals in Iran.

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Economy, Livelihood and Employment of Afghans in Iran

Access to the job market and jobs shapes the poverty pillar of the residency of Afghans in Iran, an issue which has a determining role in the long-term residence of Afghans in Iran. In view of the developments in Afghanistan in different periods of time, still the conditions and opportunities in Iran compared to Afghanistan are such that in spite of all existing problems these individuals whose numbers according to conducted headcount and without including undocumented individuals reaches to three and a half millions, do not intend to leave the country; particularly a large portion of them have spent most of the four decades in Iran and have found ways to provide their own income. On the other hand, the situation of undocumented (illegal) Afghans, which some estimate

to be more than a million, is not very clear.¹ Therefore since the repatriation of refugees (not the illegals) has always been under the supervision of the UN and been on voluntary basis, it is estimated that there is no clear perspective for their return, especially when most of them are second and third generation Afghans and have not even travelled to their country once. The study of the various aspects the impact of the presence of refugees in the country and such as their share in the economy, will create the foundation for their more suitable integration, who will form a notable minority in Iran. It's a subject which the Iranian government has still not made a decision on in the quality and quantity aspects. A look at the statistics and figures on the employment and unemployment rate of Afghans in the country can be more helpful in our understanding of the livelihood situation of this group. With a look at the latest published official figures, it has been attempted for this issue to be discussed and studied.

¹ According to official figures 780,000 Afghan refugees have Amayesh Cards and approximately 2,200,000, who have participated in this year's headcounts live in Iran. But still it is estimated that there is another more than a million Afghans are in Iran who did not take part in any headcounts or the census.

Table 1: The 10-year-old and above population of foreign nationals based on activities situation for 2011 and 2016

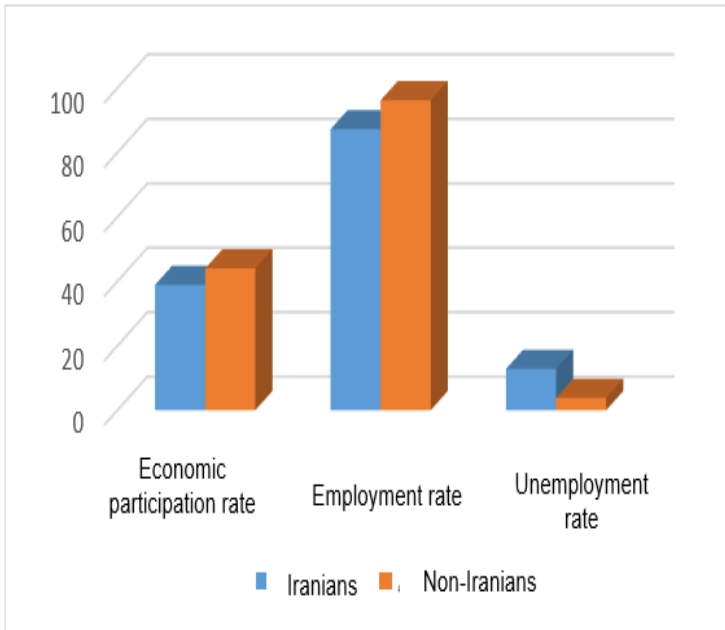
Year	Grand Total	Active Population			Inactive Population	No Mentioned
		Grand Total	Employed	Unemployed		
2011	1281772	507880	470610	37270		71954
2016	1273211	560040	538646	21394	704665	2506

Source: Census Centre of Iran 2016

The foreign nationals' active population in 2016 is equal to 560,040 which compared to 2011 has increased by 10.3 percent, this is while the employed foreign nationals' population in 2016 has had a 14.5 percent increase compared to 2011 and opposed to that the unemployed foreign nationals' population in 2016 was faced with a drop of 42.6 percent.

In 2016, the inactive population is at 704,665 which compared to 2011 has dropped by 0.4 percent.

Chart 1: Manpower based on nationality – 2016



Source: result of Population and Property Census in 2016 – Census Centre of Iran

Table 2: Employed population of the country and foreign nationals in the youth ages – years 2011 and 2016

Year	Age group	Employed		
		Country's total	Foreign nationals	Percentage
2011	Total	29546874	470610	2.3
	15 to 24yo	2247505	85868	3.8
2016	Total	22670988	538646	2.4
	15 to 24yo	1869323	147432	7.9

Source: result of Population and Property Census in 2011 and 2016 – Census Centre of Iran

From the foreign nationals in the country, 583,646 of them are in employment which makes 2.4 percent of the share of the total number of employed in the country; also, the number of foreign nationals in employment for the 15 to 24 age range is equal to 147,432 which is equal to 7.9 percent of the youths of the country. Thus, it can be said that jobs have been taken away from Iranian youths to this amount.

The thing that can be pondered is that the share of foreign youths' employment (15 to 24 age range) in 2016 doubled compared to 2011. Of course, the presence of foreign

nationals in the country is more notable when positions are filled by foreign nationals who have the same skills and expertise as the Iranian workforce. It is supposed that this rate is continued in the recent years as well, while no official statistics released by the relevant bodies.

Table 3: Population and indexes of the country's workforce – 2011 and 2016

Year	Economic activities of 10-year-old and over population				Population unemployment	
	Total		Without including foreign population		Total	
	Active population	Economic participation rate (%age)	Active population	Economic participation rate (%age)	Unemployed population	Unemployment rate (%age)
2011	24106896	38.12	22879753	38.08	3560022	14.77
2016	2592903	39	25369163	38.9	3258215	12.6

Source: Calculation of index basis, results of general population and property census 2016

According to the conclusions of the above table and with the assumption of not being able to replace the domestic workforce it can be seen that in 2016 on one hand, the exit of foreign nationals from the country's job market has

resulted in 0.1 percent drop in the economic participation rate and on the other hand has caused 0.2 percent rise in the unemployment rate.

In view of the abovementioned data, it can be understood that Afghan nationals who make up the largest foreign population in Iran and mostly live in the eastern provinces of the country or the suburbs of big cities have managed to have job opportunities in various sectors (mainly farming, construction and municipal services). What is clear for the people is the hardworking presence of Afghan labourers in the construction sector, to an extent that many experts believe constructions that have been completed in the last three-four decades in the country have been through the hard work of Afghan migrant workers (BAFIA website, 2017).

With a look at the above statistics and figures and the Afghan population and their geographic dispersity it can be concluded that this dispersity does not have a pattern. This is while even in some villages and city suburbs this dispersity (unevenness) is very noticeable. On the other hand, although the Census Centre of Iran according to this general census of the population and property, has published interesting statistics and figures, but due to various reasons these statistics that include not separating between registered Afghan nationals and nonregistered ones or in other words legal and illegal ones, it has made the assessment of the presence of Afghans in the Iranian economy with some complexities. Furthermore, the shortage or even lack of statistics and figures related to the

employment of foreign nationals, wages levels, lifestyle, consumption patterns etc. particularly in the last couple of years, it has further added to this complexity. Whereas in the recent years the Iranian government has tried through arranging work permit cards for refigures, to clear this problem. Nonetheless in view of the applied restrictions on the employment of refugees in Iran, in practice the majority of them for whom the work permit cards has defined certain professions, either cannot work or do not have any inclinations to work in any of these professions. Therefore, in most instances these cards are imposed on the provinces as just a routine and have created direct costs on the refugees and causes them dissatisfaction. Pressures on provincial authorities to precisely observe the labour laws has probably added fuel to this dissatisfaction and even cause further problems particularly in the security field. Due to these issues, we do not have comprehensive research on the impact of the presence of refugees in the country's economy, although some of the conducted researches have remained at local and or provincial levels. But on the other hand, most of the researches in this regard which have been done on the economic impact of migrants on the host country have been in developed countries, the results of which have shown the presence of migrants have had positive effects on the country's economy (Farhang, Omid, 30:1375).

Low wages, hard work of migrant and refugee workers, and in most cases not providing insurance for these workers are some of instances which bring down the

production costs and investment risks for manufacturing jobs through the use of this refugee workforce. The impact of this problem can be seen in the advancement of projects such as the city sewage system construct and development construction projects.

But despite these explanations and the impacts which were detailed, in the recent years, especially due to the rise in inflation, drop in the value of Rials against the dollar and imposed sanctions, has put the country against various challenges, which has also had an impact on refugees. These issues even resulted in a rise in the number of Afghans returning to their country. In this regard, according to Lawrence Hart² in 2018 in total 773,125 Afghan refugees voluntarily or involuntarily left Iran, which is 66 percent more than the previous year. He deems the reason for this being a drop in economic opportunities in the region, especially in Iran (Deutsche Welle, 2019).

With a look at the sanctions issues and challenges created for refugees and also their lower wages compared to Iranians, we'll see that their economic situation has suffered more than before. Maybe at first glance their low wages can be seen as one of the production factors, but the fact is that this issue cannot be seen as a zero or one hundred. In advanced countries low incomes greatly affect the total expenses and as a result the total cost, but

² Lawrence Hart, IOM's Afghanistan Chief of Mission and Special Envoy

this does not apply to all manufacturing spheres in developing countries. For example, although in some professions such as farming, brickworks and dairy farming wages make up a major part of expenses, but in construction, road construction and similar professions in which most refugees are employed in, the effect of wages are not very noticeable so that the full cost of these projects notably decrease. This impact in view of the doubling of prices, especially in the last few years and wages relatively remaining fixed have become less. Furthermore, since Afghan labourers mostly work in unskilled jobs, the impact of the difference between their wages and Iranian labourers again becomes less. Therefore, lower wages although is influential in production but in view of the high number of unemployed labourers in the country and also most refugees not having any skills, their employment impact, in the current economic inflation and the closure of some small and big workshops and factories, have been less on production and furthermore some refugees and migrants – particularly those who are skilled have left the country. Therefore, those that have remained in the country particularly Afghan refugees due to these issues and high inflation, their livelihood situation has been impacted heavily. Perhaps with the continuation of the current unemployment trend and ultimately their poverty will follow. The employment of foreign nationals including refugees as well as the human aspects, is dependent on the country's economic-social conditions and interest; in such way that with a change in these conditions, their situation

is also affected. Although there are no accurate figures regarding the employment levels of refugees in the country, but evidence points to the fact that the main part of Afghans' employment in Iran is in the construction, followed by farming and then public services and ultimately the industry. In the recent years the approach of government departments for the creation of an open educational and professional environment for refugees, has created various livelihood opportunities for them. With the passage of time, employment of refugees in their skills and livelihood opportunities to find a lasting solution for their situation in their own country or elsewhere.

Recommendations

- *Changing some laws for refugees:* unfortunately some laws, especially regarding the employment of foreign nationals even though they are not applied or are applied in a limited way, upsets the refugees' community and the foreign nationals of the country, and created confusion among the executive officials; because in some provinces their implementation results in tension between the refugee and the host community and are not implemented in some provinces resulting in shaming with regards to failure to apply the law. But it is necessary for laws to be adopted so that first be applicable and secondly to also consider the residency and livelihood status of foreign nationals to be considered. Some of the instances that can

be pointed out include amendment of regulations regarding employment of refugees and setting authorized jobs based on the realities of society.

- *Income tax deductions for foreigners:* with regards to the livelihood of refugees in Iran, one of the instances which a cause for concern for them is the payment of annual fees, especially when renewing their Amayesh Cards, which imposes a noticeable financial cost on the refugees' families. Instead of receiving municipal fees and taxes, with the cooperation of relevant bodies, BAFIA get taxes from the income of refugees. This method can reduce most of the dissatisfactions and those that are not able to work will be exempt from paying taxes and fees, and ultimately vulnerable groups can be identified much more easily and reduce the pressures they are under and also executive officials.
- *Vocational trainings and creation of livelihood opportunities:* according to UNHCR studies, the creation of conditions for repatriation is the best lasting solution for refugees. This will not happen unless the refugees' skill levels are raised in the host country. These studies show that refugees who are able to create and preserve livelihood properties, are more likely to return to their country when satisfactory security is established. Nonetheless, in view of the noticeable generosity of the Iranian government, the living conditions of Afghan refugees has been affected by the targeted subsidies, the COVID-19 pandemic, global economic recession and the increasing of international sanctions. In the lack of an aid

network and other social support services, the income of the majority of refugees, is further threatened due to lower income and no access to financial and credit services which are available to the host society. Therefore, the security threat issue, growth of drug trafficking and criminal activities by foreign nationals will follow suit. To this aim from around September 2014 the number of officially permitted occupations available to refugees was increased by the Iranian government and their access to demand focused skills have increased. Therefore, technical and professional training for refugees can while creating conditions for them staying in one place will bring about the opportunity that in the event of their return to their country, they can be integrated based on their own skills, and not be forced to return to Iran again.

-Easing of issuing visas to job applicants: easing the issuing of visas and ensuring the job applicants can travel to the country with ease will result in them to step up and renew their visas before they expire and avoid residing in the country illegally. This will result in the legitimacy of Afghan economic migrants' residency and as a result prevent other problems from arising in the country.

Conclusion

Afghanistan, a country that for continuous years has been struck with domestic and outside wars and conflicts, its infrastructures have seriously been damaged and because

of this most of the provinces of this country the conflicts have not even allowed for the infrastructures to be reconstructed. Although at times hopes have been raised for reconstruction and stability in security, but after a while these hopes have faded away because of international and external reasons and left the people with no choice but to migrate from their homes. These conditions have resulted in Afghanistan, according to UNHCR, with 2.6 million refugees to be the second country in the world with the largest number of refugees, after Syria (because of the war against ISIS) with a population of over 6.3 million refugees. Iran which is a neighboring country of Afghanistan alongside Pakistan has taken in the largest number of Afghan refugees. Thus, people who have entered Iran, either conditions have not been available for their return, or after returning to Afghanistan, have returned to Iran due to problem. Therefore, the existing conditions has made people to get jobs in different fields to be able to live, something that has both given the host society opportunities and also challenges. Therefore, benefiting from existing potentials in both communities and the use of the recommendations of experts can be planned in such way that it can both have the satisfaction and benefit of the host and guest communities.

Resources and References

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