



GUESTS OR TRASH

Iran's precarious policies towards the Afghan refugees
in the wake of sanctions and regional wars



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INTRODUCTION

Among refugees entering Europe in 2015, Afghans constituted the second-largest group after Syrians, amounting to more than 178,000 people.¹ Although most of them are fleeing the war and insecurity in Afghanistan, many of the Afghan asylum seekers in Europe come from Iran, where they have lived for a long time; some were even born there. Unlike the Afghans from Afghanistan they do not flee an immediate war, but Iran's conflicting and harsh policies towards the Afghan refugees and migrants have contributed to pushing them towards Europe. From a European perspective it is therefore very relevant to understand the dilemmas and hardships Afghans face in Iran, because increasing numbers of Iranian Afghans are seeking asylum in Europe.

The report will discuss the contradictory policies of the Iranian state towards the Afghan refugees and migrants; their experiences of living in Iran, and the geopolitical crises they are immersed in. After hosting millions of Afghans for several decades, Iran's increasing unwillingness to do so has been heavily affected by Iran's international crises: the nuclear crisis and subsequent sanctions, and Iran's involvement in the war in Syria.

According to UNHCR, in 2015 there were 951,142 registered Afghan refugees in Iran,² many of whom are second or third generation; but on top of that a further 1.4-2 million Afghans live in Iran as undocumented migrants.³ During the last four decades the Iranian state has, on the one hand, provided the Afghans with protection and state benefits such as education and health services, which have been 'unprecedented' in comparison to other countries with large number of refugees. A former international NGO official says: 'In spite of the challenges, when it comes to

large number of refugees, Iran remains one of the best countries to be a refugee in'.⁴ On the other hand, Iran continuously treats the Afghans as disposable, second-rate human beings. Afghan refugees and migrants recount endless experiences of discrimination and racism, from the government as well as the population, police brutality, and the structural violence of state bureaucracy.

Coinciding with Iran's nuclear crisis, during the last ten years Iran has forcefully deported hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants, and has also heavily encouraged documented Afghans to leave by enforcing tougher regulations and restrictions. Iran's nuclear crisis has worsened the situation for Afghans, in part because Iran – when faced with the threat of a US military attack launched from Afghanistan – used the deportations as a geopolitical tool to pressurise the Afghan government. Partly, also, the international sanctions on Iran have strongly lowered the Afghans' living standards and affected their ability to receive international refugee aid.

Secondly, the Syrian crisis has affected Iranian Afghans greatly, because Iran's involvement in the Syrian war now extends to recruiting Afghans as foot soldiers.⁵ Iran's coercive drafting policies are an important factor in pushing larger numbers of Afghans to seek asylum in Europe.

With the nuclear deal concluded in July 2015 (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), and the sanctions lifted in January 2016, the EU can enhance the trade and cooperation with Iran, also in regard to the situation of Afghan refugees. Although the nuclear deal, the lifting of sanctions, and President Rouhani's pragmatic approach have made a positive impact, many Afghans still face a lot of difficulties in Iran, which the EU should address when re-engaging with Iran and when receiving Afghan refugees from Iran. However, while it is crucial to criticise some of Iran's policies towards the Afghan refugees and migrants, the EU also needs to recognise that the international nuclear sanctions on Iran have profoundly contributed to the worsening of their situation.

Apart from secondary literature, the report is based on interviews with international refugee organisations in Iran, policymakers at the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an Iranian NGO working with Afghans in Iran, journalists at BBC Farsi and interviews with Afghans in Denmark who were born and raised in Iran, and have fled Iran within the last 4-7 years (several of them still have family residing in Iran). It is also based on conversations with experts on Afghan migration, Danish refugee organisations and activists, and on Iranian and Afghan newspaper clippings from the BBC Monitoring Iran archive. Due to the sensitivity of the topic most of my interviewees will be kept anonymous.⁶

A HISTORY OF UPS AND DOWNS

The history of Afghan refugees and migrants residing in Iran is a long and contradictory one. While the migrant cycle of 'coming and going' (raft o âmad) of seasonal labourers from Afghanistan to Iran has been a way of living for many Afghans historically, Iran's housing of Afghan refugees on a massive scale began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.⁷ Coinciding with the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, during the 1980s the Iranian government welcomed 3–4 million Afghans, who were fleeing the anti-religious brutality of the Soviets. They were granted 'blue cards' as mohâjerin (refugees exiled for religious reasons); were allowed to work and stay indefinitely and they were eligible for a number of state benefits including free education and subsidised healthcare, food and fuel. Unlike in Pakistan, where the Afghans were predominantly based in refugee camps, in Iran they were free to settle all over the country, and currently only 3% live in settlements.⁸

The 1980s was definitely the 'heyday' of Afghans in Iran. Although Iran was fighting a devastating war with Iraq in 1980–88 and received very little international refugee aid, it still hosted the largest number of refugees in the world at the time (peaking in 1991 with approximately 3 million Afghan and 1.2 million Iraqi refugees).⁹ 'During the Iran–Iraq war, everybody was hit by the war. But we were treated like normal people. A government hospital operated my brother for free when he was injured. Life was that nice', S recalls, an Afghan refugee in Denmark who was born and raised in Iran.¹⁰

The situation changed gradually during the 1990s, where the government cut a number of state benefits. By 1992 the government no longer automatically granted permanent residence rights to Afghans arriving in Iran, and it initiated the first so-called 'forced voluntary repatriation' programme - despite the fact that Afghanistan was immersed in a civil war (1992–1996).¹¹ The reign of the Taliban (1996–2001) increased the conflict between Iran and Afghanistan. It created a new wave of refugees, who were not allowed to seek asylum (although many had valid asylum claims), and became undocumented migrants instead. The 1998 tragedy in Mazar-e Sharif in particular – where the Taliban killed ten Iranian diplomats, 35 truck drivers and one journalist – added to the animosity and Iran's domestic political pressure to get rid of the Afghans. As S puts it: 'the attitude in society changed when the diplomats were killed in 1998. People would beat us in the streets, even our friends'.¹²

REPATRIATION, RESTRICTIONS, RIGHTS

After the toppling of the Taliban at the end of 2001, the main policy of the Iranian government has been to repatriate as many Afghan refugees and migrants as possible – a policy largely backed by the UNHCR, which has been present in Iran since 1983. The measures undertaken have been a combination of voluntary repatriation programmes of registered refugees, forced deportations of undocumented migrants, and cutting of subsidies and state benefits like healthcare provision and free education.

From 2002 to the end of 2005 nearly 850,000 Afghans returned with the assistance of UNHCR's repatriation programmes, conducted as part of the 'Tripartite Agreement' between Iran, Afghanistan and the UNHCR (and just as many returned without any assistance).¹³ While the repatriation programmes made sense in this period, when the future of Afghanistan looked promising, as the security situation deteriorated the voluntary returns diminished dramatically. The numbers nose-dived from 63,559 in 2005 to 5,264 in 2006. According to UNHCR, in 2006–10 between 3,600 and 8,500 returned voluntarily each year. In 2011, 18,851 decided to do so, and in 2012, 15,006 Afghan refugees repatriated,¹⁴ whereas in 2014, only 4,456 did so with the support of UNHCR.¹⁵

Since the first large-scale registration procedure in 2000, the Iranian government have tried hard to register, regulate and clarify the legal status of refugees and migrants, while doing so in such bureaucratic and expensive ways, that these procedures in themselves have become obstacles to staying. From 2003, Afghan refugees – who had been granted residency in the 1980s – had to re-register in the

system of amâyesh, granting them short-term residence permits, which they then had to extend continuously.¹⁶ From 2003 to 2015 there have been ten such different re-registration exercises.¹⁷ Many Afghans who were accepted as refugees in the 1980s have lost their residence permit along the way due to arbitrary police encounters, when going to Afghanistan voluntarily, or because they could not afford to renew it.

Afghans arriving after 2003 have not been able to register under the amâyesh scheme, deeming them 'refugees', and Iran, with very few exceptions, has not accepted any asylum claims since – a practice often criticised by international human rights organisations.¹⁸ 'Pretty much everyone that enters the country from Afghanistan at the moment is considered an "illegal" migrant and at risk of immediate deportation if caught', a former international NGO official says.¹⁹

Since 2009 Iran has attempted to legalise the presence of the undocumented Afghans.²⁰ From 2010, Afghans working irregularly in Iran have been encouraged to register for a short-term residence permit. However, in order to do so they needed an Afghan passport (so they had to travel back to Afghanistan in order to get that) and an Iranian visa (for single men that too has to be obtained in Afghanistan).²¹ All in all a very bureaucratic and expensive exercise, which often involves huge amounts of bribing. In 2010–12, 560,000 regularised their status, but the political negotiations over how this should best be done continue.²²

While many went back to Afghanistan after 2001, the increasing insecurity and lack of financial and social structure made many Afghans return to Iran, this time, however, as undocumented migrants.

The focus on repatriation as the only solution has been criticised by international experts,²³ but also, clearly, from within Iran. 'Is the repatriation policy successful? Not at all', an official at the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me in February 2015, shortly before Afghanistan's President Ghani was to visit Tehran. 'Repatriation should be voluntary, as the UNHCR says. Afghanistan should pave the way for people to return. But they are not ready'. As a consequence, he said, 'we are trying to legalise the presence of illegal Afghans. It is a very important issue. It is not possible to send them all back. We have to work with the Afghan government, but they are not ready to work with us'.²⁴

In February 2015, the director of an Iranian NGO working with Afghans said: 'The repatriation policy failed'. She emphasised that while many went back to Afghanistan after 2001, the increasing insecurity and lack of financial and social structure made many Afghans return to Iran, this time, however, as undocumented migrants, which means that people, who have lived 25–30 years in Iran, now do so with no legal documents.²⁵ Therefore, the repatriation programmes not only send people back to Afghanistan – more or less elegantly – but they also form part of a state mechanism, which produces and enlarges the category of 'illegal migrants'. As Professor Olszewska, an expert on Afghans in Iran, says: "illegality" is a convenient category that has been actively produced by the state for its own purposes', one of which is to make people deportable by retracting their legal status and rights. 'The line between "legal" and "illegal" immigration is often fragile', she reminds us. 'Even for documented Afghans, "legality" is a difficult status to maintain or prove and is itself not a guarantor of many freedoms'.²⁶

The legalising of undocumented Afghans is also complicated by Iran's strict regulations on mixed marriages, i.e. for Iranian women who marry foreigners, and the children of these marriages. According to Iran's nationality law, Iranian women cannot pass on their citizenship to their children. So when Iranian women marry Afghan refugees, or, even worse, undocumented Afghan men, not only do many of the marriages remain unregistered, but their offspring do not receive any birth certificate or citizenship. The same goes for children born of undocumented Afghan parents.²⁷ In effect, they remain stateless. These regulations have been much debated and in September 2015 MPs put forward a bill to reform the law, but it was voted down, citing concerns for Iran's 'national security', and a fear that the amendment would increase immigration and illegal marriages.²⁸

Adding to the pressure on the Afghans to leave, during the last ten years the Iranian government has limited Afghans' freedom of movement and property ownership. Out of concern for Iran's 'national security', the 'public interest', 'public safety' and 'health risks', in 2007 the Supreme National Security Council declared a number of provinces 'no-go areas' for foreigners.²⁹ Afghans who resided in these areas were ordered to move to other designated areas. If they did not do so, they were arrested and deported to Afghanistan. Currently, no-go areas exist in 28 out of the country's 31 provinces (either partially or completely), and Afghans are required to obtain a written permit to travel from one district to another.³⁰ Also, Afghans are not allowed to own anything – be it land, a house, a car or even a SIM card for a mobile phone. They need to register all property in Iranian names; they are not allowed to open a

bank account, nor hold a driver's license. Also, since registration became mandatory, it has been a criminal offence for Iranians to employ and accommodate illegal, undocumented Afghan workers.³¹

Afghan refugees' access to education in Iran has been 'the single most important transformation that Afghan refugees in Iran have experienced', Zuzanna Olszewska says. But when Iran began to roll back Afghan state benefits, free education was also reduced. Although Afghan children with residence permits were still allowed to enrol in schools, as part of the repatriation policy from 2004 on they had to pay a tuition fee, which meant that 'a hundred thousand Afghans were forced to drop out of school'.³² Until 2005 Afghan refugees were able to register their children in either Iranian schools or Afghan-run private schools (also admitting undocumented children, although clandestinely), but from 2006 the private Afghan schools have been periodically closed down, and for a long time the undocumented children had little or no access to education.³³

Afghan refugees' access to education in Iran has been 'the single most important transformation that Afghan refugees in Iran have experienced'.

'Every year they changed the rules for refugees', says N, a 32-year-old Afghan (now residing in Denmark), who was born in Iran and eager to go to school. 'Every year my mother had to go to the education office to get permission for us to continue'. If they were accepted, it often happened several weeks, if not months, into the school year and it always cost them a lot of money. 'Every year we had to pay. After high school they changed the rules again. I couldn't continue, although I had the best grades. I couldn't participate in the konkur [entry exam for university] because I was Afghan. (...) All my life I have been struggling even for the most simple, simple rights. I lost my future because of the rules of the Iranian government'.³⁴

DEPORTATIONS AND GEOPOLITICAL GAMES

As the voluntary returns to Afghanistan sharply declined in 2006 due to Afghanistan's rising insecurity, Iran's deportations of migrants (whom the Iranian state deemed 'illegal', although many of them had legal documents) amplified. The deportations became a geopolitical pressure tool, which Iran used against the Afghan government for political reasons.

||| **'I think the refugee issue is one of the most important geopolitical bargaining tools in the region'.**

With the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005, the international crisis over Iran's nuclear programme turned increasingly confrontational. The threat of a US military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities was very high on the agenda from 2006, and with reference to the national security at stake, Ahmadinejad's administration instigated a clampdown on the 'democracy promoters' within Iran's civil society - journalists, experts, and intellectuals - as well as social outcasts like drug users and refugees.³⁵ Iran also put a lot of pressure on President Karzai to ensure that the US forces in Afghanistan would not use Afghan territory to launch an attack on Iran. One effective way of pressurising the Afghan government was to expel the Afghans.³⁶ 'I think the refugee issue is one of the most important geopolitical bargaining tools in the region', a former international NGO official says.³⁷

In 2007 the Iranian government launched an extensive and aggressive deportation campaign. Some claim that Iran deported 390,000 Afghans; others that the number was closer to 730,000.³⁸ Not only did the deportations neglect the safety of returnees, but they also added to Afghanistan's instability. Obviously the Afghan government had no capacity to absorb that many returnees. The Afghan government was infuriated by the campaign, which created a humanitarian crisis and called into question the nature and price of Iran's influence in post-Taliban Afghanistan.³⁹

Although 2007 may have been extreme, since then more than 200,000 undocumented migrants have been expelled annually. In 2009, 342,000 were deported, in 2010 at least 286,662 undocumented Afghans were deported,⁴⁰ in 2011 UNHCR counted 211,023 deported,⁴¹ and in 2012 some 700 were deported per day, amounting to 255,000.⁴²

In May 2012 Afghanistan signed a strategic security pact with the United States, ensuring the legal status for US forces in Afghanistan and long-term US financial commitments to Afghanistan and the Afghan National Army after the intended 2014 military withdrawal. The nuclear crisis was at its height and prolonging the presence of US forces was the last thing Iran wanted, so Iran furiously objected to the security pact and threatened to expel all Afghans in response. Afghan MPs condemned Iran's 'very clear interference' in the internal affairs of Afghanistan,⁴³ and a government official complained that Iran 'is using Afghanistan to send a message to America that it can't be messed with. Afghanistan becomes a managed battlefield as a result'.⁴⁴

The fear of what Iran may be able to do to the Afghan migrants and refugees informs political debates in Afghanistan to a large extent.

In November 2012 Iran issued a new regulation paving the way for expelling 1.6 million 'illegal foreigners' by the end of 2015; facilitating the return of 200,000 Afghan refugees and terminating the refugee status of another 700,000 (in other words: getting rid of every single Afghan in the country).⁴⁵ For Afghan MP Qazi Nazir Ahmad Hanfai it was clear that Iran was punishing Afghanistan for disobeying its demands: 'The Iranians warned the Afghans ... and now we're seeing the result of that threat'. 'Afghan refugees and migrants are becoming the victims of big political

games played between the Iranian and US powers', said Abdul Samad Hami, Afghanistan's deputy minister for refugees.⁴⁶ Although figures from 2014 and 2015 indicate that some 200,000 Afghans were deported annually, the full force of the regulation was not implemented.⁴⁷

But the fear of what Iran may be able to do to the Afghan migrants and refugees informs political debates in Afghanistan to a large extent.⁴⁸ That was clearly the case when, for example, President Ghani in April 2015 decided to support Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen against the Houthis, who are backed by Iran (to some degree at least). As a TV correspondent said at the time: 'Now, the concern is that what will be Iran's reaction to Kabul's stance on this war? Iran has many tools to pressure Afghanistan such as the expulsion of Afghan refugees'.⁴⁹ An editorial in the Afghan daily, *Arman-e Melli*, also cautioned the Afghan government: 'We should not forget that currently there are more than two million Afghan refugees who have been living in Iran for many years and we cannot sacrifice the lives of our people for supporting Saudi Arabia'.⁵⁰

Police brutality: **'THEY DIDN'T CARE AT ALL!'**

In the process of deportations Iran has been accused of violating Afghans' rights and apprehending and pushing back refugees with valid residence permits.⁵¹ Of course, it is important to note that Iran is not exceptional in this regard, since human rights organisations equally criticise both European and American deportation and detention practices for violating the rights of deportees, using police violence, separating families in the process, and detaining people arbitrarily.⁵² However, Iran's campaigns have been merciless and aggressive.

||| **'What happens at the deportation centres is apparently beyond understanding'.**

The police would search neighbourhoods door by door, rounding up illegal migrants and loading them onto big trucks. 'Every day we could see that happening', N recalls.⁵³ Z – a 27-year-old Afghan refugee in Denmark, who was born and raised in Iran – says that if Afghans could not present a valid registration card, 'immediately they arrested and deported them, without thinking about those peoples' families, without thinking about whether they had small kids or maybe a pregnant wife at home. They didn't care at all!' Z witnessed how the police deported groups of Afghans in the middle of a wedding ceremony and during a funeral. 'There was a funeral procession. The police came and stopped people and asked them who has ID and who doesn't. They arrested all the people. They took them to the police

station. The corpse was left there. (...) They didn't care about the father and brothers of the dead person. They didn't allow them to bury the corpse of their beloved, and just deported them'.⁵⁴

The deportation centres have been criticised for using torture and treating Afghans in all sorts of dehumanising ways. Many deportees are beaten when arrested and held under appalling conditions in detention centres before being sent to the border.⁵⁵ Some are kept in military bases for months where they are forced to do hard labour, if they cannot afford their own deportation. Up to 50% of the deported are separated from their families in the process. Small children are left in Iran while both parents are deported; others are deported unaccompanied.⁵⁶

'What happens at the deportation centres is apparently beyond understanding. I've seen it from the other side. I've seen it from Islam Qala on the Afghan border with Iran. People coming in – young girls painted with wall-paint in red, just to mark them. They do all kinds of things to deter and avoid that pull factor, and this is one strategy to do that', a former international NGO official says.⁵⁷

THE CONSTANT FLOW OF AN ILLEGAL WORKFORCE

While hundreds of thousands of people are being forced back to Afghanistan every year, at the same time there is a constant flow of Afghans crossing the border back into Iran, which also means that the number of undocumented migrants in Iran has basically stayed the same, despite the large-scale deportations. Many young men strive to go back to Iran as soon as they are deported. These 'recyclers' are often unable, or too ashamed, to return to their families who have paid large sums of money to get them to Iran. But for many young men, migrating to Iran is also what Alessandro Monsutti calls a 'rite of passage' to manhood, proving their masculinity and becoming grown-ups.⁵⁸

While Iran does everything to deter Afghans from coming, at the same time, both the refugees and the migrants constitute a crucial part of the Iranian workforce.

'All the stories of undocumented Afghans are very similar', a former international NGO official says. 'It's mostly young single men, wanting to get married, no money in villages in Afghanistan, going to Iran, making some cash, going back, getting married, going back if they need to. So it's a constant flow of these people that have been there a number of times and go back if they are not caught. It's a very risky and very expensive trip'.⁵⁹ Many are shot dead while attempting to cross the border.⁶⁰ 'The smuggling networks are obviously very active and they can charge up to a 1000 dollars to take you to bordering areas in Afghanistan and into Iran'. Particularly

the young men entering Iran 'are basically unable to pay the smugglers when they cross over, so they are bound to pay the debt over time. So it's obviously a form of slavery as well. Those networks are pretty active and I think there is big business behind, (...) and probably corruption at all levels on both sides. So they cannot be dismantled easily', the former official continued.

While Iran does everything to deter Afghans from coming, at the same time, both the refugees and the migrants constitute a crucial part of the Iranian workforce. The Afghans – who are only allowed to work in a limited number of fields – take on the menial, dirty, risky and hard physical labour, few Iranians want to do. Typically they work in the construction industry, as well as in farming, cleaning, garbage collecting, brick-making, mining, and road building. The Afghans are a 'huge driver of the economy, because it is very cheap labour and you have unlimited manpower supply. So if you're not happy with your workers you can just change them immediately. (...) It's a well-studied strategy of the government to avoid the pull factor, but at the same time be able to have that workforce available at any given time', the former NGO official says.⁶¹

The effects of sanctions:

'NOBODY CAN TRANSFER EVEN ONE DOLLAR TO OUR ACCOUNT'

The nuclear crisis did not only influence the number of deportations, it also affected the Iranian Afghans because of the financial sanctions that the USA imposed in 2010 and which were intensified with the US and EU sanctions of 2012. While the severe effects of the sanctions on Iran's economy and the humanitarian consequences for Iran's medical supplies have been documented, very little attention has been paid to the unintended consequences for the Afghan population in Iran.⁶² However, the economic sanctions have affected the Afghan refugees tremendously; both in terms of their financial situation, and in terms of levels of discrimination and the amount of international aid and humanitarian assistance they have been able to receive.

'Sanctions on Iran have been bad news for both Afghan refugees and for humanitarian operations', Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), told AFP in December 2013. Apart from the fact that 'there is now exploding unemployment among Afghans', the NRC was affected by punitive measures of the US Treasury, limiting the amount of aid to be transferred into Iran. 'We can transfer a total of \$500,000 in a year – this amount is nothing for us', compared to the \$2 million in funds the NRC raises annually, Egeland said. He emphasised that the sanctions complicated their 'efforts to provide shelter, food security, information and legal assistance, water and sanitation, and education to the refugees'.⁶³

‘Despite the fact that humanitarian agencies are supposed to be exempt from the consequences of the sanctions, we have been very badly affected, be it because of banking restrictions or the difficulties of securing funding’, Nazanin Kazemi, the representative of the International Consortium for Refugees in Iran said in April 2015.⁶⁴ ‘Nobody can transfer even one dollar to our account’, was how the director of an Iranian NGO working with Afghans put it in February 2015.⁶⁵ Similarly, Bernard Doyle, the Representative of the UNHCR in Iran, said in May 2013: ‘The main difficulty is that we have problems with the banking system to transfer funds from our headquarters in Geneva to Iran’.⁶⁷ A year later, Iran’s next UNHCR Representative, Sivanka Dhanapala, repeated the complaint and emphasised that the international community ought to separate the case of refugees from other political issues. In 2014 UNHCR’s Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees in Iran remained strikingly underfunded. The UNHCR received 28 million of the necessary US\$64.8 million.⁶⁸



‘Sanctions on Iran have been bad news for both Afghan refugees and for humanitarian operations’.


While Iranian policymakers continuously complain about the lack of international support they receive to deal with the transnational problems stemming from Afghanistan (mainly related to refugees and drug trafficking), at the same time the sanctions also infected the political atmosphere in Iran with further scepticism about cooperating with international organisations and made the political environment much more difficult to navigate.⁶⁹

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 the Iranian currency (in 2012, the rial lost some 75% of its value).⁷⁰ 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 6% of Afghanistan’s GDP.⁷¹ Often the price rises due to the sanctions also targeted the Afghans disproportionately. ‘For Iranians the prices went up 4–5 times, but for Afghans they went up 10 times’, one Afghan researcher working in Iran told me.⁷² As Rikke Johannessen from the Danish Refugee Council stated in March 2013, ‘the living standards of Afghan refugees have deteriorated significantly, hitting the

poorest and most vulnerable households the hardest. The average Afghan refugee needs to live of 1.66 USD per day, which is below the poverty line of 2 USD per day in a middle-income country such as Iran'.⁷³

Although Ahmadinejad's administration cut some state subsidies on fuel and food in 2010, he also mitigated the sanctions' crushing effects on Iran's poor people through cash transfers. This populist policy worsened the inflation, but it also meant that Iran's poverty rates actually declined in 2011–13, leaving the middle class much harder hit by sanctions than the lower classes.⁷⁴ However, similar poverty alleviating policies were neither extended to the Afghan refugees, nor, for obvious reasons, to the 1.4-2 million undocumented migrants.

The sanctions intensified the social tensions and negative perception of Afghans among Iranians, who deemed them a security risk and accused them of stealing Iranian jobs. They added to the domestic pressure to cut state benefits to the Afghans, and pushed the agenda that the Afghans were draining the system and Iran had to care for its own population. As an official in Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me in February 2015: counting the 3 million Afghans residing in Iran, 'in the current situation of sanctions, they are a big burden for my country'.⁷⁵ 'Naturally, the main worries for both the Ahmadinejad and Rouhani administrations were and still are how to fix the economic situation of the Iranian people to soothe their dissatisfaction. There is no priority for Afghan refugees' rights', an economic expert told Al-Monitor in January 2015.⁷⁶ The director of an Iranian NGO agreed, 'Naturally, the government prefers to attend to its own citizens instead of the foreign citizens'.⁷⁷



The sanctions intensified the social tensions and negative perception of Afghans among Iranians, who deemed them a security risk and accused them of stealing Iranian jobs.

In a July 2014 declaration, Rouhani's administration emphasised that all ministries, organisations and government-run companies should only hire Iranian workers, except in extraordinary cases.⁷⁸ On May Day 2015 Iranian workers held a demonstration in Tehran protesting against the employment of foreign citizens. While shouting 'Iranian workers are jobless' and 'Social security is our right', Iranian workers carried placards stating 'Foreign workers should be expelled', 'Employer!

Shame on you and let Afghan workers go', and 'Hiring foreign citizens amounts to putting Iranians out of work'.⁷⁹ A few days later, two MPs questioned interior minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli about the rising unemployment, accusing Afghans of taking Iranian jobs. While Fazli actually defended the Afghan workers on that occasion, saying, 'The jobs that Afghans have taken are not the type of work that would be done by Iranian labourers; therefore, the job market has not been affected for Iranians',⁸⁰ Iranian MPs were still pressed by their constituencies. 'We have been working in areas where the local population, the host population, was seriously advocating and pushing their [representative] in the Parliament for a declaration of 'no-go area' for foreigners [i.e. in order to keep the Afghans out]', a former international NGO official said.⁸¹

'If the international community is worried about Afghan refugees in Iran, they must remove the sanctions so that the Iranian economy can improve and can support Afghans'.

Due to the effects of sanctions, the deteriorating situation for Afghans is also the responsibility of the international community, Foad Shams, a reformist journalist at the weekly *Sedâ*, told *Al-Monitor* in January 2015: 'The reality is that while Iran and its government are under cruel sanctions by the West and the US, no one can expect the Afghan refugee issue to become a priority. If the international community is worried about Afghan refugees in Iran, they must remove the sanctions so that the Iranian economy can improve and can support Afghans'.⁸²

While the sanctions generated an enormous black market and made Afghanistan more important to Iran as a hub for the increasing informal economy,⁸³ the sanctions have had many negative effects on Afghanistan as well. Afghan commentators and politicians therefore applauded the nuclear deal in July 2015, stating that it will not only help the Afghans in Iran, but also the economy and stability of Afghanistan itself – and the entire region.⁸⁴ Afghanistan's daily newspaper, *Hasht-e Sobh*, wrote that the fragile Afghan economy and refugees living in Iran would benefit from this 'new beginning': 'Iran sanctions have had devastating impacts on the countries of the region and Afghanistan... For example, commerce has collapsed in western Afghanistan, particularly in Herat, where the black economy has gradually taken root and from where foreign currency is being smuggled to Iran'.⁸⁵

Just because the sanctions are lifted does not mean that the Iranian economy will recover overnight. It will take years. However, the fact that there is a nuclear deal means that e.g. Iran's construction industry will need more Afghan labourers in future, and the easing of tensions between Iran and the US will positively affect Iran's political bargaining with Afghanistan. However, there are still a lot of other political tensions between Iran and Afghanistan concerning Iran's treatment of refugees and migrants.

Afghans fighting in Syria: **IRAN'S FORCEFUL RECRUITMENT**

The Afghans have not only been caught up in the nuclear crisis, the sanctions and the geopolitical bargains between Iran, the USA and Afghanistan; they also play an important, unenviable, role in the Syrian war. The Iranian regime has for several years recruited Afghans to fight in Syria alongside the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah, supporting Bashar al-Assad. While the Iranian government offers the Afghans financial and legal incentives, and some join the war out of religious conviction, many are de facto coerced into fighting.

The Iranian regime has for several years recruited Afghans to fight in Syria alongside the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah, supporting Bashar al-Assad.

The numbers of Afghans who have been recruited are difficult to assess (figures vary from a few thousand to 20,000),⁸⁶ but the Fatemiyoun military division consisting of Afghan fighters (under the command of the IRGC elite Quds Force) was upgraded from a brigade in early 2015, which means that it could count 10–12,000 members.⁸⁷ While some of the first funerals of Afghan fighters were reported in Iran in November 2013,⁸⁸ according to the Washington Institute the recruitments have taken place at least since spring 2013.⁸⁹ Judging from the number of burials in Iran, from January 2012 to February 2016, 342 Iranians and 255 Afghans were killed in Syria.⁹⁰ However, many have been added to the list later, and since numerous Afghan corpses are left on the battlefield the numbers are undoubtedly a lot higher.⁹¹

Iran recruits the Afghans through religious and financial means (not just in Iran, but also from Afghanistan).⁹² They urge Afghan Shiites to protect the sacred Shia shrines in Damascus, to become 'shrine defenders', *modafeyin-e haram*, reinvigorating the cult of martyrdom and the sacrifice and suffering of Shias. (In reality, however, Afghans are fighting in many areas of Syria, not limited to Damascus, often forced to defend the frontline. 'The Iranians use Afghans as human shields', according to an Afghan fighter.)⁹³ Some certainly join the fight out of religious conviction and perceive the fight in Syria as a jihad, a 'holy war' against Dâesh (Islamic State).⁹⁴ Others, however, are coerced to do so or offered strong incentives, which are hard for them to refuse.

Confronted with the option of being either deported to Afghanistan or fighting for Iran in Syria, many migrants prefer to fight in Syria. 'Between bad and worse, Afghanistan is worse'.

Afghans fighters are offered money (500–1000 dollars per month); they and their families are often promised Iranian nationality and passports (not just residence permits), which is particularly attractive to the many undocumented Afghan migrants, who constantly face the threat of deportation. Undocumented migrants, who are pulled off the streets, have been threatened with expulsion, if they do not join the Syrian war. Afghan prisoners, often serving drug-related sentences, have been offered early release if they join the fight in Syria.⁹⁵

While it is important to keep in mind that young men volunteer to go to Syria for a range of reasons (for some it gives them a sense of agency; it is 'their last chance to demonstrate their masculinity or build some form of identity or social status for themselves as fighters', as Reza Kazemi says),⁹⁶ the fact that huge numbers of Afghans in Iran sign up semi-voluntarily is a strong indicator of the bleak situation Afghans face in Iran (and Afghanistan). Confronted with the option of being either deported to Afghanistan or fighting for Iran in Syria, many migrants prefer to fight in Syria. 'Between bad and worse, Afghanistan is worse', A, who fled Afghanistan in 2010, (and stayed shortly in Iran before ending up in Denmark) told me. 'Because if a person is doing jihad in Afghanistan, nothing (positive) will happen to the family if he dies'. Whereas if he dies in Syria, his family is offered some kind of 'martyr reward', which can include residency, continued education or other kinds of socioeconomic improvement for family members.⁹⁷

Though immensely dangerous, fighting for the Iranian government in Syria is seen as a way of improving the situation for themselves and their families upon return from the war. R, a 30-year-old Afghan, who was born and raised in Iran before obtaining asylum in Denmark, put it this way: 'the people who go think about obtaining residency. It's not about the money, but about saving their family. Most people take the chance. They think that at least my family will be safe'.⁹⁸

In May 2016 the Iranian parliament passed a law granting citizenship to families of foreign 'martyrs', fighting for the Islamic Republic;⁹⁹ Afghans killed in Syria are increasingly celebrated in big funeral ceremonies to glorify their martyrdom,¹⁰⁰ and the media also highlight their importance in Syria (in March 2015 Iranian media aired a documentary about the Fatemiyoun brigade, stressing its prominent role).¹⁰¹ However, many Afghans complain that the Iranian government does not always fulfil their promises, neither when the fighters survive, nor when they are killed in battle. As Z says: 'there were a lot of poor Afghan families in Iran whom the government promised to pay, if their sons went to Syria to fight. (...) And many of their young ones were killed and their families were just hoping to receive ID documentation or residence permit. But in reality many of them received nothing'.¹⁰²

N experienced how her brothers, aged 19 and 21, were dragged into the war. 'My brother wanted to go to Syria. If he was in Syria for at least six months, they [the IRGC] said that both of my brothers could start school; my father would get permission to work with everything he wanted, and they would (...) get Iranian passport, not just residence permit. (...) My parents didn't agree, but he went to Syria. They paid him good money, 1.5 million toman per month [470–500 US dollars]. It was a big help for my family, but at the same time my brother's life costs more than a few million (toman). My mum cried and said: "Every minute I feel like I'm dying."'

N's brother was injured in Syria and returned to Iran for treatment. When he got out of hospital, the Pasdârân came to her family. 'They brought cookies and flowers to our house and said: "You are a special family, you should be proud of your son." (...) But they didn't pay him the last money and they didn't give him a passport. Instead he was asked to go to the front again. (...) The IRGC wanted both of my brothers to go. They were forced. I called him and said: "You are crazy, don't go." But my brother said: "I don't have a choice. They won't leave me alone." (...) We used all our spare money and both of them came to Europe last year'.¹⁰³

The coercive recruitments are currently one of the factors explaining why a growing number of young Afghan men decide to leave Iran for Europe. Based on a number of interviews with new asylum seekers, in January 2016 Human Rights Watch concluded: 'Many said that the threat of arrest and forced conscription in Iran was an important contributing factor in their decision to leave Iran'.¹⁰⁴

Iran's recruitment policies are a source of anger and deep frustration in the relations between Iran and Afghanistan: While the Afghan government was initially very reluctant to verify the reports of Iran's recruitments, at least since the Spring of 2014 there has been growing public resentment and debate both among Afghan MPs, journalists and analysts, and among civil society activists, criticising Iran for exploiting Afghans' poverty and vulnerability.¹⁰⁵ As Shokria Paikan, an MP from Konduz, said in May 2014: 'The Iranian government has oppressed Afghan refugees by imprisoning, torturing and executing them and finally got them addicted to drugs. Is it not enough? Now, it is oppressing these refugees in another way by sending our youths to Syria to fight there'.¹⁰⁶

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The critics loudly dispute that the Afghans are going 'voluntarily' and they condemn Iran's neighbourhood interference.¹⁰⁷ 'Forcing people to fight in this war entirely goes against all human rights conventions', Mir Ahmad Joyenda, a civil society activist told Afghan TV in December 2014.¹⁰⁸ 'The Afghans should not become the firewood of war', Afghan journalist Shah Hosayn Mortazawi said in a heated TV debate with Afghans MPs in May 2015: 'The truth is that the Islamic Republic of Iran misuses the problems and difficult conditions of the Afghans in Iran as well as their religious feelings and different other factors and recruits soldiers from among the Afghan refugees'.¹⁰⁹ Apart from sharply criticising Iran, Afghan state officials also stress that the Afghan fighters in Syria are betraying the Afghan army; that they should fight for them and not for Iran.¹¹⁰

'THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT FOR YOU CALLED DIGNITY'

Although the negative experiences of being Afghan in Iran depend on the geopolitical games, and the fluctuating and unpredictable policies of the Iranian state, it is of course tightly connected to the denigrating attitudes and outright racism, which they meet in the Iranian population – heavily influenced by populist policies and financial crises. The Afghans, I have interviewed in Denmark, speak of widespread discrimination, humiliations, physical attacks and racism (nejâdparasti). They emphasise the lack of dignity and of being constantly considered less worthy than the Iranians. 'It's a kind of shame to say, "I'm Afghan,"' A said.¹¹¹ S emphasised: 'Being an Afghan is like being a criminal'.¹¹² 'They called us afghâni kasif, "dirty Afghan," and afghâni ashghâl, "Afghan trash." We feel really humiliated. They don't think we're human at all. Animals in Iran are treated better than we are', R told me.¹¹³

Similarly, Z said: 'Humiliation of Afghans has become something really normal, an ordinary thing to do. Thinking of Afghans as a bad people, a dirty people, has become a norm. (...) When I was in secondary school, my classmates humiliated me, not just my classmates, all the people, my teachers, the head of school. There was nothing left for you called dignity. (...) Being humiliated is really painful. It hurts more than being beaten'.¹¹⁴

From her time in school, Z recalls how Afghan children would be seated separately in the classroom and pinpointed as useless: 'Whenever they wanted to give a bad example they said "like those Afghans."' Other teachers simply refused to teach as long as Afghan children were present: 'They sent us outside and we had to stay in the yard, in the sunshine, in the hot weather, until that teacher finished and left the class. It was really humiliating, really terrible'.

Many violent attacks on Afghans go unnoticed; they are met with impunity or silenced by authorities. 'Any Iranian is allowed to do anything they want to Afghan people. In fact in Iran when it comes to Afghan people every ordinary citizen is a police', Z says. As a child she watched her parents being beaten with a stick while queuing up to renew their ID cards. 'Without any reason that person beat the head and back of our parents very severely and laughed at them. But no one could complain that they were beaten. No one dared to complain (...) He was allowed to beat Afghans. We grew up in Iran with those kinds of humiliations'.

Revealing their feeling of utter powerlessness, Z explains how one of her neighbours was gang-raped: 'Six-seven years ago there was a family, who didn't have residence permit. The man was very old and had two young girls. They wanted to go back to Afghanistan. One of the girls had an Iranian boyfriend. She went to say goodbye to her boyfriend. The boy had a taxi company, and it was a famous taxi service, we all knew it. The boyfriend kept the girl in a place and he called the members of the taxi service, 15 persons, and for a week all of those 15 persons raped that girl. And later they threw her away in an abandoned building'.

'There was a beggar, a woman, [...] who wrapped her chador around the girl after finding her. The neighbourhood was small and everyone knew each other. The beggar brought the girl to her family and the girl was hospitalised for two weeks. She was destroyed; all of her body was wounded with scars and bruises. After two weeks the girl regained consciousness. She said that it was the owner of the taxi service and all 15 members and a few other people, whom the girl didn't know, and they raped her. But the family didn't dare to go and complain against those people. It was a taxi service that all of us knew. [...] But the police did nothing and we didn't complain, and people did nothing. Even the family of the guy who committed such a thing didn't come and apologise. And after two–three weeks they packed their stuff and went back to Afghanistan'.

'There were many cases like that when no one could complain. Many didn't complain [out of fear of losing] their reputation, but even if you went to complain nobody cared, or your ID card was confiscated, and you were deported. [...] It was always like that'.¹¹⁵

#IAmSetayesh: RACISM, MURDER AND SOCIAL PROTESTS

In some cases, however, people do speak up in the face of violence and ethnic discrimination. During the last few years there have been a number of cases revealing the mistreatment of Afghans, but also showing a growing civil society activism against it and pushing politicians to take a stance.

When in April 2016 a six-year-old Afghan girl was raped and murdered by a 17-year-old Iranian boy in the small city of Varamin, 60 kilometres southeast of Tehran, the Afghan community was outraged, but perhaps more strikingly, the murder also generated a strong media campaign among Iranians calling for justice. The tragedy of Setayesh, who left her house to go shopping and was then kidnapped, raped, stabbed to death and immersed in acid in order to destroy her body, highlighted the everyday racism experienced by Afghans in Iran. But the case was also so blatantly brutal that it created an outpouring of anger and solidarity on social media, using the #IAmSetayesh and #JusticeForSetayesh hashtags. The Facebook page 'I Am Setayesh' soon received more than 12,000 likes, and street graffiti picturing her face spread in Tehran. Concerned citizens and activists urged the police to take action and criticised the Iranian media for not immediately covering the case: 'If the victim had been an Iranian and the murderer had been an Afghan, would the media have remained indifferent to it?'¹¹⁶

Subsequently the tragedy was indeed covered by the media – it hit the front page of Iranian daily Ebtekar after a week – and high-ranking state officials (e.g. from the High Council for Human Rights; Vice President Shahindokht Mowlaverdi, the Prosecutor General as well as the Governor-General of Tehran) denounced the crime and promised an urgent investigation.¹¹⁷

The hospitable political rhetoric, deeming Afghans the 'guests' of Iran, was suddenly resurrected. The grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini, Seyed Hassan Khomeini, who is an outspoken reformist cleric, emphasised that 'There is no difference between Iranians and Afghans in terms of equality before the law ... we feel ashamed as hosts that such a thing happened to our guest'.¹¹⁸ Payam Borazjani, an official from Tehran province also stressed that 'The Islamic Republic of Iran supports Afghan nationals, and will spare no efforts in helping and supporting our Afghan guests'.¹¹⁹ At the same time, the case generated strong reactions from diplomats in Kabul, Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Kabul-based human rights organisations, calling upon the Iranian Ambassador in Kabul.¹²⁰

The surge in protests on social media showed that many Iranians are well aware – and ashamed – of the predicaments of the Afghan population. While Iran's political hardliners blamed Setayesh's murder on 'pornography websites and internet freedom'¹²¹ – and the police dispersed a peaceful protest outside the Afghan embassy in Tehran, telling the crowd: 'Aren't you Iranians? Why have you come for the Afghans? Don't you know how many crimes the Afghans have committed here?'¹²² – many commentators used the killing of Setayesh to criticise the mistreatment of Afghans.



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Prior to the killing of Setayesh, however, there had been a number of other controversial cases of discrimination. In June 2012 officials in Fars province prohibited the selling of food and commodities to illegal Afghans, accusing them of spreading diseases. After massive protests, however, the same governor denied having issued such a declaration.¹²³

In spring 2012 it created a lot of conflict when the local government in Esfahan, in an apartheid-mirroring manner, banned Afghans from using the buses and taxis. They were not allowed to buy groceries from the shops and bakeries or enter the public park, Park-e Sofeh, during the popular New Year's celebrations of *sizdah bedar*. Large numbers of Iranians vocally criticised the ban and showed their

sympathy on Facebook with 'I am also an Afghan' updates and 'We are all Afghans' pages,¹²⁴ and the acclaimed film director Asghar Farhadi put on a special screening of his Oscar-winning film 'A Separation' to show his solidarity with Afghans.¹²⁵

In December 2014 the 'Pakdasht' incident also received a lot of coverage. In an Afghan-only school in the city of Pakdasht, Iranian teachers had beaten and humiliated four third-grade pupils for not doing their homework. A relative of one of the students told Afghan TV that 'The Iranian teachers forced them to touch the inside of a toilet and then lick their filthy hands'.¹²⁶ A large number of Iranian newspapers and news websites – reformist, moderate and conservative – covered the case, condemning the punishment.¹²⁷

While the impact of critical journalism and updates on social media is difficult to assess, following the Pakdasht case the Facebook page 'We are ashamed of Afghan children's fate in Iran' (*sharmsârim az ruzegâr-e kudakân-e afghân dar irân*) got nearly 20,000 'likes'.¹²⁸ Hamid-Reza Jalaeipour, a reform-minded sociologist, says that it does indicate a rising social consciousness, and goes to show that social media has become a less risky strategy for social activists to engage politically, holding state authorities accountable and demanding justice. While being politically active still carries great risks, "Those people who were suppressed [for pro-democracy activities] are not dead and live under the city's skin, [and] have created a vibrant information society", Jalaeipour said in May 2016.¹²⁹

Jila Baniyaghoob, an award-winning journalist and women's rights activist, several times imprisoned for her activities,¹³⁰ has also highlighted the strong reactions as a promising development. In a January 2015 interview with *Al-Monitor*, she said: 'I think civil society's approach to the Afghan community's problems in Iran has improved. For example, in the recent case of harassment of Afghan students, social media responded seriously, which forced the government to react and even appoint a representative to follow up on the issue in Pakdasht. I think the pressure by Iranian civil society made the Education Ministry react'.¹³¹

Education: **ASPIRATIONS AND FRUSTRATIONS**

Iran's shifting policies and positions regarding Afghans' rights and ability to receive education in many ways sums up Iran's Afghan dilemma: 'Some policymakers and Iranian NGOs say that we have to educate the Afghans. It will increase the level of education in Afghanistan and help the reconstruction of the country', an official at Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me in February 2015: '[They stress that] the illiterates are a threat, who can be recruited by radicals or succumb to drug use and trafficking. The foresighted people say: we have to help our brothers and sisters to enhance their situation. But the others say: who should pay for all this?'¹³² In this debate, educating Afghans also becomes a question of Iran's 'national security': While some policymakers and Iranian NGOs stress that enhancing the education level of Afghans is for Iran's 'own safety', opponents claim that offering education will only serve as a pull factor, bringing in more illegal migrants who then become a security risk.

In May 2015, the government actually did change its policies. Ayatollah Khamenei declared that all Afghan children are eligible to go to school for free.

With the arrival of President Rouhani in 2013, the Ministry of Education promised Afghan refugees free education in what it termed 'the government's gift of hope and prudence to Afghan nationals'.¹³³ During the last 6–7 years, 250–350,000 Afghan children have enrolled in primary and secondary schools annually, but they had to

pay a tuition fee, which kept increasing.¹³⁴ 'The inflation of the past two years and the economic recession in Iran has made this social stratum extremely vulnerable and it has no means to pay such fees', an Afghan protester said in December 2014, when more than 200 Afghan mothers gathered in front of UNHCR's office in Tehran, requesting President Rouhani to keep his promises.¹³⁵

The educational level which Afghans have been able to receive in Iran – despite all challenges – also serves to increase their frustrations at being second-rate citizens in Iran.

However, in May 2015, the government actually did change its policies. Ayatollah Khamenei declared that all Afghan children are eligible to go to school for free, not just the 350,000 legally registered in Iranian schools, but also the undocumented ones – counting up to 500,000 – who have not been able to attend schools regularly in recent years. Iranian media called the decree a 'big and historical decision'.¹³⁶ In a similar, positive vein, in August 2015 the government also declared that it would extend health insurance to all Afghans residing in Iran legally, as part of President Rouhani's massive investment in a national health insurance scheme, *bimeh-e salâmat*.¹³⁷ While one expert, I talked to, claimed that with these policies, 'Iran is trying to show itself as more humanitarian than it is in reality'; to another expert it reinforced the impression that, despite the challenges, 'Iran remains one of the best countries to be a refugee in'.¹³⁸

Tellingly, the educational level which Afghans have been able to receive in Iran – despite all challenges – also serves to increase their frustrations at being second-rate citizens in Iran. Based on a research project on young Afghans' educational aspirations, Nassim Majidi, director of Samuel Hall Consulting, concludes that the education provided by the Iranian government has raised the young Afghans' expectations to carry on studying, but also their frustrations and migration aspirations, because they have limited abilities to do so.¹³⁹ Afghans wanting to attend university have to renounce their refugee status and apply for a foreign student visa, which then leaves them with no residence permit upon graduation.¹⁴⁰ Quite a number of these young Afghans seek asylum in Europe in order to pursue their education (although they would have preferred to have done so by applying for a student visa), Majidi emphasises.

Conclusions: **AFTER THE NUCLEAR DEAL**

With the nuclear deal concluded in July 2015 and the sanctions lifted in January 2016, there are new opportunities for enhancing the trade and cooperation between the EU and Iran, also in regard to the situation of Afghan refugees. In April 2016 the EU provided 16.5 million euros to Iran's Afghan refugees, which is a step forward in sharing Iran's financial burden,¹⁴¹ but the EU still needs to pay closer attention to the dilemmas and hardship Afghans face in Iran – particularly because increasing numbers of Iranian Afghans seek asylum in Europe.

As I have shown in this report, on the one hand Iran should be praised for its protection of and state services to the Afghans, which have been 'unprecedented', compared to other countries hosting millions of refugees. Particularly, the recent policy of extending free education to undocumented Afghan children is a huge improvement. On the other hand, however, with its repatriation policies during the last 15 years, Iran has limited Afghans' legal status and entitlements, their freedom of movement and economic opportunities, while deporting hundreds of thousands of people in violent and dehumanising ways.

Apart from the unending war in Afghanistan, which in 2015 claimed the highest annual number of civilian casualties recorded there by the UNAMA,¹⁴² the Iranian Afghans have been and are immersed in several international crises, which have affected their situation negatively. Thousands of Afghans are plunged into the war in Syria. Iran offers strong incentives when recruiting them to fight in Syria, but in doing so Iran also abuses their poverty and vulnerability, and Iran's drafting practices both reveal and add another layer to their insecurity. The EU should strongly urge

Iran to end the coercive recruitments, but also use the conscriptions as a means to assess and understand the Afghans' vulnerability (both in Iran and in Afghanistan). If fighting in Syria is the best option, you know that the available options on the table are simply too miserable.

Iran's nuclear crisis with the ensuing political isolation, military threats and severe financial sanctions has clearly contracted Iran's hospitality towards the Afghans - economically, politically and socially - and in the crisis Iran has also used the deportations of Afghans as a political pressure tool vis-à-vis Afghanistan and USA. When re-engaging with Iran, the EU needs to acknowledge that the sanctions have had – and will continue to have for the foreseeable future – tremendous effects on Iran's Afghan population and the political willingness within Iran to house the Afghans. This situation adds to the Afghans' wish to leave Iran for Europe.

During the last 15 years claiming asylum in Iran has been virtually impossible. Since Iran is a Party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Human Rights Watch have several times urged Iran to recreate an asylum system, which would 'allow newly arriving Afghans to lodge refuge claims'.¹⁴³ But is it fair to ask, or even demand, Iran to reopen the application procedures for granting Afghans asylum? I asked a former international NGO official and his answer summed up the dilemma the EU is facing when wanting to resume relations with Iran. Due to the international isolation of Iran, the millions of dollars Iran has lost due to the sanctions, and the very limited international contributions in refugee aid, the EU is not in a very good position to pressurise Iran. 'In my opinion, it would be a bit hypocritical to ask the Iranian government to open its border when Europe is closing its borders to Syrian refugees and on top of that, even sending refugees back to Turkey in exchange for money to the Turkish government. In a perfect world it would be great if Iran could assess new refugee claims and then accept anyone that actually is in fear of prosecution or of being killed. On the other hand, it costs a lot of money'.¹⁴⁴

Apart from offering further funding to Iran, the EU could seek to support the process of legalising the presence of undocumented migrants, which is a topic of continuing negotiations between Iran and Afghanistan. In particular, there is a great need to clarify the legal status of undocumented children, who are in effect stateless. That too, however, will add another financial burden on Iran. The EU should also pay particular attention to the undocumented Afghans from Iran when considering their asylum motives in Europe, since they are extra vulnerable, being registered neither as Iranians, nor as Afghans.

Although Iran has a natural right to defend its territory and deport people lacking visa and residence permits, it is necessary to stress that Afghans being deported from Iran face blatant human rights violations. Even though the EU cannot cease the deportations – and is hardly in a position to criticise Iran, since European countries also deport huge numbers of refugees and migrants, who are left in precarious situations – at least the EU should aim at influencing how, and by which means, these deportations are carried out.

While large groups of Iranians are increasingly ashamed of the mistreatment of Afghans, the Iranian government and population still need to decide whether Afghans are their ‘guests’, ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, or ‘dirty Afghans’ and ‘Afghan trash’. Although the nuclear deal, the lifting of sanctions and President Rouhani’s pragmatic approach have made a positive impact – not least in regard to education, which the EU can also use as a constructive platform when re-engaging with Iran – many Iranian Afghans still face a lot of hardship and discrimination. The EU should use the opening towards Iran to critically engage with the dilemmas of Iran’s refugee policies, in all their complexities, and ensure that the Afghans are not forgotten.

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