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Afghan migrants in Iran in modern times

Abstract

For many decades Iran was a destination of economic immigration for Afghans. There, they could earn money to provide for their families at home. Since the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, Iran also became a place of refuge for some 3 million Afghans. Their situation was changing according to the changes in the internal and international position of Iran. Sometimes the Iranian authorities were sympathetic; other times they were fiercely unsympathetic and keen to remove the Afghan "guests." So, the Afghans in Iran could not be sure how long they would be allowed to stay there, if the Iranians would be willing to support them, and if they would have work to provide for their families. This state of uncertainty of the Afghan community was worsened by an outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the Iranian and Afghan healthcare systems are unable to effectively deal with the problem. And the economic collapse in Iran affected primarily the foreigners there of whatever stance, in this particular case, the Afghans.

The main aim of the article is to present the changing and unstable situation of Afghans in Iran in recent years. The analysis covers areas such as their legal status, education, family life, or the right to work. It also takes into account, to a limited extent, the internal situation of Iran, which undoubtedly influenced the situation of Afghan migrants. Based on the analysis of the available materials, it can be concluded that the position of the Afghans in Iran was and is strongly dependent on the situation of Iran and the good or bad will of the Iranian authorities. At the same time, due to the complicated situation in Afghanistan, Afghan migrants find themselves in a hopeless situation and are "doomed" to stay in Iran.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Iran, migration

JEL Classification Codes: F22, O15, R23

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Afgańscy migranci w Iranie. Sytuacja współczesna

Streszczenie

Od dziesięcioleci Iran był dla Afgańczyków państwem zapewniającym miejsce pracy. To właśnie tutaj Afgańczycy znajdowali możliwość zarobienia pieniędzy, za które byli w stanie utrzymać swoje rodziny w kraju. Od chwili radzieckiej interwencji w Afganistanie w 1979 r. Iran stał się również miejscem schronienia dla około 3 mln afgańskich uchodźców. Sytuacja afgańskich pracowników i uchodźców ulegała zmianie w zależności od sytuacji wewnętrznej, jak i międzynarodowej Iranu. Stosunek irańskich władz do nich bywał przychylny, by wkrótce zmienić się radykalnie w stronę niechęci i prób pozbycia się afgańskich „gości". Tym samym Afgańczycy w Iranie nie mogli być pewni, jak długo będą mieli prawo tam przebywać, na jaką pomoc ze strony Irańczyków liczyć oraz czy nadal będą mieć pracę pozwalającą im utrzymać rodziny. Stan niepewności społeczności afgańskiej jeszcze bardziej pogłębił wybuch pandemii COVID-19, gdyż ani irański, ani afgański system opieki zdrowotnej nie są w stanie sobie z nią poradzić, a wobec załamania gospodarczego w Iranie pierwszymi ofiarami stali się cudzoziemcy niezależnie od ich statusu – również Afgańczycy. Głównym celem artykułu jest przedstawienie zmieniającej się i niepewnej sytuacji Afgańczyków w Iranie w ostatnich latach. Analiza dotyczy takich obszarów, jak: status prawny, edukacja, życie rodzinne czy też prawo do pracy. Uwzględniono tutaj także, oczywiście w ograniczonym zakresie, sytuację wewnętrzną Iranu, która niewątpliwie wpływała na położenie afgańskich emigrantów. Na podstawie przeprowadzonej analizy dostępnych materiałów można stwierdzić, że położenie Afgańczyków w Iranie było i jest bardzo mocno uzależnione od sytuacji Iranu i dobrej lub złej woli irańskich władz. Jednocześnie, ze względu na skomplikowaną sytuację Afganistanu, afgańscy emigranci znajdują się w sytuacji bez wyjścia i są „skazani" na pobyt w Iranie.

Słowa kluczowe: Afganistan, Iran, migracja

Kody klasyfikacji JEL: F22, O15, R23

"Afghan citizens are very respected, but their border passing should be legal and regulated," Mohsen Baharvand, Iranian deputy foreign minister for International and Legal Affairs (Noorzai, Jedinia, 2020).

"Police fired on the vehicle, suspected of carrying drugs and undocumented migrants, after it crashed through a checkpoint, Ahmad Tarahomi, deputy Yazd governor, told state media. After its tyres were hit, the vehicle continued to drive away on its wheel rims, igniting sparks which started the fire, Tarahomi said. …Prior to this incident of the burning car, more than 50 Afghans were arrested while crossing Afghanistan's western border to Iran in May 2020. The Iranian border police tortured them and forced them to jump into the river that flowed from Afghanistan

to Iran. As many as 23 drowned, 15 went missing and only 21 of them survived" (Afghan Migrants…, 2020).

"The list of what Afghans cannot do or have in Iran is long. In the age of telecommunication, an Afghan immigrant cannot own his or her own mobile line. They often use pay-as-you-go lines issued to Iranian account holders they have to pay a fee. Afghans cannot open bank accounts in Iran, cannot have debit cards, cannot use ATMs and cannot wire money using banking channels to their families" (Dadpay, 2020).

Introduction

Those three citations present a contradictory view of the situation of Afghans in Iran. One perspective shows a sympathetic attitude of the authorities; the other shows the brutality of security forces and legal restrictions. It is not easy to say which of the options is truer, but many reports prepared by international institutions rather support the second notion, namely that the position of Afghans in Iran is difficult. At the same time, the situation of the Afghan community is quite typical for the fate of most of the contemporary migrants. In 2018 the number of international migrants was estimated to be almost 272 million globally, which is 3.5% of the world's population. Nearly two-thirds of all migrants were labor migrants (IOM, 2020: 2). Roughly 16.6 million, 82% of the total refugee population, are from 10 countries – the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, and Burundi (IOM, 2019: 39). Up to the Arab Spring, for 32 years, Afghans were the biggest migrant group in the world with 5 million people (More, 2013).

The main aim of the article is to present the changing and unstable situation of Afghans in Iran in recent years. The analysis covers such areas as their legal status, education, family life, or the right to work. It also takes into account, to a limited extent, the internal situation of Iran, which undoubtedly influenced the situation of Afghan migrants. The source of the information included in the article were reports of international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, documents of the Iranian authorities, reports prepared by think-tanks and research institutions, as well as press materials.

The beginning of the mass emigration of Afghans is connected with the Soviet intervention of 1979. Since that moment, there have been five waves of Afghan emigration (Noor, 2006: 60–61). The first was during the Soviet intervention from 1979 to 1989. During that time, about 6 million Afghans emigrated, that was ca. 20% of the whole population (Dimitriadi, 2013: 7). Roughly 3.5 million found shelter in Pakistan

and another 2 million in Iran.[2] The rest emigrated much further, to Europe or even to Australia and New Zealand (National Geographic Society, 2012). After the end of the Soviet intervention in 1989, about 2–3 million Afghans returned to their country. However, the start of the civil war caused the emigration of ca. 5 million people. The second wave of emigration started after the victory of mujahidin in 1992, and later as an effect of repressive policies of the Taliban after 1996. It is estimated that around 1 million people left the country at that time (Stigter, Monsutti, 2005). Again, most of the emigrants found shelter in Pakistan and Iran. The third wave of migration, this time a return wave, was connected to the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 after the US intervention in Afghanistan. Especially in the years 2002–2005, when 4,370,000 Afghans returned home: 3 million from Pakistan and 1,370,000 from Iran (IOM, 2014: 33). During the next few years, there were further returns, but some of those were just temporary. An emigre was returning home with money granted by his or her host country and then, after usually some five years, was returning back where he or she came from (Monsutti, 2006: 14).

After 2005 there was the fourth wave of Afghan migration caused by the deterioration of the internal situation and the escalation of military actions in Afghanistan. A crucial cause was the significant rise in civilian casualties of the conflict (*Afghanistan: Key Facts and Figures*, 2010). Another, the fifth wave of Afghan emigration happened after 2014, when President Barack Obama unexpectedly decided to withdraw most of the American forces from Afghanistan, and to change the character of the mission, and to limit the American contingent there to just 10,000 soldiers (Hussain, Jahanzaib, 2015). This led to further destabilization of the situation. In that situation many of the Afghans decided to leave the country, although about 700,000 people returned after 2016 – many of them were the people forced to leave the country (Dunewald, Talishli, 2017). Right now, the number of Afghans still living outside the borders of Afghanistan is estimated as high as 2.7–3 million people (Stanzel, 2016: 2).

Just this short presentation of migrations out and to Afghanistan shows how important this problem is, already lasting for over 40 years; in effect, it is an experience that affects the whole Afghan society. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross survey from 2009, almost all Afghans (96%) were directly or indirectly affected by the immediate or wider consequences of the war; nearly half (45%) had seen a family member killed; a third (35%) had been wounded in fighting;

[2] Afghans are regarded as people with Afghan citizenship. In fact, as of late 2005, Shia Hazaras constituted 47%, Tajiks 30%, Pashtuns 13%, and the remaining 10% were divided between small numbers of Baluch, Turkmen, and Uzbeks (Adelkhah, Olszewska, 2007: 143).

most had to leave their homes (76%); suffered property damage (66%); lost contact with a close relative (61%); had limited or no supplies of water/electricity (56%) or healthcare (59%); someone well-known to them had been a victim of sexual violence (5%) (ICRC, 2009: 5, 22–23).

As it was already mentioned, the Afghans found a safe haven both in neighboring countries and on other continents. Among the countries which were a destination of immigration was, obviously, Iran. In fact, it was the destination of Afghan migration much longer than just the last 40 years. And the migrations to Iran had a much more complex background than in other cases. It was not just looking for asylum. Moreover, it is not so easy to identify the motives of a given person to emigrate – was it a war, a natural disaster (drought, flood, poor harvest), or just looking for an economic opportunity. In many cases, there were more than just one reason, but one of them played a key role in making such a decision. Therefore, more reasonable will be to present the attitude of the Iranian authorities toward Afghan migrants as it changed over time and was not correlated to the reasons for emigration.

The topic of Afghan migration to Iran interests quite a few scholars from several academic centers and think tanks, although it is not at the top of the interests of the wider public. This limited popular interest is, certainly, connected to the fact that there was much more interest in immigration to Europe. Still, there are several published reports and research such as Adelkhah, Olszewska (2007), Monsutti, Jauhiainen, Eyvazlu, Sarcheshmeh (2020), or Christensen (2016).

With all those publications, there are still two major problems. One is the question of the overall number of Afghans in Iran, and how many of them are legally or illegally there. Therefore, all given data should be treated with caution as just estimations. The other is shown to describe the Afghans in Iran as refugees, migrants, or seasonal workers, etc. It is connected to the fact that the same person may have more than one reason for coming to Iran. At a given time, such a person could come to Iran as a refugee, at another as a seasonal worker, and then again as a refugee. In fact, the article of Crrawley and Skleparis, *Refugees, Migrants, neither, both. Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe's 'Migration Crisis'* (Crawley, Skleparis, 2018) deals with this question. Moreover, such definitions are also unclear in official documents such as the Convention of 1951 (Konwencja, 1951) or the clarification made by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2016). Therefore, the author decided to use the term "migrant"/"migration" to describe the Afghans who found themselves in Iran. In some cases, the term "refugee" is used when it is connected with the legal status given by the Iranian authorities.

Afghans' migration to Iran

The political and economic relations between Teheran and Kabul were not especially close in the past. Iran did turn its attention rather toward the Persian Gulf, while Afghanistan was more closely connected to India. What is more, for many years, both countries have been conflicted over the Helmand River water resources. Despite many agreements, it still remains unsolved (Aman, 2016). At the same time, Iran attracted economic migration from Afghanistan, and there has been a permanent settlement of Afghans since the 1850s. This quite probably did take place already in the 19th century but in the 20th century it was observable since the 1960s. One of the reasons behind this migration was a famine in north-western Afghanistan, which happened at the turn of 1972 (Adelkhah, Olszewska, 2007: 141), and an economic boom in Iran connected to rapid development of the oil industry there (Willner-Reid, 2017). During 1973–1979, Afghans worked in construction and services, the food industry, especially in poultry and dairy farms. Usually, they lived in their workplaces, saved a great part of their income, and went back to their home country with their money. It was estimated that in 1978 there were about 400,000 Afghan workers in Iran (Moughari, 2007: 63). In addition, many young Afghan Shiʿite men studied at the religious seminaries in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s (Roy, 1990: 139–140).

The first wave of migrants from Afghanistan did come to Iran in 1978 after the coup of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan against Mohammed Daoud. But the mass exodus started after the Soviet intervention in December 1979. From that moment, the number of Afghan migrants in Iran climbed steadily throughout the 1980s, and it peaked at 3 million people in 1991. By this time, Afghans had become the largest migrant population in the world.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and mujahidin's assuming power in Kabul, around 1.4 million Afghans returned to their country. However, the outbreak of civil war in 1989, the repressive rule of the Taliban, and fighting between the Taliban and opposition groups resulted in new waves of migration. With the fall of the Taliban in 2004, there was some repatriation movement, but because of prolonged fighting there was a continuation of migration to Iran. All these migrations forth and back tend to be cyclical, and any individual can move for different reasons – at one time because of an armed conflict, the next time because of work, and, last but not least, because of bad weather conditions, i.e., drought. This could lead to a conclusion that migration between Iran and Afghanistan could be seen as cyclical cross-border

mobility for many reasons.[3] What is very important, most Afghans remain in Iran for a long period (in fact, permanently). A second, or even third, generation of children born to Afghans in Iran outnumber the Afghans born in Afghanistan (Abbasi-Shavazi, Sadeghi, 2015).

Legal status

As it was mentioned earlier, massive migration from Afghanistan to Iran started at the end of the 1970s with the Soviet aggression. By the mid-1980s, there were circa 2 million Afghans in Iran and 3 million in 1990. Only a few Afghans were accommodated in refugee camps because most of them spread throughout the country and lived amongst the local community and only less than 5% lived in refugee camps.[4]

Afghans were welcomed by the government of Iran for a religious (and economic, too) reason (Yarbakhsh, 2018). This was the "open door" policy on the Iranian side (Esfahani, Hosseini, 2018), especially that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1982 said: "We are Muslims, they are Muslims, too. We should welcome them, offer them services" (Norwegian, 2017: 2).

Until 1992 the Iranian administration provided for Afghans "blue cards", which were for involuntary migrants. As "blue cards" holders, Afghans have indefinite permission to stay in Iran legally, had access to healthcare (Bisailon, 2016), subsidized food, fuel, water, transportation, and free primary and secondary education. Many Afghans were able to find work because many Iranian men were in the army because of the Iran-Iraq war. The right to work was limited to low-wage positions in construction and agriculture, i.e., digging ditches, curing skins for leather. However, Afghans were barred from working as street sellers or owning their own business (Frelick, 1999).

Initially, the Iranian government did not ask for international help for the migrants from Afghanistan, but the situation changed during a few months due to the outbreak

[3] A good example could be a story of life of Mohammad Ali described by Monsutti. "Mohammad Ali was then about twenty-eight years old. He left his home for the first time in 1982, before his fifteenth birthday, and spent two and a half years in Pakistan and one year in Iran. Between 1986 and 1987, he again spent a year in Iran with his father. Then, after a year back in Afghanistan, he travelled a third time to Iran for a period of eleven months (1989), before returning to his village for another three years. … When I met him in Tehran, he had been there since 1993. … We met again in 2003 in Tehran and in 2004 in Afghanistan. Tired of his traveling life, he has been unable to save enough money to stay on a more permanent base in his country of origin and keeps going back and forth between Afghanistan and Iran" (Monsutti, 2007: 177).

[4] On the contrary, in Pakistan Afghans lived in more than 300 refugee camps established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Moughari, 2007: 65).

of war with Iraq. International aid to Iran was not coming, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) ultimately obtained some money for Afghan migrants in Iran. It was $ 150 million between 1979 and 1997. To compare, at the same time, Pakistan obtained $ 1 billion (UNHCR, 2020: 118).

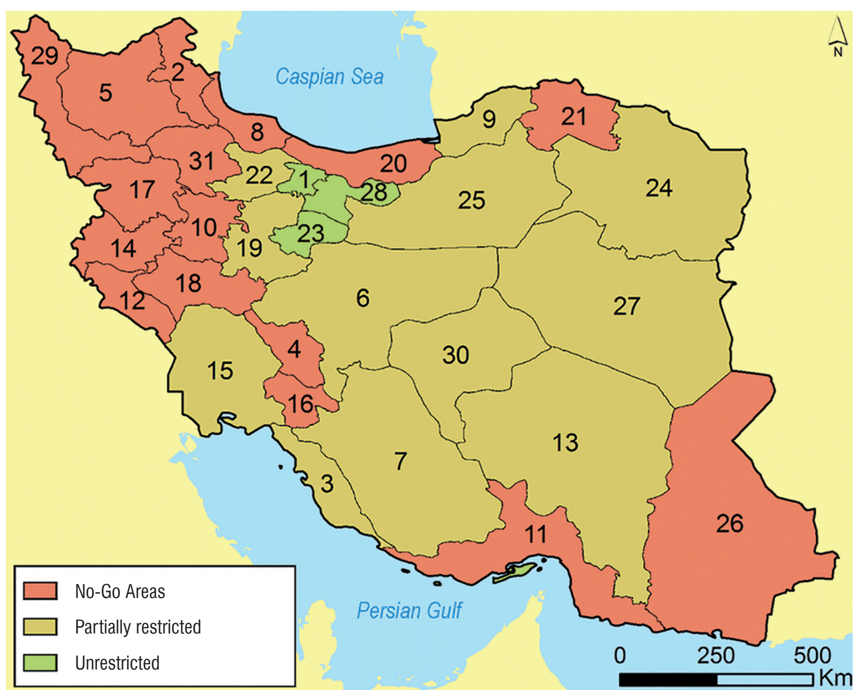
After the fall of the pro-Soviet Najibullah government in Afghanistan in 1992, Iran started to change the "open door" policy. The Iranian administration no longer granted automatically Afghans permanent residence rights and refugee status. It related to the financial cost of maintaining such a huge number of Afghans in the aftermath of Iran's baby boom, the cost of the war with Iraq, and the economic sanctions lasting from 1979. Beginning in 1993, the Iranian government started issuing new temporary registration cards to newly arriving and undocumented Afghan migrants. They granted them a temporary legal status. Iran started to restrict the Afghans' access to public services, especially medical and educational. What is more, the government of Iran started to encourage Afghans to return to Afghanistan. Finally, in March 1995, the government announced that all Afghan migrants must leave Iran within two years, by March 1997. It was also said that between March and April 1995, 500,000 Afghans with newly issued temporary residence permits or without permits would be required to leave the country or be removed to a camp near the border with Afghanistan (Immigration and Refugee Services of America, 1996: 110). The repatriation from 1993 to 2001 faced large problems due to the unstable situation in Afghanistan and the fundamentalist Taliban movement. Because of that, Afghan migrants stayed in Iran, and Afghans continued to flow to Iran. Iran's authorities tolerated this situation.

In the 2000s, Iran implemented policies regarding Afghans. The first policy was to reduce the number of Afghans in Iran and repatriate them to Afghanistan. The second policy was to design the position of those Afghans who remained in Iran, first to separate them from the Iranian society and then later, in the 2010s, to integrate Afghans with Iranians.

In 2001, Iran's authority ratified a law which restricted the movement and residency of Afghans (and other foreigners) for security reasons. There were 17 provinces that became full no-go areas, and 11 became partial no-go areas of all 31 provinces in Iran. These areas were called "Afghan-free zones," where Afghans were prohibited from residing or visiting, or where their presence was strongly regulated and restricted (Jauhiainen, Eyvazlu, Sarcheshmeh, 2020: 22). Afghans were authorized to move freely within their designated provinces of residence, but in order to travel to other provinces, they were required to inform the authorities and obtain a travel permit. 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.

What is more, Afghans were allowed to work in the areas of residency and, as mentioned earlier, only in specific jobs. This policy has been implemented since 2007 (Farzin, Jadali, 2013).

Figure 1. "Afghan-free zones" in Iran



1. Alborz
2. Ardabil
3. Bushehr
4. Chaharmahal & Bakhtiari
5. East Azerbaijan
6. Isfahan
7. Fars
8. Gilan
9. Golestan
10. Hamadan
11. Hormozgan
12. Ilam
13. Kerman
14. Kermashah
15. Khuzestan
16. Kohgiluyeh & Boyer-Ahmad
17. Kurdistan
18. Lorestan
19. Markazi
20. Mazandaran
21. North Khorasan
22. Qazvin
23. Qom
24. Razavi Khorasan
25. Semnan
26. Sistan & Baluchestan
27. South Khorasan
28. Tehran
29. West Azerbaijan
30. Yazd
31. Zanjan

Source: Jauhiainen, Eyvazlu (2018: 7).

In 2003, the Iranian government established a new registration system for Afghans, which replaced all other issued documents. So-called "Amayesh" card became the only valid migrant documentation in Iran. "Amayesh" cards were given to all Afghans who had been granted residency rights in Iran based on their Afghan nationality in the "open door" policy (in the 1980s and 1990s). "Amayesh" cardholders were granted short term residency permits (the cards were valid three months for a single person and six months for families) (Adelkhah, Olszewska, 2007: 142), which they needed to extend regularly paying for that up to $ 200 for municipal tax and $ 15 to renew

their status (Naseh et al., 2018: 2). Newborn Afghans whose parents had refugee status in Iran were granted an "Amayesh" card, but newly arrived Afghans no longer received refugee status. In 2019, in Iran there were nearly one million Afghans with "Amayesh" cards, 450,000 holders of a valid visa, and between 1.5 and 2 million undocumented persons (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019). Some sources estimate that the Afghan population in Iran is 4.5 million (Rich, 2020).

Since 2009 the Iranian authorities have attempted to legalize the presence of undocumented Afghans. Those who work irregularly in Iran have been encouraged to register for a short-term residence permit. In order to do so, they needed an Afghan passport (they had to travel back to Afghanistan in order to get that) and an Iranian visa. It was a very bureaucratic and expensive procedure, often involving huge amounts of money as a bribe. In 2010–2012, 560,000 Afghans regulated their status in this way (Christensen, 2016: 12).

The other option for Afghans in Iran was to become the combatant of the Fatemiyoun Division. The Fatemiyoun Division is an Afghan Shia militia formed in late 2013 as a brigade and later designated as a division in 2014 to fight in Syria on the side of the government of President Bashar al-Assad. This Division is trained, funded, and equipped by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and commanded by Iranian officers. In 2017, the Division numbered between 10,000–20,000 fighters – some analysts consider these figures to be exaggerations and put the number of Afghan fighters at a couple of thousand, but others stated that in 2018 the Division counted more than 36,000 (Rasmussen, Nader, 2016). These combatants received salaries of $ 500 to $ 700 per month, a promise of legal residency permits for themselves and their immediate families, and payment to families of those killed or severely injured in combat. Those who die are buried in one of the sacred places of Shia, and their families are granted Iranian citizenship. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) recruits undocumented Afghan migrants by offering them permanent residency, financial aid, and other benefits for their families and threatened with arrest or deportation. Some of the recruits joined the Fatemiyoun Division to escape prisoner sentences. Some of the recruits were children as young as 14 years old (Majidyar, 2018; Toumaj, 2016; Liwa, n.d.).

As it follows from reports of former fighters, Iran did not realize the results of these processes. Ferhad Amiri says: "The IRGC made countless promises to attract migrants to partake in the war in Syria. But afterward, we realized that all these promises were false. If they made good on these promises, I would retain my health now, and my body would not be devastated by war. And I am looking just for a piece of bread to keep me alive" (IIIS, 2019). According to Mohammed Dansh (four years in the ranks of the Fatemiyoun Division), "the IRGC promised the

Fatemiyoun Division's members that if they were killed in battle, their families would get Iranian IDs and they would receive permanent aid from the government. But it seems that the only thing that happens now is holding birthday parties for the orphans and visiting the graveyards of those killed" (IIIS, 2019).

Education

During the "open door" policy, until 1992, the Iranian administration provided Afghans with "blue cards" for them to have access to free primary and secondary education.[5] After 1992 Iran started to restrict the Afghans' access to public services, especially to education.

In the early 2000s, the Iranian government restricted Afghans' access to Iranian schools. Thus, Afghan children continued their education in self-regulated schools (Afghan Self-Regulated Schools) managed by Afghans. A few years later, the Iranian authorities changed their policy slightly. The documented Afghan migrant could attend Iranian public schools, but undocumented Afghan children had to study in self-regulated schools.

It is worth saying more about these self-regulated schools. These schools were established by the Afghan community outside official state-run schools. This type of schools came into being in the 1990s as a result of the introduction of laws prohibiting undocumented Afghan children from attending Iranian state-run schools.[6] These self-regulated schools offer basic education, but they suffer from a number of problems, for example, a lack of funds, untrained teachers, and kids of wide age ranges in one class. In 2002, the Iranian authorities pronounced self-regulated schools illegal because they encouraged Afghans to remain in Iran. The implementation of this regulation varied from one area to another, depending on local relations between Afghans and the Iranian authorities. Additionally, the Afghan communities closed one self-regulated school and opened the next ones in new places or replaced one large self-regulated school with a few smaller schools (Hervé, 2018: 8–9).

In 2004, the Iranian government banned Afghan students from enrolling in vocational schools and pre-university centers. The ban on pre-university centers meant that Afghans could no longer apply for entrance exams. In 2012, Afghan students

5 Iran's government withdrawal of food subsidies in 1995 (Frelick, 1999).

6 In fact, they also admitted children whose education had been delayed so they were too old for junior classes, children whose education qualifications were not recognized in Iranian state-run schools and children who could not afford the school fees of state-run schools – $ 28 vs. $ 167 (Wickramasekara et al., 2006: 42).

had to renew their refugee status and obtain an Afghan passport and visa. What is more, the Iranian government banned Afghans (and other foreigners) from studying 30 subjects in Iran, for example, nuclear engineering, atomic physics, aerospace engineering, and chemical engineering (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2013: 67).

In 2015, the situation changed once again because the Supreme Leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei said: "No Afghan child, even those who illegally live in Iran without documentation, should be deprived of education. They should all be enrolled in Iranian schools" (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2017: 2). The Iranian authorities issued a decree which allowed all Afghan children (documented and undocumented) to attend Iranian schools. The process started in April 2016, and what is more, the Iranian government created a special educational support card for undocumented Afghan pupils that protected them and their families from deportation during their studies. All Afghan children gained the right to learn in elementary and secondary level schools up to, and including, obtaining a secondary school diploma and permission to enroll outstanding schools and schools dedicated to children of martyrs and war veterans. It is estimated that around 51,000 undocumented Afghan children started to attend Iranian schools in 2016 (*Statement* …, 2016; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2017: 3).

Despite these new regulations, some non-legal barriers (i.e., administrative, political, and economic) do remain, which obstruct the full realization of these regulations. It can be mentioned, for example, that the new decree has not been fully understood at provincial and school level. Other barriers include school fees, the cost of books and uniforms required to enroll in schools; children laborers who cannot adapt their working hours to attend schools; a high number of overaged Afghan children who cannot directly be enrolled in state schools; a lack of information for undocumented Afghan families about the possibility of enrolling their kids in schools; early marriages of Afghan girls (Grigsby, 2013); a lack of trained Iranian teachers to deal with the needs of Afghan children (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2017: 4–5).

Marriage

Afghans living in Iran have a lot of problems connected with marital law and citizenship. Iran's marriage laws allow Afghan women who marry Iranian men to gain citizenship but refuse citizenship to Afghan men who marry Iranian women.[7] What

[7] Some Iranian families, because of poverty, force their daughters to marry Afghan men in exchange for "petty monetary gains" (Legalizing, 2016).

is more, for many years, children with Afghan fathers were not eligible for birthright citizenship. It was changed in June 2020, when the law allowed children born to foreign fathers to apply for citizenship (Shirmohammadi, 2020; Iran Women…, 2019b; Begum, 2019). It probably concerns approximately 800,000 children of Iranian mothers and Afghan migrants (Iran Recognizes…, 2019a). As important as the legal status for children can be an experience of one of the Afghan girls who lived in Iran and was very determined to get legal status: "When she was a teen, Soheila asked a worker in a public records office to get her fake identity documents. He agreed but asked for sexual favors in return. 'I was desperate, and I accepted,' Soheila recalled with tears in her eyes. 'But luckily my mother found out before it was too late and brought me to my senses.'" (Iran Recognizes…, 2019a).

In 2006, the Iranian government implemented a regulation that makes it more demanding for Iranian women to marry Afghan men. These laws make it necessary for Iranian women to gain permission from the authorities (i.e., Foreign Ministry) before they can marry Afghan men. According to Article 51 of the Family Protection Law, any foreigner who marries an Iranian woman without the permission of the Iranian government will be sentenced to 2–5 years in prison plus a cash penalty (Human Rights Watch, 2013: 69; Legalizing…, 2016).

Additionally, because men inherit property from their wives, in order to prevent a foreign man from owning property inside Iran, upon marrying a non-Iranian woman relinquish most of their property. The Iranian authorities are of the opinion that Afghan men desire to marry Iranian women to obtain Iranian residency and to enjoy citizenship (Iran, 2013: 11).

Work

In the 1980s, most Afghans in Iran were able to obtain permission to live and work throughout Iran without too much interference from the government. Nevertheless, step by step, the Iranian government introduced additional restrictions. As "blue cards" holders, Afghans were able to find work as many Iranian men were in the army because of the Iran-Iraq war. But the right to work was limited to a low-wage position in construction and agriculture, i.e., digging ditches, curing skins for leather. However, Afghans were barred from working as street sellers or owning their own business (Frelick, 1999).

In 2017, of the three million Afghan nationals who were residing in Iran, around 1,800,000 were migrant workers. Of those, around 250,000 had temporary residency cards or work permits issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Among them,

around 15,000 had insurance benefits covering medical bills and employment insurance. Most migrant Afghan workers in Iran were employed in legal jobs but under illegal circumstances, because they did not have work permits. Registered Afghan migrants were entitled to apply for temporary work permits. However, acquiring work permits was difficult because it is expensive, and the Iranian government has not issued them consistently and freely in recent years. Work permits are valid for 12 months and require regular renewal, which is not very cheap compared to wages. They cost $ 11 in 2019 (Human, 2013: 70).

Generally speaking, Afghan migrants have to accept any hard, dirty, and low-paid jobs without any insurance or any form of social security. They live in fear of the loss work or deportation, so they prefer the workplaces that are in the suburbs and far from the administration supervisors. They usually live in their workplaces or small rooms in unsuitable conditions. Iranian employers willing to employ cheap and hardworking Afghan workers were not exclusively in the private sector but also in government institutions such as city administration and the private contractors of government projects such as gas pipelines (Moughari, 2007: 65–66; Afghan Migrant Workers…, 2017).

On average, an Afghan migrant worker's monthly income was around $ 350–$ 400, but even $ 100 per month was accepted as a good wage. During the last few months, the average wages lowered (below $ 100 per month) because of the economic crisis in Iran (Afghan Adolescents…, 2019; Müller, 2018b). The money earned by Afghan workers is spent on daily costs of living, rent, transportation, and bribes to the police. The rest is sent to families in Afghanistan. It is also connected with additional costs because the Afghans must pay their smugglers (Eqbal, 2017).

Farshid, an Iranian employer, explained: "Why do we hire Afghan laborers? First of all, because they are good workers. And they never complain about what they have to do. They do not generally have families to spend time with, so they stay on the site longer and work more. Since they are undocumented, we do not have to pay for any insurance for them. Which is a good way to save money in these hard times" (Müller, 2018a).

Repatriation

Occasionally, the Iranian authorities have tried to reduce the number of Afghans in their country, but with no effect because of the cyclical nature of Afghans' migration to Iran. Some people decided voluntarily to return to Afghanistan, and some were deported. The first wave of Afghans returned home after 1992. About 600,000 people

returned to Afghanistan, over 300,000 of them under the repatriation program. In the following years, the Iranian authorities focused more on voluntarily than forced return. Afghans were encouraged to return by offering them repatriation packages. In 2000 the repatriation package contained the equivalent of $ 40, 50 kg of wheat, and the International Organization for Migration would also provide transportation. After 2001, until the end of September 2004, 770,643 Afghans left Iran to go home voluntarily. When President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office in 2005, Iran followed a very strict deportation policy. The Iranian administration believed that people from Afghanistan harm the Iranian economy because they are using subsidized services and taking over the job market. Although the Iranian government conducts its deportation policy, new Afghans have come to Iran (Ghani, Malekian, Sun, n.d.).

The next wave of repatriation was an effect of the economic crisis in Iran. In 2014, 206,000 Afghans returned voluntarily and 570,000 involuntarily but the next year the numbers were higher – in 2015, 296,000 and 882,000, respectively; in 2016, 1,011,000 and 742,000, respectively; in 2017, 1,743,000 and 544,000, respectively; in 2018, 449,000 and 255,000, respectively; in 2019, 170,000 and 220,000, respectively (Afghanistan Human Rights…, 2019: 9).

The economic crisis in Iran was a consequence of sanctions used by the United States to try to force Iran to resign from the nuclear program. The US sanctions on Iran, which are primarily "secondary sanctions" on firms that conduct certain transactions with Iran, have adversely affected Iran's economy. During 2011–2015, global economic sanctions contributed to a 50% fall in Iran's crude oil export and blocked Iranian foreign exchange assets abroad. In 2015 Iran decided to enter into an agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)) that put limits on its nuclear program. These sanctions were lifted, but on 8 May 2018, President Donald Trump announced that the United States would no longer participate in the JCPOA, and the United States reimposed all secondary sanctions by 6 November 2018 (Congressional Research Service, 2020). As a result of the sanctions, Iran's GDP contracted an estimated 4.8% in 2018 and was forecast to shrink by another 9.5% in 2019. The unemployment rate rose from 14.5% in 2018 to 16.8% in 2019. In 2018 the exchange rate was 150.000 rials to 1 dollar and reached its lowest levels ever – 200,000 against the dollar – in late June 2020 (Six Charts…, 2019). In this economic condition, the cost of aid for Afghans is seen as a major obligation. As Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said: "Afghan refugees cost Iran 3 billion to 5 billion euros (approximately $ 3.37 billion to $ 5.61 billion) every year. … About 468,000 Afghan students are being educated in Iran's government schools, and each student costs us 600 euros a year" (Europe Should Pay…, 2019). To compare – in 2017, the European Union offered 10 million euros as aid to Afghan children in Iran (Domagalska, Kaczmarek, 2019: 188–189).

The new wave of migration was forced in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic. In the first four months of 2020, the International Organization of Migration reported that 272,868 undocumented Afghans were expelled from Iran through the border stations of Islam Qala and Nimroz. Of these, 80.4% were described as "spontaneous," which means that they had left Iran on their own. 19.6% were officially deported (IOM, 2020). In addition to those who passed through the official border stations, there were thousands of Afghans who crossed the border illegally – nobody knows how many.

These returnees are going back untested and unmonitored to places around the country and have brought new infections with them. The Herat province bordering Iran, a transit point for many traveling to and from, has become a hotspot for COVID-19 in Afghanistan.[8] Because of that, Afghan Health Minister Ferozudin Feroz expressed concern that Iran would push out more than 1 million Afghans who are in the country illegally (Aman, 2020).

Despite the pandemic, the economic crisis, increasing violence and unemployment in Afghanistan coupled with the pandemic – which, according to the Biruni Institute, has already seen 4.8 million Afghans lose their jobs – will push many Afghans to leave again and return to Iran (Biruni, 2020: 9).

Conclusion

For decades Afghans have been one of the largest groups forced, for many reasons, to live beyond their borders. The largest Afghan communities exist in Pakistan and Iran. In the case of the latter, the situation is difficult and complex, as the position of Afghans is influenced by several interconnected factors. First of all, the Iranian authorities has responsibility for supporting migrants as Iran has very limited help, in this respect, from the international community. Iran, in theory, has significant possibilities due to its more than significant resources of crude oil. Still, the sanctions limit its ability to make large profits from the export of oil. This is the cause of a serious economic crisis in Iran, and this limits its ability to support financially Afghan migrants there. Moreover, with rising unemployment in Iran, the Afghans who are engaged in worst-paid jobs are viewed by many Iranians as those who block their access to the labor market. Therefore, the pressure to deport Afghans back

[8] On July 20, 2020 Afghanistan had a total of 35,526 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 1,185 deaths attributed to the disease. The most cases occurred in Kabul (14,371 confirmed cases and 456 deaths), Herat (5,313 confirmed cases and 162 deaths), Balkh (1,790 confirmed cases and 61 deaths), Nangarhar (1,377 confirmed cases and 67 deaths), and Kandahar (1,348 confirmed cases and 35 deaths) (US Embassy).

to their country of origin is popular. On the other hand, the Afghans in Iran, despite the economic hardships of this country, still believe that they have a better chance to find work and better existence there than in Afghanistan, which since 1979 has been plagued by consecutive military conflicts, so there are much fewer opportunities there. The COVID-19 pandemic has convinced some of the Afghans to return to their country, but this is probably just a temporary situation, and sooner or later, they will try to return to Iran. The only other option is the stabilization of Afghanistan, which would lead to a cessation of struggles and reconstruction of this country. Otherwise, Iran is forced to accept Afghan migrants.

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