

Afghan Refugees in Iran: Employment & Iran's Baby Boom

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Afghan refugees began entering Iran in large numbers in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time when more pressing matters distracted Iran. The refugees began to cross the frontier in 1978, initially fleeing the incipient civil war in their homeland and later the Soviet invasion. Meanwhile, the Iranian Revolution that began in 1978 had yet to settle out. The Islamic revolutionaries were anti-American and anti-Soviet, as well as violently opposed to the regimes governing most Muslim countries, making Iran an international outcast. Moreover, the Iranian economy was slowing after the oil-led boom of the 1970s. And then Iraq invaded Afghanistan in September 1980.

Because of these troubles and the importance in Islam of providing sanctuary to refugees, rather than turning the refugees away, the Iranian government opened the country's borders to the Afghans and let society at large absorb them. The new Islamic government let the existing social and economic infrastructure provide for the refugees' needs. Allowing Afghans to find work and earn a living was "the best way of solving their problems and alleviating the burden on local authorities."¹

It was only in the early 1990s - when the regime was secure, Iran less isolated internationally, and the war with Iraq over - that it began to encourage the Afghans to go home. There were three reasons for this change in attitude: the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989, a rapidly rising Iranian population caused by a government-encouraged baby boom, and a recession that pushed Iran's unemployment rate up to 30 percent by 1993.

But some things got in the way of repatriation. The anti-Farsiwan and virulently anti-Shia Taliban took power in Kabul in 1996. The Taliban brought a "new edge" to longstanding sectarian hostility between the Sunni Pashtuns and the Shi'i Hazaras.² The massacres committed by both sides against each other in 1996-98 further hardened that enmity. Then drought settled over the region in 1999. And in 2001, the United States attacked Afghanistan, the

first campaign in its “war on terrorism.”

Today, roughly two million Afghans remain in Iran. Just like Mexicans in Los Angeles, Afghan men wait on the street corners of Tehran for Iranians to stop and hire them for day jobs, especially as laborers on construction sites. But this is illegal unless Iranian employers have special permits and Afghans workers have proper documentation. The problem is that young Iranians are entering the workplace faster than the economy can create jobs. Two-thirds of the country’s seventy million people are younger than thirty. It is a group that is “politically repressed, economically troubled, and socially restless.”³ Clerical rule since 1979 has given them nothing but unfulfilled economic promises. There is a dire need for the government to find a way to produce jobs for this mass of young, disenchanting Iranians who reach working age each year.⁴

In contrast, when the Afghans began arriving in large numbers in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the fledgling Iranian government had no policy to deal with them, and any employer who needed bodies could hire Afghans. Able bodies were in short supply because of the war with Iraq. It took time for the government to evolve a refugee policy, as Ahmad Hosseini, head of refugee affairs at Iran’s Interior Ministry, explained in a 1995 interview:

Unfortunately at that time [when Afghans first arrived] we did not have a formulated plan to receive such a large number of refugees and settle them in special places. Therefore, the Afghans were scattered everywhere to the extent that today they have become part of our society.... If a refugee passes through the borders it is hard to make him return to his homeland.⁵

Even before the anti-communist civil war erupted in Afghanistan in 1978, there were hundreds of thousands of Afghans in Iran.⁶ The country’s rapid economic expansion in the 1970s, fueled by increases in oil production after the Arab oil embargo of 1973 drove oil prices to record levels, resulted in labor shortages. Afghans and other foreigners filled these jobs. The migration was so heavy from western Afghanistan that by 1978 there were reports of crops in the Herat area going unharvested.⁷ Many of the Afghans headed for the Persian Gulf, where they were hired as manual laborers at construction sites and on the docks of Iran’s ports. Estimates of the number of Afghan workers in Iran in the 1970s ranged from 600,000 to 1 million. The April 1978 communist coup in Kabul subsequently added a trickle of refugees to the flow of migrant workers. By late 1979, resistance to the Kabul regime threatened to over-

throw it. That December, Soviet troops invaded to save the communist government. The trickle of refugees became a torrent.

It was not until there were an estimated 1.5 million Afghans in the country that Iran began to pay attention to them. It had good reason for ignoring them. The country had been undergoing the convulsions of revolution at the same time it was fighting Iraq. Without "any real cohesion," the new Islamic regime had been unable to run the government effectively.⁸ While the war with Iraq had consumed 10 percent of the country's resources by 1983, Iran's economy still functioned well enough to provide basic necessities. A desperate oil export policy that tripled production between 1980 and 1983, coupled with Iran's "willingness to discount below OPEC prices to increase its market share," buoyed the economy.⁹

To deal with the Afghans, the government established the Council for Afghan Refugees, or CAR, in 1982. In March 1983, the Interior Ministry said that it would undertake a census to find out just how many Afghans were in the country. The day after the announcement, Interior Minister Hojjat ol-Islam Nateq-Nuri called on his countrymen to welcome the Afghans and to treat them like Iranians who had been made homeless as a result of the war with Iraq.¹⁰ A year later, his ministry announced that there were more than 1.8 million Afghan refugees in the country. The Interior Ministry said that each would receive a special identification card to be able to take advantage of Iranian welfare, educational, and health services. According to Hassan Bashir, chairman of CAR, the refugees were "entitled to all the privileges of Iranian nationals in terms of health and education, the cost of which is absorbed by the concerned organizations, as with Iranian nationals."¹¹

While the census did not provide data on the religious, linguistic, or ethnic makeup of the refugees, it was thought that those who fled to Iran were mostly Persian speakers from western and central Afghanistan, including the Shi'i Hazara. A study of the Afghans in Khorasan province found that by 1988, three-fifths of the nearly 300,000 Afghans in Mashhad were Shi'i and that half were from Herat province. Closer to the border, most of the Afghans were Sunni. And in the south of the province, there were Pashtuns living in camps. These Pashtuns huggēd the border apparently because of their involvement in cross-border trading and smuggling, and because the men still worked farmland in Afghanistan while their families were safe in Iran.¹²

It was not until the middle of 1983 that the Iranian govern-

ment, now firmly in control of the country, invited the United Nations refugee relief agency, known as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to help with the still rising tide of Afghan refugees. That July, UNHCR officials visited "transit" camps the government had set up to handle the incoming Afghans. These small camps hold about 3,000 refugees for stays of no longer than two months. In Sabzevar, the camp was a small city of tents and concrete shelters erected on a cement platform, with sanitation facilities and a water distribution system. Though barbed wire surrounded the camp, it still had a job placement office.¹³

Along with the transit camps, the Iranian government set up "quarantine" camps along the frontier. Here the Afghans undergo medical screenings and security checks, and are asked whether they already have family members in Iran. From the quarantine camps, the refugees are sent on to the transit camps. The quarantine camps were established following an upsurge of new arrivals carrying contagious diseases.¹⁴ By mid-1985, ten quarantine centers had been established. But only an estimated 10 percent of incoming Afghans had actually gone through them.¹⁵ The refugees—many of them in poor health and malnourished because of famine and war—brought with them malaria, tuberculosis, measles, cholera, typhus, pneumonia, bronchitis, and leprosy. By mid-1986, the Iranian government had spent US\$120 million in combating these diseases, many of which had virtually disappeared from Iran before being reintroduced by the Afghans.¹⁶

An indication of Iran's international isolation is that, from 1982 to 1990, UNHCR provided about US\$82 million to help care for the 2.4 million Afghans in the country. However, this pales in comparison to the almost US\$407 million it provided for the 3.3 million Afghans in Pakistan. Iran's radicalism, its anti-Americanism, and its hope that the Islamic revolution would spread to other countries meant that no individual nations were willing to offer help.

The Iranian government encouraged the refugees to become self-sufficient and to spread out across the country. By 1985, some 720,000 Afghans were in Khorasan and Sistan-Baluchistan provinces, the arid and sparsely populated provinces that border Afghanistan. Meanwhile, more than 800,000 Afghans had moved deeper into the country, as far west as Isfahan and Tehran. More than 300,000 went to find work in the capital.¹⁷

In eastern Iran, the government steered the Afghans into farm work, part of an effort to make the country self-sufficient in

food. But tensions were already evident as the Afghans were willing to take jobs at lower wages than Iranians.¹⁸ The Iranian government also wanted the Afghans to find work because of the war against Iraq. The only military advantage Iran had in the war was manpower. Afghans entering the workforce freed still more Iranians for military duty.

The Afghans found work as trench and well diggers, bricklayers, street sweepers, pistachio shellers, and walnut harvesters. Often the backbreaking work was only seasonal. Children who could not go to school and women who could not find work stayed home and wove carpets. The refugees even began collecting discarded items and turned recycling into a major activity.¹⁹ The men gained a reputation for working in construction. In Majid Majidi's 2001 movie *Baran (Rain)*, an Iranian goes to an Afghan village looking for a co-worker named Soltan. The Iranian asks a cobbler if he knows Soltan. The cobbler replies that there are many Afghans named Soltan. The Iranian then says the Soltan he is looking for works in construction. The cobbler responds, "All Afghan men are builders."

The natural gas pipeline grid in Tehran was virtually installed by Afghan labor. One foreman overseeing the laying of gas mains in a neighborhood near Ayatollah Khomeini's residence had a crew comprising entirely Afghans. The foreman said the Afghans were "good employees, they work hard. They are never late in the morning because they sleep on site."²⁰

Life for the Afghan laborers was not easy and grew harder over time, as a 1992 news report noted:

Like many Afghan refugees in Iran, Ahmad Islam, 34, is constantly on the run, making a meager living working illegally at odd jobs in a land where his countrymen are increasingly unwelcome. But while fighting and uncertainty convulse Afghanistan, he and his fellow refugees would rather stay in Iran.... Islam's friend Mohammad Rasoul, 24, the youngest of the group, said: "We live like fugitives, do the dirtiest jobs, live hand-to-mouth. But at least there's no war."²¹

In 1985, declining oil revenues and the strain on the economy from the war with Iraq increased the competition for jobs. In the winter of 1985-86, Saudi Arabia depressed world oil prices by doubling its output. Iran saw its monthly oil income fall from US\$1.25 billion in the spring of 1985 to US\$500 million in the spring of 1986.²² The economic contraction was coupled with a rapidly rising population. From 1979 to 1987, Iran's per capita gross do-

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mestic product plunged by 47 percent, while Iran's population growth rate of 3.9 percent a year from 1976 to 1986 was the highest in the world.²³

These strains generated friction between Afghans and Iranian jobseekers, leading the government to restrict Afghan employment. Registered Afghans could only be employed in designated trades and only in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, with limits on the number of Afghans in each workplace.²⁴ Employment restrictions were further tightened in the 1990s as more and more baby-boom Iranians entered the work force and unemployment rose. Afghans could be found milling along Tehran's roadsides.

One immediately notices Afghan men on the streets. They're frequently seen on construction sites, and on street corners, where they wait for foremen to drive by in their pick-ups, looking for day laborers. Everyone has something to say about [Afghans], but few have any contact with them. The commentaries are standard fare applied to underdog immigrants in many countries: poor and wretched creatures fleeing from the horrors of civil war ... and/or parasites taking the precious few available jobs away from the locals, making a bad job market even worse. Many here ignore the fact that the two million Afghani men and women often do jobs that are considered beneath Iranians, and that employers and the economy have depended on cheap Afghan cheap labor.²⁵

Afghans are usually paid just half of what Iranians earn, or less. In Mashhad, the worst off are those who shell pistachio nuts at home. Shelling three kilograms of pistachios brings in 1,200 riyals, equal to 15 US cents. "If I wake early in the morning and my daughters help me we can shell only six kilos between us every day," said one woman. Her family used the shells as fuel to heat their ramshackle room in winter.²⁶

The Afghans became increasingly unwelcome especially after Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989. Mashhad's deputy governor charged that illegal Afghan immigrants had deformed his province. Afghans had doubled Mashhad's population in the 1980s. The refugees created a vast bazaar around the Haram of Imam Reza, "filling the void" that emerged after the Shah had pulled down the city's old bazaar in the 1970s. The goods the Afghans sold differed little from what Iranian shops sold, except that they were cheaper.²⁷ The mayor's complaints echoed growing impatience with the refugees. Many Iranians blamed the refugees for rising crime rates and the narcotics trade, which flourished despite crackdowns

in which thousands of people were killed or arrested.²⁸ But there were those who stood up for the Afghans. The Tehran daily *Abrar* defended "those migrating in the way of Allah."²⁹

Three years after its own war with Iraq had ended, Iran experienced a flood of Iraqi refugees along its western border in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. During two weeks at the beginning of April 1991, the Iraqi refugee population in Iran skyrocketed from 50,000 to 560,000. These Iraqis, both Shi'i Arabs and Sunni Kurds, were fleeing the wrath of Saddam Hussein. His Republican Guards brutally reasserted government authority over regions in northern and southern Iraq that had rebelled shortly after Iraq's retreat from Kuwait. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata called it "the fastest refugee movement in the 40-year history of UNHCR."³⁰ At its peak, the total number of refugees in Iran—Iraqis, Afghans and Azeris—would exceed 4.1 million, the largest refugee population ever recorded in a single country, and nearly a quarter of the 16.8 million refugees worldwide in 1991, according to UN figures. The Iraqi refugees did not stay long. By September 1991, three-quarters of them had returned to Iraq.

Subsequently, the Iranian government started to prod the Afghans into going home. There were an estimated three million Afghan refugees in the country, the economy was stagnating, and resources shrinking. Repatriation was necessary "to avoid a domestic crisis," said Ahmad Hosseini, head of the department in the Iranian Foreign Ministry overseeing immigrants and foreign nationals. The effort to send the Afghans home, despite running counter to "humanitarian Islamic values" was seen as "pragmatic at a time of economic recession," one Iranian economist said.³¹

In 1993, unemployment was estimated at 30 percent and inflation was surging, averaging 31 percent from 1994 to 1997.³² The government began implementing a family planning policy in response to the country's worsening social and economic conditions because the regime was unable to respond adequately to the results of the baby boom it had brought upon itself. A high-ranking government official said in 1994 "explosive growth in population will lead to political turmoil and instability."³³

But Afghanistan's unsettled domestic situation kept throwing up roadblocks to repatriation. The civil war that had been interrupted by the Soviet invasion now resumed. Afghanistan's continued instability frustrated the Iranian government, which had tightened the restrictions on Afghans to get them to leave. Benefits were

trimmed or taken away. The Iranian government even began food-aid programs inside Afghanistan to deter refugees from returning to Iran. "What we are doing is purely a humanitarian Islamic service. If we don't do it, we will have more refugees from this country at our doorsteps," an Iranian diplomat said.³⁴

The heyday of repatriation lasted from 1992 to 1995. During the period, between 195,000 and 606,000 Afghans headed home each year. During these peak years, truck drivers were "coining money," taking households back with the goods acquired after years of residence in Iran.³⁵ After the Taliban took control, repatriation came to a halt. In 1996, just 14,000 refugees crossed the frontier back to Afghanistan. "This would indicate a massive vote of no confidence in the mainly Pashto-speaking Taliban by the mainly Dari-speaking refugees in Iran."³⁶ The Dari speakers, especially the Shi'i Hazara, were right to be wary. The Taliban committed atrocities against the Persian speakers in northern and western Afghanistan, massacring whole villages of Hazaras, whom they viewed as heretics. One Hazara from Bamiyan in central Afghanistan told an American anthropologist, "Most of us fled when the Taliban first arrived. They began killing Hazaras. They had been here before, but this time [early 2001] it was much worse. This time they simply shot people wherever they found them."³⁷ After the Taliban takeover, "Iran is heaven for them compared with Afghanistan," said Sudang Kaentrakool, head of the UNHCR office in Mashhad. "Bread is cheap, schooling is free and the streets are safe. Many don't even know Afghanistan: 60 percent were born here."³⁸

In the face of Taliban brutality, Iran stopped trying to force the Afghans out, especially after Iran and the Taliban nearly went to war after the Taliban murdered eleven Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998. Nonetheless, two years later, a period of tense relations between Kabul and Tehran, the Iranian government again began urging the Afghans to go home, telling all those without the proper papers that they had until October 2000 to leave.³⁹ To propel the Afghans homeward, the government barred Iranians from employing the refugees. However, employers protested that, without cheap Afghan labor, prices would go up, aggravating inflation. When the government tried to clamp down by threatening to fine or imprison employers who hired Afghans, many company owners in the construction business closed their plants in protest.⁴⁰

In 2001, reports began to surface of anti-Afghan violence within Iran. In Pishva, in southern Tehran, anti-Afghan protestors

rampaged through a neighborhood, injuring a number of people and shouting, "Death to Afghans." In Falavarjan, a village in Isfahan province, a group of 100 Iranian "motorcyclists" was reported to have attacked Afghans.⁴¹ Constant reports about criminal activities by Afghans, especially drug trafficking, fueled the attacks. Iran saw an upsurge in drug running after the Taliban took control of Kabul. Afghanistan is the biggest producer of opium and heroin in the world, and Iran is a major transit route to Europe for those drugs.⁴² Roughly 85 percent of the world's opium seizures take place in Iran, and more than 3,000 Iranian soldiers have been killed fighting drug dealers.⁴³ In the mid-1990s, an Iranian newspaper editor summed up Iranian frustration: "This is the last bloody time we do anything humanitarian. Look at the mess it's got us into. We welcomed the Afghans with open arms and all we got was crime and drugs."⁴⁴

Even nature began working against Iranian efforts to make the Afghans head home. A devastating drought that began in 1999, combined with the Taliban's bigotry, led many Afghans, especially Hazaras who had gone home between 1992 and 1995, to return to Iran.⁴⁵ Then the United States threw up its own barricade to Afghan repatriation when it attacked Afghanistan and the Taliban for harboring Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida.

The long sojourn in Iran has changed many Afghans, especially women. One of the "ironies surrounding the exodus of millions of Afghans [from their homeland] is that huge numbers of girls were able to receive an education in exile [that] they would have been denied at home."⁴⁶ The Iranian government opened its primary and secondary schools to both Afghan boys and girls "without discrimination."⁴⁷ But while the Persian-speaking Shi'i refugees generally send their children to Iranian schools, many Sunni Afghans prefer to run their own schools or to keep their children at home.⁴⁸

While some Afghan women found outside work, most tended to stay at home, raising children or taking on wage labor, such as sewing, rug weaving, making handicrafts and prayer beads, shelling pistachios, making brooms, straightening crooked nails, and planting vegetables.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the Afghans mixed with the Iranian population and came into contact with an Iranian society in which most girls go to school and many women work. This exposure to education and the workplace had the unintended effect of making many Afghan women loath to leave Iran. A 21-year-old woman originally from Kabul said, "I left Afghanistan as a little girl, knowing nothing. Now I am a mother and I have an education.

How can I ever go back to the 'old' Afghanistan even if peace comes?"⁵⁰

Marriages between Afghans and Iranians have turned out to be an unexpected hitch in the efforts to send the Afghans home. "There are more than 100,000 illegal marriages, mainly between Afghan men and Iranian women, and the women's unwillingness to go to Afghanistan has turned into a dilemma," said an Afghan diplomat in Tehran.⁵¹ Afghan and Iranian officials have been trying to untie the legal knot without cleaving the marriages. The Iranian government repeatedly warned against Iranian-Afghan marriages and in 1990 outlawed marriages between Afghan men and Iranian women.

Take the example of Muhammad-Yunis. He wants to return home but his Iranian wife, Iran-Taj, refuses to leave. Their two daughters, eleven and nine years old, were born in Iran but are being forced to go with their father, who, after working twenty-five years in an Iranian factory, lost his job. "I love my husband, but if the situation in Kabul is not rife to lead a normal life, what will it be like in Parwan [his home province]?" Iran-Taj asked. "I have two daughters [and] I attend university. Who can guarantee they would even finish high school in Afghanistan?"⁵²

Recently, the Iranian government announced something of a policy to deal with these families. In an interview in Mashhad, Ahmad Hosseini, the deputy interior minister who handles refugee affairs, said that, under a plan that would send all Afghans home by March 2005, Afghans married to Iranians would be allowed to return home last. The Iranian government also would provide special privileges to Afghan men legally married to Iranian women so the men would not have to quit their families. Iranian women married to Afghan nationals would be allowed to keep their Iranian passports, but their children would be given the same "special blue cards" issued to Afghan refugees.⁵³

To get a fix on just how many Afghans were still in the country, the Iranian government undertook a census that required Afghans to register by 27 August 2002 or face expulsion. Iran was facing a re-influx of Afghans because of the American military campaign against the Taliban. The census found that the number of Afghans in Iran had swollen to nearly 2.6 million. Once again, like a broken record, Ahmad Hosseini declared the Afghans were an economic burden: "The displaced Afghans are considered immigrants, not refugees, and so they should return to the home country."⁵⁴

In April 2002, the United Nations, Iran and the post-Taliban government in Kabul struck an agreement on repatriating the refugees. Since then, the outflow has picked up. From March 2002 through June 2003, roughly 575,000 refugees returned home.⁵⁵

Despite the American victory over the Taliban, many Afghans in Iran do not want to go home. In August 2002, in a somewhat paradoxical protest, hundreds of Afghans mobbed their embassy in Tehran seeking its protection from being repatriated by the Iranian government. "We want an identity paper allowing us to stay in Iran, and to continue to work," one Afghan laborer said.⁵⁶ Afghans have become Iran's working underclass, taking on the low-wage, backbreaking, and repetitious work that Iranians avoid. Afghan construction workers humping bricks, mixing mortar, and pouring concrete have helped build Tehran. Though Iran's economy has grown by at least 3.6 percent a year over the past three years, it is not producing jobs fast enough for the burgeoning population. Iran's population more than doubled from 1975 to 2000, rising from 33.5 million to 70.3 million. Each year, 1.8 million Iranians enter the workforce. Officially, unemployment is 16 percent, with 3.2 million people jobless.⁵⁷ Recently, Interior Minister Abdulvahed Mussavi Lari said that Iran's high unemployment rate and pressure from labor groups were behind his country's push to accelerate the repatriation effort.⁵⁸ If all the Afghans leave, more work will be available to Iranians - if they are willing to take the jobs the refugees did. But even then, the departure of the Afghans would only ease the employment problem for a year at most.

After two decades of refuge in Iran, a country with its share of problems, Afghans have found a place where they can work and raise their families in peace. Iran's economy and security will keep Afghans in the country. Many Afghan children know no other home. In contrast, Afghanistan is a wreck, devastated by twenty-four years of nearly uninterrupted warfare. Its cities are ruined. Its government is shaky. Safety is uncertain. Brigands make its roads dangerous. Landmines make its fields deadly, and the drought leaves them parched. As one Afghan said, "Even if the Taliban have gone, I don't want to go back to my country until it is like Iran and there is security, and when life gets better and also the drought is over."⁵⁹

It has been fifteen years since the war with Iraq ended. Iran has a moderate president who has striven to end the country's isolation. The Taliban have been obliterated. The economy is growing. The Afghans are maybe the last issue the Iranians have to deal with

before closing the book on the 1980s. Then they can turn all their attention to their twenty-first century political and employment problems.

Notes

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