



Migration Profile

IRAN

A. Executive Summary

Situated at the junction of the Middle East and Asia, Iran, also known as Persia, is an ancient civilisation, amongst the oldest sovereign States in the world. A predominantly Persian yet multi-ethnic society, the political nature of the State in Iran is Shiite and theocratic. Founded in 1989 after the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran is headed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Rouhani. Due to its proximity with Afghanistan and the porous nature of the mountainous border regions, Iran hosts one of the biggest refugee and migrant communities in the world, almost exclusively composed of Afghans who have fled their country over the past 40 years, as well as a lesser number of Iraqis. Though official Amayesh cardholders are considered as refugees, the remaining Afghans and Iraqis are not in a regular administrative situation on Iranian soil. The economic hardships experienced by Iran have increased the risks of human trafficking for the most vulnerable parts of the population, particularly for Afghan migrants but also impoverished Iranian children and women, who are more susceptible of being victims of forced labor and sexual abuse, mainly because of early and temporary marriages. Although Iran is home to a large community of refugees and migrants, many Iranians have left Iran since the 1970s, forming a strong diaspora across the region and in Western countries. The country is currently supporting various actors involved in the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. As the target of UN financial sanctions, Iran is currently suffering from a severe economic crisis that the COVID-19 crisis has dramatically worsened: the sanctions have made it impossible for interested parties to transfer funds to Iran, causing humanitarian aid to be only allowed in-kind. Due to its geographic location, Iran is prone to major natural disasters, especially earthquakes such as the Bam earthquake of 2003, to such an extent that it has prompted reflections about moving the capital away from Tehran. The future of Iran will be influenced by the evolutions of its relations with the new US administration, and by the results of the coming Iranian presidential election in 2021, as well as by the evolutions of the entire Middle-East and Gulf regions. Though Iran only has a very limited Catholic community, the country nonetheless welcomes activities by Caritas Iran and has official relations with the Catholic Church.

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

The Islamic Republic of Iran was founded in 1979 as a result of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Led by the Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei since 1989 and President Hassan Rouhani since 2013, the country has a population of 84,923,314 as per July 2020 estimates. Although these are not official figures, Iran's ethnic mix is believed to be composed of Persians (61%), Azerbaijanis (16%), Kurds (10%), Lurs (6%), Baloch (2%), Arabs (2%), Turkmen, and Turkic tribes (2%), as well as smaller numbers of Armenians, Assyrians, and Georgians. Religiously speaking, Iranians are estimated to be almost exclusively Muslim 99.4% (the official State religion of Shia Islam comprises 90-95%, while the Sunni minority constitutes 5-10%). Other religions, including Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity compose 0.3% of the population and 0.4% is unspecified, as per 2011 estimates. The country is bordered by Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the Gulf, and the Caspian Sea. The name of the Gulf is disputed, since Iranians call it the Persian Gulf while Arabs call it the Arabian Gulf. Some media call it the Arabo-Persian Gulf to find a middle ground. Because of its geography, infrastructural fragility, urbanisation trends, and worsening economic crisis, Iran often experiences floods, droughts, dust, and sandstorms, as well as earthquakes. Consequently, Iran ranks among the 10 most disaster-prone countries in the world. Moreover, Iran has recently been the country hardest hit by COVID-19 in the region, with an economic situation already aggravated by existing international sanctions: the price of goods has increased by between 55% and 100% over the past year. 2020 was marked by grave tensions, particularly surrounding the assassinations of General Soleimani in Iraq and nuclear scientist Mohesen Fakhrizadeh.

II. International and Internal Migrants

Given the political situation, demography, and economy of Iran, the nation is at once a country of origin and destination for migrants, as well as a place of transit. However, the decaying economic situation and international isolation of Iran have caused the country to lose most of its international workforce. Internal migration data has been collected since 1956. The 2016 Census data showed that Iranians are moderately mobile, and that Iran is relatively advanced in the process of urbanization. The country has been experiencing mainly urban-to-urban migration trends since the mid 2000s. As expected, the provinces around Tehran are becoming more populous, while the east and west regions of the country decrease in population. Though limited, these trends have caused the authorities to tackle housing costs, traffic congestion in populous areas, and questions around the ageing and feminisation of rural populations. Regarding foreigners, the records of the Philippines' Department of Labor show that 1,180 Filipinos are based in Iran, including Filipino women married to Iranians. One should also consider the Russians residing in Southern Iran, as many of them work in nuclear-related activities, such as at the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant. Iran and Russia have developed a stronger bond due to the growing antagonism between Tehran and Washington.

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

A substantial Iranian Diaspora is present in the Middle East, as well as Western Europe, North America, and Australia. Official figures are not available, however it is believed that up to 1 million Iranians have left Iran since 1950. In total, including their descendants born outside of Iran, the Iranian Diaspora would reach roughly 3 million. Around 500,000

Iranians are said to live in the metropolitan region of Los Angeles, engendering the nickname “Tehrangeles,” where the Iranian community is known to be financially successful. The average salary of an Iranian in the United States is 30% higher than the average US salary. Publications over the years have mentioned the drastic effect of what they call the world’s biggest brain drain. Back in 1999, according to OECD figures, 25% of the Iranian population with a tertiary education was living in OECD countries, and therefore outside of Iran. In 2019, an official communication by the Iranian Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare expressed their plan to send 5,000 workers overseas in 2019-2020. The Iranian Deputy Cooperatives Minister declared, *“Last year, up to 2,000 Iranians were sent abroad to work through the ministry’s Department of Employment Promotion. More people are now willing to work overseas, given the depreciation of the local currency against foreign currencies.”* In light of present-day economic hardships induced by the COVID-19 crisis and international sanctions, emigration is set to remain a constant threat to Iran’s future economic development.

IV. Forced Migrants (internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, and refugees)

Iran is home to one of the largest and most protracted, longest-running urban refugee populations in the world, hosting roughly 3 million Afghans. As per the most recent report dated April-June 2020, 979,410 people in Iran are considered to be of concern to the UNHCR, including 951,141 Afghans and 28,268 Iraqis, all of which are Amayesh cardholders and thus treated as refugees. As the UNHCR reports, 97% of these refugees live in urban and rural areas while the remaining 3% reside in 21 settlements managed by the Iranian Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA). There are 450,000 other Afghan passport-holders with Iranian visas who reside in Iran, including former Amayesh cardholders who now have student visas that allow them to access higher education. It is estimated that some 1.5 to 2 million undocumented Afghans also live in Iran. Despite successive campaigns, obtaining the Amayesh card remains immensely difficult for newcomers. In the South of Iran, Rafsanjan hosts the largest refugee settlement, with roughly 5,500 Afghans. Approximately 30,000 other Afghan Amayesh cardholders live in Rafsanjan city. According to the Government of Iran, some 2,000-2,500 Afghans arrive in Iran every day via remote entry points along the 921 km border shared with Afghanistan. It must be underlined that a sizable part of the Afghan population are ethnic Tajiks, who have a Persian background and speak a dialect very close to Farsi, the official language of Iran. The nomad Afghan Hazara pastoralist tribesmen must also be counted among the Afghans in Iran. Regional media and social media have denounced the violent and sometimes lethal treatment of Afghans in Iran. The year 2020 was marked by the drowning of 45 Afghans, after having allegedly been forced into a river by Iranian guards, as well as a viral video of a car containing the corpses of deceased Afghans, which was set ablaze by the shootings of Iranian guards. These events contributed to a rising atmosphere of mistrust, fear and anger amongst Afghans, at home and abroad. Afghani officials report that thousands of Afghans have recently been deported by Iran, despite the Coronavirus pandemic. Numerous personal testimonies of the fear and danger faced by Afghans in Iran were reported by a journalist involved in an NGO serving migrants in Calais, France. Among the many Afghans that have left their country for Europe, most of them vividly recall the intense fear they experienced on the roads in Iran, because of the local security forces or the violence of

smugglers. Due to the traditional nature of the Afghan society, most of the migrants who can get the necessary financial resources to leave their country are boys and men, with the exception of a few women who travel with their husbands. However, among the Amayesh cardholders, and thus among officially recognised Afghan residents, 53% are men and 47% are women. There were 630 refugees repatriated in 2020, according to the UNHCR, which is involved in facilitating voluntary repatriation for Afghans, once it is established that their return is voluntary, safe, dignified, and durable. "Since 2002, UNHCR Iran has supported nearly 1 million refugees to return to Afghanistan. However, as the situation in Afghanistan remains fragile, only a small number of Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran have shown willingness and ability to return to their home country."¹ Lastly, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reports a total number of 180,000 remaining internally displaced people (IDPs) in Iran, mostly due to floods, while a total of 520,000 movements were noted over the course of 2019.

5. Victims of Human Trafficking

As in many parts of the world, the trends in human trafficking seem to have been exacerbated by the on-going economic crisis. Although prostitution is illegal in Iran, it was reported in 2017 that illegal prostitution and child sex trafficking pose a real problem. As is often the case, the commercial sex market is active in large urban centres, with Iranian, Iraqi, Saudi, Bahraini, and Lebanese women reportedly being highly vulnerable to trafficking. Though some of them have willingly begun working in commercial sex, they are often coerced to continue this activity against their will. The phenomenon of short term marriages called "sigheh," is a legal and religiously sanctioned form of prostitution, lasting from one hour to one week, taking place in "chastity houses," massage parlours, and private homes, and exploiting women from Iran, as well as Chinese and Thai women and children. Afghan girls are vulnerable to forced marriage with men living in Iran, which can easily lead to their involvement in sex trafficking, forced labour, and domestic servitude. The situation is worsened by the current economic hardships. Child marriage of Iranian and some foreign girls is reportedly increasing in Iran, and is most widespread among communities in lower-income areas of large cities, often with the consent of parents, causing the girls to be at risk of sexual slavery or domestic servitude. The occurrence of these phenomena is higher in North Khorasan, where the government registered more than 4,000 marriages of girls, some as young as 10 years old, in April 2019. Forced labour is also a high risk for Afghan refugee children, Iranian street children and orphans. Official Iranian figures evoke 3 million children working in the country, however the local media suggests there could be 7 million Iranian children between the ages of 10 and 15 who are sold, rented, or sent to work in Iran. Many children, especially Afghan children, are forced to work in low-paying industries, including transport, garbage and waste disposal, car washing, brick factories, construction, and the carpet industry, where they face risks of withheld wages, sexual abuse, and infectious diseases. Criminal groups organise begging rings to exploit children, often injuring the children to gain sympathy from the passers by. Other children have been forced into drug trafficking. Leading a child into drug addiction is also a way to keep them attached to the drug provider and as such forced to keep working.

¹[IRN VolRep September 2020 - EXT](#)

VI. National Legal Framework

Iran is a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol on refugees since 1976. According to the latest UNHCR fact sheet, the Government of Iran is responsible for asylum-seeker registration and refugee status determination, and periodically renews refugee identification through cards called Amayesh. These cards give migrants conditional freedom of movement, access to basic services, and eligibility for temporary work permits. Refugees must register again during each successive Amayesh registration campaign. Failing this step, refugees lose their status and fall back into illegality, with no hope of re-registering later on. Only Afghans who reached Iran before 2001 have been easily recognised as refugees by the Iranian authorities, while Afghans who arrived after 2001 are seen as illegal immigrants in Iran, as Afghanistan is considered to be a country with a lawfully elected government, thus the Iranian State deems that Afghans no longer need proper protection. Neither the Iranian government nor the UNHCR evaluates the needs of illegal Afghans. In the 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report released by the US State Department, the chapter on Iran reports that the 2004 Iranian law against the abuse of power for purposes of prostitution, slavery, or forced marriage does not fully criminalise all forms of human trafficking, and that the law is inconsistent with the definition of trafficking in international law. Indeed, the law requires a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion in child sex trafficking cases. The US State Department's report also considers the Iranian Labour Code section on forced labour to be limited in its scope, and sees the penalty of a fine and up to one-year imprisonment as not being sufficiently stringent. The 2002 Law to Protect Children and Adolescents criminalised buying, selling, and exploiting children. Once again, the potential 6 months to 1-year imprisonment and fine considered to be insufficient. It must be noted that according to Iranian law, the legal testimony of a woman carries only half the weight of the testimony given by a man, creating a limitation in women's access to justice. In this way, women can easily be trapped into being prosecuted for adultery, which is punishable by death. On June 7, 2020, the Iranian Guardian Council, the body responsible for ensuring the compatibility of legislation with Sharia, approved a bill to support children and adolescents, which was deemed insufficient by Human Rights Watch, since it includes new penalties for certain acts that harm a child's safety and well-being, including physical harm and preventing access to education, while failing to address child marriage and the imposition of the death penalty on children.

VII. Main Actors

Due to sanctions, the blockade of the international financial system forbids the transfer of funds to Iranian humanitarian actors, be it by State agencies or international NGOs. However, humanitarian in-kind help can be transferred through a license system.

The State

Nevertheless, in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 30 countries managed to send medical aid to Iran, ranging from test kits and masks to respirators. China was the first to act, offering more medical supplies than any other country. On March 30, 2020, Iranian state media reported that China was shipping roughly 40 tons of medical supplies daily. Britain, France, and Germany delivered medical supplies through INSTEX

(the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges, a financial system set up by the three European powers that went into effect in January 2019). The purpose of INSTEX is to ensure that Iran receives the benefits promised by the 2015 nuclear deal, which were endangered following the Trump Administration's withdrawal in 2018. In late January 2020, the US announced the authorisation of a new Swiss humanitarian channel for sale and delivery of medical supplies to Iran. Although humanitarian goods have always been exempt from US sanctions, foreign banks have not gone as far as financing business with the country for fear of a compliance breach that could prove devastating.

The Catholic Church

Although Catholic international NGOs have relatively few activities in Iran due to the small minority of Catholics, Caritas Iran was founded by the Conference of Iranian Bishops in 1981 to help with *ad hoc* initiatives in Christian communities, and scaled up its operations following the devastating Bam earthquake in 2003, with the support of Caritas International. Supported by Caritas Italy as a facilitating partner, Caritas Iran has 3 staff in Tehran and 6 in Bam.

International Organisation

The UNHCR presence is composed of 140 national staff and 14 international staff, with 1 office branch and 1 field office in Tehran, 3 sub-offices in Mashhad, Kerman, and Shiraz, and 2 field units in Esfahan and Dogharoon. The UNHCR reports that the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs (BAFIA) is their main government counterpart in Iran. However, UNHCR Iran does not have access to border points and thus is unable to independently monitor arrivals or returns of Afghans and Iraqis. The UNHCR particularly works with UN partner agencies, NGOs, and international organizations under the umbrella of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR). The office reports that further Project Partnership Agreements are being finalised with other partners, including governmental institutions (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, etc.), as well as national NGOs.

Other Organisations

These national NGOs include the Association for Protection of Refugee Women and Children (HAMI), the Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV), the Society to Protect Children Suffering from Cancer (MAHAK), the Society for Recovery Support (SRS), the Rebirth Charity Organization (Rebirth), the World Relief Foundation (WRF), Chain of Hope (COH), the Pars Development Activists Institute (PDA), the Iranian Life Quality Improvement Association (ILIA), the Kiyana Cultural and Social Group (KIYANA), and the Kowsar Scientific and Cultural Institute (KOWSAR). The Red Crescent Society of the Republic of Iran is also noteworthy, currently serving as the main NGO in the country and one of the 190 members of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Some voices in the NGO sector have expressed their condemnation of the difficulties that they feel are caused by the Iranian Government, preventing NGOs from operating freely. Nevertheless, the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and NGO representatives have recently discussed the problems faced by the Afghan citizens in Iran.

8. Other Important Issues

The government Statistical Centre of Iran reports there are 117,700 Christians in the country, of which 21,000 are Catholics, of the Latin, Chaldean, and Armenian Rites. Catholics of the Latin Rite in Iran are governed by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Isfahan, which is part of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. The Armenian Catholic Eparchy of Isfahan covers the whole of Iran, and has its cathedral episcopal see in Isfahan. The Chaldean Catholic Church in Iran is divided in the Archdioceses of Tehran and Urmya, the Archeparchy of Ahvaz, and the Diocese of Salmas. There was a very cordial encounter between Pope Francis and President Rouhani, in which each leader asked the other for prayers. Another proof of the positive relations in dialogue between Iran and the Church is that the Catechism of the Catholic Church has been translated into Persian by Iranian Shia scholars with the validation of the Catholic Church and an introduction by the late Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran.

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