

IRAN'S POLITICAL FACTORS TOWARDS AFGHAN REFUGEES: TRENDS OF ETHNONATIONAL CONSOLIDATION AND CHANGING PRIORITIES OF REGIONALISM

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Abstract

The relevance of this article's research topic lies in the complex multi-polar factors of Iran's policy toward Afghan refugees. Its significance is predetermined by the scale and nature of Afghan refugees and labor migrants in Iran due to the explosive conflict and political instability. The article notes that, despite a number of ethnonational issues, Iranian authorities still demonstrate confidence that Afghans educated in Iran are already capable of forming a stratum that can play a significant role in the reconstruction of modern Afghanistan. At the same time, it is important to consider the impact of globalization and regionalization on the development of Iranian and Afghan multi-ethnic societies. In this context, we observe how, even despite certain successes of globalization in terms of social and economic progress, these countries are facing fierce resistance to societal modernization; they are retreating, returning to their traditional positions. This resistance appears to be deeply rooted in the very nature of their cultures. This is precisely why, in the current context of the transformation of the global community and the emergence of a new system of international relations, the complex nature of ethnonational processes and the specific nature of relations between Iran and Afghanistan, which are drawn into this process, are of primary concern. The current stage of global development is characterized by the emergence of new values, new orientations, and the formation of a unified social and spiritual global space linking diverse cultures and peoples. At the same time, opposing trends in the search for self-identification in a globalizing world and the desire of peoples to preserve their uniqueness and distinctiveness, expressed in culture, language, religion, and the revival of national traditions, are becoming significant.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, ethno-cultural dimension, security challenges, Fatemioun, Hazara, Iran, language, refugees, religious, Taliban.*

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Introduction

Afghanistan's importance in contemporary international politics is determined by a complex set of factors related to the armed conflict within its territory. Afghanistan's social, economic, and political instability can be considered a source of risk for all countries in the region, including China, Pakistan, Iran, and the countries of Central Asia, as if extremists gain strength and state institutions weaken, Iran becomes a potential springboard for terrorist organizations to establish bases. Also of great importance is the transit factor, with Iran potentially serving as a transit zone for a number of transport routes linking post-Soviet Central Asia and the countries along the Indian Ocean. This combination of factors makes Iran a region whose situation is of great importance for international political processes (Siavoshi 2025).

Iran's policy towards Afghan refugees has evolved over the past four decades, shaped by both internal and external factors. Following the Islamic Revolution, Iran welcomed Afghan refugees with the expectation that they would return home once the situation in Afghanistan stabilised. This perhaps explains why Iran has primarily designed its refugee policy with a short-term perspective. However, due to social, economic, and security concerns, as well as the ongoing influx of refugees, Iran continues to pursue a short-term approach to its refugee policy.

This article examines the factors influencing Iran's refugee policy toward the more than 3.4 million officially registered Afghan refugees (ODP-UNHCR 2025), as Iranian and Afghan societies are acutely sensitive to refugee issues, water use from the Helmand River, and border security. In the context of geopolitical developments, these issues could negatively impact current and future Iranian-Afghan relations. Over the past decade, the refugee issue has become a considerable aspect of Iran's domestic agenda, adversely affecting public opinion towards Afghans. This topic has gained particular attention in light of Iran's broader policy in the Middle East, which involves the establishment of the Fatemiyoun group, composed entirely of Afghan refugee fighters, on Iran's initiative.

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran's policy towards Afghans has been characterised in scholarly literature as an 'open door' policy, rooted in the historical, linguistic, cultural and religious affinities between Iranians and Afghans. The Afghan authorities' treatment of Shia Hazaras and other Persian-speaking ethnic groups has considerably influenced this policy. Due to the cultural and historical ties between Iranians and Afghans, Iran did not impose upon Afghans the typical restrictions on refugees. Initially, the prevailing sentiment in Iran was that Afghans are brothers of Iranians, and they need to be helped. As the flow of refugees continued and new factors emerged, the Iranian political landscape began to shift.

In modern Iranian society, attitudes toward Afghan refugees tend to be negative, manifesting primarily at the upper and middle social levels. In parliament, representatives from constituencies with the highest percentage of Afghan refugees cite them as the cause of social and economic problems in the regions (EUAA 2022).

The problem of Afghan refugees and migrant workers is further exacerbated by the lack of a public policy for their integration into Iranian society (Siavoshi 2022; Siavoshi 2025). Neither the migrants or refugees themselves nor the Iranian authorities show interest in this process, relying largely on stereotypes about linguistic, religious,

and cultural similarities. As a result, specialists at adaptation centers serve as facilitators in solving pressing problems. However, experience in previous years has shown that adaptation is necessary even in interactions between two neighboring Muslim countries. Adaptation courses, by helping to identify extremist elements, could help resolve a number of issues. Furthermore, the courses would familiarize representatives of rural areas, who make up a significant portion of Afghan refugees and migrants, with behavioral patterns in the urban environment, thereby reducing the degree of negative attitudes among the Iranian population. Finally, adaptation courses should help dispel the persistent myth in Afghanistan about Iran's colossal international aid to support refugees.

The ideology of the Iranian Revolution (1978-1979) encouraged the acceptance and support of refugees (Glazebrook and Abbasi-Shavazi 2007, 191). Iran is also guided by this ideology in its support for the 'oppressed peoples' of the Middle East. Until the first Taliban rule in 1996, Iran had generally managed the flow of Afghan refugees effectively. However, under Taliban rule, conditions became dire for the Shia population in Afghanistan. In 1997, the Taliban blockaded Hazarajat, making it exceedingly difficult for Hazaras to escape the country, leading many to enter Iran primarily via Pakistani territory. This new wave of refugees strained Iran's borders.

The main triggers for Afghan migration to Iran include: a) the unstable political situation in Afghanistan, b) the oppression of the Shia and Persian-speaking populations by Afghan authorities and c) the cultural similarities between Iranians and Afghans.

A comparative study of the historical experience of Afghanists shows that when internal tensions in Afghanistan intensify, the flow of refugees to Iran increases. After the Islamic Revolution, Afghan migration to Iran occurred in three stages: 1) 1979 - the Islamic Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; 2) The Afghan Civil War from 1989 to 1993; 3) 1996 and 2021 - the capture of Kabul by the Taliban and the establishment of control over Afghanistan.

Estimates of the number of Afghan refugees in Iran vary. In the early 1980s, the number of Afghan refugees in Iran ranged from 1 to 1.5 million. Between 1989 and 1992, this number doubled to 3 million (Ahmed and Akbar 2023, 37).

The arrival of Afghan refugees in Iran began after the Islamic Revolution. Migration indicators suggest that this migration was forced rather than voluntary. An analysis of migration flows from Afghanistan to Iran between 1986 and 2011 indicates that the largest influx occurred in 1991, when 3 million people arrived (Hugo, Abbasi-Shavazib and Sadeghi 2012, 265; Moinipour 2017).

By 1991, Iran had already faced significant socio-economic challenges following the Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War. In this context, the perceived 'takeover' of the Iranian labour market by Afghan refugees only heightened tensions within Iranian society (Shargh 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b).

Consequently, Iran revised its refugee policy in the 1990s, emphasising three main focuses, namely, repatriation of refugees, invite international support and Integration of Afghan refugees within Iranian society (Rajaei 2000, 56).

Afghans residing in Iran can be categorised into four groups: 1) Refugee card holders (Amayesh), 2) Afghan passport holders with Iranian visas (500,000), 3)

undocumented Afghan refugees (1.5–2 million) and 4) Afghans registered in censuses (850,000). It is important to note that the exact number of irregular (undocumented) Afghan migrants in Iran remains a topic of ongoing debate (Jussi, Davood and Salavati 2020, 11).

According to 2016 data, there were nearly 1 million registered refugees and 3 million illegal, unregistered refugees living in Iran (Sahbnam 2017, 824). According to these figures, the largest flow of refugees to Iran occurred during the Taliban rule. In addition to security concerns, the decision of Afghans to migrate to Iran was influenced by the Taliban government's policies towards the Iranian-speaking population and the Shia Hazara community.

Since 1989, Iran has endeavoured to facilitate the return of Afghans to their country through several initiatives (EUAA 2022, 100). The Bureau for Foreigners and Immigrants (BAFIA) has been established. As a result of cooperation between the governments of Iran and Afghanistan and the UNHCR, repatriation agreements have been signed. According to the Iranian interior minister, by 2023, there will be 5 million Afghan refugees residing in Iran (UNHCR 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). However, the Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan, Hassan Kazemi Gomi, provided a different estimate, stating that the number of refugees before the second Taliban regime was 4 million. Combining these two sets of data suggests that the number of Afghan refugees had increased by 1 million after 2021 (ODP-UNHCR 2025; UNHCR 2025a).

A notable aspect concerning the Afghan refugee population in Iran is the issue of second-generation Afghans, which offers valuable insights into the nuances of Iran's migration policy. According to the 2006 census, half of the Afghan refugees living in Iran were born in the country and are considered second generation (Naseh et al. 2018). In fact, most Afghan refugees who have resided in Iran for decades are yet to be granted Iranian citizenship. The process of obtaining citizenship under Iranian law is notably complex. However, in the first half of 2024, a bill has been submitted to the Iranian parliament to amend the law on obtaining citizenship. There are various assessments and viewpoints on this issue within Iran.

Iranian officials assert that cultural and scientific figures will find it easier to obtain citizenship (Iranintl 2024). Further, a process to grant Iranian citizenship to families of the deceased members of Fatemiyoun is also believed to be underway (Schwartz 2022). However, Iran does not grant citizenship even to individuals whose mother is an Iranian citizen and whose father is an Afghan. Interestingly, upon returning to Afghanistan, these individuals often adopt an objectively anti-Iranian stance.

Ethno-cultural factors: Is the Persian language under threat in Afghanistan?

To assess the influence of ethno-religious and linguistic factors on Iran's migration policy, I posed the following research questions: Under what circumstances have Hazara Shiites and other Farsiyazi ethnic groups decided to migrate to Iran, and what factors has Iran deemed most important in shaping its migration policy?

Among the factors influencing Iran's policy towards Afghan refugees, perhaps the most influential are the historical, cultural and religious similarities between Iranians and Afghans. Both Iranians and Afghans, having coexisted within the same civilisation throughout history, share close linguistic, cultural and religious commonalities. These

shared traits facilitate the integration of Afghan refugees into Iranian society. While there is consensus regarding the historical and cultural ties between the two nations, Iranian and Afghan historians have diverged on numerous issues.

A prevalent belief among Iranian intellectuals is that Afghanistan was established as a result of the Paris Agreement during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar. In the late nineteenth century, the two states were separated by administrative and political boundaries. Following the Pashtunisation of Afghanistan, a 'separation' of identities became evident. In this context, it is important to note that Afghanistan is important for Iran not only politically, but also from a cultural and historical point of view, as there are many similarities between Iranians and Afghans, which are evident in Afghanistan's policy towards the Persian language and the situation of Afghan refugees living in Iran (Lamm and Winter 2024; Lischer 2016). Currently, the linguistic and cultural divide between Iran and Afghanistan is so pronounced that Dari speakers in Afghanistan can be accused of holding pro-Iranian views if they use words characteristic of Persian. Conversely, most Iranians remain unaware of the distinctive features of Dari. More than half of Afghanistan's population speaks Persian, with Afghanistan's Persian language – Farsi Dari – serving as one of the country's official languages and acting as a lingua franca for the Afghan populace (Hakimi 2025; International Crisis Group 2022).

Language has played a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of Afghan and Iranian identities. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that, according to Iranian sources, Afghan intellectuals who wrote in Persian, despite never having visited Iran, were perceived by the Afghan populace as Iranians prior to the Pashto policy aimed at diminishing the role of the Persian language. Thus, when Pashto was declared Afghanistan's official language, the identity of Afghans underwent a transformation (Arman-e Melli 2021, 51).

In the early twentieth century, nationalist ideologies in Iranian and Afghan state politics also influenced the perspectives and ideas of the Afghan and Iranian elites regarding history and identity. In the ideology of Pashtun nationalists, elements of Iranism began to be dissociated from Afghan history. By the 1930s, these ideas and principles became foundational to Afghanistan's state ideology (History of Afghanistan 2004, 45).

As part of this ideology, the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan and the Society for the History of Afghanistan were established, and Pashto gained prominence during Mahmud Tarzi's reign. Pashto became the official second language of Afghanistan, and Farsi became Dari. Iran contends that Pashtuns employ Dari instead of Farsi to fragment the Persian-speaking populations residing in the border regions of Iran and Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's Constitution refers to the country's population as Afghans. However, this designation is generally unacceptable to other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, with the exception of the Pashtuns. This overshadows the identity of other ethnic groups. They are identified with the Pashtuns.

Following the emergence of nationalist ideology among the Pashtuns of Afghanistan in the 1950s, the Pashtuns have wielded greater influence and authority within the governance system of the country than the other ethnic groups.

Despite the process of Pashtunisation, experts assert that the nation-building (mellat-sazi) process in Afghanistan remains incomplete. While the constitutional movement in Iran during the early 20th century led to the unification of Iranians as a nation, the national identity of Afghans is yet to fully form (Castien Maestro 2024; Lamm and Winter 2024).

Nation-building in Afghanistan has a number of peculiarities and difficulties, as it attempts to be based on the identity, culture and civilization of the roots of the Afghan nation, and has represented a special form both in its nature and identity, and in its implementation (Castien Maestro 2024; Wafa 2024).

A unique feature of Afghan society is that each ethnic group strives to gain an influential role in the government system. The primary rivalry is between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns (Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras). It is important to note that the differences between these two main players hinder the formation of unity in Afghan society (Ahmadzada 2024; Castien Maestro 2024.). In this context, Iranian and Afghan historians and researchers hold contradictory views of history. Afghan scholars, in particular, reject Iranian claims that Afghanistan lies within Iran's cultural sphere and that most Afghans identify themselves as part of the civilisation of 'Greater Iran'.

Afghanistan not only distances itself from Iran but also accuses Iran of appropriating Afghan historical and cultural figures. Additionally, Afghanistan claims Molana, Masawi, Hafez and Saadi as integral figures of Afghan literature.

In recent decades, Iran has struggled to leverage the ideology of Iranism to foster genuine cooperation between Iran, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The underlying issue is not solely the Pashtunisation of Afghanistan, as Iranian experts assert, but also the differing approaches and priorities of Iran and Tajikistan (Israyelyan 2019, 272-274).

Iran's official stance has consistently been that all religious and ethnic groups in Afghanistan should participate in the formation of the government. The Bonn Conference in 2001 recognised the Hazaras as the third ethnic group in Afghanistan. According to the Afghan constitution, the second vice president has always been a Hazara. From 2004 to 2009, Mohammad Mohaghegh served as Afghanistan's Vice President, representing the Hazara community (Sahar 2025).

During the presidencies of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan authorities generally practised participatory governance. In periods of relative calm, when there were no triggers for refugee flows, Iran initiated programmes to encourage the repatriation of Afghan refugees (Hugo, Abbasi-Shavazib and Sadeghi 2012, 276).

During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, Tehran sought to capitalise on the media's portrayal to enhance the situation in Afghanistan and increase the influence of the Persian language. The Islamic Republic of Iran proposed the establishment of a television channel for Persian-speaking countries called 'Nowruz', which however was never realised due to a number of factors, including the political ideologies of the countries involved. Neighbouring countries have failed to establish such cooperation on the basis of cultural commonalities. This cooperation could have manifested itself in collaborations with Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and could have had a positive impact on relations between states.

After the second Taliban government assumed power, another wave of refugees arrived in Iran, prompting the Iranian press to once again highlight the discriminatory policies of the Taliban government against Shia Hazaras and Persian-speaking groups.

The issue of limitations on the Persian language in Afghanistan was even raised during a visit to Iran by Mohammad Motaghi, the foreign minister of the Taliban's interim government (Gholami 2018; BBC 2023).

In my assessment, the primary reason for Afghan migration to Iran is the continuing instability in Afghanistan and the resulting security risks.. However, two interrelated factors may have also influenced Afghans' decisions to migrate: the Taliban's policies towards Hazara Shia and Persian-speaking groups and Iran's cultural and educational policies towards Afghan refugees.

Despite the socio-economic and legal challenges associated with the presence of refugees in Iran, the Iranian government places considerable emphasis on addressing the language issues faced by Afghan refugees. According to a decree from the Supreme Leader of Iran (2015), all Afghan migrant children residing in Iran have the right to receive an education, regardless of their parents' status. Refugees living illegally in Iran are also entitled to education, as per an order from the country's spiritual leader.

Over the past four decades, Iran has invested substantial resources in the education of Afghan migrants. While the number of Afghan students enrolled in Iranian schools was 300,000 in 2014, this figure had doubled by 2023 (Barzegar 2014, 121). Currently, approximately 620,000 Afghan students are receiving education in Iran, with 35,000 students benefiting from free education (UNHCR 2025a; 2025b, 2025c).

On the surface, the Islamic Republic of Iran's educational initiatives for Afghan refugees represent a considerable contribution to integrating Afghans into Iranian society and harnessing their potential for Iran's long-term prospects. If we consider Iran's long-term policy towards Afghan refugees, it would be reasonable to argue that Iran accounts for cultural factors in implementing its long-term strategy. However, the reality contradicts claims that Iran is employing Persian as a form of soft power against Afghans (Ahmed and Akbar 2023; Akbarzadeh, Ahmed and Ibrahim 2021). In my opinion, it appears that Afghan students educated in Iran, who were expected to remain in the country after their studies, either return to Afghanistan or emigrate to other countries due to the lack of citizenship.

Influence of the religious factor

Pashtuns have played an important role in Afghanistan from both a religious (Sunni) and ethnic (demographic) perspective. The Hazaras of Afghanistan, whose origins and religious affiliations are subjects of various theories, are predominantly Shia Muslims (Bartold 2003, 71). The Hazaras have historically maintained close ties with Iran, which has exerted considerable ideological influence over them. Even prior to the Islamic Revolution, the Hazaras had a notable presence in Iran.

In the face of security threats, ethno-religious factors have served as the primary motivation for Afghans to migrate to Iran. Hazara clerics who received their religious education in Iran regarded the leader of the revolution, Imam Khomeini, as their supreme leader (Canfield 2004, 252). Following the Islamic Revolution, Imam Khomeini's positive stance towards Afghans contributed to the influx of thousands of

Afghans who moved to Iran as refugees. Iran's open door policy towards Afghan refugees was driven by the objective of exporting the Islamic Revolution (Siavoshi 2025, 1591-1594).

Iran has a history of utilising Afghan Shiites to further its geopolitical interests, particularly during the 1980s when Shiite groups supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran formed resistance factions to combat the Soviet Union. Grounded in Islamic solidarity, Iran felt compelled to shelter Afghans fleeing the communist regime (Siavoshi 2025; Zandi-Navgran et al. 2024).

The migration of Afghans to Iran primarily occurred as part of religious migration in the early years of the Islamic Revolution. Iran's migration policy is influenced by both external and internal factors. External factors are mainly related to policies of the Afghan authorities towards the Iranian-speaking population and the Shia Hazaras, the internal situation in Afghanistan and the conditions along the Iran-Afghanistan border.

During both periods of Taliban rule, the Hazaras were targeted precisely because they were Shia, whom the Sunni Taliban regarded as pro-Iranian forces. It was during this time that the Taliban imposed the most brutal repression on the Shia Hazaras (Saikal 2012, 82). Since the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, the primary flow of Shia Hazara migration has been to Iran (Glazebrook 2007, 190).

In my view, after the Islamic Revolution, the religious factor in the refugee issue has remained a priority for Iran. Unlike the linguistic factor, Iran adopts a long-term perspective regarding the religious factor. Similar to its approach towards Tajikistan, Iran prioritises the religious factor (Israyelyan 2019, 272-274).

In 2014, for the first time since the Islamic Revolution, Iran developed a long-term plan for Afghan refugees. Iran reconsidered its decision to forcibly expel Afghan refugees, recognising the necessity of intensifying the activities of proxy groups in the Middle East. Similar Iranian-backed groups are also active in Pakistan (Zaynebiyoun), Azerbaijan (Hoseyniyou), Yemen (Ansarullah), Iraq (Hashd al-Shaabi) and Lebanon (Hezbollah). For this purpose, another Iranian-backed group, 'Fatemiyou', was formed in May 2013 by Afghan commander Ali Reza Tavassoli, primarily comprising Afghan refugees and migrant workers who had settled in Iran. Most of these individuals belonged to the Shia Hazara ethnic group (Jamal 2019, 5).

The majority of the millions of Afghan refugees living in Iran are ethnic Tajiks and Hazaras. Among the registered Afghan refugees in Iran, 40 per cent are Shia Hazaras (Monsutti 2007, 169). Iran's differentiated approach to the Afghan refugee issue has caused some confusion within Afghan society. In interviews with Iranian officials, Afghan journalists frequently highlight instances of human rights violations against Afghan refugees in Iran. The establishment of Fatemiyou in particular has intensified discussions on this matter.

Iran has not officially denied its connections with the Fatemiyou formation. Instead, Iran has claimed that the group formed spontaneously and that its members voluntarily travelled to Syria to protect Shi'ite shrines. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (2013-2021) commented on the issue, stating: The fighters of the Fatemiyou, which was made up of Afghans living in Iran, made their own decisions and fought in Syria for their religious ideas (Shadi 2020).

While Tehran officially asserts that these Afghan fighters travelled to Syria voluntarily, reports indicate that some refugees, facing the risk of deportation, opted to go to Syria rather than return to Afghanistan. In this manner, they sought to safeguard their families from the threat of deportation (Human Rights Watch 2016).

Iran ceased recruiting new fighters for Fatemiyoun after the defeat of ISIS in Syria in 2017. There are conflicting reports regarding the number of fighters in the group, with estimates ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 Fatemiyoun fighters in Syria (Ahmed and Akbar 2023). After the Lebanese, the Afghan Shia Hazaras constituted the second largest foreign ethnic group killed in Syria, with 897 Afghans reported to have died there between 2012 and 2018.

Iran has paid special attention to the families of Afghans who fought in and were martyred through Fatemiyoun. Evidence supporting this assessment includes Iran's decision to grant citizenship to members of these families.

Mohammad Ali Shahidi, head of Iran's Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation, stated in an interview in 2017 that Iran's Supreme Leader had ordered the resolution of citizenship issues for the 'Holy Shrine Defenders' to be resolved. On the other hand, claims from some Fatemiyoun members suggest that Iran did not grant citizenship but provided residence permits for a period of five years (Sheikh 2016; Schwarz 2022, 102). It is noteworthy that, in light of existing security and demographic challenges, Iran made an exception for family members of Fatemiyoun that had not previously been extended to other Afghan refugees. This case is unprecedented, given that the process of obtaining citizenship in Iran is notoriously complicated. Millions of Afghan refugees have lived in Iran for decades without gaining citizenship.

Second-generation Afghans are already integrated into Iranian society, receiving substantial educational, social and medical support from the government, yet they have not been afforded the opportunity to acquire Iranian citizenship. Even Afghan cultural figures and intellectuals encounter difficulties in obtaining citizenship (Lischer 2016).

In summary, Iran has been providing funding to Afghan refugees for decades to meet their social, educational and health needs. However, after receiving education, many leave the country due to the lack of Iranian citizenship. Some Iranian experts believe that Iran is losing a huge amount of capital that could have been leveraged to further Iranian interests. By 2020, Iran had deported 860,000 illegal migrants from the country. According to the International Organisation for Migration, Iran deportes between 20,000 and 30,000 migrants every week (IOM 2025a, 2025b).

The Iranian Foreign Ministry is yet to officially respond to this concern. It is highly likely that this reflects the bifurcation of power characteristic of Iran's Islamic system. This is probably one of those cases where diplomacy has adopted one approach to a sensitive issue, while 'Maidan' (the influence of the Revolutionary Guard) has pursued a different one.

Iran's differentiated approach to Fatemiyoun appears inconsistent with its social policy towards refugees. This action contradicts the argument that Iran is employing linguistic and cultural soft power to influence Afghanistan. An analysis of Iran's educational and religious policies towards migrants can be summarised as follows: Iranian policy over the past decade has demonstrated that, with the exception of a

limited number of Hazara Shiites, Tehran lacks a clear medium- and long-term policy towards refugee groups.

This contradiction is evident in the fact that Iran is undertaking educational initiatives that logically should be reserved for the second generation. In short, Iranian-educated Afghan students become second-generation refugees and are integrated into Iranian society but without the opportunity to obtain Iranian citizenship.

In conclusion, the above arguments suggest that, unlike cultural, ethnic and linguistic factors, the religious factor has long been a priority in Iran's policy towards Afghan refugees, at least over the past two decades.

Iranian society's attitude towards Afghan refugees

Examining Iran's migration policies over the last two decades reveals a shift in Iranian society's attitude towards Afghan migrants. This change can be explained by both internal and external factors, and the following circumstances themselves represent the main issues influencing the mood in Iranian society: social, economic and demographic problems, as well as security threats.

Internal factors consist of several components. Initially, the civilisational links between Iranians and Afghans were considerable. While a sizeable portion of Iranian society accepted Afghan migrants as fellow Iranians after the Islamic Revolution, perceptions began to shift in the 2000s. It is likely that the Iranian public's views have been influenced by the inconsistent policies of successive Iranian governments towards migrants and the impact of these issues.

The prevailing sentiment among Iranian society has been that refugees should settle in Iran temporarily. Thus, the underlying assumption was that they would return to their homeland after a certain period. However, the increasing number of refugees, coupled with the government's social and health costs and its ambiguous migration policy, has begun to create challenges for citizens, particularly under international sanctions on Iran. As much as Iranian society initially accepted and perceived Afghans as fellow Iranians, social and security issues have had a negative impact on Iranians' approach.

The demographic issue is another factor contributing to Iranian society's frustration with refugees. Concerns such as Afghans occupy the south of Tehran, 75% of mothers giving birth in Tehran are Afghans, 80% of schools in Iran operate double shifts due to Afghan migrants, Refugees receive government subsidies and Refugees take foreign currency out of the country stoke fears within the Iranian society (UNHCR 2025a).

There is a widespread fear that Afghans, who tend to cluster in specific areas, may eventually outnumber the Iranians. To manage such risks, Iran has refrained from resettling refugees in major cities or provinces bordering Afghanistan since 2008. As of 2023, the following provinces of Iran are subject to a general ban on the presence of Afghan refugees: East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanzan, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam, Lorestan, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Gilan, Mazandaran, Sistan and Baluchestan, Hormozgan and Hamadan. Only select areas within the provinces of Isfahan, Bushehr, Razavi Khorasan, South Khorasan, Khuzestan, Semnan, Fars, Qazvin, Markazi and Yazd are made available for settlement.

Water issues concerning the Helmand River also influence the Iranian government's migration policy and shape public opinion. When the Afghan side fails to supply Iran with sufficient water for objective and subjective reasons, the problem becomes particularly acute. The problem is especially pressing in Sistan and Baluchistan, one of Iran's most water-stressed provinces. In such instances, the populace may demand that the authorities respond to the water concerns by deporting Afghan refugees.

The head of Iran's National Organisation for Migration, Ali Asghar Balukian, on May 4, 2024 stated that Iran no longer possesses the capacity to accommodate Afghan migrants. He urged the Taliban government to ensure the necessary security and living conditions for Afghan migrants to facilitate their return to Afghanistan.

According to Ahmad Ali Goudarzi, commander of the Iranian Border Police, Afghans living illegally in Iran are expected to leave the country by the end of the year (Iranian date).

This indicates that the refugee issue is indeed a concern for both Iranian society and the government of Iran's newly elected president, Massoud Pezeshkian. It is also possible that Iran is attempting to exert pressure on the Taliban government by deporting refugees.

In a related development, a spokesperson for the Afghan interim government's Ministry of Migrants and Repatriates has urged the Iranian government to exercise patience until Afghanistan can create adequate conditions for the return of Afghan refugees. According to the IOM, a total of 714,572 Afghan migrants were registered as returning from Iran between January 1 and June 29, 2025 (IOM 2025a, 2025b).

The security aspect

Are Afghan refugees an opportunity or a threat to Iran's national security? This question is pertinent across all aspects of this study. Following the Islamic Revolution, the issue was perhaps viewed more as a prospective one, but after the NATO operation in Afghanistan in 2001, the security component of Iran's Afghanistan policy became paramount. The ongoing uncontrolled influx of refugees into Iran has become a security concern. Moreover, Iran has since begun to frame its relations with neighbouring countries in terms of security rather than economics, leading to the development of a security-concerned regional policy.

The influence of the security factor on Iran's migration policy is intertwined with both internal and external realities. Events in Afghanistan, the foreign policy priorities of Afghanistan, the activities of ISIL, the Afghan authorities' approach to border security, disputes over the Helmand River's water and attitudes towards Shia and Persian speakers in Afghanistan are all contributing circumstances influencing Afghans seeking asylum in Iran.

Internal realities consist of two components. One aspect of the security issues arises from the principles of Iran's regional policy, while the other stems from the situation on the ground.

I have examined Iran's migration policy in two distinct periods to address the questions posed in this section of the study. The first phase spans from the Islamic Revolution until 1996. During this period, Iran generally managed the security threats

associated with refugees, and the security factor had less influence on Iran's migration policy. Following the first Taliban takeover, the issue of Afghan refugees became securitised.

In 2001, the security component of Iran's refugee policy gained prominence after the 11 September attacks (Mahmud and Hossain 2025) which prompted several countries to launch military operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan (Monsutti 2007, 170; Hunter 2003).

The security factor has considerably influenced Iran's migration policy since the second Taliban rule. Until that point, Iran had generally been able to manage the security challenges posed by migration flows. I believe that Iran had employed the threat of deportation primarily as a leverage in its relations with Afghan authorities (Akbarzadeh 2021, 8).

In collaboration with Afghanistan and international organisations, Iran has sought to ensure the voluntary return of Afghan refugees to their homeland. However, simultaneously, to hinder the expansion of security cooperation between Afghanistan and the U.S., Iran has been securitising the refugee issue (Ahmed and Akbar 2023; Akbarzadeh, Ahmed and Ibrahimi 2021). In 2005, during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first term in office, Iran forcibly expelled over 350,000 refugees from the country. Iran even threatened illegal immigrants with prison (FIDH 2025).

In subsequent years, in 2003 an agreement was reached between the governments of Iran and Afghanistan, resulting in several hundred thousand individuals voluntarily returning to Afghanistan (Naseh et al. 2018). At that time, the number of Afghans residing in Iran was approximately 1.5 million (Emery 2001, 16-17).

The flow of Afghan refugees to Iran increased considerably, particularly during the second period of Taliban rule. Naturally, a new influx of refugees was anticipated following the tense situation in Iran (Barzegar 2014, 123). As soon as the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan, the Tehran government, despite criticism from certain social and political circles, engaged in dialogue with the Taliban to manage refugee flows. Cooperation with the Taliban has become a priority in Iran's policy toward Afghanistan. Despite criticism from various social and political groups, as well as its tough stance toward the Taliban, Tehran officially maintains dialogue with the movement.

The main reasons for Iran's acceptance of the Taliban as a reality and the basis of its policy towards Afghanistan are the security of the 1,000-kilometer border between Iran and Afghanistan, drug trafficking, the presence of 5 million Afghan refugees in Iran, the presence of ISIS in northwest Afghanistan, and the rights of Shia Hazaras and Iranian-speaking ethnic groups in Afghanistan. If the Taliban are officially recognised, will they adhere to agreements? After assuming power in Afghanistan, the Taliban attempted to rebrand themselves, seeking legitimacy by creating the impression that the Taliban of 2021 is different from that of 1996.

Iran's perspective is that without a minimal relationship with the Taliban, isolation may drive the group to adopt more extreme measures. Despite dialogue between the interim Taliban government and Iran, disagreements have arisen over the past two years regarding the utilisation of water from the Helmand River and border security, occasionally resulting in border clashes.

Iran's official stance on the Taliban is as follows: Iran acknowledges the Taliban as a reality. However, following official recognition, all religious and ethnic groups in Afghanistan should be represented in the formation of the main government, particularly the Shia Hazaras and Tajiks.

In Iran's view, the flow of refugees can be managed if Kabul is willing to engage in constructive discussions. Iranian experts have suggested that the Taliban may be interested in encouraging opposition groups to emigrate, thereby exercising lax control at the borders to facilitate this end (Ali Akbar Raefipour's YouTube Channel 2023).

Until 2021, during the second Taliban rule, Iran was generally able to manage refugee issues in cooperation with the governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. Security concerns became more pronounced as ISIS became increasingly active in Western Afghanistan, particularly in regions bordering Iran. Concurrently, the Taliban intensified pressure on the Shia Hazaras. Iran contends that both the Taliban and ISIS pose a serious threat to Afghanistan's Shia population (Middle East Institute 2021).

The conflict between the Taliban and ISIS has further complicated the internal situation in Afghanistan, which in turn has led to a new wave of refugees seeking asylum in Iran. According to official Iranian figures, 5,000 Afghans entered Iran daily in 2022 (Eghtesadsaramad 2022).

The Iranian authorities have offered to assist the Taliban in establishing proper border control and risk management. The Iranian government has also invited Afghanistan to sign a comprehensive agreement on border security cooperation. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Afghanistan for this purpose. According to Iranian sources, the Afghan authorities have not adequately addressed border control issues. This may explain why Iran has decided to construct a wall along its border with Afghanistan, allocating \$3 billion for the project.

Over the past four decades, the attitudes of both Iranian authorities and society towards Afghan refugees have shifted due to security concerns. In the periods after the Islamic Revolution, Afghans were seen as *muhajirs*; by the 1990s, economic issues had redefined them into migrants (Safri 2011, 587).

Due to security and socio-economic concerns, Iran has shown little interest in hosting Afghan refugees over the past decade. The security threat was exacerbated when several terrorist attacks involving refugees occurred within Iran.

In 2021, outside the Imam Reza mausoleum in Mashhad, three clerics were killed in a terrorist attack. According to official Iranian sources, the perpetrator held refugee status in Iran and was an illegal immigrant. This incident has raised considerable concerns within Iranian society. In 2022, another terrorist attack occurred at the Shah Chirag mosque in Shiraz (Nournews 2023). There was another terrorist attack in Kerman, the hometown of Suleimani, in January 2024, for which ISIS Khorasan claimed responsibility (Hafezi, Elwelly and Tanios 2024). In the aftermath of these attacks, there has been a growing perception in Iranian society that the actions of a few individuals among the 5 million Afghans residing in Iran are being unjustly blamed on Afghan refugees as a whole (Lieven 2021). In order to avoid public unrest, Iranian officials were careful not to associate the attacks with any specific nationality (Entekhab 2023).

An analysis of Iranian press publications indicates that efforts are being made to shape public sentiment in order to facilitate the deportation of refugees without considerable upheaval. Both Iranian and Afghan media have contributed to tensions amid the prevailing discontent in Iranian society. Kabul has accused Tehran of mistreating refugees, while Tehran has countered by accusing the Afghan government of disregarding Iranian aid and portraying isolated incidents involving refugees as indicative of Iranian policy. There is a prevailing sentiment among Iranian officials and intellectuals that a single instance of mistreatment could overshadow the extensive efforts made by the Iranian government towards Afghan refugees.

While Iran views anti-Afghanism as a programme linked to security threats, Afghan refugees are sometimes ridiculed in Iranian TV series. This affects the behaviour of both the public and Iranian officials who interact with migrants (Iran 2023).

With the second Taliban rule, security issues related to refugees have intensified. Although Iranian authorities were generally able to cooperate with the Afghan government and make mutually acceptable decisions, the situation became more complicated after 2021.

The uncontrolled influx of migrants poses security threats such as food security, employment and shifting ethnic dynamics. On the one hand, Iranian society expresses legitimate grievances regarding refugees and calls for decisive government action; on the other hand, the Taliban accuse Iran of treating refugees harshly, humiliating them and abandoning those who cross the border.

Three years into the Taliban's second rule, Iran's security risk management has become increasingly complex, and its capabilities more constrained. In 2024, the press reported extensively that thousands of Afghans trained by the Taliban were in Iran. Therefore, in 2024, Iran allocated \$3 billion for a wall project along the border with Afghanistan, while the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was involved in the border demarcation and installation of barbed wire (Smith 2024; Cafiero and Aman 2025).

According to official figures, Iran spends \$10 billion annually on the 6 million Afghan refugees it hosts (Iranpress 2024). Iran's new government has announced that all Afghans residing illegally in Iran will be required to leave.

The above indicators suggest that influence of the security concerns has considerably increased in recent years. Iran is no longer considering cooperation with the Taliban in managing the flow of refugees. It is likely that Iran has assessed the security risks as high and is therefore resorting to more stringent measures.

Conclusion and discussion

Against the backdrop of such changes, there arises a need to analyze the development of the social roles and destinies of nations, national entities, nationalism, trends in ethnosocial and national development in contemporary Iran and Afghanistan, and the nature of self-identification and worldview of the peoples inhabiting them. The problem is exacerbated by the divergence of opinions among political figures and ideologists in Eastern countries regarding the foundation of a modern state strategy that would enable developing nations to adequately respond to the challenges of the times. This has a specific rationale, as the appearance of any social and political system in the

world, along with other parameters, is determined by the ideas and ideological and political processes that underlie it, the attitudes of the people of a given national entity, and their conceptions of a dignified public life. Given this, the author's consideration of the experiences of Afghanistan and Iran in relation to refugees and migrant workers is entirely justified, as the historical stages of Afghan and Iranian societies provide vivid examples of the achievements of their peoples in terms of national and state development. The study devotes particular attention to the nature of the development trends in these countries, taking into account the significant challenges of managing refugee and migrant worker flows. Along with the general historical relevance of studying the experiences of Afghanistan and Iran, it is worth emphasizing the general significance of certain aspects of their experiences for countries in the post-Soviet space, as these countries are neighboring countries for many of them. Therefore, the analysis of social and political processes in Afghanistan and Iran is becoming an important state and public imperative.

Linguistic, cultural and religious factors possess considerable potential for integrating Afghan refugees into Iranian society and enhancing Iranian influence over the Persian-speaking populations of Afghanistan. However, due to its inconsistent and short-term policies regarding Afghan refugees, Iran has failed to maximise this opportunity, prioritising religious and security considerations instead. As a result of both Iranian and Afghan policies, alongside objective and subjective factors, an atmosphere of mutual distrust has developed between Iranians and the Iranophone people of Afghanistan.

Since the Islamic Revolution, the Afghan refugee issue has evolved into a serious security and demographic challenge for Iran. Both Iran and Afghanistan have been unable to resolve the refugee issue through inter-state mechanisms. Consequently, the Iranian government has opted to address it through deportation.

Iran has been prioritising religious factors over ethno-linguistic and cultural considerations in its policies towards Afghan refugees, with an eye primarily on short- to medium-term results. However, it is my view that, in the long term, the attitudes of the Iranian-speaking population of Afghanistan towards Iran may shift.

The deportation of Afghan refugees, including the substantial second-generation refugee population, could exacerbate the existing mutual mistrust between Iran and Afghanistan. I do not discount the possibility that this situation may provide an opportunity for a third party to influence the political relations between the two nations. As a result, anti-Afghanism may increase within Iranian society, while anti-Iranism may rise within Afghan society.

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Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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