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FORCED DEPORTATION OF AFGHAN MIGRANTS FROM IRAN: FACTORS AND ITS IMPACT ON BILATERAL POLITICAL RELATIONS



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FORCED DEPORTATION OF AFGHAN MIGRANTS FROM IRAN: FACTORS AND ITS IMPACT ON BILATERAL POLITICAL RELATIONS

Introduction

Wars, in addition to other calamities, create the problem of migration, and one of the major reasons for Afghan migration to Iran is precisely this warfare. Political problems, unemployment, social inequality, and human rights violations are among other significant factors that compel people to migrate.

According to the United Nations Migration Agency report for 2024, 37.9 million people worldwide live in displacement, of which 65% originate from just four countries: Syria with 6.3 million, Venezuela with 6.2 million, and Ukraine and Afghanistan each with 6.1 million migrants. This places Afghanistan fourth globally in terms of migration. Of these 6.1 million Afghan migrants, five million five hundred twenty-six thousand seven hundred live in neighboring countries, with 3,752,300 in Iran, 1,751,500 in Pakistan, 10,400 in Tajikistan, 9,000 in Uzbekistan, and 3,500 in Turkmenistan.

Following the recent war with Israel, Iran extensively undertook the forced deportation of Afghan migrants, representing the largest forced deportation event of Afghan migrants by Iran in historical precedent. According to reports, nearly 2.6 million Afghan migrants live in Iran without legal residency documentation.

Since 2025, Iran has deported more than one million Afghan migrants from its territory, and from June 1 to July 9 of this year, nearly 600,000 Afghan migrants have been expelled from Iran, with approximately 70% of them forcibly deported. Children constitute nearly 25% of these forced deportations.

This analytical piece will address the following questions: Why has Iran undertaken the unprecedented forced deportation of Afghan migrants? Does this Iranian action not constitute a violation of international law? Finally, what will be the consequences, and what impact will it have on the bilateral political relations between Iran and Afghanistan?

LEGAL ASSESSMENT OF IRAN'S FORCED DEPORTATION OF AFGHAN MIGRANTS

In international law, the most important document regarding migration is the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This convention outlines all refugee rights, including: the right to non-discrimination (Article 3), religious freedom (Article 4), property ownership (Article 13), freedom of association (Article 15), access to courts (Article 16), the right to work (Article 17), education (Article 22), freedom of movement and travel (Article 26),



transfer of assets (Article 30), and prohibition of forced deportation (Article 33). The Iranian government has violated several of these rights concerning Afghan migrants. Most notably, while this convention prohibits forced deportation, Iran has been forcibly deporting Afghan migrants in practice.

Additionally, Article 3(1) of the UN Convention against Torture also prohibits the forced deportation of migrants. This article states: "No State Party shall expel, return ('refouler') or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture."

Furthermore, Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights grants people the right to seek asylum in other countries for their safety or to obtain citizenship elsewhere. Similarly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and other international instruments emphasize migrant rights.

Based on these international documents, Iran's forced deportation of Afghan migrants has violated several fundamental rights. Iran has violated their right to education, as many students were forced to leave their studies incomplete and could not even retrieve their academic documents. Iran has also violated their right to health, as these forced deportations occurred during extreme heat waves with temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius. Over 70% of those deported were children and women who could not tolerate such heat, and many became ill as a result.

Moreover, the right to transfer assets is a fundamental migrant right, but most Afghan migrants deported from Iran did not have the opportunity to transfer their belongings properly. During the deportation process, Afghan migrants faced numerous challenges. An Afghan migrant named Bashir, who CNN interviewed, said: "Iranian soldiers arrested me on the street and took 10 million tomans (about \$200) from me, then transferred me to a detention center where they demanded another 2 million tomans (\$50) and forced me to pay it. They didn't give us food or water, and on top of that, they beat us."

Beyond these examples, Iran has violated many other rights during the deportation of Afghan migrants.

REASONS FOR THE FORCED DEPORTATION OF AFGHAN MIGRANTS

This section examines some of the reasons behind the forced deportation of Afghan migrants:



1. Security Rationale: Iran, like Pakistan, has securitized the issue of Afghan migrants. Securitization of an issue is a theory from the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, which posits that securitizing a problem involves three stages:

First stage: Speech Act - officials and authorities must present an issue as a security threat. Second stage: Audience Acceptance - society and the public must accept and view that issue as a security threat. Third stage: Extraordinary Measures - taking unusual steps to eliminate that threat.

Iran has followed this theoretical framework by first introducing this issue as a threat to its security, then gaining public acceptance that Afghans were involved in espionage during the war against Israel, and finally implementing extraordinary measures by forcibly expelling Afghan migrants from the country.

Iranian officials cite security concerns as one of the reasons for forcibly deporting Afghan migrants. During the recent Iran-Israel conflict, many of their high-ranking officials were killed, and important security centers were targeted. They believe that one reason for this intelligence failure was internal spies, and in this context, Afghan migrants had also been spying for Israel. Iranian state television released a video showing an Afghan migrant who had allegedly spied for Israel regarding important security locations. In this video, the individual identified as Afghan states: "I sent information about security locations to a person residing in Germany in exchange for \$2,000." Through such actions, the Iranian government seeks to blame the intelligence failure of the recent war on Afghan migrants and absolve itself of responsibility. In summary, Iran's security concerns represent one of the reasons for the forced deportation of Afghan migrants.

2. Pressure Tool Against the Islamic Emirate: Pakistan and Iran have consistently used Afghan migrants as a tool for applying pressure. During the second period of the Islamic Emirate, although Iran-Afghanistan relations are relatively good, statements by Iranian officials regarding water issues and Iran's overall policy concerning Helmand River waters indicate that they want the existing agreement to be modified and Iran's water rights from this river to be increased. Therefore, it is believed that Afghan migrants are being used as a tool for pressure, particularly regarding water issues.

3. Economic Deterioration: Iran is under severe international sanctions that have negatively impacted its economy. Additionally, due to the recent war with Israel, its economy has been severely damaged. Furthermore, unemployment and poverty within the country have increased, per capita income and revenues have decreased, and the country is grappling with other economic problems. The third reason that Iranians themselves cite is their belief that Afghans have taken their jobs and business opportunities, and if they are expelled,



employment and business opportunities will become available for Iranians. Moreover, the Iranian government believes that Afghan migrants have put pressure on their economic resources, contributing to economic deterioration, and if they are returned to their country, some pressure on Iran's economic resources will be reduced. However, this appears to be merely an excuse, as how can a few million migrants negatively impact the economic situation of a country with such a large population? Furthermore, Afghan migrants serve as a workforce in Iranian factories, performing arduous jobs that even Iranians themselves are unwilling to do, and through this work, Afghan migrants have contributed to Iran's development and reconstruction.

4. Covering Intelligence Failure and Gaining Public Support: After a brief conflict between Iran and Israel in which some important Iranian locations were bombed and several of their military and scientific figures were killed, Iran's security institutions faced severe criticism from the public for failing to protect important individuals and locations. To respond to the public, reduce popular pressure, and cover their intelligence failure, they accused Afghan migrants of espionage and proceeded with their forced deportation. Iran expects three benefits from this forced deportation: first, to blame its intelligence failure on Afghan migrants; second, to manage popular pressure and divert their attention elsewhere; and third, to limit the number of Afghan migrants in Iran.

IMPACT ON BILATERAL POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAN

Iran supported the return of the Islamic Emirate to power and even maintained relations with the Islamic Emirate during the final years of the republic, hosting meetings for them in Iran. When the Islamic Emirate came to power in 2021, Iran's leader, Khamenei, declared his support for this new system and instructed Ebrahim Raisi to establish good relations with the Islamic Emirate. While there may be many reasons for establishing these good relations, two are particularly significant: First, both systems share commonalities, with the most important being their Islamic governance structure. Iran wants such a system to exist alongside itself so it can tell its people that such a system now exists in our neighborhood and that they should support their system. Second, Iran considers the United States as the great common enemy of both itself and the Islamic Emirate, and wants to ensure that no U.S. bases exist in its neighborhood. Iran seeks assurance that this territory will not be used by the United States or other "terrorist" groups, particularly ISIS, against Iran.

According to "social compression" theory, when a society faces pressures such as the presence of large numbers of migrants, conflicts and dissatisfaction can increase. These social pressures, particularly in areas where Afghan migrants are heavily concentrated, can lead to distrust and security concerns, which can complicate Iran-Afghanistan relations.



The forced deportation of Afghan migrants by Iran at such a high level has confronted the Islamic Emirate with severe challenges. On one hand, a humanitarian crisis has emerged that is difficult for the Islamic Emirate to manage. On the other hand, Afghan society may face severe economic problems, particularly increased poverty and unemployment levels, rising prices and market pressures, increased strain on infrastructure, and other issues. Additionally, some security problems may arise, which can be analyzed from two perspectives: First, Iran may insert its intelligence personnel among these migrants into Afghan territory. Second, the return of such a large number of Afghan migrants may cause them to join certain groups, particularly those opposed to the Islamic Emirate, which could negatively impact Afghanistan's security situation.

Understanding all these problems, it can be said that the forced deportation of Afghan migrants at such a high level may have negative effects on future political relations between the Islamic Emirate and Iran at the governmental level. This could create an atmosphere of distrust in bilateral relations and weaken the spirit of cooperation in some areas, which would negatively impact bilateral political relations. At the popular level, it will damage relations between the two nations. During the recent Iran-Israel war, the Afghan people stood alongside the government and people of Iran and supported them. However, Iran's deportation of Afghan migrants has created hatred among Afghans against the Iranian government, and this issue will have a negative impact on popular relations between the two countries.

CONCLUSION

Iran's forced deportation of Afghan migrants represents a clear violation of international law, particularly the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The main reasons for this forced deportation have been security concerns in Iran, economic deterioration in the country, concealing intelligence failures, and gaining public satisfaction and support. To hide this failure, Iran accused Afghan migrants of espionage and therefore proceeded with their forced deportation. Additionally, Iran uses Afghan migrants as a tool for applying pressure.

The forced deportation of Afghan migrants at such a high level negatively impacts Afghanistan's economic, security, and social situation. If no joint coordination and specific mechanism is established between the Islamic Emirate and Iran in this regard, this issue will negatively affect future political relations between the Islamic Emirate and Iran, and an atmosphere of distrust will dominate political relations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Islamic Emirate should develop a national strategy to solve migrant problems. In this regard, the national conference organized by Salam University in Kabul on migrant



challenges and solutions could be utilized, and articles from this conference could be used in developing this national strategy.

2. The Islamic Emirate should urgently address all problems of migrants who have returned from Iran, shelter them, help them obtain food and drinking water, and address their health issues. Due to extreme heat, many children, women, and elderly people may face health problems. The government should address their illnesses through specialist doctors and medical staff and provide free medication.
3. The Islamic Emirate should monitor property owners to prevent them from increasing house rents due to the return of migrants. The Islamic Emirate should also work on a mechanism to pay the rent for these migrants' housing for one year or six months.
4. The Iranian government should respect all rights of Afghan migrants in light of international law and take serious measures to grant these rights. Since forced deportation violates all international standards and rights, the Iranian government should refrain from forcibly deporting Afghan migrants.
5. If Iran wants Afghan migrants to return, it should do so through an understanding with the Afghan government and through a specific mechanism. Doing this unilaterally without agreement from the Afghan government and Afghan migrants creates problems and challenges for Afghan migrants.
6. The UN Migration Agency should help Afghan migrants financially, logistically, and in establishing camps when they return.
7. To prevent violations of Afghan migrants' rights and their forced deportation, the UN Migration Agency should pressure Iran through publishing reports and through the United Nations to prevent this practice and thereby prevent harm to Afghan migrants.

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