

Changes in Afghan Migration Patterns to Iran and the Political Economy of Smuggling Networks After the 2021 Taliban Takeover

Introduction

Over the past twenty years of war and instability in Afghanistan, millions of Afghan refugees fled to two neighboring countries, Iran and Pakistan. Minimal language barriers between Afghan Dari and Iranian Farsi made Iran an intermediate or final destination for Afghan migrants fleeing with their families or men coming in search of informal sector jobs to provide for their families. As of 2024, there were an estimated 3.6-4 million Afghans living in Iran according to UNHCR. The presence of lucrative employment opportunities in Iran has resulted in decades of illegal immigration and smuggling to Iran, for both Afghan families and male providers. Afghanistan's economy is primarily agrarian, and the absence of foreign aid and investments has made the agricultural sector collapse following the Taliban takeover (United Nations, 2024). The Iranian government provides very minimal opportunities for legal migration and asylum pathways and naturalization except through marriage is virtually impossible, even for Afghans who have been in Iran for generations. As of 2022, there were 780,000 Amayesh card (residence permit) holders, 600,000 Afghan citizens with Afghan passports and temporary resident status in Iran, and about 2.1 million undocumented Afghan migrants (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.).

As a result of the lack of a legal status, the majority of Afghans in Iran are employed in informal sectors, often working in dangerous conditions for below-market wages in construction, brick kilns, agriculture, and maintenance. Approximately 80% of Afghans in Iran were working in manufacturing, construction, and trade and commerce, whereas only 26% of Iranian employees worked in these sectors (Wickramasekara et al., 2009). Although Afghanistan has an agrarian economy and 50% of the surveyed Afghan migrants used to work in agriculture in Afghanistan, only 13% had undertaken agricultural work in Iran.

This policy analysis paper attempts to elucidate two main questions of the combined effect of the **a) 2021 Taliban shock and b) the subsequent Iranian immigration tightening on i) smuggling price and immigration volume, as well as the dangers and inefficiencies associated with these unofficial routes.**

Setting

The Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani fell in August of 2021 as the Taliban took over Kabul just months following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan (BBC News, 2021). The added uncertainty, economic collapse, and religious suppression following the Taliban takeover resulted in an influx of Afghan migration to Iran (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022).

Operationally, tightened immigration enforcement at the Iranian border means increased checkpoints and the risk of deportation, as well as a heightened possibility of being shot by the Iranian border guards. Iran constructed a 15-foot high wall at the border with the Afghan province Nimrooz as an attempt to deter migrants from entering, but the accumulation of sand dunes has made climbing the wall a viable option for migrants, rendering the wall rather ineffective (Augustova & Hakimi, 2021).

Overall, due to increased enforcement, a larger smuggling market, and a much higher demand for migration out of Afghanistan, the risk of detention and violence against Afghans has increased since August 2021. Trafficking and exploitation en route to Turkey increased from 10.3% to 18.3%, while detention increased from 24.3% to 30.2%, showing more extreme immigration enforcement. The report was compiled by interviewing the migrants who had arrived in Turkey (Mixed Migration Centre, 2023). Thus, the rates are probably higher for those who do not reach Turkey due to detention at any location along the route. Although specific data on such incidents on route to Iran is not available, it can be assumed that similar or more extreme trends apply to the route from Afghanistan to Iran, particularly since the path to Turkey goes through Iran.

Simultaneously, Pakistan started deportations of Afghan migrants in 2023-2024 (Himmat, 2025), potentially diverting some of the migrant flow to Iran. In Iran, anti-migrant sentiments and negative media

portrayals of Afghans increased, and the economic crisis in Iran exacerbated the outsider threat feelings of Iranians. Xenophobic attitudes as well as accusations of espionage following the Iran-Israel war in June of 2025 resulted in the Iranian government tightening its border policies over time and the mass deportation of thousands of Afghan families, many of whom had lived in Iran for decades and children who were born and raised entirely in Iran (Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2025).

Evidence

To better understand the effects of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on illegal migration patterns and human smuggling to Iran, I conducted interviews with 12 Afghan migrants living in Iran, some of whom had entered Iran before and some after the Taliban takeover. 11 of the interviewees were men, and one was a woman. The analysis is complemented with existing literature in the field. All participants were compensated for their time and participation in the study. No names or otherwise identifying information were asked or recorded. The voices of the participants were recorded with their full consent and are kept anonymously in a secure folder.

Literature

Prices

Prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, prices for reaching Europe from Afghanistan ranged from 4,000-6,000 Euros per person. Prices were significantly higher for Canada and the UK, ranging from 8,000-1,0000 Euros and +16,000 Euros, respectively (Mahadevan et al., 2023). Given the high cost associated with European destinations, Iran serves as a viable first stop for many migrants. The Iranian embassy was one of the few embassies that remained open in Kabul after the Taliban takeover, but at least 50% of the migrants entering Iran do not have travel documents and enter illegally. Interestingly, the Taliban government and their family members created a shadow market for the sale of scarce passports ranging from \$800-\$1000 (Mahadevan et al., 2023).

The Taliban takeover and the subsequent tightening of smuggling routes dramatically increased smuggling costs from Iran to Afghanistan. Smuggling costs from Quetta, a border city in Pakistan, to

Islamabad were around 19 USD prior to the Afghan takeover (Mixed Migration Center, 2023). This price increased up to 718 USD after the fall of the Afghan government. Similar price increases were observed for routes ending in Iran. In 2021, the average price charged by smugglers for Iran was between 100-300 USD, and the price more than tripled to 300-400 USD in 2022 (Mahadevan et al., 2023).

Deportations

Nevertheless, in spite of increased demand for migration to Iran and Pakistan and the one million new migrants who entered Iran in the year following the Afghan government collapse, 65% of said migrants were deported back (EUAA, 2022). UNHCR data confirms that deportations from Iran back to Afghanistan have been extremely high since 2021 (UNHCR, 2025). In 2023-2025, deportations from Iran escalated to what can even be described as “mass expulsions”, with more than 1,083,000 Afghans being deported from Iran to Afghanistan between January 1 2025 and August 6, 2025 (UNHCR, 2025). The shocking trend is that headcount slip holders, which constitutes a temporary protected status in Iran, constituted 43% of these deportations, with the remaining 57% being undocumented migrants, and 0.1% being Amayesh card holders. According to the UN Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan Richard Bennet, deportations peaked immediately after the Iran-Israel war due to the rise in xenophobic attitudes and propaganda propagated by the Islamic Republic government that many undocumented Afghan immigrants were working for Israeli intelligence (Bennet, 2025; RFE/RL, 2025). Monthly deportations reached their peak in July right after the Iran-Israel war, reaching 460,000 individuals (UNHCR, 2025).

Interview Results

The interviews were all male except for one woman, who was the spouse of another interviewee. Their ages ranged from 18 to 65. Most were working in construction or as carekeepers or janitors in buildings. For the sake of protecting the individual’s identity, only the gender and age of the respondents were recorded. All of the participants reside in Tehran. Below are the results of the interviews summarized. Table 1 shows the prices reported by the interviewees, as well as the year and the approximate value in USD at the time. It is important to note that the prices in USD are approximations due to the high

fluctuations of the Iranian currency exchange rates relative to the USD and the lack of precise entry dates from the interviews.

Interviewee	Year entered	Price in Tomans	Price in Dollars
1- Male, 65	Summer of 2021	40 million Tomans for two	~750 USD per person
2- Male, 32	Summer of 2021	26 million Tomans	860 USD
3- Male, 24	After Taliban takeover (2021)	25 million Tomans	800-830 USD
4- Male, 28	2021	28 million Tomans	900-950 USD
5- Male, 36	2022	28 million Tomans	800 USD
6- Male, 18	2021	25 million Tomans	800-830 USD
7- Male, 38 (three entries)	2004-2005	300,000 Tomans	340 USD
	2017-2018	8.5 million Tomans	1,800 USD
	Last entry in 2024	50 million Tomans (with passport and visa)	650 USD
8- Male, thirties	2021	9 million Tomans (including food and other costs along the way)	300 USD
9- Male, mid forties	2021	10 million Tomans - Directly from Nimruz to Iran	330 USD
10- Male, thirties	2021	8 million Tomans	300 USD
11- Male, twenties	2020	4 million Tomans	300 USD
12 - Female, thirties-fourties	30 years ago (~1995-2000)	7 million Tomans - for family, number of individuals unclear; reported it to be 30-40 million Tomans per person (~300-350 USD) at the moment	7,000 USD

Table 1: The reported price paid for travel to Iran in Tomans and USD approximations

Price increases

There is not a set amount of wage for the caretakers in Tehran, but the average price seems to be between 30 to 40 million Tomans. Almost all caregivers also receive free housing within a built-in suite that exists in most newer Iranian apartments for the caregiver. This can help set the price paid into perspective. Given reports of the price for smuggling ranging from 50-70 million at the moment, it seems to be that it is approximately ~1.5x the monthly wage. However, this is not generalizable to all of the population of Afghan caregivers and employees in Tehran since all of the recruited participants were from nearly the same neighborhood, so variations might exist. Furthermore, those working in construction also tend to earn more.

Looking at the reported numbers, it seems that prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the price for border crossings was approximately 300 USD. Reported data from participant 7 shows that the smuggling price increased on par with the depreciation of the Iranian currency, keeping the relative real price constant over the years. Nevertheless, after the Afghan takeover, the average reported price seems to be

ranging from 800-950 USD, showing a three-fold increase. The price reported by participant 7 for his entry in 2017-2018 is abnormally high. However, multiple participants mentioned extortion and kidnappings along the route, so this abnormally high price could be brought about by smugglers exploiting the vulnerability of migrants.

The most interesting revelations were perhaps from participant 7, who had crossed the border three times. He first entered Iran in the year (1383, which is 2004-2005), and paid 300,000 Tomans at the time (equivalent to ~340 USD). He then crossed the border in 1396 (2017-2018), having paid 8,500,000 Tomans, walking and being on route for 27 days. After having crossed the border illegally, he was caught by the Iranian border police, prompting him to come with a passport and a visa in the summer of 2024. The price was now 50,000,000 Tomans for the visa and paperwork only, which is 650 USD. This anecdote can explain why many individuals choose to undergo the more difficult route of smuggling, because even if getting a visa is possible and the embassy approves of it, it is much more costly than illegal crossings.

Dangers of the route and the smuggling network

The route was almost the same for all participants, having to cross to Pakistan and then enter Iran through the Balouchestan province and going to the border city of Saravan and then Tehran or any other major city where they have networks. The prices are charged in Iranian Tomas and are received after the migrants reach their destination. Oftentimes, they have to borrow money from their existing network in the destination and work to pay it off to them. Most of the migrants mentioned danger of theft, death, getting lost in the mountains, injury, and hunger as challenges of the route, especially since most of the path is done on foot. Participant 2 said that the smugglers even happen to coordinate with the thieves. “They take your wallet, phone, shoes, everything”. Similarly, participant 2 mentioned sharp increases in the price after the Taliban takeover due to “inflation, theft, bribes. They [the smugglers] are not satisfied with the previous price.” He said that the journey is difficult and often has physical altercations and even shootings by the Iranian border guards. He said that even the women and children undertaking the journey have to walk for hours and cross mountains. He mentioned the relatively “normal” nature of the job.

When asked about the availability of smugglers, he said that it is very easy to find them at the Afghanistan border and it is a “normal job”. Participant 5 mentioned that the smugglers even have hostels and dorms at the border. According to participant 4, it is a “normal job and not scandalous, everyone knows them in Afghanistan”. According to participant 8, the “rahbalads” are in a network themselves; Afghan smugglers take you until the Pakistani border and then the migrants go with the Pakistani smugglers to the Iranian border, where Iranian smugglers take the migrants and bring them to major cities. In Iran, Irani Balochs bring migrants in trucks, often having multiple people sit in the same seat, and it is not uncommon for people to die along the way due to thirst or hunger.

Reasons for leaving Afghanistan

Most of the interviewees had crossed the border after the Afghan takeover. Three of them mentioned having to leave due to a history of serving in the former Afghan military or police force and fear of execution. The primary reason for leaving for all else was poverty, unemployment, and lack of job opportunities, especially since the Taliban takeover. One participant mentioned leaving so that his two youngest daughters could continue their education.

Participant 2 mentioned that he existed in Afghanistan because he is from the province of Panjshir, the home region of Ahmad Massoud, the son of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud and the leader of the National Resistance Front opposing the Taliban (Amnesty International, 2022). Since the 2021 Taliban takeover of the Afghan government, Panjshir has been reported to be the subject of intense raids and pressure by the Taliban forces due to the presence of resistance leaders and ongoing activity (Beaumont, 2021).

Routes

Participant 8 said that after the Taliban takeover, smuggling has become much more difficult because if the Taliban capture smugglers and migrants, all of them would be imprisoned. He was in a “hiding place” for three places at the border city of Zaranj in Afghanistan along with around 25 other migrants, since they were being followed by the Taliban due to reports of smuggling. According to this account and other participants’ responses, the Taliban does not seem to be explicitly complicit in the smuggling schemes. A

single cigarette along the route can cost as much as 100,000 to 150,000 Tomans. The route used to take 5-6 days from Nimruz to Tehran, but now it can take as long as two weeks.

Interviewee 11 said that there are three main routes: the Wall, Islamghaleh, Pakistan. The wall is shorter and takes 5-6 days and those who want to cross from the Islamghaleh border have to pay a higher fee to bribe the border officers and is also the way that those wanting to cross legally have to go through.

Figure 1 shows the locations of Tehran, Islam Qala in Afghanistan, Saravan in Iran, The Nimruz province in Afghanistan, and the border city of Quetta, highlighting the main cities that different routes pass by. This figure clearly shows how the detour through Afghanistan from the province of Zaranj and potentially even the border city of Quetta, and then to Saravan in Iran, makes the route significantly longer. This is especially longer compared to crossing through Islam Qala in the north which borders the Iranian province of Khorasan, but this route is much more heavily guarded and is primarily used for legal crossings, according to participant 11.

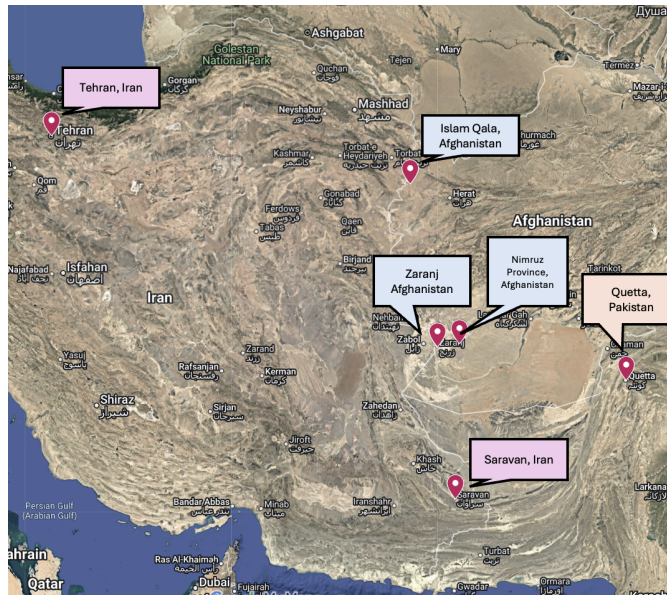


Figure 1: Map showing the location of the major cities along the route to Iran

Border tightening

Participant 9 mentioned that Pakistani border police are not as strict but the Iranian police seem to be much stricter. Afghan smugglers have “close ties” with the Taliban and give them “rights [bribes]”, which seems more plausible but is contradictory.

Interviewee 11 mentioned that the Taliban tries to limit smuggling, creating a bottleneck in the way. He mentioned that most migrants are men, especially since the Iranian government doesn't allow undocumented children of Afghan migrants to attend school. There are contradictory reports regarding the rights of Afghan children to attend school in Iran. Officially, as of May 2015, the Iranian government started allowing all school-age Afghan children to attend school (Norwegian Refugee Council & ADSP, 2017), resulting in the enrollment of 48,000 new children the year following. Nevertheless, reports of Afghan children being denied education are still common. This could potentially be explained by systematic forms of racism that results in schools preferentially refusing to enroll Afghan school children, rather than a law prohibiting their enrollment.

Conceptual framework and Analysis

A study that interviewed Afghan smugglers found that people were recruited by their family members and fathers and uncles would “pass down” the smuggling knowledge to their sons and nephews. The word for smuggler in Afghan Dari is “rahbalad”, which the interviewees described as “someone who knows and guides the way” (Mahadevan et al., 2023). This shows both the relatively positive connotation associated with smuggling as well as the knowledge component associated with this job. The interviews indicate that smuggling is seen as “normal”, although reports of abuse and even kidnapping from smugglers is not uncommon. However, given the statements about the nature of the inheritance of the job and the specific knowledge and network that is needed to engage in smuggling, both in Afghanistan and in Iran and beyond, it is reasonable to assume that the smuggling market has a high barrier to entry due to the violent nature of this occupation.

Illegal migration can be viewed as a market consisting of smugglers who supply illegal border crossings, and migrants who demand the service. The market operates under incomplete information and weak regulation.

For a migrant, willingness to pay is dependent on their expected utility:

$$U_{migrate} = (1 - p_{caught})(W_{Iran} - C_{smuggle}) - p_{death} * L$$

Where p_{caught} = probability of being detained or deported back to Afghanistan, p_{death} = probability of death, W_{Iran} is the expected wage differential in Iran, $C_{smuggle}$ = smuggling fee, L is the disutility from loss or death. Following the recent border tightenings and increased deportations, p_{death} and p_{caught} have increased, reducing the utility of migration. Over time, demand becomes more and more price inelastic (as the situation in Afghanistan gets worse, immigrating for the sake of higher wage in Iran becomes less significant than migration for the sake of survival).

On the supply side, we have the direct costs of smuggling, including but not limited to transportation, bribes, and false documents. The risk is increased with policy tightening (an expanded wall, more checkpoints). M denotes the markup associated with the smuggling price which can be affected by shocks such as natural disasters and earthquakes that are frequent to Afghanistan and tend to further exacerbate the livelihood of the Afghan people.

$$P_{smuggle} = C_s + Risk + M$$

It is important to consider the risk premium embedded in the smuggling price and the size of the market, as well as the frictions that exist, making perfect competition impossible.

Furthermore, the interview results show that the migrants have very low destination elasticity but high route elasticity: the presence of guards and tightened restrictions at the Iranian border prompt them to cross using the Pakistani border, but the destination is commonly where they have family members and social ties. Furthermore, there does not seem to be much of a deterrence effect for the Afghan migrants. Demand is very inelastic, especially since it is now survival-based and not so much wage-based, as it used to be prior to the Taliban takeover.

The high-volume of the Afghan migration to Iran is also consistent with gravity models of migration. Iran and Afghanistan share a border, but also have a common language and history, resulting in inherently high flows of migrants. This is consistent with the findings of the World Bank “Moving for Prosperity: Global Migration and Labor Markets” report (2018) that linguistic similarity has a strong positive correlation with emigrant shares. Even though their results do not find a significant correlation for refugees, this is perhaps even more pertinent for low-wage Afghan migrants seeking employment in Iran since they probably don’t speak another language. In addition, the interviewees reported paying the smugglers after getting to Iran where their “kin” live and possibly even borrowing money from them. This underscores the significance of the existence of a diaspora network.

Conclusion and path forward

The results of this policy paper highlight that migration demand from Afghanistan to Iran has increased dramatically since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in summer 2021. Increased enforcement against illegal migration, mainly from the Iranian government but also the Taliban authorities, has increased the price, risk, and violence associated with illegal migration and border crossings, but does not seem to have significantly reduced migration volume because the primary motive has shifted from wage-seeking to survival, both economically and politically.

Although the Iranian government reports increased rates of deportations in the past few years, Iran’s border tightening has had a multitude of negative externalities and unintended consequences as well. Mainly there seems to be much larger smuggling networks and higher death rates, especially since Iranian border guards seem to be shooting at migrants after an initial “warning”, according to one participant. The expanded smuggling network has also created business for dorms, hostels, and stores along the way that can now sell water, food, cigarettes, and other necessities at a much higher price. Smugglers using kidnapping and extortion also highlights the increased violence associated with the networks, which is consistent with existing reports (Mixed Migration Centre, 2023; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). Overall, the results show that tightened enforcement without legal pathways for Afghan migrants to immigrate increases black-market activity in a variety of ways.

The results highlight the importance of temporary protected status and humanitarian visas whenever possible. However, it must also be noted that Iran's economy is not able to responsibly and sustainably take in all Afghan nationals who desire to migrate to Iran; the efforts for refugee settlements must extend beyond Iran and Pakistan. Moreover, recent efforts to provide school access for Afghan migrants in Iran is a step in the right direction to ensure that forcefully displaced children, especially young girls who cannot attend school in Afghanistan, are not the victim of this decades-long armed conflict and war. Overall, the results show that no matter how burdensome, violent, or dangerous the route or how high the price, Afghans continue to migrate to Iran because of the linguistic, historical, and social ties.

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