

Mass Deportations from Iran: Afghan Women Caught in the Grip of Violence and Inhumanity

written by Elahe Amani | August 2, 2025

Afghan refugees, a population of 4-5 million who have lived, worked & raised families in Iran for decades, are being deported en masse.

In recent weeks, in the aftermath of military confrontations with Israel and mounting domestic unrest, the Iranian government has sought to reassert control by deflecting attention from its deepening polycrisis. This is being done through a familiar authoritarian tactic: Scapegoating. Afghan refugees constituting a population of 4 to 5 million who have lived and worked in Iran for decades, and whose children were born and raised in the country—are now being labeled as threats, “spies for Israel,” or “illegals” to create a climate of fear and nationalism.

This strategy of “othering” is not new. It is part of a long-standing pattern used by the Islamic Republic of Iran to suppress dissent, silence movements, and consolidate power. By dehumanizing Afghan migrants and criminalizing their existence, the regime is attempting to rebuild a fragile internal unity based on exclusion and xenophobia. In this process, race, nationality, class, and gender intersect to produce a devastating impact, especially on Afghan women.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Iran issued an order in March 2025 requiring undocumented Afghans to leave the country by July 6.

However, the crackdown intensified following the Iran-Israel conflict in June, leading to a surge in arrests and deportations. The IOM reported a sharp rise in forced returns starting in May, with a notable shift toward deporting families—departing from the earlier pattern of targeting single young men. Since January, 2025, over 1.2 million Afghans have been returned from Iran by mid-July 2025 (UN/OCHA).

While the official deadline preceded the conflict, the scale and severity of mass deportations, particularly of families, escalated dramatically in June and July 2025. The sharpest rise was **on 26 June**, when some 36,100 Afghans returned in just one day. The number of daily returns has continued to increase since June 13.

This alarming move, framed as a “security project” or a process of “organizing undocumented foreigners,” is in reality a systematic and racist expulsion—one that violates human rights, endangers lives, and reinforces structural oppression against already marginalized communities. **History shows that an authoritarian state does not deport bodies—it exiles hope, dignity, and the right to live without fear.**

Two urgent and powerful statements—from a collective of independent Iranian women’s organizations and a group of women human rights activists—condemn this policy and call for international attention, public outcry, and immediate action to protect Afghan migrants, particularly women and children.

“We demand the immediate halt of deportations and forced returns of Afghan migrants and refugees who have been compelled to flee due to the Taliban regime’s system of war and repression—a regime that has destroyed the foundations of life, education, and safety for women and minorities.”

A petition signed by Afghan and Iranian activists also condemned the silence of so many Iranians in face of the deportations. Three Afghan feminists issued an open letter to their Iranian sisters to express solidarity with them in their struggle against the reactionary war among Israel/U.S. and Iran.

Women activists inside and in diaspora emphasize that Afghan women bear the heaviest burden of this violent expulsion. Many have worked for years in Iran under precarious, exploitative conditions—in households, workshops, and farms, often without insurance, legal protection, or the ability to access healthcare or education. Now, faced with mass deportation, **they are being sent back to a country under Taliban rule where women have no right to education, employment, or public participation. No border policy is just if it delivers people into the hands of their oppressors.**

For women who are heads of households, the consequences are particularly catastrophic. A mother and sole breadwinner forced to return to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan faces not only economic ruin but also threats to her physical safety and dignity. Many women and girls are being sent to a land where schools are closed to them and survival is no longer guaranteed.

Feminists warn: deportation is not just a geographic relocation. It is a return to a system of institutionalized misogyny, where women are stripped of their most basic rights. It is a violent act that targets the body, life, and freedom of Afghan women.

It should be mentioned that for many Afghan migrants, especially younger generations born and raised in Iran, the concept of “returning” to Afghanistan is false. Iran is their home. It is where they went to school, formed social networks, learned the language, and built lives—albeit in the shadow of discrimination and marginalization. For these individuals, deportation is a form of forced exile and social death. It means losing one’s community, stability, and sense of belonging.

Moreover, deportation is often carried out with violence, without due process, and in direct violation of international humanitarian norms. According to official statistics, as of early July 2025, over 380,000 Afghan migrants were deported through the Dogharoun border in Khorasan province alone. Also approximately 80,000 children—some of them unaccompanied minors, further endangered by statelessness and child trafficking risks.

Since the ceasefire following U.S. and Israeli attacks, the daily deportation rate has skyrocketed from 2,000 to over 30,000 per day. This mass expulsion is a calculated, state-sanctioned campaign of erasure.

The history of Afghanistan refugees in Iran is long, complex, and deeply intertwined with decades of war, political upheaval, and shifting policies. Below is an overview organized by historical periods, including key themes such as migration waves, legal status, integration, discrimination, and the current situation.

Early Waves: 1970s-1980s

1978-1979: Following the Saur Revolution and USSR invasion of Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands of people from Afghanistan—mostly ethnic Tajiks, Hazaras, and Pashtuns—fled to Iran. Iran, under the newly formed Islamic Republic (1979), welcomed Afghan refugees as fellow

Muslims, especially the persecuted Shi'a Hazaras, in line with its "revolutionary" and Islamic solidarity rhetoric. No formal refugee camps were created; instead, Afghans were allowed to integrate into Iranian society, especially in labor-intensive sectors like construction and agriculture.

1990s: Shifting Policies and Refugee Fatigue

As Iran struggled with after the Iran-Iraq War, it began to tighten refugee policies. Iran signed a tripartite agreement with Afghanistan and UNHCR, encouraging voluntary repatriation. Legal ambiguity persisted and most Afghans remained without official refugee status, receiving instead temporary protection cards (Amayesh). Restrictions also grew on education, employment, and internal travel for undocumented Afghans.

2000s: Deportations and Increased Control - With the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Iran increased pressure on Afghans to return. Mass deportations became common—hundreds of thousands were forcibly returned. The Amayesh registration system was formalized (2003) to manage documented Afghans but came with the following limitations of annual renewals, limited geographic mobility and no path to permanent residency or citizenship

2010s: Afghan Youth and Generational Struggles - A generation of Iran-born Afghans came of age, often with no memory of Afghanistan, yet were denied many rights including to access to higher education which was largely restricted (some eased in 2015 for undocumented students), no Iranian nationality, even if born in Iran. Afghans were subjected to xenophobia, police harassment, and public stigma. However, Iran relied heavily on Afghan labor—2 to 3 million Afghans (documented and undocumented) were estimated to live in Iran.

The Fatemiyoun Brigade: Afghans in the Syrian War - Thousands of Afghan men—mostly Shi'a Hazaras—were recruited by Iran's Revolutionary Guards to fight in Syria (2013 onward) in defense of the Assad regime. They were called the the Fatemiyoun Brigade. In return, some were promised legal status, salaries, or Iranian residency—but many felt exploited or abandoned after returning.

Post-2021: Taliban Takeover and New Refugee Influx- After the Taliban returned to power in 2021, a new wave of refugees—including activists, journalists, women's rights defenders, and minority groups—fled to Iran. Iran closed many official border crossings, but hundreds of thousands crossed irregularly. As of 2023, Iran hosts an estimated 4 to 5 million Afghans, but only about 800,000-1 million are officially registered. Iran has limited UNHCR access, denied many asylum requests, and continues to deport thousands monthly. Refugees face rising hostility amid Iran's economic crisis, sanctions, and internal unrest.

Throughout the 2020s, Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran have faced a range of critical challenges. Most live in legal limbo, lacking formal refugee status or a path to citizenship. Women and girls are especially vulnerable, often denied access to education, employment, and protection from abuse. Deportations and incidents of border violence have increased, while access to schooling remains severely restricted, particularly for undocumented youth. Despite these hardships, Afghan communities have established deep roots in major cities such as Mashhad, Tehran, Qom, and Isfahan.

Iran's policy toward Afghan refugees has fluctuated between solidarity, pragmatism, exclusion and the current violent deportation of migrants from Afghanistan.

Iran hosted one of the world's largest long-term refugee populations without international support because of the sanctions. Although Iran's Afghan refugees—especially the younger generation—remain marginalized and invisible in many aspects of public life, they have been

essential workers doing the types of work that most Iranians do not want. Their absence has now made Iran's falling economy even more crisis-ridden.

The anti-immigrant purge in Iran is part of a global pattern. In times of crisis, authoritarian and fascist regimes often deflect from internal failures by targeting refugees and migrants: From Trump's policies in the United States to anti-immigrant rhetoric in Europe, the tactic is the same: blame the vulnerable, criminalize the displaced, and distract from systemic oppression and corruption.

Iran's current deportation wave is similarly rooted in structural racism. It is an effort not just to purge bodies but to enforce a narrow definition of national identity—one that excludes based on ethnicity, class, and gender. It is about controlling who belongs and who does not.

Afghan migrants are not "outsiders." They have fought, lived, and dreamed alongside Iranians. During the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising, Afghan migrants marched with Iranian activists, resisted the Islamic Republic of Iran. The slogan "From Kabul to Tehran, down with the Taliban" reflected a shared vision for liberation from both state and religious authoritarianism.

The Islamic Republic of Iran war on migrants is not happening in isolation. It is occurring alongside a broader crackdown on women's rights, civil society, labor movements, and ethnic minorities. The same mechanisms of surveillance, violence, and propaganda used against Iranian dissidents are now turned against Afghan refugees. Feminist groups argue that silence in the face of this purge is nothing short of complicity in the Islamic Republic's human rights violations.

In particular, the failure of major media outlets to report on the deportation crisis enables further violence. When institutions of power—from the media to academia—remain indifferent, they become part of the machinery of repression.

The feminist and women's rights communities in Iran have issued a clear and urgent call: the deportation of Afghan migrants must stop. This is not a matter of charity or humanitarian aid—it is a matter of justice. The deportations are part of a larger authoritarian project that seeks to criminalize difference, suppress resistance, and institutionalize misogyny. Indeed, the feminist movement offers a different path—one of solidarity, dignity, and shared resistance. Afghan refugees are not outsiders. They are workers, mothers, students, comrades. They are us.

As long as oppression exists—be it from the Taliban or the Islamic Republic—human rights defenders and feminists in Iran and Afghanistan will continue to resist. From Kabul to Tehran, the struggle for life, freedom, and justice will go on. Let us remember that when a state sends people back to danger, it abandons not just them—but the very idea of humanity

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