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UNHCR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC REGIONAL BUREAU

SOUTH-WEST ASIA ROUTE TO EUROPE

An Analysis of Afghan Onward Movements from Iran to Türkiye



SSAR
Support Platform
GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary 3

1. Methodology 4

2. Profile of the respondents 5

3. Journey from Iran to Türkiye 6

4. Drivers for onward movements to Türkiye 8

4.1. Drivers of onward movement by year of arrival in Türkiye 9

5. Iran 10

5.1. Protection risks in Iran 11

5.2. Economic conditions and risks inside Iran

Pakistani sample: findings and comparison 12

6. Conclusions and Recommendations 14

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Cover photo: Afghans at the Islam Qala border, Herat Province.© UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines protection risks along the South-West Asia route, living conditions, and drivers of onward movement among Afghans who transited through the Islamic Republic of Iran before travelling onward to Türkiye. It is based on 855 interviews conducted in Türkiye between late December 2025 and January 2026 and forms part of a route based approach to analyzing risks and decision making along the Iran–Türkiye segment of the South-West Asia route.

The findings should be interpreted in the context of a rapidly evolving regional environment. Since data collection, a sharp escalation of hostilities in the Middle East beginning on 28 February 2026 has significantly affected the political, security and socioeconomic environment in Iran and neighbouring countries. These developments have led to increased security measures, economic disruption and tighter restrictions on movement. While the findings reflect conditions at the end of 2025, they remain relevant for understanding onward movement dynamics, particularly where pressures may have intensified.

The analysis identifies two overlapping movement patterns.

First, 30 per cent of Afghan respondents reported that Iran was "*just a transit country,*" indicating no intention to remain. This group is predominantly male (approximately 75 per cent men and 25 per cent women), reflecting a gendered pattern of transit oriented movement.

Second, among those who did not consider Iran solely as a transit country (70 per cent), onward movement is primarily driven by conditions experienced in Iran rather than pre-planned intentions. Within this group, 95 per cent cited legal uncertainty, discrimination, protection risks, poor living conditions, and economic hardship as key drivers.

Legal status constraints and discrimination are the most consistent drivers, while protection and socioeconomic pressures tend to accumulate over time. Afghans who worked or remained in Iran for extended periods often described onward movement as a response to accumulating constraints and risks, rather than part of their initial plans.

Overall, the findings show that onward movement from Iran cannot be explained by a single factor or a simple transit versus destination dichotomy. While a minority view Iran strictly as a transit point, for many others, onward movement is gradual and reactive, shaped by cumulative legal, protection and livelihood pressures.

These dynamics underscore the importance of addressing legal status, protection risks, discrimination and access to livelihoods along the South-West Asia route, while recognizing distinct gendered patterns and movement trajectories among Afghans leaving Iran.

1. METHODOLOGY

The report draws on 855 interviews conducted in Türkiye between December 2025 and January 2026 with Afghan respondents residing primarily in Konya, Ankara, Istanbul, Kayseri, Yozgat and Van.

Residence locations of Afghan respondents



Men constitute 75 per cent of respondents and women 25 per cent. Respondents are aged between 18 and 65 years: approximately 30 per cent are aged 18–24, 49 per cent are 25–34, 16 per cent are 35–44 and five per cent are 45 or older.

The sample also includes 256 Pakistani respondents who transited through Iran before arriving in Türkiye. Findings relating to Pakistanis are referenced where relevant but are not the primary focus of this report.

A non-probability sampling approach was used, combining purposive and snowball sampling. Findings should therefore be considered indicative rather than statistically representative. Respondents were identified through established community contacts, local NGOs, and referral chains .

Limitations

The findings presented in this report are subject to several limitations and should be interpreted accordingly.

Non probability sampling: The data are based on purposive and snowball sampling and are therefore not statistically representative of all Afghans who transited through Iran or moved onward to Türkiye. Findings should be understood as indicative of reported protection risks and experiences rather than generalizable estimates.

Timing of data collection: Interviews were conducted in late December 2025 and January 2026. Since then, the context in Iran and the wider Middle East has evolved significantly. In particular, the escalation of hostilities beginning on 28 February 2026 has affected security conditions, state responses, economic pressures and mobility dynamics. As a result, some protection risks and movement patterns described in this report may have intensified or shifted, and the findings may not fully reflect current conditions.

Retrospective self reporting: Responses are based on retrospective accounts of experiences in Iran and along the route, which may be subject to recall bias or influenced by respondents' circumstances at the time of interview in Türkiye.

Scope of analysis: The report focuses on key drivers of onward movement and protection risks but does not capture all contextual, policy, or operational developments following departure from Iran or after the interview period. Where relevant, trends over time and gender disaggregated analysis have been included.

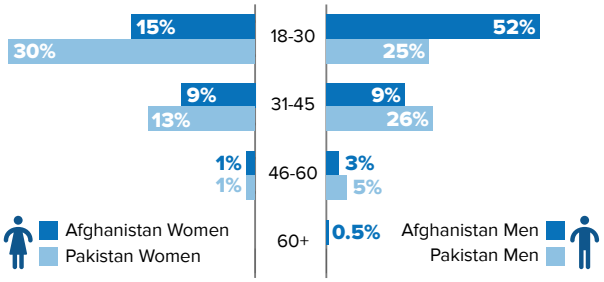
Despite these limitations, the analysis provides valuable, evidence based insights into protection risks and drivers of onward movement among Afghans in Iran at the time of data collection and remains relevant for informing route based protection responses.

2. PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

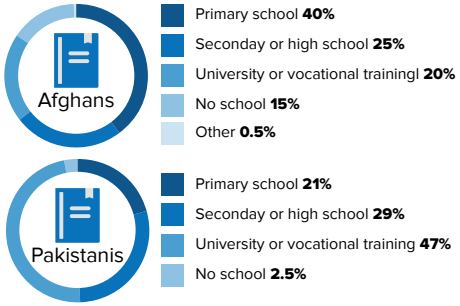
Country of origin



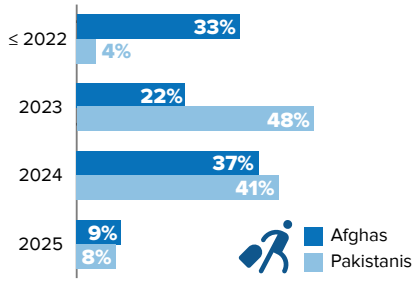
Age & Gender



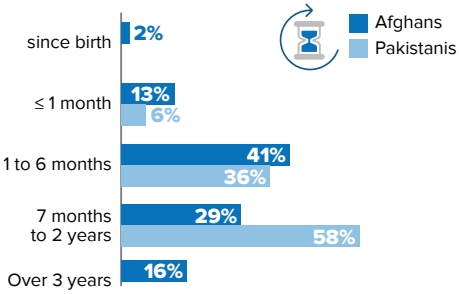
Education



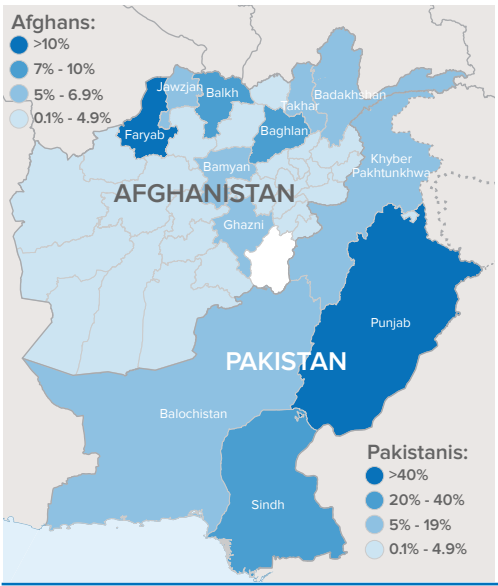
Year of last arrival in Iran



Length of last stay in Iran



Provinces of origin of respondents



Educational attainment varies widely among respondents. Approximately 40 per cent have completed primary education, 25 per cent secondary education, and 20 per cent vocational training or university, while 15 per cent report no formal education.

Among Afghan respondents, most reported relatively short to medium stays in Iran. Overall, 54 per cent stayed less than six months (including 13 per cent under one month and 40 per cent between one and six months). A further 28 per cent stayed between seven months and two years, and 15 per cent remained for three years or more. A small proportion (1.5 per cent) were born in Iran and had never left, while 1.6 per cent selected “don’t know/other”.

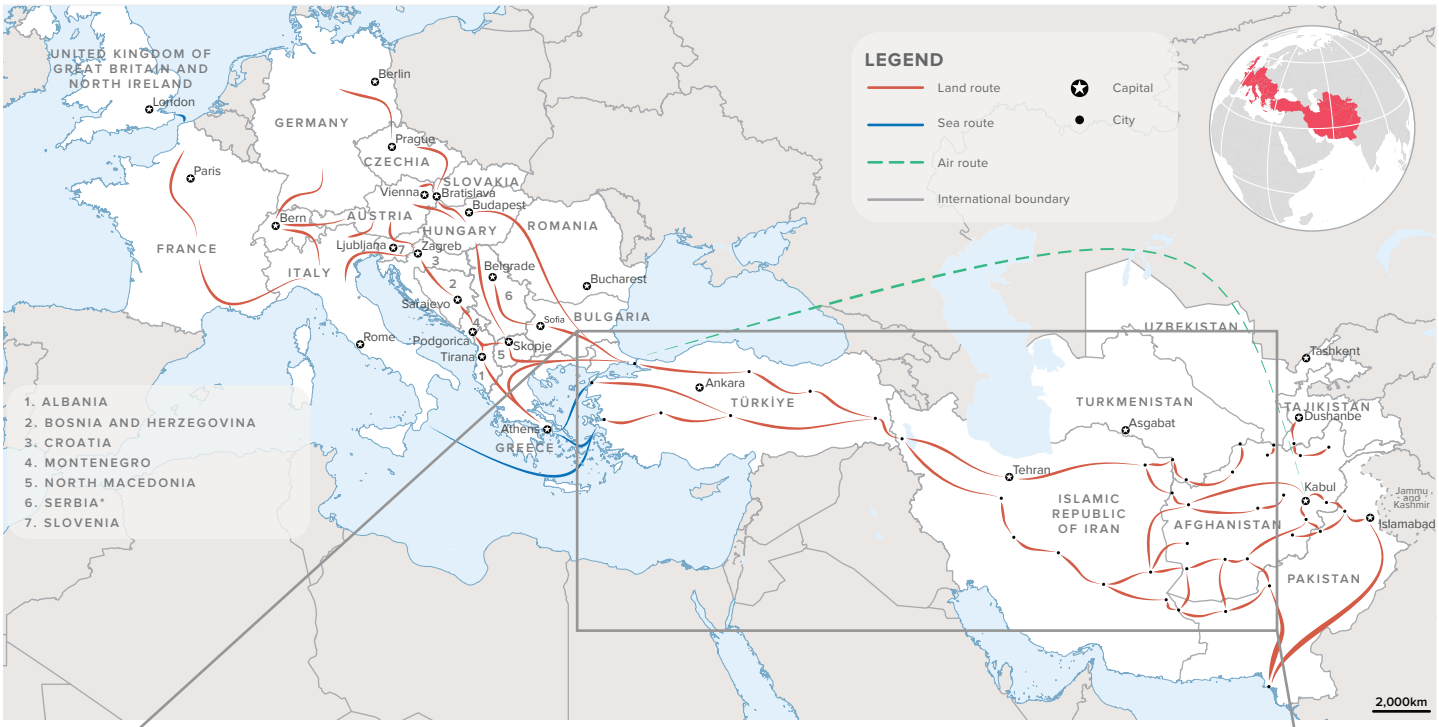
Women are slightly more likely than men to report very short stays (58 per cent compared to 52 per cent), while men are more likely to report medium-term stays (31 per cent versus 22 per cent). Long-term stay patterns are broadly similar across both groups.

Among respondents who did not consider Iran solely as a transit country, stays were generally longer: 46 per cent stayed less than six months, 31 per cent between seven months and two years, and 20 per cent three years or more.

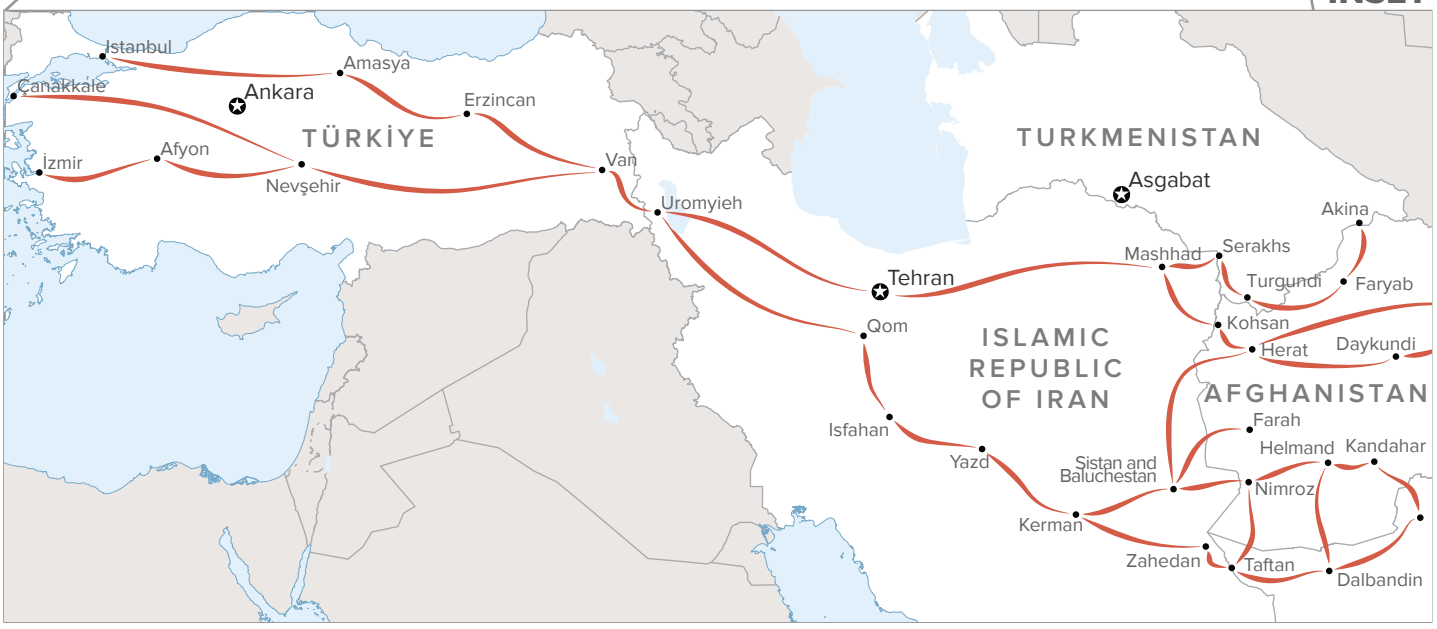
The sample is geographically concentrated in northern and central Afghanistan. The most frequently reported provinces of origin include Faryab (13 per cent), Balkh (9 per cent), Baghlan (8 per cent), Bamyan (6.9 per cent), Ghazni (6.7 per cent), Badakhshan (6.6 per cent), Jawzjan (5.3 per cent), Takhar (5.2 per cent), and Daykundi (4.6 per cent). Respondents come from both rural and urban settings.

Among **Pakistani respondents**, 45 per cent come from Punjab, followed by Sindh (20 per cent), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (16 per cent), Balochistan (15 per cent) and the Islamabad Capital Territory (4 per cent). The Pakistan sample is primarily drawn from major urban centres and surrounding districts and is not geographically representative of the country as a whole.

3. JOURNEY FROM IRAN TO TÜRKİYE



INSET



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not been agreed upon by the parties.

* Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244 [1999]).

Once inside the Schengen zone, it is very hard to track the routes given the open borders. Therefore the arrows simply outline the preferred countries of destination for Afghans, and not necessarily the exact routes.

The South-West Asia (SWA) Route, covers movements from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran, and to some extent to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, onward to Europe.

Most Afghan respondents used multiple, largely irregular modes of transport when leaving Iran. The most commonly reported modes (multiple responses possible) include travel on foot (72 per cent) and by car or pick-up (68), followed by trucks (25 per cent) and buses (16 per cent). Motorbike use (9 per cent) is less common, while air travel is negligible (0.6 per cent). These patterns indicate that onward movement from Iran to Türkiye is primarily overland and typically involves combining several modes of transport.

Transport patterns have shifted in recent years. Among respondents arriving in Türkiye in 2024–2025, truck and motorbike use increased, while reliance on buses, cars and pick-ups declined. Truck use rose from around 18–20 per cent before 2023 to 34 per cent in 2025, while motorbike use increased from 3 per cent in 2023 to 17 per cent in 2025. Over the same period, bus use fell from 22 per cent to 10 per cent, and car or pick-up use from about 73 per cent to 62 per cent. This suggests a shift towards more flexible and potentially riskier transport arrangements, particularly among more recent arrivals.

Most respondents did not travel **alone**. Overall, 63 per cent reported travelling in groups, 31 per cent with family members, and 28 per cent with smugglers (multiple responses possible), while only 11 per cent reported travelling alone.

Group travel remains the predominant pattern although it has slightly declined over time. The proportion travelling in groups decreased from approximately 70–77 per cent among those who arrived in or before 2023 to around 65 per cent in 2024 and 60 per cent in 2025.

Family travel also declined from approximately 34–45 per cent in ≤2023 to 23 per cent in 2024, before increasing to 31 per cent in 2025. Travel with smugglers remained relatively stable across cohorts (around 26–36 per cent), while solo travel fluctuated without a clear trend.

Overall, these patterns indicate continued reliance on group travel and facilitation networks, alongside limited access to safe and regular movement options.

Crossing from Iran to Türkiye is often difficult and requires multiple attempts. Only 8 per cent crossed on their first attempt. Most required repeated attempts: 39 per cent crossed after one failed attempt, 34 per cent after two attempts, 10 per cent after three attempts, and 9 per cent after more than three attempts. In total, one in five (19 per cent) required three or more attempts.

These findings highlight a highly restrictive and dangerous border environment, where successful crossing often depends on persistence and repeated attempts.

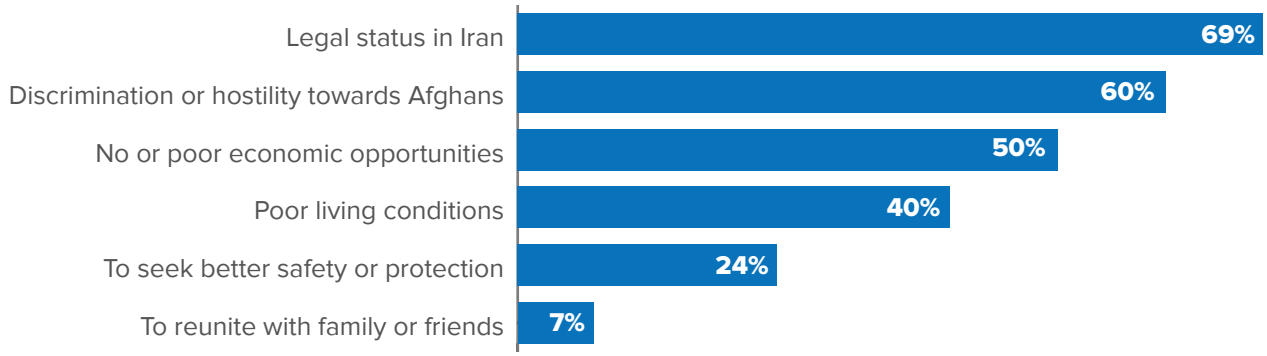
4. DRIVERS FOR ONWARD MOVEMENTS TO TÜRKİYE

Approximately 30 per cent of Afghan respondents reported that Iran was solely a transit country and that they had no intention to remain. These respondents are excluded from the analysis of onward movement drivers, as their stay in Iran was not considered a country of residence.

Among the remaining respondents, onward movement from Iran to Türkiye is primarily associated with legal stay constraints, discrimination, protection concerns and adverse socioeconomic conditions. These factors are interconnected and tend to accumulate over time rather than operate in isolation.

Figure 1 | Main reasons for leaving Iran for Türkiye

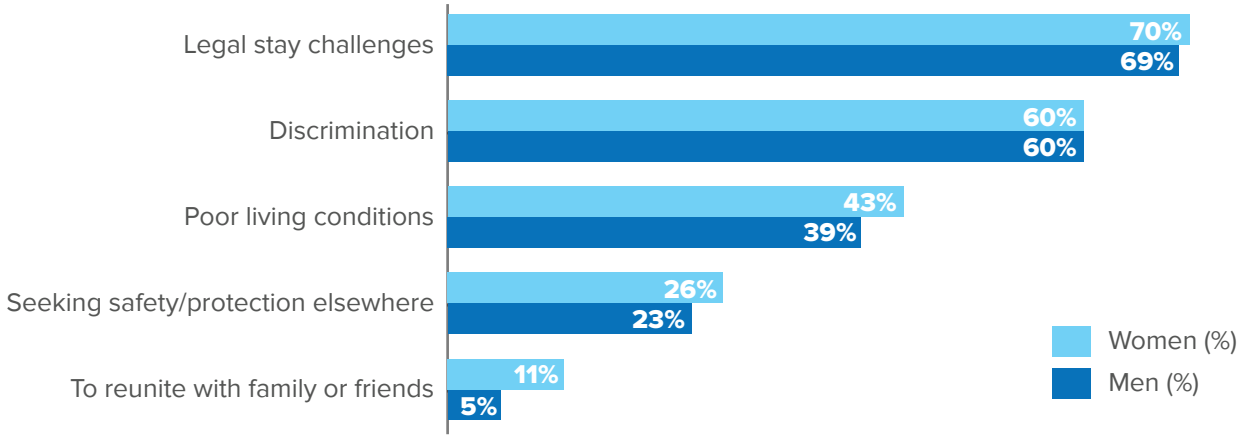
Multiple choice questions may add to over 100%. Excludes those who had no intention to stay in Iran (transit).



Overall, men and women report similar drivers. However, women more frequently frame onward movement in relation to protection concerns and living conditions, reflecting gender-specific vulnerabilities linked to discrimination, limited opportunities and exposure to harm.

Figure 2 | Main reasons for leaving Iran for Türkiye by gender

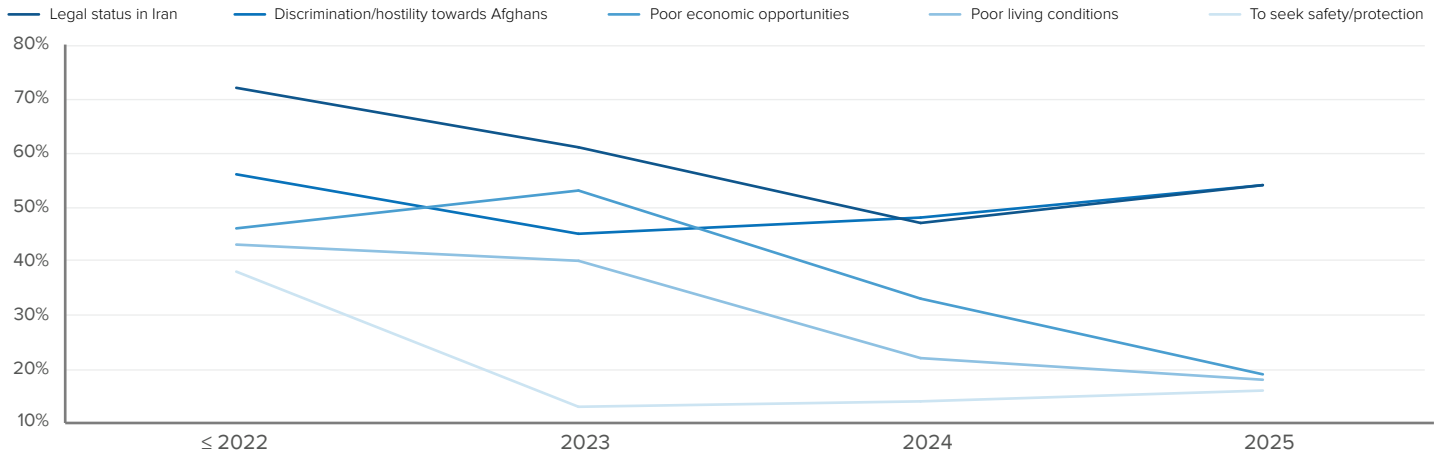
Multiple choice questions may add to over 100%. Excludes those who had no intention to stay in Iran (transit).



4.1 Drivers of onward movement by year of arrival in Türkiye

Figure 3 | Trends in reasons for leaving Iran (Afghan respondents) by estimated year of arrival in Türkiye

Multiple choice questions may add to over 100%. Excludes those who had no intention to stay in Iran (transit).



Drivers of onward movement show moderate variation across arrival cohorts. To examine these changes, Afghan respondents who did not treat Iran as a transit-only country were grouped by year or arrival in Türkiye (≤2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025).

Legal stay challenges remain a major driver across all cohorts although their relative importance declines slightly among those more recent arrivals (2024–2025). They are cited by 72 per cent of those arriving in or before 2022 and 61 per cent in 2023, falling to 47 per cent in 2024 and 54 per cent in 2025.

Discrimination and hostility are consistently reported across cohorts, with no clear linear trend: 56 per cent (≤2022), 45 per cent (2023), 48 per cent (2024) and 54 per cent (2025). Protection related motives are present across all years, declining in 2023 and increasing again in 2024 and 2025 although remaining below earlier cohorts.

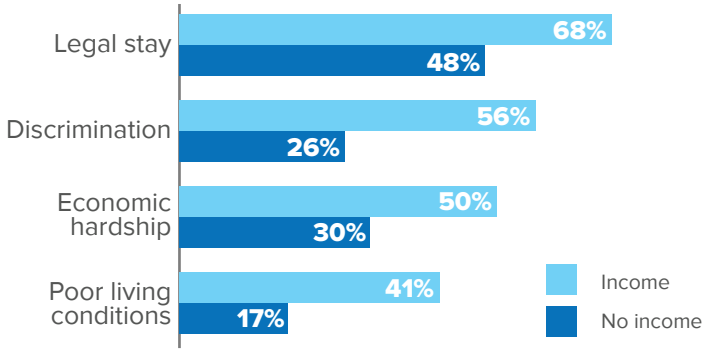
Taken together, these patterns indicate that structural protection-related factors in Iran – particularly legal status constraints, discrimination, and the inability to live safely and with dignity – remain key driving factors of onward movement to Türkiye, even as their relative importance shifts over time.

Analysis of the full Afghan sample shows that the share of respondents describing Iran as "*just a transit country*" is higher among more recent arrival cohorts, particularly in 2024–2025. This suggests that a gradual shift, with onward movement to Türkiye increasingly forming part of a planned route for some respondents, alongside those moving in response to deteriorating conditions.

Socioeconomic characteristics also shape how respondents report their reasons for onward movement. Respondents with lower levels of education more frequently cite economic hardship and poor living conditions, while those with higher levels of education are more likely to report discrimination and protection-related concerns.

Income source further differentiates these patterns. Among Afghan respondents who worked in Iran, 68 per cent cite legal stay challenges, 56 per cent discrimination, 50 per cent economic hardship and 41 per cent poor living conditions. This suggests that those engaged in the labour market are more likely to frame onward movement as a response to accumulated legal and protection constraints. Conversely, respondents with no income report these drivers less frequently, pointing to a more economically vulnerable group with less clearly articulated movement rationales (Figure 4).

Figure 4 | Onward movement drivers by income status Multiple choice questions may add to over 100%.



Length of stay in Iran is also strongly associated with both livelihood patterns and reported drivers. Respondents staying less than six months are less likely to report income from work (24 per cent, compared with 76 per cent among those staying 7–24 months and 79 per cent among those staying three years or more) and more likely to rely on savings or family support.

While the ability to meet basic needs is broadly similar for short- and medium-term stays (60 per cent), it is lower among long-term stay respondents (53 per cent). Reported drivers of onward movement also shift over time. Short-term stays are associated with lower levels of legal and protection concerns. For medium-term stays, onward movement is more closely linked to legal stay challenges (68 per cent), economic hardship (64 per cent), poor living conditions (53 per cent) and discrimination (62 per cent).

Among long-term stay respondents, greater emphasis is placed on legal stay insecurity (70 per cent), discrimination (53 per cent) and the search for safety and stability (38 per cent).

Overall, the longer Afghans remain in Iran, the more their decision to move onward appears shaped by accumulated legal, economic and protection-related constraints . While 30 per cent of respondents treat Iran as a transit country, those who stay longer or engage in the labour market are more likely to move onward in response to deteriorating conditions and protection concerns. This indicates that onward movement is often reactive, reflecting pressures that build over time rather than a single triggering factor.

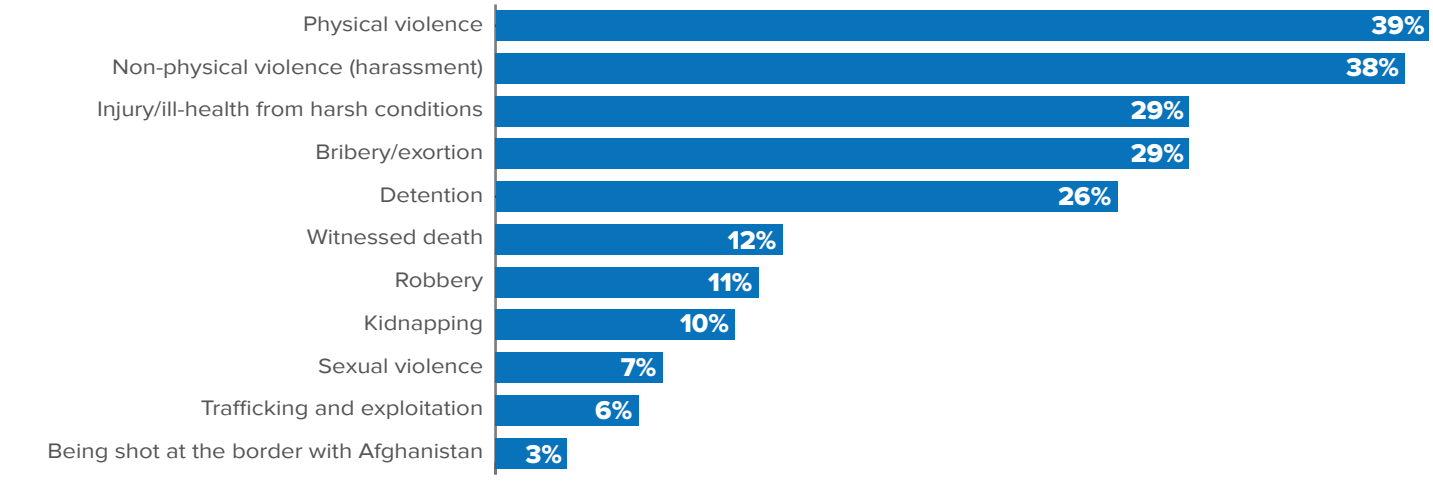
5. IRAN

Afghan respondents moving onward report a combination of protection risks and economic challenges that shape both their experiences in the country and their decisions to leave. These include discrimination, legal uncertainty, and exposure to violence and exploitation , which are compounded by fragile income sources and unstable employment.

Taken together, these overlapping pressures contribute to heightened vulnerability during their stay in Iran and influence onward movement.

Figure 5 | Types of incidents experienced in Iran

Multiple choice questions may add to over 100%.



5.1 Protection risks in Iran

76 per cent of Afghan respondents reported experiencing at least one serious protection incident while in Iran, with only a small minority reporting none. The most commonly reported incidents include physical violence and non-physical harassment (around four in ten respondents) as well as bribery or extortion and injury or ill health linked to harsh conditions. Other risks include detention, robbery, kidnapping, sexual violence and trafficking.

Clear gender differences emerge. Women face markedly higher risks of sexual violence while travelling (20 per cent compared to 3 per cent among men) and injury or ill health linked to harsh conditions (36 per cent compared to 27 per cent).

Conversely, men are more frequently exposed to detention (29 per cent compared to 16 per cent among women), as well as slightly higher rates of kidnapping (10 per cent compared to 7 per cent) and shooting incidents at the Afghanistan–Iran border (4 per cent compared to 2 per cent). These patterns highlight distinct risk profiles that require targeted protection responses both within Iran and along onward routes.

Protection risks also vary over time. Reports of physical violence and harassment are highest among respondents departing in 2025. Harassment declines in 2023 before increasing again in 2024-2025, while detention peaks in 2022 and remains at slightly lower but still significant levels in 2024–2025. Reports of sexual violence are lower in 2023-2024 but rise again in 2025, indicating a deterioration in protection conditions for more recent departures.

Figure 6 | Types of incidents experienced in Iran (Afghan respondents) by estimated year of arrival in Türkiye

Multiple choice questions may add to over 100%.

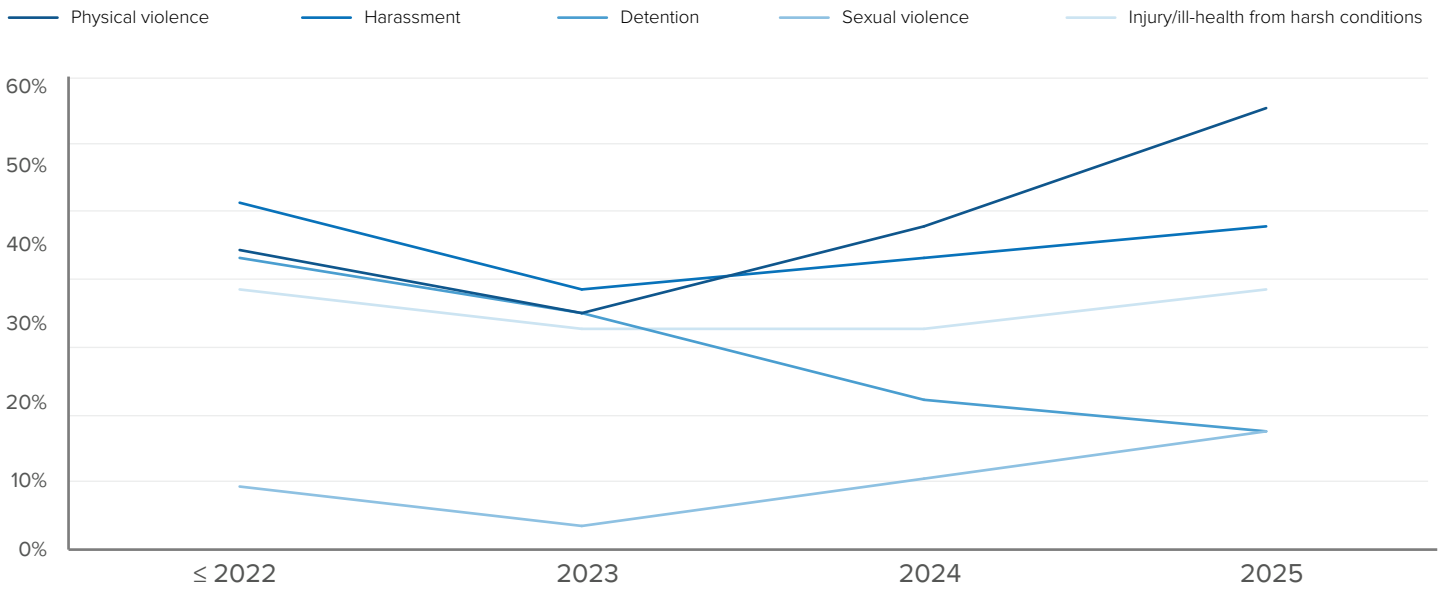
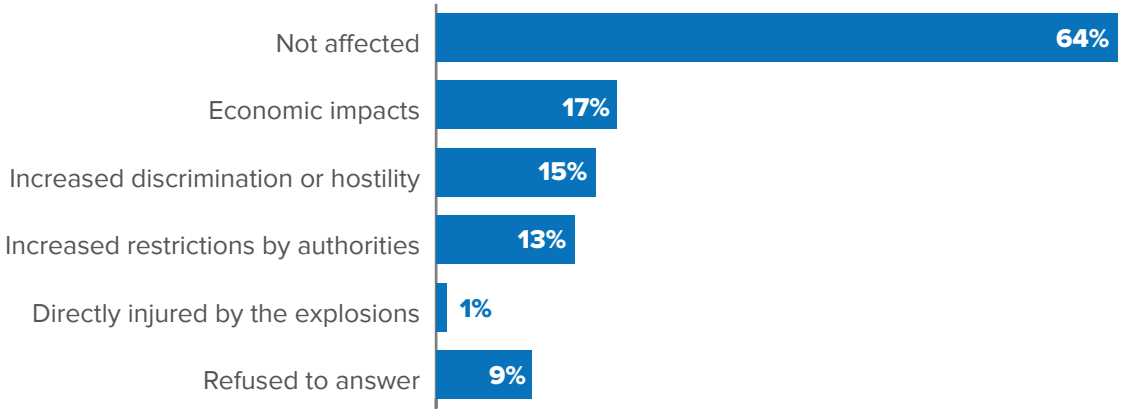


Figure 7 | Impact of 12-Day Conflict on Afghans

Multiple choice questions may add to over 100%.



Among Afghan respondents who arrived in Türkiye from July 2025 onwards, four out of 10 report being affected by the 12-day conflict between Iran and Israel. Reported impacts include economic disruption (17 per cent), increased discrimination and hostility (15 per cent) and tighter restrictions such as movement limitations, stricter border controls and intensified deportations (13 per cent). Direct physical harm linked to the conflict was rare (1 per cent), but broader protection and socioeconomic effects were significant.

5.2 Economic conditions and risks inside Iran

Across Afghan respondents who considered Iran a place of stay, income sources are limited and often unstable. Just over half (51 per cent) reported earning income through work, while 19 per cent relied on financial support from family or friends, and 8 per cent on savings. A further 19 per cent reported having no income. Only very small shares cited assistance from NGOs or international organizations (0.5 per cent) or other sources (1.2 per cent).

This indicates that nearly **one in five Afghans had no earnings** or regular support, pointing to significant structural economic vulnerability during their stay in Iran.

Among those who considered Iran solely as a transit country , fewer reported working (26 per cent), while a larger share relied on savings (30 per cent). However, 21 per cent still reported having no income, suggesting that economic uncertainty is also common during short-term transit.

Employment among those who worked is predominantly informal and unstable. Most respondents (81 per cent) were engaged in casual or occasional work, while only 11 per cent held regular jobs. A further 3 per cent were self employed and another 4 per cent reported other forms of work. Overall, only 5 per cent of all Afghan respondents held regular employment, while 35 per cent relied on casual labour, underscoring heavy dependence on precarious livelihoods.

Despite these constraints, 61 per cent reported being able to meet their basic needs, while 25 per cent were unable to do so and 6 per cent reported exceeding them.

Taken together, these findings indicate that while many Afghans manage to meet basic needs through a combination of casual labour and family support, around **one in four remain unable to do so**. Economic precarity therefore acts as an important **contributing factor to onward movement**, alongside legal and protection-related pressures, rather than as a standalone driver.

PAKISTANI SAMPLE: FINDINGS AND COMPARISON

For the Pakistan sample, movement patterns through Iran are broadly similar to those of Afghan respondents but with notable differences in how transit is framed and in the drivers of onward movement.

A key distinction lies in **reasons for transiting through Iran**. While 30 per cent of Afghan respondents described Iran solely as a transit country, this share rises to 81 per cent among Pakistani respondents. This indicates that for most Pakistanis, onward movement is pre-planned, with Iran functioning primarily as a transit point rather than a place of stay. Among the much smaller group of Pakistanis who did not describe Iran as transit only reported drivers of onward movement were mainly economic reasons (62.5 per cent), legal stay challenges (56.3 per cent) and poor living conditions (52.1 per cent).

Despite these differences, both groups report using similar irregular routes and movement arrangements, including group travel and reliance on smugglers. However, Pakistani respondents report greater use of trucks, fewer repeated border crossing attempts, and a more consistent emphasis on transit rather than settlement in Iran.

Clear differences also emerge in reasons for leaving countries of origin. Among Afghan respondents, departure is shaped by a combination of factors, including economic conditions (71 per cent), generalized insecurity (43 per cent) and restrictions on civic, political, religious, and gender-related freedoms (37 per cent).

In contrast, Pakistani respondents report a more narrowly economic profile. A large majority cite economic reasons (89 per cent), while smaller shares report violence or insecurity (23 per cent) – primarily in specific regions – and only 12 per cent refer to restrictions related to rights or freedoms.

Overall, while economic factors are important for both groups, Pakistani respondents are less likely than Afghans to frame their departure in terms of insecurity or rights-related pressures, and more likely to describe it as driven by economic marginalization and limited livelihood opportunities.



6. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the data sets, three main route-based patterns emerge.

First, conditions in Iran – particularly legal stay constraints, discrimination, protection risks and economic precarity – act as key upstream drivers of onward movement for Afghans towards Türkiye and beyond.

Second, the Iran-Türkiye route and border areas are characterized by significant protection risks, including reliance on smugglers, exposure to violence and exploitation and repeated crossing attempts.

Third, gender and length of stay shape distinct vulnerability profiles, indicating that experiences in Iran and along the route are not uniform and require targeted responses.

On the basis of these conclusions, UNHCR recommends:



Strengthen access to legal stay and documentation. Legal stay constraints are a primary driver of onward movement, alongside discrimination and poor living conditions.

UNHCR calls on States to expand predictable, accessible and affordable pathways to residence permits, asylum and other stay arrangements for Afghans, and to avoid sudden policy shifts that may increase irregular onward movement.



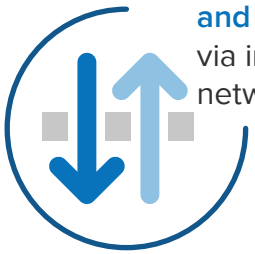
Address discrimination, xenophobia and harassment. Discrimination and hostility are consistently reported as key drivers of onward movement, including among recent arrivals, and have been exacerbated by regional tensions.

UNHCR urges authorities and partners to address discriminatory practices, hate speech and violence against Afghans through public messaging, feedback and complaints mechanisms and accountability measures.



Prevent and respond to violence, including gender based violence. Three quarters of respondents reported experiencing at least one serious incident in Iran, including physical violence, harassment, detention, extortion, robbery and kidnapping. Women face significantly higher risks of sexual violence and health related harm.

UNHCR calls for strengthened protection systems in Iran and along the Iran–Türkiye route, including safe reporting channels, survivor centered services for gender-based violence, and safeguards against excessive use of force at borders.



Ensure rights-based border management and returns fully respect international refugee and human rights law. Many Afghans attempt to cross from Iran to Türkiye multiple times via irregular routes, often under dangerous conditions involving smugglers and criminal networks.

UNHCR urges States to uphold the principle of non refoulement, prevent pushbacks and collective expulsions, and ensure that any return procedures are individual, fair and include access to asylum and legal assistance.



Expand safe and regular pathways for Afghans with heightened protection needs. Many Afghans report leaving Afghanistan due to a combination of economic collapse, generalized insecurity and shrinking civic, political, religious and gender related freedoms. This clearly distinguishes Afghan movement patterns – which more significantly reflect forced displacement due to international protection needs - from those of Pakistani respondents, which are largely economically driven or transit related.

UNHCR calls for increased resettlement, family reunification and complementary pathways from Iran and the wider region, particularly for Afghans with heightened protection needs.



Address structural economic vulnerability for Afghans in Iran. Around one in three Afghan respondents report limited or no income while roughly one in four are unable to meet basic needs, relying on precarious and informal labour.

UNHCR encourages expanded access to livelihoods, decent work and basic services inside Iran, including through the inclusion of refugees and other people l ikely to be in need of international protection in national systems and livelihood programmes.



Respond to risks linked to smuggling and repeated irregular crossings. Most Afghans travel onwards from Iran to Türkiye in groups, often with smugglers, using increasingly risky transport modes and requiring multiple attempts to cross.

UNHCR advocates for strengthened regional cooperation to disrupt smuggling networks, expand safe and legal pathways, and improve access to reliable information to support informed decision-making.



Integrate age, gender and diversity considerations into all responses. Findings show gendered patterns, with women more likely to report protection- and conditions related drivers and higher exposure to sexual violence, while men face slightly higher risks of detention and border related incidents.

UNHCR calls for age-, gender- and diversity-responsive programming across all i nterventions, ensuring that the specific risks faced by women, men, girls and boys are addressed, and that Afghan women and youth are meaningfully included in programme design.

UNHCR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC REGIONAL BUREAU

SOUTH-WEST ASIA ROUTE TO EUROPE

An Analysis of Afghan Onward Movements from Iran to Türkiye

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Analysis prepared by
DATA, IDENTITY MANAGEMENT & ANALYSIS UNIT (DIMA)
UNHCR REGIONAL BUREAU FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC