Since the 1979 Soviet invasion and the subsequent waves of violence that have rocked Afghanistan, millions of Afghans have fled the country, seeking safety elsewhere. The Islamic Republic of Iran boasts 5,894 km of borders. Most of it, including the 921 km that are shared with Afghanistan, are porous and located in remote areas. According to the Government of Iran, some 2000-2500 Afghans arrive in Iran every day. UNHCR Iran does not have access to border points and thus is unable to independently monitor arrivals or returns of Afghans. Afghans who currently reside in Afghanistan have different statuses: some are refugees (Amayesh card holders), others are Afghans who possess a national passport, while others are undocumented. These populations move across borders in various ways. 

951,000
Amayesh Card Holders (Afghan refugees)

In 2001, the Government of Iran issues Amayesh cards to regularize the stay of Afghan Refugees in the country as refugees. Each year, refugees have to renew their Amayesh cards. However, more recently arrived Afghans do not receive an Amayesh card. The Government of Iran is in charge of refugee status determination and UNHCR can advocate for a handful of refugees to receive amayesh cards each year.

1,5-2 M
undocumented Afghans

Undocumented is an umbrella term used to describe various groups of foreign nationals residing in Iran including: those with an invalid passport and invalid Iranian visa; those who lost their Amayesh status for different reasons; those who hold a type of document, for example Tazkara, but no legal residence for Iran; and those who are not in possession of any type of document.

450,000
passport holders

The Comprehensive Regularisation Plan (CRP) introduced in 2010 allowed undocumented Afghans to register with the government of Iran, and receive an Afghan passport and a visa ("family passport"). The visas of those participating in the CRP have been extended at different intervals since 2012, often following high level visits by the government of Afghanistan.

870
voluntarily repatriated in 2020

In March 2020, UNHCR suspended its VolRep activities as a preventive measure to reduce exposure of refugees, host communities and staff to COVID-19. In May, UNHCR partially resumed VolRep activities from its Field Unit in Dogharoun, in keeping with health and security measures, to assist refugees who have opted to return to Afghanistan.

*The map reflects Afghan refugees as of 2015 and Iraqi refugees as of 2013. Disclaimer: the boundaries and names shown and the designations used on the map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

1Afghan “prima facie” refugees. There has not been a prima facie decision or statement by the GIRI on prima facie recognition for this group. Technically Amayesh is a “temporary residency permit” and it does not specifically afford refugee status.
INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

In 2020, displacement due to ongoing conflict and natural disasters is continuing to drive humanitarian needs in Afghanistan. Almost 286,000 people have left their homes this year due to fighting. Many of these people remain displaced across the country, as conflict and poverty prevent them from returning to their areas of origin.

2,993,000
IDPs due to conflict as of end of 2019

The 2020 Humanitarian Needs Overview estimates that close to a million people on the move will need humanitarian assistance by the end of the year.

286,000
Afghans displaced internally in 2020

59% of newly displaced Afghans are children under 18.

ONWARD MOVEMENT OF AFGHANS

From January to October 2020, Afghans were the second most common citizenship to claim asylum in Europe (25,485 first-time claims), after Syrians (39,405 first-time claims). In September 2020, 58% of Afghan asylum claimants in Europe were granted international protection, higher than the first half of 2020. Germany received the most claims.

3,000,000
Afghans outside of Afghanistan

This number includes only Afghan refugees and asylum seekers.

RETURN OF UNDOCUMENTED AFGHANS FROM IRAN

The number of Afghans who have returned to Afghanistan spontaneously, without UNHCR support (approx. 490,000) increased by 240% compared to the same period in 2019 (approx. 204,000), presumably due to the deteriorating financial situation in Iran and the coronavirus pandemic.

790,000
Undocumented returns in 2020

Reasons of entry to Iran TOP reasons of return to Afghanistan

In search of employment Reunites with family members in Afghanistan

Deportee 14%

Fear of COVID-19

Spontaneous returnee 8%

No employment opportunities in CoPR

Deportee holder 7%

Abuse by police or state authorities

Spontaneous returnee holder 6%

High cost of living/ high rent in Iran

Deportee holder less than 0.5%

Reached end of stay

Spontaneous returnee holder less than 0.1%

Family gatherings

Spontaneous returnee holder 1%

Denied access to health facilities

Spontaneous returnee holder 2%

Discrimination by local community

Spontaneous returnee holder 2%

Fear of COVID-19

Deportee holder 2%

Denied access to health facilities

Deportee holder 3%

Threat of forced quarantine

Deportee holder 4%

Family gatherings

Deportee holder 8%

No employment opportunities in CoPR

Deportee holder 11%

Abuse by police or state authorities

Deportee holder 12%

High cost of living/ high rent in Iran

Deportee holder 13%

Reached end of stay

Deportee holder 15%

Family gatherings

Deportee holder 15%

Denied access to health facilities

Deportee holder 15%

Discrimination by local community

Deportee holder 15%

Sources: Refugees in Iran – BAFIA (2015); Voluntary Repatriation - UNHCR Iran (Nov 2020); Afghans outside of Afghanistan - UNHCR Refugee Data Finder as of 5 Nov; Internally displaced Afghans due to conflict as of end of 2019 - IDMC; UNHCR Factsheet “Onward Movements of Afghan Refugees and Migrants toward Europe” (Oct 2020); undocumented returnees from Iran from 2018 to Nov 2020 - IOM Afghanistan “Return of Undocumented Afghans from Iran” (12 Oct 2020); UNHCR Afghanistan returnee border monitoring - UNHCR Afghanistan (covers the period from 4 June to 21 Sep 2020); internally displaced people in Afghanistan - OCHA Afghanistan “Snapshot of Population Movements (January to October 2020)” as of 19 Nov. The numbers are subject to change as more information becomes available. Updated: 16 December 2020. Contact: Farha Bhoyroo, Communications Officer, bhoyroo@unhcr.org.