

## **Investigating the Reasons for Choosing Iran as an Immigration Destination for Afghans**

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Received: 06/02/2025

Accepted: 20/07/2025

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### **Abstract**

Today, migrations are classified into different categories in terms of type and nature. While Iran has been among the main regions receiving immigrants since the Aryans immigrated 4500 years ago, Afghanistan has been an epicenter of sending immigrants since the establishment of the Durrani dynasty. So, Iran has always been a main destination for Afghan immigrants. As the latest statistic shows about 4.5 million Afghan immigrants live in Iran. The question is which features of Iran, particularly in the age of the Islamic Republic, have made it the primary destination for Afghan immigrants? In response, some features can be addressed such as special geographical conditions, socio-cultural cognateness, economic situation, and the Islamic republic regime's immigration policies. Taking advantage of Ravenstein and Evert lee's "push and pull" theory as a theoretical framework, the paper conducts a descriptive-analytical narration built on an investigation of history and statistics. The data is collected in a library-based method.

**Keywords:** Afghan Immigrants, Iran, Immigration, Immigration Policies, Push and Pull.

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## **1. Introduction**

The issue of Afghan immigration and seeking asylum in Iran is not a new issue. Afghan migration can be considered a result of various insecurities of many dimensions. The lack of individual, economic, social, cultural, and scientific securities have always forced the people of Afghanistan to leave their homes and homelands to find security.

On August 15, 2021, the republican system fell as the Taliban took control of Kabul. It was predictable that with the establishment of the Islamic Emirate system in Afghanistan, similar to the previous period in which this system was dominating the country, a new wave of migration to other countries would occur. While this new wave of immigration had already begun a month or two before the Taliban's official takeover, this process suddenly intensified and accelerated after the fall of Kabul. Similar to the previous immigration waves of Afghans, Iran, as one of the most important neighbors of Afghanistan, received a large number of refugees in this new wave. According to Iranian officials, from the fall of Kabul in August 2021 to March of 2022, five thousand immigrants entered Iran every day (Tabnak News Agency, 2022).

While the internal events of Afghanistan are very influential in the occurrence and formation of migration waves in this country, the focus of this research is on the destination. Therefore, the question of this research is "What characteristics does Iran have that have resulted in this country hosting a significant population of Afghan immigrants during the last four decades?" In addition, the hypothesis of the research is that Iran has been an important and accessible destination for Afghan immigrants due to its special geographical conditions, common historical-cultural roots, more favorable economic situation, and the adoption of immigrant-friendly policies.

To explain this hypothesis, the present paper utilizes the theoretical framework of "Attraction and Repulsion", based on Ravenstein's ideas and the complementary thoughts of Everett S. Lee. The research will use causal mechanism method. In the organization of this study, we will first present the theoretical framework, followed by the research methodology. Then, in the findings section, while reviewing the history of Afghan migration to Iran, we will examine the factors that have influenced this migration, particularly during the Islamic Republic period.

## **2. Methodology**

From a methodological stand point, this research uses causal mechanism methodology. As stated by Little (1990), cause and effect linking mechanisms, while expressing limitations from the social and economic structures of people's decision making, also show their informed discretion. It seems that regarding immigrants, there are structural, value, and rational fields that have an effect on the process through which a destination is selected.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

### **3-1. The Theory of Attraction and Repulsion**

According to Everett S. Lee (1966), migration is defined as the permanent or semi-permanent relocation of individuals without restrictions on the distance traveled, and it can occur voluntarily or involuntarily, with no distinction between internal or external migration. If we refer to the United Nations definition of migration, it refers to people who have lived outside their country for more than one year. In this definition, border dwellers, refugees, tourists, merchants, students, and ordinary travelers are not considered migrants (Taheri Damneh & Kazemi, 2018:56).

One of the important theories in migration studies is the "Attraction and Repulsion Theory". This theory falls under the category of classical and micro theories. The Attraction and Repulsion Theory is considered the first migration theory, introduced by Ravenstein in 1885 in his paper "Laws of Migration" (Haji Hoseyni, 2006:35). In this paper, he outlined and explained a set of laws analyzing and examining the phenomenon of migration. The key laws are summarized as follows:

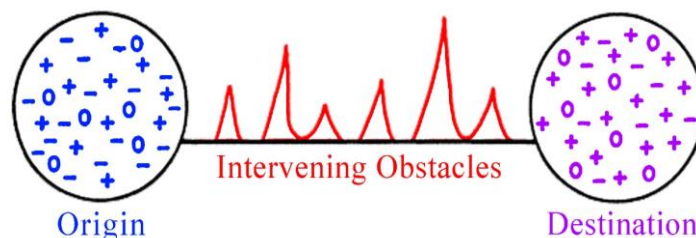
1. Migrants prefer closer destinations.
2. The flow of migration tends to center around commercial and industrial hubs.
3. Each primary migration flow generates a counter-flow.
4. In short distances, the number of female migrants exceeds that of males.
5. Migration increases with technological advancement.
6. Several factors contribute to migration, including poor social conditions and unjust laws. However, the key reason for migration is economic issues (Corbett, 2003:3).

After Ravenstein, Everett S. Lee became one of the most important scholars to expand on migration theory and complement Ravenstein's ideas.

According to Lee, the “personal factors”, “factors related to the source area”, “factors related to the destination area”, and “intervening obstacles” are the main elements influencing an individual’s decision to migrate (Lee, 1966:50). Additionally, Lee also discussed migration context, migration flow expansion, and characteristics of migrants (Haji Hoseyni,2006:39).

In the process of migration, both the source and destination regions contain a combination of positive and negative factors. Moreover, there are intervening obstacles that migrants face along the way. These positive and negative factors are essentially the attraction and repulsion factors. One of the key intervening obstacles is the distance. According to Lee, distance can be both physical and non-physical. Non-physical distance may refer to cultural-social differences. Furthermore, personal factors refer to the individual characteristics of a migrant affecting their decisions. These characteristics include gender, age, education level, family situation, etc. (Lee,1966:51).

Lee explains his theory by illustrating it through a diagram. In his view, both the origin and destination areas contain numerous factors that retain individuals or, in other words, attraction factors, and other factors that repel them. Attraction factors are marked with a + in the diagram, while repulsion factors are marked with a -. Besides, there are other factors marked with an O, indicating neutrality. It is clear that the combination of +, -, and O in both the origin and destination will differ for each migrant or potential migrant. For instance, an individual interested in education might find the poor quality of the educational system in the origin area to be a repelling factor. However, for someone uninterested in education, this would be a neutral factor. Therefore, personal characteristics play a significant role in migration.



**Fig (1): Destination, Origin and Intervening Factors in Migration**  
(Source: Lee,1966:50)

In general, it can be said that the Attraction and Repulsion Theory focuses on two key aspects of migration: “factors causing people to leave their place of residence” (repulsion) and “factors attracting them to the destination area” (attraction). Since this research is aimed at examining the reasons for choosing Iran as a destination by Afghan migrants, the Attraction and Repulsion Theory has been employed because it offers insights into the question of this study. Undoubtedly, to answer the research question, it is essential to explore the causes and factors that influence Afghan migrants’ decision to choose Iran as their destination. These factors can be analyzed in terms of the “origin”, “pathway”, and “destination”.

#### **4. The History of Afghan Migration to Iran**

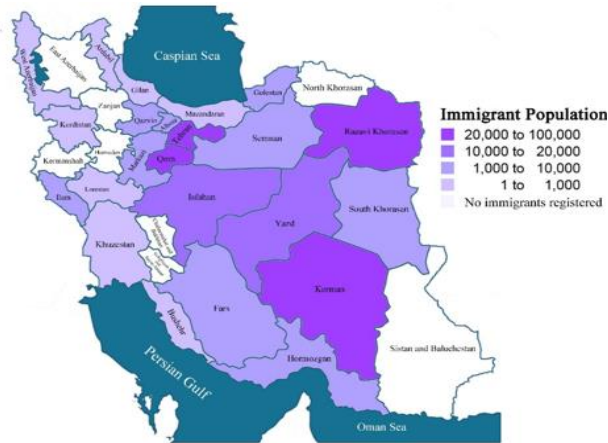
With the beginning of the reign of Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1748, Afghanistan underwent major changes, including new political demarcations and the weakening of local power on the borders. The discriminatory policies of the Pashtun-centric government, especially against the Hazaras, led to tensions from the outset, and led to about 5,000 Hazaras migrating to Torbat-e Jam and Bakhzar in 1850 (Adelkhah,2008:136). The reign of Abdul Rahman Khan was the climax of oppression. He attacked the Hazarajat by issuing jihad against the Shiites and accompanying the Ghuljais (Ewans,2002:170). These attacks, supported by the fatwa of Mullah Mohammad Kosj, led to mass killings and migration between 1891 and 1893, leading to 15,000 Hazaras migrating to Iran (Mohammadi,2021: 76). This trend continued until the 1970s.

With the death of Stalin in 1953, Afghanistan became the focus of Soviet expansionist policies (Ewans,2002:170). This process intensified with the Saur Revolution of 28 April 1978, which led to the overthrow of Davod Khan and the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Followed by a communist coup, the country entered a deep crisis. Internal disputes and popular uprisings paved the way for the Red Army’s invasion in October 1979 (Modrzejewska-Leśniewska,2020:14). During the nine-year war between the Mujahideen and the Soviet Union, a massive wave of emigration took place; by 1980, more than 2.5 million Afghans had sought refuge in Iran (Abbasi,2012:189; Adelkhah,2008:138). After the Soviet withdrawal, Najibullah’s government lasted until 1992, but insecurity continued, and by 1991 the number of Afghan refugees in Iran had surpassed 3.5 million (Adelkhah,2008:138). With the fall of Najibullah,

about 1.5 million Afghans returned (Mohammadi,2021:89), but with the rise of the Taliban and the capture of Kabul in 1996, hopes faded. The Taliban's Islamic Emirate, with its strict and violent policies, committed crimes such as the Mazar-i-Sharif massacre and the murder of Iranian diplomats (Brunner and Mihailov,2023:46-47).

The beginning of the Taliban regime was the next factor in the migration of Afghans for the first time in the last five decades. In May 2001, about nine months before the fall of the Taliban and the invasion of Afghanistan by the US and its allies, the census results of the Identification of Afghans Living in Iran project, jointly conducted by the Islamic Republic and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, showed that about 2.35 million Afghans had settled in Iran. That is, about another million migrants came to Iran during the five-year Taliban regime (Setareh,2019:118).

With the fall of the Islamic Emirate after the events of September 11, the Afghan regime was transformed into an Islamic Republic (Shafiee et al,2012:130). At this time, relative peace prevailed in most parts of Afghanistan, and economic prosperity flourished with the influx of international financial assistance (Shahbazbegian et al,2016:178). This relative stability and economic prosperity encouraged many refugees to voluntarily return to their homeland. In this regard, tripartite agreements were signed and implemented between Iran, Pakistan and UNHCR to facilitate and organize these returns (Mohammadi,2021:110). With the conclusion of these agreements, UNHCR significantly expanded its activities in Iran. According to UNHCR statistics, by 2012, approximately 824,100 Afghan refugees (Refworld, 13/9/2013) were receiving assistance and support from the organization in 23 provinces of Iran (Fig 2). This measure was part of international efforts to systematically manage the situation of refugees and their sustained return to Afghanistan.

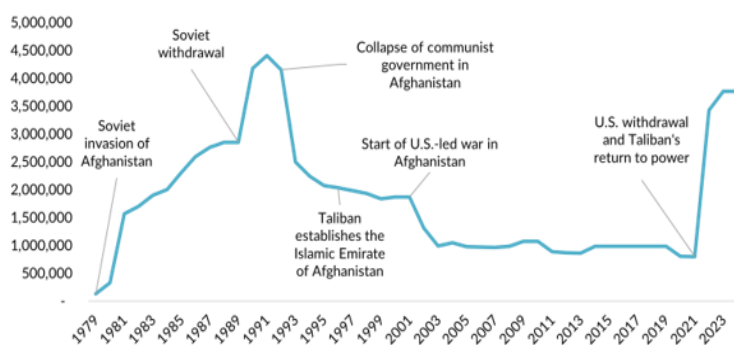


**Fig (2): Map Distribution of Afghan Immigrants in Iranian Provinces by 2012**  
 (Source: Operational Data Portal, 20/7/2020)

According to the 2016 census, the number of Afghan refugees in Iran was found to be 1,583,979, a decrease of nearly one million from 2001, and a sign of relative security and stability in Afghanistan during that period. But the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan failed to completely eliminate the Taliban; the group resumed its activities after the fall of the Islamic Emirate and gained power in many areas. Finally, following the Doha talks and military conflicts, the Taliban regained power in August 2021 and re-established the Islamic Emirate (Murtazashvili,2022:40). With the fall of the central government, a new wave of migration began. According to the International Organization for Migration, between April 2021 and March 2022, about 1.6 million Afghans entered Iran and 1.2 million left (IOM UN Migration,2022:2).

After the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, Iran faced a new wave of Afghan refugees and launched a census and six-month residence permit scheme for undocumented migrants in April 2022 (General Directorate of Foreign Citizens and Foreigners,2022). In 2025, the Iranian government adopted a new policy for managing Afghan refugees in order to regulate their situation and reduce the economic and social pressures caused by their presence, according to which only those with valid residence documents were allowed to stay in the country. According to statistics from the Ministry of the Interior, as of March 2025, there were about 6.1 million Afghans living in Iran, of whom 2,100,000 had legal documents, 2,000,000

had no documents, and another 2,000,000 were in a “semi-legal” status (holding temporary permits from the 2022 census). According to this policy, only the first group is allowed to stay, while the others must leave Iran by the end of summer, 2025 (IFP News,2/4/2025). With the implementation of this plan, more than one million immigrants will have left Iran by June 2025 (IRNA,7/6/2025).



**Fig (3): Number of Afghan Immigrants (Legal) in Iran from 1979 to 2023**

(Source: Migration Policy Institute, 7/1/2025)

## 5. Iran; the Chosen Land of Afghan Immigrants

The significant population of 4.5 million Afghans and their constant migration in the last four decades brings to mind the question that during the formation of the two countries, what factors have caused Afghans to choose Iran whenever they are in need to change their land and migrate. This article argues that geography, historical-cultural similarities, Iran's better economic conditions compared to Afghanistan, immigration policies towards Afghans, and the failure of the Islamic Republic's plans to return Afghan immigrants are the main factors that draw these immigrants to Iran.

### 5-1. Geography

From the point of view of the pull and push theory of Raunstein and Lee, besides the influencing factors in the countries of origin and destination, there are also other intervening factors that affect the amount of migration. One of these intervening factors is distance; the longer the distance and the more obstacles there are, the higher the financial cost and risk, resulting in a negative effect on the amount of migration (Lee,1966:56).

Afghanistan, with an area of more than 650,000 square kilometers, is located in South Asia (Nobahar & Kabiri Renani,2020:194). It shares its

eastern border with Iran. Iran is the western neighbor of Afghanistan, with a total of 913.6 km of common border between the two countries, of which 711.9 km and 201.6 km are land and water borders, respectively. This long border has been one of positive driving points in the decision of Afghans to immigrate to Iran. Although most of the regions of Afghanistan are mountainous, the border regions with Iran have low elevation and are flat, therefore, this path has long been preferred by the citizens of both countries. Many tribes lived in a nomadic way in Afghanistan, these tribes used to travel seasonally in the border areas of Iran and Afghanistan at a time when borders were not enforced as they are today. Also, the geographical location of Iran has long been a place of passage for Indian and Afghan pilgrimage caravans on their way to various shrines, such as Mecca and Imam Reza's shrine in Mashhad (Adelkhah,2008:142). This shows that the routes between Afghanistan and Iran were and are suitable for migrants.

With the sudden influx of Afghan immigrants after the Soviet attack on this country, suddenly the country and the border of Afghanistan became doubly important. In the beginning, Iran welcomed the arrival of these immigrants with humanitarian and Islamic motives, but the future effects of this great migration caused Iran to change its behavior towards the Afghan border. The contractionary policy that Iran has taken against the Afghan border includes the evacuation of border villages located five kilometers from the border, the construction of more checkpoints and watchtowers and strengthening their equipment, the construction of more border roads for controlling and patrolling, the creation of canals, banks, and barbed wire on a large scale, the increase of border patrol forces, the implementation of electronic border control plans, and the participation of border residents in maintaining the security of the region (Hafeznia,2004:76).

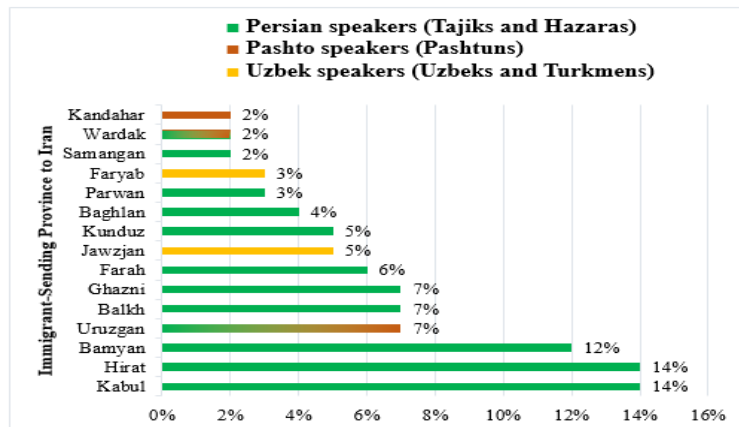
Due to the new importance of the Iran-Afghanistan border and implementing the mentioned plans, the boom in traffic that existed in the past from this border slowly disappeared. However, this issue has not made Afghan immigrants abandon Iran as a destination, rather, a new way has been created with the existence of criminal gangs and smuggling. This new way is from the Iran-Pakistan border. In the last one or two decades, the most important entry point for illegal immigrants from Afghanistan has been through the border of Pakistan to Iran.



**Fig (4): Map most Important Migration Routes of Afghans to Iran**  
(Source: Mohammadi et al,18/10/2021)

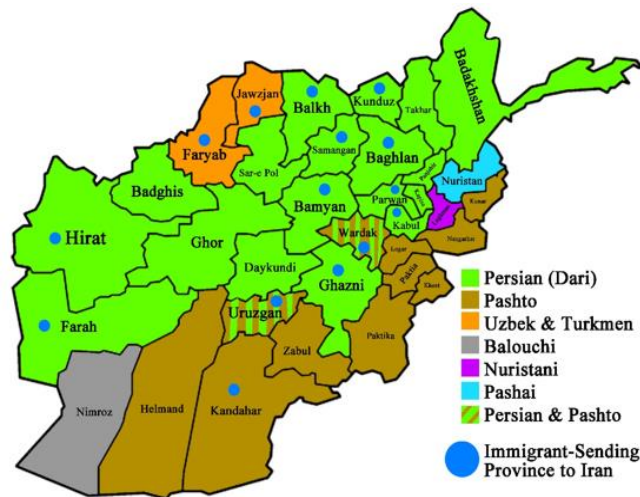
### 5-2. Historical-Cultural Roots

Lee mentions the issue of selective immigration in his article on immigration. According to him, migration is selective; people respond differently to the set of positive and negative factors in the origin and destination (Lee,1966:51). Although the migration flows of the last five decades of Afghanistan have occurred completely involuntarily and suddenly for Afghans, these immigrants have acted very cautiously in choosing their destination. In the history of Afghan migration, Iran and Pakistan have been the main destinations of immigrants, and these countries has attracted certain ethnic groups according to race and culture.



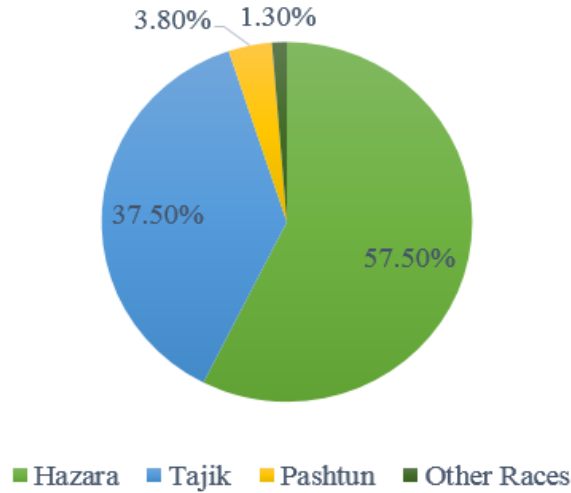
**Fig (5): Percentage of Afghan Immigrants in Iran based on Language and Ethnicity of their Provinces of Origin (by 2012)**

Iran and Afghanistan share common history until the reign of Ahmad Shah Abdali. This long-term coexistence left many commonalities for both lands, such as history, language, subcultures, customs, religion, etc. (Nobahar and Kabiri Renani,2020:194). In this regard, more than 50% of the Afghan people speak the Dari Persian language, illustrating the coexistence of the people of this region for thousands of years (Hamidi,2005:74). In the traditional schools of Afghanistan, Hafez and Saadi's poems are taught, and in Iran, there are many poems of Rumi are loved by many. In Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, we see the glorious history of the people of these countries without the borders of today. Persian literature and language is one of the most important links of solidarity between Afghanistan and Iran (Fani and Schwartz,2022:3).



**Fig (6): Map Linguistic and Cultural Distribution in Afghanistan and Geographical Locations of Provinces Sending Immigrants to Iran**

Currently, the percentages of ethnic diversity of Afghan immigrants in Iran is as follows: 57.5% Hazara, 37.5% Tajik, 3.8% Pashtun, and 1.3% other races (Hatami,2021:11). According to these percentages, the Hazara and Tajik peoples form a significant population of Afghan immigrants in Iran. The reason behind this can be sought in socio-cultural roots; the Hazara people are Persian-speaking and Shiite, and the Tajiks are Persian-speaking and Aryan. These two peoples share language, race, and religion with Iran.



**Fig (7): Amount and Percentage of Ethnicity of Afghan Immigrants in Iran after 2021**

(Source: Hatami,2021:11)

According to the above mentioned statistics, the Aryan race, Persian language, Islam religion, and especially the Shia sect are a set of socio-cultural factors in Iran which attract Afghans to this country as their destination for migration. Furthermore, similar factors have been manifested for the Pashtun people in Pakistan and have pushed these people to migrate more towards that country.

**5-3. Iran's better Economic Situation and ease of Finding an Occupation in Iran**

One of the main consequences of years of war and insecurity in Afghanistan is the chaotic economic situation, which has led to poverty. From a theoretical point of view, especially in the pull and push theory, economic factors are of great importance in sending and receiving immigrants (Alavi shushtari and Hafeznia,2020:31). Researchers have tested this theory and emphasized the importance of the economic conditions of the country of origin and the destination. According to this theory, migration from one region to another has a direct relationship with attractive opportunities such as employment, housing, development, economy, welfare, etc. (Haji Hosseini,2006:39).

In the 1960s, Iran saw political stability and economic and industrial growth, which were due to the increase in oil production and price. Also, the attention of foreign powers, especially America, to the geographical and

strategic position of Iran caused financial-military investment and the establishment of friendly relations between these two countries. The result of these events was the prosperity and development of Iran in various fields, including economic, social, educational, military, etc. (Ghaninejad,2019: 269-272). Very soon, these developments were noticed by the people of Afghanistan, resulting in the migration of Afghan laborers to the country. In 1977, about 400,000 Afghans were working in Iran, mostly in the construction sector (Karimi Moghari,2004:63). However, this period of migration of Afghans was mostly temporary and the migrants would go back and forth between Iran and their country of origin.

After the Islamic revolution and shortly after the start of the Iraq-imposed war on Iran, Iran's economic situation became unstable. Although the country did not have a good economic situation in this period, from 1979 to the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran opened its borders to immigrants due to political reasons and Ayatollah Khomeini's order to accept Afghan immigrants whose country was now invaded by the Soviet Union. With the end of the war, Iran was suffering from many economic problems. With the start of Hashemi Rafsanjani's administration, the main approaches of the government revolved around economic development policies which were based on privatization and increasing investment. Although these economic policies had high and low points, they ultimately helped in the relative reconstruction of Iran after the war. At this time, despite the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan and the disapproval of the Hashemi Rafsanjani administration regarding the presence of Afghans in Iran, most of these immigrants remained in Iran. During this period, due to the beginning of reconstruction and development policies, the labor market flourished, and the Afghans were an integral part of implementing such projects. This is why, despite the relative security experienced during the twenty-year republic period in Afghanistan, a significant return of Afghans was not observed, and the migrations to Iran continued. After these years, even though Iran has faced many economic problems due to global sanctions and the drop in oil prices, it has been and still is in a better situation than Afghanistan, which had a stagnant and international aid-reliant economy.

In the last few decades, Afghan immigrants who were driven from their homeland and have taken refuge in Iran have turned to various jobs and professions to make ends meet. Most of these jobs are non-specialized and

do not require much specialized knowledge. Also, most of these immigrants were forced to engage in difficult, low wage jobs as they lack the required expertise and literacy (Ahmadi Movahedi,2003:40). Based on the mentioned issues, along with those who are against the presence of Afghan immigrants, many supporters also defend their presence in Iran. Most of these supporters are business and industry owners because they consider Afghan workers to be a useful and economical force. This is because even though they are paid less than Iranian workers, they work more and harder, and employers are not obligated to insure them.

Until 1984, there were no restrictions on the employment of immigrants. This lack of supervision and restrictions on the employment of immigrants caused protests from Iranian workers. For this reason, the Ministry of the Interior approved the labor law for immigrants in thirteen job categories in the year 1984, and four more job categories were added to it two years later. These job categories included working in plaster kilns and lime kilns, small workshops and plastic smelters, animal husbandry and poultry farming, road and canal construction, tanneries, kitchen kilns, agriculture, construction, leather making, loading and unloading at ports, mosaic making, mines, unloading and loading in silos, glass making, block making, and stone cutting workshops. According to this law, Afghan immigrants were only allowed to work in these jobs (Nasr Esfahani,2021:107). By working in these difficult jobs, the share of Afghan workers in Iran's national income in 1993 was estimated at 4.4%. (Farhang,1996:48).

Therefore, as the industry and construction sector in Iran expanded greatly after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the attraction and permanent residency of Afghan immigrants grew. Statistics show that among the three occupational fields of industry and construction, agriculture, and services, Afghans are most present in the industry and construction sector. According to the statistics of the census of foreign nationals in 2001, the number of Afghan immigrants was estimated at around 2.3 million people. Among the working immigrants, 86% worked in the industry and construction sector, while 6% of Afghans worked in the agricultural sector, and 8% in the service sector (Isizadeh and Mehranfar,2011:169). Considering the employment laws of foreigners in Iran, as well as the lack of expertise and low literacy of most Afghan immigrants, working in industries, especially in the construction sector, was and is one of the main job options for these people.

During this period, unlike Iran, Pakistan was not dependent on Afghan migrant labor. Thus, after the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan and the decline of direct security threats, the Pakistani government's migration policy towards Afghan refugees, which was initially tolerant, gradually became more limiting. One of the turning points of this change was the publication of the Shigri Report in 1996 by Afzal Shigri, which introduced Afghan migrants as illegal immigrants. This report argued that with the end of the Soviet occupation and the return of relative stability to Afghanistan, the long-term presence of refugees was no longer justified (Mulk et al,2020:38). The report also pointed to the expanding geographical dispersion of refugees from camps to urban areas, their entry into the Pakistani labor market and economy, and negative security impacts such as increased access to light weapons. The gradual integration of some migrants into the labor market, along with allegations of their involvement in organized crime and the misuse of Pakistani passports for illegal activities in third-party countries, made Pakistan's social and political atmosphere more negative towards them. The Shagari report also pointed to the decline in international aid to refugees and emphasized that refugees who had left their place of residence for cities had violated the provisions of the trilateral agreement between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the UNHCR and that their asylum status should be reviewed (Anwar,2014:41-44). The report eventually became the official basis for the Pakistani government's immigration policy towards migrants and marked the beginning of their departure from Pakistan.

#### **5-4. Shiite Ideology of the Islamic Republic and Afghan Immigrants**

In his theory, Lee talks about the effect of distance on the migration process. In his opinion, apart from physical distance, socio-cultural distance is also important. Socio-cultural distance means the differences between the beliefs, religion, language, tendencies, etc. in the country of origin and the destination (Lee,1966:56). The smaller the socio-cultural distance between the two countries, the more willing are the immigrants to migrate. This also makes immigrants less inclined to return after migrating to their destination. Iran and Afghanistan have the closest socio-cultural distance with each other, and the Shiite ideology of the Islamic Republic adds to this cultural closeness. This ideology covers the entire Shiite world, especially since in the early years of the Islamic Republic and when the communists were present in Afghanistan, Iran adopted the policy of "neither east nor west,"

and while staying away from the capitalist system, it also viewed communism as a foreign ideology. Therefore, the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran have taken a protective view of Afghan immigrants (especially the Shiites of this country, who comprise the majority of Afghan immigrants in Iran). For example, in one of his speeches in 1985, Ayatollah Khomeini said:

"...the guests we have are Afghans, they are Muslims, or let's say they are Iraqis, or they have been taken away from their homes, their belongings have been taken, they were sent here. So what should be done with them? Shouldn't they be welcomed? We are Muslims, they are also Muslims..." (Khomeini,1985:174).

He also says:

"...displaced persons who are from war, and there are more than one million, two million of them, I do not know the exact number, they are also something that the government should take care of..." (Khomeini,1985: 171).

Therefore, since the communist revolution had occurred in Afghanistan before the Islamic revolution in Iran, this country paid special attention to the issue of Afghanistan according to its Islamic and revolutionary ideals. Because Afghanistan was considered as an Islamic country that has been invaded by infidels. Therefore, with the guidelines placed by Imam Khomeini in the face of the massive flood of Afghan immigrants at that time, the Iranian government followed a completely open-minded policy.

After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Khamenei continued his policy regarding Afghan immigrants. In one of his Friday prayer sermons in 2001, he said:

"...we do not interfere in the affairs of Afghanistan, but we support the Afghan people. In the past 20 years, the government and people of Iran have done everything they could, they have not forsaken the Muslim people of Afghanistan. It has been like this for the past 21-22 years. Afghans, whether the people of Afghanistan inside their country or those who were here, were supported by the Iranian government and people. We support the people of Afghanistan..." (Office for the Preservation and Publication of the Works of Ayatollah Khamenei,2001).

This policy resulted in the opening of the border to Afghan immigrants who share the same language and religion with Iranians. Also, one of the important consequences of this policy was the widespread settlement of

immigrants throughout Iran. Additionally, immigrants came to Iran in groups and families. Unlike Pakistan, which organizes its immigrants in border camps, Afghan immigrants live freely in different cities of Iran. However, this unsupervised settlement caused many problems for Iran down the line (Jauhiainen et al,2020:18).

The influence of the Shiite ideology on Iran's immigration policies is quite evident. The Fatemiyoun militia (a militia group composed mainly of Afghan Shiite fighters which was formed in 2014. This group is mainly composed of Afghan refugees and immigrants living in Iran, who are recruited and trained by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Fatemiyoun has participated in various battles and operations in Syria, especially against rebel groups and the Islamic State (ISIS)) is another important example in this regard. This group consisted of Afghan immigrants who voluntarily fought against the armed opposition of the Syrian government from the first days of the Syrian war in 2014. From that day onwards, the influence that the Fatemiyoun militia had on Iran's immigration policy is undeniable and completely evident. After the emergence of this group, the authorities of the Islamic Republic have paid more attention to Afghani immigrants in word and deed, and the Rouhani and Raisi administrations are more tolerant and incentive-oriented compared to the Hashemi and Khatami administrations. For example, in a meeting with Abdullah Abdullah on the sidelines of the 13th Islamic Cooperation Summit in Istanbul, Turkey in 2016, Hassan Rouhani said "This country is not planning to deport Afghan immigrants. Iran is trying to register illegal Afghan [Afghanistani] immigrants living in Iran" (Afghanistan Newspaper, 2016). This was the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran that its president spoke openly and directly about not deporting immigrants and instead organizing them. After Rouhani, Ebrahim Raisi has repeatedly mentioned the importance of the issue of Afghan immigrants in his speeches. One of the first reactions of Ebrahim Raisi in relation to Afghan immigrants was his speech in the administrative council of Yazd province, where he said "We must form an organization of immigrants, and in this organization we must deal with their social, cultural, economic, legal, personal status, marriage, and divorce issues. We need an active organization and mechanism that can follow all aspects of the problems of these loved ones" (Tasnim news agency,2021).

In contrast, Pakistan initially adopted a policy of empathy and hospitality in the early years of Afghan refugees entering the country, based on religious commonalities and linguistic and ethnic ties, especially with the Afghan Pashtuns. The ethnic commonality of the Pashtuns living on both sides of the Durand Border, as well as cultural and religious similarities, paved the way for the acceptance of millions of Afghan refugees in the 1980s and 1990s. However, with the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Pakistani government's approach changed. Pakistani policymakers, relying on reports such as the "Shagari Report" that identified refugees as illegal immigrants, gradually paved the way for their expulsion (Mulk et al, 2020:38-39). This change in approach stemmed from challenges such as the spread of weapons, crime, irregular presence in urban areas, and pressure on the country's economic resources. As a result, the Pakistani government, deviating from the principles of religious and ethnic integration, adopted a policy of restriction and expulsion of Afghan refugees as a national strategy (Zubair et al, 2019:32).

#### **5-5. Unconditional Education for Everyone**

Lee (1966) has especially pointed out the importance of education in migration in his theory. He believes that the unfavorable quality and educational laws of the country of origin can make people migrate for a better future and go to a country with a favorable educational system (Lee, 1966:51-52). Years of war and conflict have prevented the formation of a suitable educational system in Afghanistan. With the Taliban taking control of the country once again, modern education and female education, which are not accepted by them, were completely banned. This issue has caused the migration of Afghans to a place that can provide better a quality of education without such restrictions.

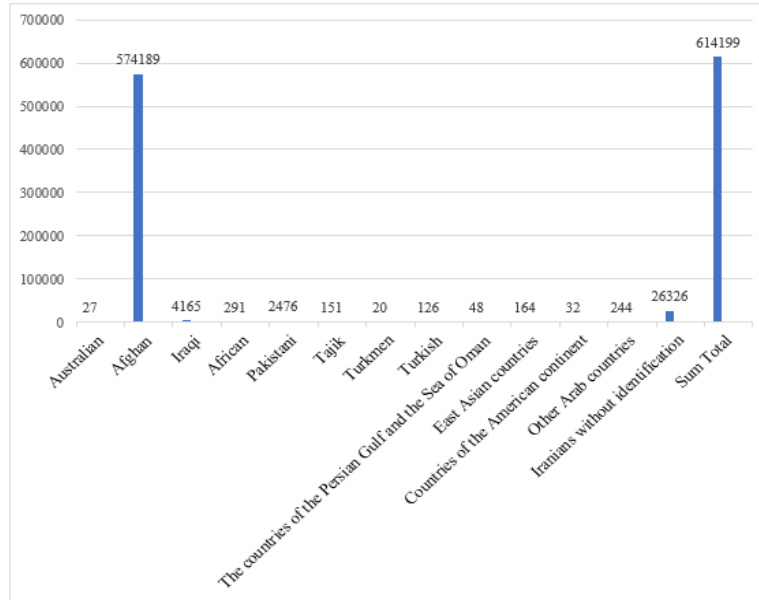
The first and second generations of Afghan immigrants in Iran faced a great challenge in education. Educational problems had led to the establishment of self-governing schools, which could not handle the large population of immigrant students. In addition, these schools were declared illegal and were facing legal problems. Even the authorized immigrant students had to pay tuition for their studies. Therefore, due to the lack of financial ability, many immigrants with degrees were not able to study. After the decree of Ayatollah Khamenei, the leader of the Islamic Republic in 2015, stating that "no Afghan children, even immigrants who are in Iran illegally and without documents, should be deprived of education and all of them should be

enrolled in Iranian schools", all Afghan immigrant children were allowed to study in Iran. Before this decree, only immigrants who had a legal residency certificate had the right to study (Christensen,2016:39-40).

Five years after this decree, the recruitment and education of Afghan students increased by 40% compared to before 2015. According to this decree, three important events happened in the field of immigrant education: free education for immigrant students in Iran's public schools, the possibility of studying for illegal immigrant children without documents, and determining the task of self-governing schools and authorizing the operation of some of these schools (Haghighattalab et al.,2022:10-11).

The result of adopting such a policy can be understood by examining the statistics of the literacy rate of immigrants. The level of literacy of the first generation of immigrants who entered Iran in the early 1970s was about 10 percent, while at the beginning of the 2010s, the literacy rate among immigrants was around 52%, and at the beginning of the 2020s, this rate reached 64%. In the academic year of 2004-2005, due to the bans imposed in order to force immigrants to leave the country, the number of immigrant students in Iranian schools was at its lowest level in the last 30 years, which was about 84 thousand students (ISNA News Agency,2022). In 2022, 180 thousand students without identity documents were allowed to study under completely equal conditions with Iranian students (Khabergazari Fars, 2022). In the academic year 2022-2023, the total number of foreign students was 614,199, out of which 574,189 were Afghan immigrants. In fact, 93% of foreign students in Iran are Afghans (Diaran,2023).

In addition to educational issues, the decree of the leader of the Islamic Republic caused new conditions to be created for immigrants, as the registration of students became a kind of residency certificate for their families. This decree caused a new wave of immigration to Iran with the aim of obtaining residence permits through student education. Therefore, this decree can be considered one of the most important and effective decrees in the field of immigration by the authorities of Iran.



**Fig (8): Number of Foreign Students in Iran during 2022-2023**  
(Source: Diaran,2023)

**5-6. Failure of Return Home Policies**

The first of the seven laws of immigration listed by Raunstein is that immigrants are more willing to choose a destination that is less far from their origin so that they can return more easily should they need to (Corbett, 2003:3). Also, according to Lee, positive and negative factors are not definite and permanent, and these factors can change over time. Therefore, it is possible for immigrants to engage in reverse migration as either the attraction factors of the destination (positive) or repulsion factors of the origin (negative) diminish (Lee,1966:56).

With the end of the Iran-Iraq imposed war and the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, the open attitude of the Iranian government slowly gave way to a new policy. After leaving behind the unrest at the beginning of the revolution and the imposed war, administrative system in Iran gradually became more organized and coherent, causing the issue of migration to be regarded more carefully and regularly.

Since the first wave of Afghan migration to Iran occurred due to the Soviet attack, after the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan and the ostensible disappearance of insecurity, the Iranian people and government believed the immigrants should return to their country of origin. Therefore,

to this end, policies were put in place, the first of which related to settling Afghan nationals from cities and villages in camps. This policy was presented in the Islamic Council of Iran in 1988, but it was not feasible due to the immigrants' large population, their location, the lack of infrastructure, and the government's inability to build suitable and sufficient camps.

In December of 1992, the government of Iran signed a three-year agreement with the Afghan government and the refugee commission to facilitate the return of refugees. This tripartite agreement was the official start of the return policy (Nasr Esfahani,2021:140). Not long after the beginning of the return plan based on the tripartite agreement, the Taliban announced its presence in Afghanistan and quickly occupied large areas. The start of the Taliban's rise to power was the beginning of the second large wave of Afghan immigration to Iran. Ismail Khan, the governor of Herat, had a good cooperation with the Iranian government during the implementation of the return policy since 1992. When the Taliban took Herat, this policy was put to a halt. In fact, at the beginning of the same year that Herat fell, Iran had announced that all Afghan immigrants should leave Iran by 1997. With the Taliban ruling the country and the immigrants not wanting to return and start new migrations, this plan was essentially abandoned and Iran was once again forced to open its borders to Afghan immigrants (Abbasi-Shavazi and Other,2005:17). Statistics show that with the implementation of the return policy from 1992 to 1995, about 1.3 million immigrants returned to their country (Nasr Esfahani,2021:184). But with the Taliban's control over Afghanistan, a huge group once again moved to Iran. In the meantime, the Mazar-e-Sharif incident on August 8, 1998 (on this day, the city of Mazar-e-Sharif was taken by the Taliban. The Taliban, along with the massacre of the people of the city, stormed the Iranian consulate building and killed the employees along with a reporter. However, until the 11 of September of that year, the Taliban refused to announce the death of these people and it was suspected that they were captured.) had an important impact on Iran's immigration policy in the Khatami administration. After this incident, Khatami's administration focused on re-implementing the return policy in any way possible. The Director General of Foreign Nationals was the first Iranian statesman to officially propose the expulsion of all Afghan migrants in November 1998, stating "All illegal nationals have only one month to leave the country." In 1999, Iran's government announced a deadline for illegal immigrants to leave. This order, which was the most drastic

deportation order that included all immigrants, both legal and illegal, involved the deporting of immigrants between April 8 and October 11, 2000. However, these deportation policies failed one after another due to the lack of infrastructure, the unwillingness of immigrants to return, the arrival of new immigrants, and the return of immigrants who had already returned to Afghanistan. In the end, these policies served to only threaten and intimidate immigrants. With the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the Iranian government saw no reason to accept new immigrants and allow those who were already in Iran to stay, therefore, the borders were immediately closed and the return policy was strictly implemented. In 2002, the procedure for the return of Afghan refugees was passed. Between May and September of that year, about 1.7 million immigrants returned to their country (Nasr Esfahani,2021:157-170). This amount of return of Afghan immigrants is one of the most unprecedented statistics of immigrants returning to their country. However, with the establishment of the Ahmadinejad administration, the implementation of the return policy subsided.

The coming into office of the Ahmadinejad administration was promising in terms of solving the problems of immigrants. According to the new administration, the return policy was not successful and Iran needed a new road map to deal with the issue of immigration. From that moment on, by accepting the "reality of permanence of immigrants" and "importance of their labor force," the plan to organize immigrants and optimize their labor was proposed and implemented. This change in procedure can be seen alongside the realistic view of the importance of the labor force of Afghan immigrants, which arose from the change in the political discourse of the system and the introduction of the doctrine of the Union of Persian-speaking countries by Ahmadinejad. Hence, the significant change in views of the Iranian government on immigrants, after years of strictness and policy implementation, occurred on January 17, 2008, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad ordered the temporary suspension of the implementation of the return policy after the request of the Afghan authorities (Islamic Republic News Agency,2008).

In the Rouhani and Raisi administrations, there was no news about the implementation of plans to return to the era of Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami. What can be witnessed in the Rouhani and especially the Raisi administrations, is the plan to organize the immigrants instead of the return policy. The implementation of the plan to identify and enumerate

unauthorized Afghan nationals in May, 2022 was one of the biggest plans for organizing foreign nationals in the country. In this plan, all undocumented immigrants were asked to register, by which they would benefit from temporary residence documents. According to Iranian authorities, about 2.3 million people registered in this plan (Salawati,2023: 55). Indeed, the failure of return policies and the Iranian administration's attitude change toward immigrants have been some of the important reasons for the desire of Afghan immigrants to choose Iran as their destination in recent years.

## **6. Conclusion**

A wide variety of factors have affected the migration of Afghans during the 45-year lifespan of the Islamic Republic. Economic, political, cultural, social, etc. factors have been equally influential and have merged together in such a way that they cannot be clearly and decisively ordered in terms of impact. These factors have made Iran a favored destination for Afghan immigrants. Iran's closeness in terms of culture and roots with Afghanistan have made immigrants consider this country as the first choice when choosing their destination. Also, the relative political and economic stability of Iran in the last thirty years compared to the chaotic situation in Afghanistan has been an important incentive for immigrants to choose this country as their destination. The better economic condition of Iran has been an important factor for choosing Iran as an immigration destination, especially as Iran is showing favor to the non-specialist Afghan labor force as time goes on. Also, Iran's lack of strictness compared to the norm in other countries in regard to dealing with immigrants, especially in the first two decades after the Islamic Revolution, has made Iran the ideal country for Afghan immigrants. This is also because Iran's strict measures for the return of immigrants have always been abandoned in less than a year. Therefore, it can be claimed that the political and economic characteristics of the Islamic Republic have made it a country that accepts immigrants, even if the government does not approve of it.

However, it seems that Iran's approach in the first two decades of the Islamic Revolution was not planned and controlling. Unrestricted acceptance and unsupervised settlement are the cornerstones of many of today's immigration problems in Iran. However, on the threshold of the fifth decade of hosting Afghan immigrants, it is clear that Iran has finally reached

a definite stance and is planning and implementing important large scale policies in this regard.

In this regard, it seems that the Islamic Republic should make some changes in its immigration policies:

1. Deal more decisively with illegal immigrants: It is necessary to strengthen the government's control policies regarding the illegal residence of Afghan immigrants. The presence of permit-less immigrants puts increasing pressure on the country's social and economic infrastructure and creates the basis for abuse by human trafficking groups and illegitimate employers. Therefore, it is necessary to intensify border surveillance, organize residency, and update databases on foreign nationals in this regard.

2. Make use of immigrant workers' employment potential: Considering the challenge of labor shortage (especially in jobs that do not require specialized skills), the potential of immigrants can be used. This is especially true for provinces that have high industrial, manufacturing, and construction needs, but the local labor force is lacking and there is a need for immigrant labor.

3. Devise a large-scale and long-term plan for immigrants and immigration: As mentioned, the sinusoidal and oscillating outlook toward immigrants over the past few decades puts immigrants in a fluctuating state of fear and hope. On the one hand, illegal immigrants know that the government's strictness will eventually pass should they show some tolerance. On the other hand, immigrants who have legal residence permits cannot count on policies made even by a single cabinet. This challenge necessitates the need to devise a long-term plan in this regard, especially since employers and institutions related to Afghans must also be able to adopt a long-term plan.

4. Potential interaction with the Taliban government through immigrant forces: The presence of millions of immigrants in Iran provides a good opportunity for constructive interaction with the Taliban. In particular, regarding issues that could be points of contention between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban, immigrants can be seen as suitable for consultation purposes.

5. Educated immigrants as cultural agents of Iran: Given that Afghan immigration is not limited to Iran and many of them continue to move from Iran to neighboring countries or the West, they can also play the role of cultural agents of Iran. Therefore, stability and dignified treatment of them can present a positive image of Iranian culture and society. This is especially true for immigrants who have graduated from Iran and travel to

the West to continue their education and life. Furthermore, experience has shown that Afghan students have had greater communication skills and academic success in comparison to students from other countries who come to Iran.

### **7. Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments that contributed to improving the quality of the present paper. We also appreciate the editorial team of the *Geopolitics Quarterly* for their valuable feedback and professional guidance.

### **8. Conflict of Interest**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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