Deadly crossings at the Afghanistan–Iran border

Neela Hassan

The disturbing number of deaths and disappearances at the Afghanistan-Iran border could be reduced through better international responsibility-sharing, holding Iran accountable for its immigration policies, and enhancing humanitarian services at the border.

Iran is one of the primary destinations for Afghans fleeing war and poverty, largely due to its land borders with western Afghanistan. As reported by UNHCR,[1] Iran currently hosts approximately 3.7 million Afghans, of which 761,000 are registered refugees and the remainder asylum seekers and undocumented Afghans living in a 'refugee-like' situation.[2] The Afghanistan-Iran border is fairly porous, with many Afghans crossing informal borders due to difficulties in obtaining passports and visas, often paying smugglers or relying on information from those who have already made the journey. For the majority of Afghans, crossing the border into Iran represents an opportunity to escape the Taliban regime and seek better economic opportunities. However, for some, this initial crossing is merely the beginning of a much longer journey, as they seek to reach Turkey and eventually European countries. After the Taliban's return to power in 2021, there was a significant influx of approximately 1 million Afghans crossing unofficial land borders into Iran.[3]

Crossing the Afghanistan–Iran border, Afghan migrants face a number of risks and challenging conditions, including violence and torture by smugglers and Iranian border police, harsh weather conditions, dangerous transportation and lack of food and potable water. As someone born and raised in Afghanistan, I grew up hearing stories of young Afghans who disappeared after migrating to Iran or who returned with chilling accounts of being abandoned by smugglers or tortured by Iranian border police. Reports by international organisations detail death, harassment, shooting and beatings by Iranian authorities at the border.[4] There have also been reports of torture, sexual harassment and theft by smugglers. The smuggling networks navigate routes through treacherous mountains and rugged terrain, heightening the risk of casualties from both road accidents and violence inflicted by smugglers.

While the exact number of migrants who go missing or lose their lives at the Afghanistan–Iran border remains unclear, reports from media highlight the escalating violence and abuse Afghan migrants endure there.[5] This escalation has been particularly pronounced since the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan in 2021, which led to a dramatic increase in the number of Afghans trying to enter Iran irregularly. A report from Amnesty International reveals that, between August and December 2021 alone, during the early months of the Taliban's takeover, humanitarian workers and Afghan doctors documented 59 deaths and 31 injuries among Afghan migrants attempting to cross into Iran.[6] In 2020, Iranian lawmakers proposed new legislation to impose severe prison terms on undocumented migrants

and authorise security officers to shoot at vehicles suspected of carrying them.[7] Although the legislation was not enacted, numerous reports have documented instances of Iranian police opening fire on Afghan migrants at the border. The death of over 250 migrants in a mass shooting by Iranian border police in October 2024 – reported by Haalvsh, an Iranian human rights organisation – is one recent instance of border violence perpetrated by official authorities.[8]

To shed light on the experiences of Afghan migrants crossing the border into Iran, I examined testimonies and stories shared by migrants on five well-known Afghan YouTube channels between September 2021 and December 2024.[9] These channels regularly broadcast reports on the challenges and realities faced by Afghans, covering a wide range of social, political and economic issues. My objective was to analyse how these migrants perceive their journey crossing the border, the dangers and risks they encounter and the types of support and services they require along the way.

Experiences at the border

Given the repressive Taliban regime and deteriorating humanitarian conditions, many Afghans lack the economic means or the time to obtain valid travel documents to migrate to Iran. Additionally, Iran's embassy in Afghanistan issues single-entry visas valid for three months from the date of issue. Travelers may extend their stay within Iran for an additional 90 days, meaning the total stay, including visa extensions, can be up to 180 days. Given the financial requirements for travel documents and the short duration of the visa, the majority of migrants attempt to cross the border without valid travel documents and often with the assistance of smugglers. This does not guarantee success, as migrants can be turned away at the border or deported shortly after crossing.

One Afghan migrant who was deported from Iran only a month after crossing the border describes his harrowing story of entering Iran through smuggling routes:

"They [smugglers] tell you that you will cross the border with 100% confidence. But once you get to the border, you see that the road conditions are so bad and there are police checks every 1,000 metres. Even a fly can't cross that border, let alone humans."

Another Afghan migrant described his encounters with smugglers and Iranian border police as the most heartbreaking experience of his life:

"You wish that the earth would open and swallow you alive when you see the treatment by Iran's police at the border. They [smugglers] made us go through rivers and deserts, which I wouldn't cross even if I were paid, but I didn't have a choice. We were a group of 30. The border police started firing at us. I was injured on my head. A friend of mine suffered broken ribs."

An Afghan deportee, sharing his experiences of arrest and detention by the Iranian border police, stated:

"Afghans don't have anyone to defend them. You can have a valid passport and visa, and they will still arrest you and deport you. The reason is that we don't have a government; we don't have anyone to support us. They beat you and curse you. Afghan refugees are treated like a piece of hay in Iran."

Preventing deaths and disappearances

Amid a prolonged economic crisis and ongoing sanctions, the Iranian regime's frustration has increasingly been directed at Afghan migrants in recent years. According to a report by the Norwegian Refugee Council, Iran's economic challenges

have worsened since the re-imposition of US sanctions in 2018 and the COVID-19 pandemic, hindering its ability to adequately support and accommodate Afghan migrants.[10] Additionally, both the Iranian government and the Taliban show a blatant disregard for their international human rights obligations which has been widely condemned. Preventing disappearances and fatalities at the border requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that not only responds to the immediate needs of migrants at border crossings but also considers fundamental solutions at local, regional and international levels. Currently, no official body tracks the deaths or disappearances of Afghan migrants at the Afghanistan–Iran border, neither the Taliban regime, the Iranian government, nor any international organisation.

1. Accountability and immigration reform in Iran

The arbitrary nature of Iran's immigration policies concerning Afghan migrants is illustrated by their frequent arrests, treatment in detention centres and the power exercised by the Iranian border police to prevent undocumented migrants from entering the country. The Government of Iran, as a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, is obligated to ensure that its detention and deportation policies align with the principles outlined in the Convention. UNHCR should urge the Iranian government to legislate clear policies regarding Afghan migrants' detention and deportation in Iran. The instances of killings and torture of Afghan migrants at the border require a comprehensive investigation, and it is imperative that the individuals and entities involved are held accountable for their actions. In the past, the UN and other international organisations have condemned the mass shootings of Afghan nationals by the Iranian border police but no substantive investigations have been conducted.

2. Responsibility-sharing and coordination

It is evident that, given Iran's diplomatic relationships with the West, there is diminished interest from governments worldwide in providing direct support to the Iranian government for hosting Afghan migrants. However, more effective use of existing legal and international frameworks could not only lift some of the burden currently placed on Iran but also save lives at the border. One way to do so is to involve and support other countries in the region to offer regular immigration pathways for Afghan migrants. The global community previously established a Comprehensive Plan of Action to address the Syrian refugee crisis. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey estblished temporary protection programmes, offering Syrian refugees the right to work, adequate shelter and housing and legal status. Similarly, the Temporary Protection Directive gave Ukrainian citizens expedited stay, residence and work status in many EU States.[11] Despite the fact that by their nature such programmes do not offer permanent solutions, a similar scheme might provide regular and alternative immigration pathways for Afghan migrants.

3. Saving lives through humanitarian aid

Although there are hundreds of daily crossings on both sides of the border, there are currently only two reception centres, operated by the International Organization for Migration, which provide immediate humanitarian post-arrival services at the border. These services include temporary accommodation, hot meals, onward transportation and medical care. Additional services such as mental health support and mine risk education are also offered. These centres are located at the main entry points along the border in Afghanistan's Herat and Nimroz provinces. While most Afghan

migrants use established routes to cross into Iran, the heavy security at key border crossings forces many undocumented migrants to risk their safety by opting for less monitored and more dangerous remote routes. For example, in recent years, an increasing number of Afghan migrants have entered Iran through Pakistan. They use smuggling routes in Nimroz province to cross into Pakistan, after which they typically undertake a three-day journey – two of those days on foot – to enter Iran via the Kalagan Valley in Saravan, a city located in the province of Sistan and Balochistan in the south-east of Iran. By using such remote and unmonitored routes, migrants encounter not only the threat of violence and exploitation from smugglers and armed groups but also harsh environmental conditions and restricted access to essential resources.

As a result of these more dangerous routes being used more frequently, there is a critical need for programmes that offer essential services such as medical treatment, water, food and temporary shelter for migrants. In this context, the presence of NGOs is crucial, as they can not only provide practical support to migrants but also help to identify the factors that jeopardise their lives and offer insights into the number of deaths and disappearances at the border. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the international community has faced significant challenges in formulating an effective response to the situation in Afghanistan. A primary concern has been how to provide meaningful support to vulnerable Afghans while simultaneously holding the Taliban accountable for their actions and policies that violate human rights. This challenge could be mitigated by supporting local communities and impartial non-profit organisations to lead life-saving efforts at the border. Local actors have strong ties to their communities, which enables them to navigate the social, cultural and logistical complexities of the region effectively. As reflected in many ongoing humanitarian programmes in Afghanistan, local actors can coordinate with Taliban authorities to facilitate the implementation of their initiatives without directly funding or supporting the Taliban or their institutions.[12]

Neela Hassan
PhD Candidate
University of Waterloo Canada
neela.hassan@uwaterloo.ca

1. *bit.ly/afghanistan-situations*
2. *In this article, the term 'migrant' is used as a broad category that encompasses all forms of cross-border movement, including asylum seekers, refugees and individuals migrating for economic reasons.*
3. *'One of the World's Largest Refugee Populations, Afghans Have Faced Increasing Restrictions in Iran', Migration Policy Institute, 7th January 2025 bit.ly/mpi-afghans-restrictions-iran*
4. *Including European Union Agency for Asylum (2022) Iran – Situation of Afghan Refugees bit.ly/iran-afghans-refugees*
5. *For example, 'Afghan migrants continue to face abuse from Iranian border guards, traffickers', Arab News, 13th August 2022 bit.ly/afghan-abuse-iranian-guards*
6. *bit.ly/afghans-unlawful-returns*
7. *bit.ly/iran-new-refugee-bill*
8. *bit.ly/afghans-killed-report*
9. *YouTube channels have increasingly become important and reliable sources of news, information and entertainment for Afghans, especially as mainstream media faces significant restrictions and bans under the Taliban regime. The main channels from which I sourced the first-hand accounts are: Watan Man, Kabul Fans Media, Afghan Daily and Negin Afghanistan.*
10. *bit.ly/nrc-iran-2024*
11. *bit.ly/temporary-protection-directive*
12. *For details of how some organisations are navigating this issue, see United Kingdom Humanitarian Innovation Hub (2023) Navigating Ethical Dilemmas for Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan*