

To Live on the Margins: A Closer Look at the Social and Economic Situation of Illegal Afghan Migrants in Iran

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Abstract : Years of prolong war in Afghanistan has led to one of the largest refugee and migrant populations in the contemporary world. During this continuous unrest which began in 1970s (by military coup, Marxist revolution and the subsequent invasion of USSR), over one-third of the population migrated to neighboring countries, especially Pakistan and Iran. After the Soviet Army withdrawal in 1989, a new wave of conflicts emerged between rival Afghan groups and this led to new refugees. Taliban period, also, created its own refugees. During all these years, I.R. of Iran has been one of the main destinations of Afghan refugees and migrants. At first, due to the political situation after Islamic Revolution, Iran government didn't restrict the entry of Afghan refugees. Those who came first in Iran received ID cards and had access to education and healthcare services. But in 1990s, due to economic and social concerns, Iran's policy towards Afghan refugees and migrants changed. The government has tried to identify and register Afghans in Iran and limit their access to some services and jobs. Unfortunately, there are few studies on Afghan refugees and migrants' situation in Iran and we have a dim and vague picture of them. Of the few studies done on this group, none of them focus on the illegal Afghan migrants' situation in Iran. Here, we tried to study the social and economic aspects of illegal Afghan migrants' living in Iran. In doing so, we interviewed 24 illegal Afghan migrants in Iran. The method applied for analyzing the data is thematic analysis. For the interviews, we chose family heads (17 men and 7 women). According to the findings, illegal Afghan migrants' socio-economic situation in Iran is very undesirable. Its main cause is the marginalization of this group which is resulted from government policies towards Afghan migrants. Most of the illegal Afghan migrants work in unskilled and inferior jobs and live in rent houses on the margins of cities and villages. None of them could buy a house or vehicle due to law. Based on their income, they form one of the lowest, unprivileged groups in the society. Socially, they face many problems in their everyday life: social insecurity, harassment and violence, misuse of their situation by police and people, lack of education opportunity, etc. In general, we may conclude that illegal Afghan migrant have little adaptation with Iran's society. They face severe limitations compared to legal migrants and refugees and have no opportunity for upward social mobility. However, they have managed some strategies to face these difficulties including: seeking financial and emotional helps from family and friendship networks, sending one of the family members to third country (mostly to European countries), establishing self-administered schools for children (schools which are illegal and run by Afghan educated youth).

Keywords : illegal Afghan migrants, marginalization, social insecurity, upward social mobility

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