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# Expansion of the Presence of Afghan Nationals and the Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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## ABSTRACT

The expansion of the presence of Afghan nationals in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly following the rise of the Taliban to power in 2021, has had extensive implications for the country's national security. This study was conducted with the aim of examining the effects of this presence on Iran's political, economic, cultural, and social security. The main research question is how the increasing number of Afghan migrants may affect the country's security. The subsidiary questions address specific threats in the political and economic spheres, as well as cultural and social challenges. The principal hypothesis posits that the widespread presence of Afghan nationals, accompanied by the rise of extremism and terrorist threats, may lead to security-related problems in Iran. In this article, existing data have been analyzed using theoretical frameworks related to national security and migration. The findings indicate that the growth of the Afghan migrant population in Iran may generate multiple challenges, including pressure on economic resources, increased social tensions, and cultural threats. Furthermore, political threats arising from the potential infiltration of extremist and terrorist groups have been examined as a significant factor. Finally, solutions are proposed for better management of the situation and for reducing security threats. The expansion of the presence of Afghan foreign nationals in the Islamic Republic of Iran following the Taliban's assumption of power in 2021 suggests that this presence may significantly affect political, economic, social, and cultural security, and—alongside the intensification of extremism, the spread of radical tendencies, the strengthening of extremist movements, and terrorist threats—may lead to security challenges in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The increase in the Afghan migrant population in Iran may result in numerous challenges, including pressure on economic resources, heightened social tensions, and cultural threats. The four drivers—political, economic, cultural, and social—play the most significant role in shaping the political-security diplomacy between the two countries.

**Keywords:** *Afghan nationals, national security, Iran, migration, political security, economic security.*

## Introduction

The presence of Afghan nationals in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly in recent years and especially following the rise of the Taliban to power in 2021, has become one of the most significant and controversial issues in the country's domestic politics and national security discourse. This issue is important for several reasons: on the one hand, Iran is a neighboring country with Afghanistan and shares deep historical, cultural, and social ties with it;



on the other hand, political and security developments in Afghanistan have direct and indirect consequences for Iran's internal stability and security (1, 2). For example, the escalation of insecurity and instability in Afghanistan has triggered new waves of migration toward Iran, generating challenges in the security, political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. Given the complex security environment of the region and the intensification of extremist tendencies, as well as the strengthening of radical movements, it is essential to examine carefully how the extensive presence of Afghan nationals may affect the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran (3, 4). The primary objective of this article is to analyze the impacts of the large-scale presence of Afghan nationals on the security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The study seeks to examine various dimensions of these impacts, including political, economic, social, and cultural security. Accordingly, the article addresses the following questions: How can the expansion of the presence of Afghan nationals affect national security? What political and economic threats arise from this situation for Iran's national security? And how might the presence of Afghan nationals influence Iran's social and cultural security?

The main research question aims to identify the effects of the expansion of Afghan nationals' presence on Iran's national security. More specifically, the subsidiary questions are as follows: How does the expansion of Afghan nationals' presence in the Islamic Republic of Iran affect the country's security? In what ways does the expansion of Afghan nationals' presence threaten the political and economic security of the Islamic Republic of Iran? And how does it endanger the social and cultural security of the Islamic Republic of Iran? These questions clearly reflect the multidimensional nature of the issue and facilitate a deeper understanding of the existing challenges and threats.

The principal hypothesis of this research is that the expansion of Afghan nationals' presence in the Islamic Republic of Iran following the Taliban's return to power in 2021—accompanied by the rise of extremism and terrorism—poses a threat to Iran's national security. This hypothesis is of particular significance because it may assist decision-makers in adopting appropriate policies to manage Afghan migration and reduce security threats. Moreover, analyzing this hypothesis may contribute to the expansion of scientific knowledge and provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and potential solutions in this field.

Considering the current circumstances and the extensive impacts that the presence of Afghan nationals has on various social and security aspects of Iranian society, this study may serve as a valuable resource for policymakers and researchers in the fields of national security and migration management. Through a careful examination of this issue, it is hoped that effective strategies can be proposed to mitigate threats while also benefiting from potential opportunities (5, 6).

## **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in theories related to national security and migration. National security, as a complex and multidimensional concept, encompasses political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions (7, 8). Various theoretical perspectives address the impact of migration on these dimensions. One important approach is the theory concerning the "role of migrants in national security," which argues that an increase in the number of migrants may generate political and social security threats for the host country, including increased crime rates, social tensions, and public dissatisfaction (3, 9).

From an economic perspective, theories suggest that migration can exert pressure on the host country's economic resources and labor market (10, 11). These approaches examine how migration influences economic growth, employment opportunities, and labor market dynamics. Migrants often enter the host country's labor market

due to economic necessity and may compete with domestic labor forces, potentially increasing economic pressures and reducing employment opportunities for the host population (12, 13).

With regard to social and cultural impacts, the “cultural identity” theory posits that the entry of migrants into a society may alter that society’s cultural identity (14, 15). Cultural differences between migrants and the host society may lead to social tensions and dissatisfaction, particularly when the migrants’ culture significantly diverges from the values, norms, and lifestyle of the host community (16, 17). Under such conditions, the host society may perceive its cultural identity as being under threat, thereby intensifying social tensions (18, 19).

Culture is one of the most complex phenomena of the contemporary world and plays crucial functions in every society. Despite the multiplicity of definitions of culture, several core dimensions can be identified: culture serves as a unifying factor for social values and provides coherence among them; it differentiates societies from one another; it shapes and regulates individual behavior; it strengthens cooperation and interpersonal relations; and it is inherently dynamic and subject to change (20, 21).

In the economic dimension, migration theories argue that large-scale migration may increase demand for public services such as healthcare, education, and housing, thereby placing additional pressure on financial and economic resources, especially when public service systems are not adequately prepared to accommodate a growing migrant population (10, 11).

Regarding the presence of Afghan migrants in Iran and its consequences for the host society, numerous studies have examined the phenomenon from cultural, social, economic, and security perspectives. In the cultural and social domain, research has identified challenges arising from cultural and identity differences between Afghan migrants and Iranian society, particularly in regions with high migrant density (17, 22). These studies emphasize the need for comprehensive cultural and social programs to prevent misunderstandings and social tensions.

In the security dimension, several studies have examined potential threats associated with Afghan migration, particularly in light of recent political developments in Afghanistan. These analyses suggest that the return of the Taliban to power in 2021 has heightened concerns regarding extremism and terrorist threats along Iran’s borders (2, 23). Research also indicates that significant migrant presence may impose additional pressure on security institutions and border management systems, affecting both border and internal security (4, 9).

Economic studies further demonstrate that the extensive presence of Afghan migrants has imposed additional economic pressures on host communities, including increased public expenditure and strain on infrastructure and social services (10, 12).

A review of previous research indicates that the issue of Afghan migrants’ presence in Iran is not merely a cultural, economic, or security challenge, but rather a multidimensional phenomenon requiring comprehensive policy responses across cultural, social, political, and security domains (6, 24). As Iran is recognized as one of the largest host countries for Afghan nationals, analyzing these studies can contribute to a better understanding of existing challenges and assist policymakers in developing effective strategies for managing this situation (1, 5).

## Research Method

The research method in this study is grounded in fundamental concepts of national, political, economic, social, and cultural security in relation to migration, and it seeks to examine the impacts of large-scale migrant presence on various security dimensions in the host country. National security, as a multidimensional and complex concept, encompasses political, economic, social, and cultural domains, each of which may be directly or indirectly affected

by migration (7, 8). The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, relying on library research and the systematic analysis of theoretical and empirical findings in order to evaluate the effects of Afghan migration on Iran's national security. This multidimensional analytical framework enables a comprehensive assessment of the challenges and threats associated with the expanded presence of Afghan nationals in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### **Analysis of the Status of Afghan Nationals' Presence in Iran**

An analysis of the presence of Afghan nationals in Iran requires a comprehensive examination of its historical background, relevant statistics and data, and the factors influencing the increase in migration following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Such an analysis contributes to a clearer understanding of the existing challenges and opportunities in this domain (1, 2).

The presence of Afghan nationals in Iran dates back several decades and has been shaped by multiple factors. Initially, Afghan migration to Iran began during the 1980s as a consequence of internal conflicts and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. During that period, many Afghans sought refuge in Iran to escape war and insecurity, resulting in the formation of Afghan communities, particularly in Iran's border regions (25, 26).

Over time, economic factors also emerged as significant drivers of continued Afghan migration to Iran. Many Afghan nationals migrated in search of employment opportunities and improved living conditions, becoming active in various sectors of the Iranian economy (10, 11). Following the collapse of the Taliban government in 2001 and the establishment of a new administration, some Afghans returned to their homeland; however, with the resurgence of political and security crises in Afghanistan, migration toward Iran once again intensified (1).

Statistical data indicate that the presence of Afghan nationals in Iran has significantly increased in recent years. Reports suggest that approximately three to four million Afghans reside in Iran, some with legal status and others without official documentation (6, 27). This population is primarily concentrated in border provinces and major urban centers such as Tehran, Mashhad, and Isfahan. The economic and social conditions of this population—including high unemployment rates, social and cultural inequalities, and economic pressures—have generated serious challenges for the host society (12, 17). The Taliban's return to power in 2021 once again triggered a wave of migration toward Iran and other countries due to insecurity and instability in Afghanistan, particularly in political, social, and economic domains (2, 23).

Insecurity and violence intensified following the Taliban's takeover, accompanied by increased human rights violations. Many individuals—especially minorities, women, and youth seeking better living and educational opportunities—fled the country (3, 28).

The economic crisis in Afghanistan, exacerbated by sanctions and limited access to financial resources, resulted in heightened unemployment and poverty, prompting many Afghans to seek economic opportunities in Iran (10, 11).

Social and cultural transformations in Afghanistan, along with the aspirations of younger generations for improved educational and social conditions, also contributed to migration tendencies (14, 15).

Furthermore, international support provided by foreign governments and international organizations in response to humanitarian and human rights concerns in Afghanistan has facilitated migration and asylum processes for Afghan nationals in host countries, including Iran (2, 28).

Collectively, these factors have led to a significant increase in the number of Afghan migrants entering Iran, thereby generating new security, economic, and social challenges for the Islamic Republic of Iran. A more detailed

examination of this situation can assist policymakers in formulating strategies to manage this crisis effectively (24, 29).

### **Impacts of Afghan Nationals' Presence on Political and Economic Security**

The presence of Afghan nationals in Iran has had notable implications for the country's political and economic security, particularly in light of Afghanistan's ongoing political and social crises (4, 6).

In the sphere of political security, the increase in Afghan migrants may generate serious threats. One of the principal concerns is the potential infiltration of extremist ideologies and terrorism. Given the historical background of the Taliban and other radical groups in Afghanistan, there exists a possibility that some migrants may become influenced by extremist ideologies, potentially leading to the formation of radical networks and heightened terrorist threats within Iran (3, 23).

Moreover, the presence of Afghan nationals may give rise to social and cultural tensions, which in turn could escalate public and political dissatisfaction, thereby jeopardizing political stability (17, 22). Issues related to espionage and political infiltration are also raised in security analyses, as foreign actors might exploit migrant communities as instruments of influence within Iran's domestic affairs (2). The increase in migrant flows also poses challenges to border control and border security, potentially facilitating infiltration by terrorist networks and smuggling groups (9, 23).

In terms of economic security, the presence of Afghan nationals has significant effects on the labor market and unemployment levels. Employment competition constitutes one of the principal challenges, particularly in deprived regions, where Afghan migrants may compete with domestic workers, potentially contributing to higher unemployment rates among Iranian citizens (12, 13). Employers may also prefer lower-cost Afghan labor, potentially leading to wage reductions and social dissatisfaction among domestic workers (10).

Additionally, the increased migrant population places financial pressure on the government in the provision of healthcare, education, and social services. Expanding access to medical services for a large migrant population may impose substantial fiscal burdens, while meeting the educational needs of Afghan children adds strain to an already pressured educational system (6, 11).

The presence of Afghan nationals may also contribute to the expansion of the informal economy, as many migrants, due to legal constraints, are employed in informal sectors. This dynamic may foster illegal activities and unfair labor competition, potentially resulting in broader social consequences such as corruption and public dissatisfaction (29, 30).

The political and economic security implications of Afghan nationals' presence in the Islamic Republic of Iran thus warrant careful consideration. A precise assessment of these challenges may assist policymakers in developing effective strategies to mitigate both security and economic threats (6, 24).

### *Analysis of Cultural Security Components*

In definitions of national security, emphasis is consistently placed on safeguarding vital national values against predominantly external threats and vulnerabilities, ultimately ensuring the preservation of an acceptable way of life aligned with the legitimate needs and aspirations of citizens (7, 8). Cultural security, in this sense, refers to the capacity of a society to preserve its distinctive characteristics in the face of changing conditions and both material and non-material threats (18, 19). More precisely, cultural security encompasses the preservation of traditional

linguistic patterns, cultural continuity, identity, and religious or national customs, while allowing for acceptable forms of change (15, 20).

From another perspective, cultural security relates to the level of tolerance, cohesion, and peaceful coexistence of cultural identities within a society, as well as the society's ability to sustain its fundamental characteristics under evolving conditions and in the face of real or perceived threats (16, 21).

Accordingly, several key components of cultural security can be identified.

The first component concerns the preservation of the distinct identity characteristics of subcultures within a national cultural framework. Ensuring respect for non-dominant cultural identities may enhance social satisfaction while simultaneously providing valuable resources for adaptability, positive transformation, and cultural vitality (18, 19).

The second component involves safeguarding the right of non-dominant cultures to interact with global cultural flows. Such interaction can strengthen internal development capacities and reinforce the sustainability of subcultures, while also enhancing their sense of autonomy and satisfaction. Moreover, constructive engagement with global cultural dynamics may equip the national culture with updated tools for responding to globalization processes (15, 16).

The third component pertains to the preservation of foundational moral and value systems within society. Protecting widely accepted ethical and cultural values against disruptive or destabilizing influences constitutes one of the principal expectations of citizens from governing institutions in the cultural sphere. Failure to address this expectation may undermine public satisfaction and challenge the legitimacy and acceptance of cultural governance (8, 20).

### Threats to Cultural Security

The security dimension of the cultural sphere arises from the activation of threats that have emerged for four main reasons: the declining control of governments over the existing social space, the emergence and strengthening of subnational separatist movements, the increase in external infiltrating currents, and evolving domestic and foreign frameworks (2, 20).

### The Core–Periphery Model of Ensuring Cultural Security

One of the key models for ensuring cultural security that has enjoyed broad public acceptance and appears justifiable is the core–periphery model. This model is based on the principle that a culture must simultaneously possess stability and flexibility. At first glance, living cultures may resemble stagnant ponds; in reality, however, currents flow beneath the apparently still surface. In any case, the inherent tension between stability and dynamism within culture constitutes the central issue of cultural security, while security-oriented thinking in this domain tends to prioritize stability and resistance to change (19, 20).

To preserve national cultural identity, it becomes necessary to maintain particular value and behavioral frameworks as the central core of identity; altering this core threatens the survival of that cultural identity. Surrounding this core lies a shell or periphery, within which transformation and change in value frameworks and behavioral patterns are possible in order to develop adaptive capacity in response to new environmental conditions (15, 16).

## Impacts of Afghan Nationals' Presence on Cultural and Social Security

The presence of Afghan nationals in Iran has profound effects on the country's cultural and social security. These effects can generate multiple challenges in the present and in the near future, requiring careful and systematic analysis (17, 31).

Cultural changes resulting from the growing presence of Afghan migrants may significantly influence Iranian lifestyle patterns and cultural practices. Initially, such changes may lead to cultural integration and the exchange of experiences between the two cultures; at the same time, however, they may also entail challenges (14, 18).

Cultural security is situated within the broader framework of national security and constitutes one of its principal components. While in previous centuries military power and the economy played a decisive role in ensuring both internal and external security, in the twenty-first century it is necessary to emphasize more strongly the centrality of culture and its importance (20). Language, religion, and cultural tradition each play a distinct role in governmental thought and in the shaping of national cohesion (8, 20). In defense and security studies, this dimension of security—due to conceptual boundary ambiguities on the one hand, and the dominance of military and political dimensions of power during the Cold War on the other—was comparatively less examined and less systematically categorized. However, following transformations associated with the collapse of the bipolar order and the end of the Cold War, the cultural dimensions of security have gained exceptional prominence and importance (2, 19).

Some aspects of this heightened salience are linked to the revolution in knowledge, technology, and information and communication infrastructures, which have dramatically increased cultural exchanges and interactions in ways that are expansive, borderless, and difficult to control. As a result, national governments—and even national cultures and subcultures—are experiencing diminished visibility and influence. In addition, arenas of competition among local, regional, and international powers have been fundamentally transformed compared with the Cold War period: the axis of competition has shifted from politics to human beings; the instruments of competition have moved from “power,” especially military power, toward “culture and economy”; and the space of competition has shifted from an atmosphere of fear and intimidation to one of “globalization” (16, 20).

Unlike the Cold War era—when a material bipolar order marginalized culture, particularly religious culture, from power equations—the contemporary world is increasingly characterized by a multipolar configuration with cultural centrality and civilizational-religious emphasis. Whereas security equations in the past were oriented toward military power, under present conditions real power has acquired a “soft” dimension with cultural and economic characteristics. Even military conflicts have increasingly become knowledge-based and capability-centered, and have taken on a pronounced soft-power character (2). Therefore, it is argued that under contemporary conditions, the true superpower is one that possesses unrivaled soft and cultural power and can, on a global scale and with dominant superiority, produce, distribute, and consume mass knowledge, information, and technology—thus capturing intellectual and cultural spheres rather than territory. Under conditions of global interdependence and the intertwining of national interests, governments' ability to insulate societies from external influence has decreased, while mutual societal penetration has intensified. In transnational conditions, people are increasingly exposed to foreign ideas and ideologies, engage more than ever in cultural interaction and exchange, and—amid unequal cultural competition—cultural influence and assimilation occur more intensively. Paradoxically, while national security and national sovereignty face serious challenges, international stability has also emerged, in an unprecedented manner, as a high-priority security objective (2, 20).

*(A) Analysis of Cultural Changes and Potential Consequences for Iranian Lifestyle and Culture*

One consequence of Afghan nationals' presence is the possibility of cultural exchange, through which new experiences and lifestyle patterns may be introduced into Iranian society. This exchange can contribute to cultural enrichment in the host society, but it may also affect certain elements of Iranian culture (14, 15).

In migrant-dense areas, some Afghan cultural elements may influence local lifestyle patterns and cultural practices. These changes may generate cultural and social tensions; for instance, certain Afghan traditions and customs may not be readily accepted by the host society, potentially producing perceptions of identity threat among segments of Iranian society (17, 22).

*(B) Examination of Identity and Cultural Challenges in Migrant-Dense Areas*

The extensive presence of Afghan nationals may lead to identity-related challenges across different social groups. Some individuals may feel that their cultural identity is being affected, potentially resulting in negative reactions and social aversion (18, 22).

In areas with higher concentrations of Afghan migrants, cultural conflicts may also emerge, particularly in domains such as religion, language, and customary practices. For example, differences regarding religious ceremonies and rituals can contribute to social and cultural tensions (8, 17).

*(C) Consequences of Afghan Migration for Cultural Security*

Cultural security refers to the immunity of individuals and society from any form of aggression or threat; in other words, it involves creating a reassuring, calming condition free from threats and encroachments upon religion, ideas, morality, customs, beliefs and values, cultural heritage, literary works, and related domains (16, 19). On this basis, the objective meaning of cultural security is the absence of threats to cultural heritage, achievements, and acquired values, while its subjective meaning is the absence of fear regarding assaults or attacks that place values, customs, beliefs, and traditions at risk of cultural assimilation or destruction (15, 21).

Accordingly, one of the central indicators for examining the cultural dimensions of Afghan presence concerns the extent to which Afghan migrants are influenced by, and exert influence upon, the cultural sector in Iran. A key point is that these dimensions of security do not operate in isolation; rather, they are interconnected through continuous interaction and strong linkages, each possessing its own significant focal point within the broader security issue and its own method for prioritizing security concerns (7, 8).

In light of the foregoing, and with regard to how migration theory aligns with the realities governing Afghan migrants in Iran, it is noteworthy that the weakening of identity—considered the most fundamental basis of cultural security—may constitute one of the threatening consequences of this phenomenon, which in a relatively short time may acquire the capacity to become a distinct security issue (18, 19).

Within this context, Afghan men's marriages with Iranian women, the lack of official and legal registration, and the resulting birth of thousands of undocumented and identity-less children in Iranian society; the absence of a clear legal status for this group of women; the issue of Afghan departure from Iran and the uncertainty faced by their Iranian spouses; and numerous other social and legal problems constitute reflections of this migration phenomenon that may, over time, target Iran's national identity—one of the preferred components of cultural security (8, 17). Because children born of such marriages often lack Iranian identity documents, they remain in a state of uncertainty

within society. Obtaining birth certificates, education, employment, compulsory service, acquiring a driver's license, and many other social matters are among the numerous difficulties faced by this not-insignificant group (24, 29).

With illegal marriages between foreign nationals and Iranian women, one of the principal threats relates to human security, which may spread on a wider scale and become a social security threat. For example, with the illegal entry of Afghan nationals into Iran and their marriages with Iranian girls, various illnesses may be presumed, such that—given the illegal nature of such marriages—no reliable assurance regarding the health conditions of the men from other countries can be established. In a study conducted in 1990 on Afghan migrants' health, most Afghans (90%) reportedly suffered at the time of entry from various diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, skin diseases, and other conditions. In Afghanistan, due to low levels of public health, life expectancy is also considered low. Threats to individual security become threats to social security when such diseases move beyond the individual level and affect segments of society (29). Afghan migrants may also negatively affect Iranian citizens' public health security. For example, the relatively high incidence of malaria among Afghans is attributed to their lifestyle and insufficient attention to preventive methods, and these migrants maintain weak links with healthcare and treatment centers, which is highly important for timely and complete treatment (9). Moreover, the security consequences of Afghan presence can also be considered within the domain of national security, including military security and environmental security (with specific considerations) (2, 3).

### **Social Security Analysis**

The presence of Afghan nationals also has significant effects on Iran's social system and social issues. These effects may include increases in crime and delinquency, social tensions, and challenges associated with mixed marriages (3, 9).

#### *(A) Analysis of Impacts on the Social System, Including Crime Rates*

Some studies suggest that growth in migrant populations may be associated with higher crime and delinquency rates. In areas where Afghan migrants reside, instances of unlawful behavior and lower conformity with local rules may be observed more frequently. This situation may generate public concern and dissatisfaction within the host community (3, 27).

In certain cases, migrant presence may also be associated with the expansion of organized illegal activities such as human trafficking and drug trafficking. Such activities may be more visible in border areas and migrant-dense regions, thereby threatening social security (9, 23).

#### *(B) Analysis of Potential Tensions Between the Host Society and Migrants*

An increase in the migrant population can lead to the emergence of social tensions between the host society and migrants. These tensions may stem from economic inequalities, competition over limited resources, and cultural differences. Under such conditions, the host community may develop feelings of distrust and dissatisfaction toward migrants (17, 22).

In some circumstances, these tensions can result in negative and even violent reactions against migrants. Such reactions not only harm migrants but may also undermine social security at the national level (7, 18).

### *(C) Analysis of Social Problems Such as Mixed Marriages and Their Consequences*

One potential social challenge is the increase in mixed marriages between Iranians and Afghans. Such marriages may lead to family and social conflicts, particularly in families that strongly adhere to their cultural and religious traditions (8, 17).

Mixed marriages may also generate identity-related challenges for the children of such families. These children may confront dual identity frameworks, potentially leading to identity and social difficulties. Moreover, negative social perceptions may result in discrimination and social inequality (16, 22).

Accordingly, the cultural and social security implications of Afghan nationals' presence in the Islamic Republic of Iran require careful attention and precise management. Identifying both challenges and opportunities can assist policymakers in designing appropriate programs for social and cultural integration, reducing tensions, and strengthening peaceful coexistence between host communities and migrants (5, 24).

### **Analysis and Assessment of Post-2021 Threats Following the Taliban's Return to Power**

Assessing threats arising from the expanded presence of Afghan nationals—particularly after the Taliban's return to power in 2021—requires deeper analysis of the trajectory of extremism and its implications for Iran's security. Recent developments in Afghanistan have affected not only Afghanistan's internal security, but also Iran's border and internal security environment (2, 4).

Following the collapse of the previous Afghan government in 2021 and the Taliban's return, extremist tendencies and the activities of terrorist groups increased in Afghanistan. The Taliban, as a jihadi movement, has not only consolidated its position within Afghanistan but has also indirectly created conditions that other extremist groups can exploit. Such groups benefit from Afghanistan's instability to recruit members and secure financial resources. Groups such as ISIS, which have a record of activity in Afghanistan, may pursue plans to expand influence and conduct terrorist operations inside and outside Afghanistan, thereby increasing regional security threats, including for Iran (2, 3).

Because Iran borders Afghanistan, changes in Afghanistan's security situation can have serious consequences for Iran's border security. Rising Afghan migration flows alongside extremist dynamics may generate new challenges for Iran's border forces (9, 23).

The increased migration flow and potential movement of terrorist groups can heighten pressure on Iran's borders and facilitate the infiltration of smugglers and terrorist elements. Concerns about the entry of extremist actors into Iranian territory may lead to intensified border security measures (2, 23).

In addition, as extremist threats grow, Iran may face new challenges in internal security. These threats may increase public and political anxiety and ultimately contribute to social and political dissatisfaction (7, 27).

Cooperation between the Taliban and groups hostile to Iran—particularly in border regions—may also produce serious consequences for Iran's national security (2, 4).

If an alliance forms between the Taliban and anti-Iran groups, there may be increased terrorist attacks and border unrest. Such cooperation can function as a direct threat to Iran's national security and increase the likelihood of attacks against governmental and military institutions (3, 23).

Such cooperation may also contribute to the development of terrorist networks in Iran's border regions. These networks could serve as connective channels between extremist groups in Afghanistan and Iran, thereby intensifying threats (9, 23).

Finally, such dynamics may disrupt Iran's regional security and foreign policy calculations, potentially compelling Iran to adjust its security and military policies and to engage more actively in regional affairs in response to perceived threats (2, 32).

Overall, Afghanistan's post-2021 security situation has not only created challenges for Afghanistan itself but has also generated serious threats to the Islamic Republic of Iran's security. Identifying and analyzing these threats can help policymakers propose effective responses and prevent potential crises (6, 24).

### **Assessment of Psychological and Social Effects on the Host Community**

The presence of a large number of Afghan migrants in the Islamic Republic of Iran has deep and wide-ranging psychological and social effects on the host community. These effects may manifest in both positive and negative forms and require careful and comprehensive assessment. One of the main challenges concerns tensions arising from cultural and social differences, which may generate feelings of instability and dissatisfaction among host-community members (17, 22).

With the arrival of Afghan migrants, the host community encounters new cultural diversity, which may be difficult for some segments of society to navigate. Cultural change can generate perceptions of threat to national and cultural identity, and in some cases may contribute to discrimination or xenophobic attitudes toward migrants. This risk may be especially pronounced in areas with high migrant density, where local residents may feel that their cultural and social identity is being affected (18, 21).

Some host-community members may also perceive that public resources and services—such as healthcare, education, and social support—are being allocated disproportionately to migrants. This perception may lead to discouragement and dissatisfaction, particularly under difficult economic conditions in which public resources are limited. In such circumstances, accusations that migrants impose a heavier fiscal burden on the state may intensify social tensions and conflicts. These dynamics may contribute to the formation of social groups that advocate for migrants' rights and other groups that adopt oppositional positions toward them (10, 11).

In this context, the importance of identifying psychological and social effects of migration on the host society is undeniable. Effective planning and policy-making can reduce tensions and improve social conditions. For example, educational and cultural workshops may enhance intercultural understanding and communicate to host-community members that migrants also seek better living conditions and peaceful coexistence. Promoting values of solidarity and mutual assistance between the two groups may further reduce tension and dissatisfaction. Moreover, active participation of host-community members in social and economic planning and decision-making processes may strengthen their sense of belonging and improve relationships with migrants. By creating shared opportunities for social, economic, and cultural cooperation, social cohesion can be strengthened and feelings of alienation reduced (5, 24).

It is also necessary to develop supportive programs and appropriate social services for both groups, in order to strengthen positive relations and reduce tensions. Such measures should include facilitating migrants' access to healthcare, education, and social services, while simultaneously improving the quality of life for local residents. In this way, a stable and healthy social situation can be fostered in which both migrants and host-community members

can benefit from available opportunities and resources, thereby reducing dissatisfaction and feelings of instability. Overall, analyzing the psychological and social effects of Afghan migrants' presence in Iran underscores the importance of addressing the needs and challenges of both groups. Through comprehensive and supportive approaches, social conditions can be improved, tensions reduced, and peaceful and sustainable coexistence promoted (6, 7).

### **The Role of Media in Shaping Attitudes**

Media, as one of the key factors in shaping public attitudes and perceptions toward migrants, play a significant role in influencing societal approaches to migration. Through their communicative power, media outlets can shape public opinion and contribute to defining the host society's stance toward migrants (15, 16).

On the one hand, by presenting accurate and informative content, media can help reduce discrimination and social inequality. Such content may include narratives of migrants' success, their contributions to the host society, and their positive economic and cultural impacts. In this context, media can help foster a positive and empathetic atmosphere and introduce migrants as valuable members of society (14, 18).

On the other hand, media may also intensify anti-migrant sentiments by disseminating negative, stereotypical, or inaccurate portrayals of migrants. Particularly during crises—such as criminal incidents or social unrest—media coverage may unfairly depict migrants as primary culprits. This type of representation can generate distrust and heighten social tensions between migrants and the host community. Moreover, such coverage may reinforce negative perceptions and unjust judgments, thereby exacerbating discrimination and social inequality (17, 22).

Analyzing the role of media in either aggravating or mitigating tensions requires systematic content analysis of media coverage related to Afghan migrants. This includes examining the type of coverage, the frequency of positive and negative narratives, and the language and framing employed in reporting. Attention must also be given to the psychological impact of such coverage on both host communities and migrants. These analyses can clarify existing challenges and opportunities, providing policymakers and social actors with tools to manage social and media communications more effectively (7, 16).

Media can also function as bridges for intercultural dialogue. By promoting positive narratives and creating spaces in which migrants' voices are heard, media can contribute to strengthening peaceful coexistence and reducing tensions. Consequently, implementing educational programs for journalists and media professionals on fair and accurate migration reporting can help reduce inequalities and strengthen social cohesion between migrants and host communities (15, 24).

### **International Management and Regional Cooperation**

Under current conditions, international management and regional cooperation—particularly in the context of migration and security crises—have gained increasing importance. In light of the complex circumstances following the Taliban's return to power in 2021 and its impact on neighboring countries, Iran must seek effective cooperation with neighboring states, international organizations, and non-governmental institutions to manage challenges arising from the presence of Afghan nationals (2, 6).

Such cooperation may include information exchange among states, sharing experiences and best practices in crisis management, and coordinating joint planning for border security. One key dimension of these collaborations involves the establishment of joint border security programs. Iran and neighboring countries can develop

coordinated mechanisms—through joint meetings and mutual learning—to prevent the infiltration of terrorist and extremist groups that may exploit Afghanistan’s instability (4, 23).

This cooperation may include joint border patrols, intelligence-sharing regarding security threats, and collaborative assessments of border conditions. In addition, regional and international cooperation can contribute to the socio-economic development of border regions. Considering that many Afghan migrants reside in border areas, joint development initiatives can improve living conditions and reduce the social and economic burden on host communities (10, 11).

Such initiatives may encompass educational services, healthcare provision, and employment creation programs for migrants. Furthermore, examining the experiences of other countries that have confronted similar migration and security challenges is of considerable importance. Successful models in migration management, integration policies, and host–migrant interaction strategies may offer valuable lessons for Iran (5, 24).

Ultimately, regional and international cooperation not only facilitates more effective management of challenges associated with Afghan nationals’ presence, but also strengthens diplomatic relations and economic cooperation among regional states. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, Iran can play an important role in managing regional crises and advancing toward sustainable security and regional development (2, 32).

## Conclusion

The presence of Afghan nationals in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly following recent developments and the return of the Taliban to power in 2021, has generated profound and wide-ranging effects on various dimensions of national security. These effects are especially significant in the political, economic, cultural, and social spheres. The increase in the number of Afghan migrants in Iran, largely driven by insecurity and instability in Afghanistan, has given rise to challenges including concerns related to extremism and terrorism, pressure on the labor market and public services, and cultural and social tensions. The analyses conducted in this study indicate that the research hypothesis—namely, that the expansion of Afghan nationals’ presence may pose challenges to the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran—is substantiated. Accordingly, more effective policies and programs are required to mitigate security risks and to facilitate the structured and lawful integration of migrants into the host society. Measures such as strengthening border control and security forces, designing targeted social and economic programs for migrants, and creating employment opportunities can contribute to reducing tensions and improving the country’s economic conditions.

International and regional cooperation in managing migration and security-related crises is of paramount importance. Iran should enhance coordination with neighboring countries and relevant international institutions in both security and economic domains in order to develop joint solutions to challenges arising from the presence of Afghan migrants. The development of joint cultural and social initiatives can promote peaceful coexistence between migrants and the host community and enhance mutual cultural understanding. By adopting a comprehensive and multi-layered approach, Iran can not only safeguard its national security but also contribute to broader social and economic development, transforming existing challenges into opportunities for the benefit of all segments of society.

The circumstances emerging from large-scale migration inevitably intensify debates surrounding identity, culture, and social cohesion. It is natural that such conditions may significantly affect the cultural fabric of the host country and, consequently, raise concerns regarding cultural security. In migration processes—particularly cross-border migration—the incoming population both influences and is influenced by the host society. Individuals who gather

within a specific temporal and spatial setting gradually construct a cultural system for collective life. This system shapes patterns of social interaction and stabilizes social organization. While individuals residing within their original social framework generally conform to established norms of interaction, migration disrupts this structure. The migrant, unfamiliar with the values and standards of the destination society, and finding limited recognition for his or her own normative system, experiences a transformation in patterns of interaction. Over time, the prior social organization may weaken or dissolve.

Such disruption can result in confusion or a perceived absence of social control, which may increase the likelihood of deviant or non-conforming behavior. As intimate social bonds weaken and individuals become socially anonymous, they may be less subject to informal oversight by familiar social networks. Reduced social pressure and diminished communal supervision can create greater opportunity for deviation from prevailing social norms. Furthermore, migrants often lose the sense of identity recognition they previously possessed within their society of origin. Even when they strive to conform fully to the norms and customs of the host country, cultural differences may still subject them to scrutiny, fostering feelings of insecurity. These psychological pressures may generate varied behavioral responses. Refugees and migrants in more economically and socially developed societies frequently experience psychological insecurity and prolonged difficulty in establishing stable social connections, which may further contribute to social tension.

If not properly managed, the presence of foreign nationals in Iran could pose significant challenges to cultural security and national cohesion. However, through intelligent policymaking, strengthened regulatory and supervisory mechanisms, and the creation of structured opportunities for cultural exchange, it is possible to harness the potential benefits of migration while minimizing associated risks. In safeguarding national identity and cultural security, Iran must pursue balanced and strategic policies that simultaneously address security concerns and promote social stability and cohesion.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors equally contributed to this study.

### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### **Transparency of Data**

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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