

Afghan Refugees and the Coronavirus Pandemic

Written by Grant Farr

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GRANT FARR, MAY 26 2020

The coronavirus, along with international economic sanctions and the collapse of the world oil market, has devastated Iran and its economy, bringing the jobs that Afghan refugees have depended on for a livelihood to a halt. Over the last four decades thousands of Afghans have fled their war torn country and have been living in Iran. Now these Afghan refugees are returning to Afghanistan. Although some of the refugees are leaving on their own, many thousands are being forcefully expelled (Akhgar, 2020). These returning refugees are overwhelming the meager medical resources of Afghanistan, spreading the coronavirus across the country. These returning refugees are also spreading the disease in the border cities of Herat and Farah, where the returning refugees live in cramped quarters or board crowded buses for the 14 hour ride to Kabul.

Afghanistan is ill equipped to handle all of these returning refugees and the pandemic they bring as it faces an existential political crisis caused by a split and dysfunctional government, an insurgent Taliban, and the potential collapse in international aid. Afghanistan has neither the medical facilities nor the organizational structure to deal with these returning refugees and the pandemic they bring. This crisis also has provided an opportunity for the Taliban who appear to offer medical support to those confronted with the virus (Jackson, 2020).

Afghans have been fleeing their war torn country since the Soviet invasion in 1979. Over the last four decades, several million Afghans have fled across the border to Pakistan, settling in the areas near the border around the city of Peshawar in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This is an area where the culture and language is similar to Afghanistan's. This area of Afghanistan is also where the highest concentration of Afghans live and near the major cities of Kabul and Jalalabad. Over the last several decades many of these refugees have returned, willingly or not, to Afghanistan flooding the cities of Jalalabad and Kabul (IOM, 2020).

There are also Afghan refugees in Turkey and in Europe, where they make up the second largest refugee population after the Syrians. (McGreger, 2019) There are also sizeable Afghan refugee populations in India, and as far away as Malaysia and Australia. Many of the Afghans have been in exile for a generation or longer, many refugee children have grown up without ever having lived in Afghanistan.

Thousands of Afghans have also fled across the Western border to Iran. Afghans in Iran are largely Persian speakers, the language of Iran, primarily ethnic Tajiks and Hazara, minorities in Afghanistan. Also, many of the Afghans who fled to Iran are of the Shia branch of Islam, the predominant religion in Iran, but a persecuted minority in Afghanistan.

Travelling across the Afghan-Iranian border can be difficult and even dangerous. The area around the border is sparsely populated, largely semi-arid desert. There are three official border crossings, but since the border is in open country many Afghans routinely cross the border in areas away from the official border crossings. There is an active smuggling business ferrying Afghans and goods, largely drugs, back and forth. Two Afghan cities, Farah and Herat, are near, but not on, the border. The ancient city of Herat, a city of about 500,000, is the major drop off point for Afghans entering or exiting Iran. Farah, a city of about 50,000, is an active target of the Taliban and therefore avoided (Post, 2019).

There are about one million Afghans officially registered in Iran, but many more live in the country who are not

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officially registered. Some estimates have the Afghan population in Iran as high as 4.5 million (Rich, 2020). About 97 percent of the Afghan refugees in Iran live in urban or semi-urban areas where they work as day laborers on Iranian construction projects and as domestic help. Only about 3 percent live in the 20 refugee settlements managed by the Iranian government (Rich, 2020). On the outskirts of most Iranian cities there are large shanty towns where Afghan refugees live. The largest concentration of Afghans is in the areas around the major Iranian cities, particularly Tehran, Zabol, Mashad, and Qom. In an attempt to control the settlement of Afghans, Iran has specified certain areas where the Afghans are not allowed to go – including the provinces of Azerbaijan, Ardebil, and Esfahan.

About 450,000 Afghans in Iran hold official visas and therefore have legal status to live and work in the country. This allows them to attend school, use medical facilities, and to work. In 2017, the Iranian government, in an effort to regularize the undocumented Afghans in the country, conducted a “headcount exercise” targeting certain categories of undocumented Afghans residing in the country. Those identified in this effort were given identification slips and are referred to as *Amayesh* (undocumented) card holders. An additional 804,000 Afghans were registered in this effort (Rich, 2020). Although there are many Afghan refugee families in Iran, the majority of the refugees are single men who have gone to Iran for work. Afghans attempting to migrate to Europe through Turkey typically pass through Iran as well.

Iran faces a severe economic and social crisis from three external threats: The collapse of the international oil market; the imposition of US economic sanctions; and the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. In 2018–2019 Iran’s GDP contracted 4.7 percent and in the first nine months of the 2019–20 fiscal year, the Iranian GDP has fallen by 14.1 percent (World Bank, 2020). This has led to an unemployment rate of over 10 percent. For those 15 to 24, the unemployment rate is above 25 percent (World Bank, 2020).

Iran was one of the first countries in Asia to experience a surge in coronavirus cases and now has the second highest number of cases in Asia after China. Iran has reported over 138,000 coronavirus cases and over 7,000 deaths from the disease. Testing is not widely available in Iran, so the exact extent of the disease is not known, but the spread of the disease is no doubt many times greater than the official numbers. A number of Iranian officials, including the deputy health minister, have contracted the disease. As with the spread of the disease in other countries, the disease has hit the lower classes and those living in marginal housing particularly hard. This includes the Afghan refugees, many of whom live in crowded housing on the outskirts of the Iranian cities. Isolating or establishing personal distancing is not an option in the refugee settlements.

The first coronavirus case in Iran was reported on February 19th, 2020, in the city of Qom. The virus is thought to have been brought to the country by a merchant from Qom, who had recently returned from a business trip to China (Wright, 2020). As a major religious center, Qom is the home to a number of religious shrines known as *Imanzadehs*. These shrines are believed to be the tombs of descendants of the Prophet Mohammed and are important in the Shia Islamic belief system. *Imamzadehs* are located in many areas of Iran but are particularly found in the religious centers of Mashad and Qom. They are important to lower class Shia Moslems who come to the shrines to pray for divine help or support from God to heal a sick family member or to bring good luck in general. As a form of veneration it is common to lick or kiss the shrine, a practice that spreads the disease. Since many of the Afghan refugees in Iran are Shia, the same sect of Islam as the Iranians, and often poor, they are particularly attracted to these shrines. In addition, many of these shrines are in cities with large Afghan populations.

As a result of the faltering economy and the spread of the coronavirus, Iran is now expelling Afghans, returning them, sometimes forcefully, to the Afghan border. The majority of those leaving Iran are single men although there are many of families with children being expelled as well. Since there is also no work or opportunities in Afghanistan, over 50 percent of the of the single men who are forcefully expelled try to return to Iran. These usually means finding a smuggler who will take them back. Many of these smugglers are shady characters who abuse people, often handing them over to criminal gangs who demand a ransom to be released (Bishop, 2020).

In the first four and a half months of 2020 (up to May 9th), data from the International Organization of Migration reports that 277,905 undocumented Afghans were expelled from Iran through the border stations of Islam Qala and Nimroz (IOM, 2020). Of these, the vast majority, 80.4 percent, were classified as “spontaneous” meaning that they

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had left Iran on their own, and 19.6 percent were officially deported (IOM, 2020). The flow of refugees slowed down, but did not stop, during the month of Ramadan; April 24th to May 22nd. The flow of refugees at the two border crossings averaged several thousand deportees each day, although the number of refugees varied week to week. In the third week of April 2020, a week before the beginning of Ramadan over 62,341 Afghans crossed the border, averaging almost 8,000 each day (IOM, 2020).

In addition to those who passed through the official border stations, there were thousands of Afghans who crossed the border illegally. According to a report by the International Organization for Migration, (Nassim, 2016) there is a large scale smuggling business bringing Afghans in and out of Iran. Beginning in 2001, most of the smuggling was bringing Afghans to Iran and then on to Europe. Now the flow is reversing and Afghans are being smuggled back to Afghanistan. The Afghans being forcefully repatriated are dropped off by Iranian authorities at a place known as "Zero Point", a neutral location between the two countries. At this location, several international organizations work alongside the Afghan government providing services for the returnees and to assist in reintegrating them into Afghanistan. In the process of being expelled from Iran most Afghans have lost everything except the clothes on their back. Since many worked as undocumented day laborers, they were prone to exploitation and abuse in Iran. Many were not paid in cash by their Iranian bosses, but sometimes in drugs. As a result many of the returning Afghans are addicted to drugs, usually heroin (Kumar, 2020).

Many of the returning Afghans have been out the country for years, even generations, and have no connections or family left in Afghanistan. As a result they have no place to go and often they end up in Herat or take a 14 hour ride on a crowded bus to Kabul. Even getting from the border to Herat or Farah, is a several hour bus or taxi ride and many do not have the money for fare. An Afghan border guard interviewed by the International Organization for Migration, an inter-governmental organization that works with governments to facilitate humane migration policies, reported that "Once the Afghans get here, we first try to give them a hot meal since many have spent days in detention, possibly facing hardship and mistreatment" (Kumar, 2020). He added, "we register them and try to better understand their needs, whether its health care, shelter, and even transportation to families or relative around Afghanistan" (Kumar, 2020).

The Afghan government and the international agencies at the border have no capacity to test for the virus, take temperatures, or quarantine the returnees who test positive. It has been estimated that as many as one half of the returnees have the virus, but with no testing most of those who are infected are not quarantined or otherwise treated.

The refugees returning from Iran are bringing the virus back to Afghanistan, which itself is facing a number of existential challenges: The peace talks with the Taliban have not taken off, the United States is pulling its troops out and threatening to withhold aid, and the country is facing a pandemic. As of May 23, 2020 Afghanistan reported 9,998 cases of the coronavirus and 216 deaths.(Worldometer, 2020). In Herat, the city where many of the returnees from Iran end up, there are 1611 confirmed cases and 34 deaths reported, but the number is thought to be considerably higher (Saifullah, 2020). Recent studies estimate that up to one half of Kabul's population may already be infected, (Lawrence, 2020). The Afghan government predicts that 110,000 Afghans may eventually die from the disease, but some estimates predict that the toll could be closer to six times that amount (Jackson, 2020). However, the actual number of deaths may never be known since there is a general lack of health care in Afghanistan and data on deaths is poorly kept (Saifullah, 2020). More Afghans are now dying from the coronavirus than from the violence from the war with the Taliban.

Afghanistan is woefully unprepared for the pandemic. It has only tested a little over 6,000 people in a country of over 30 million (Saifullah, 2020). The government has a limited supply of test kits, but is attempting to buy more on the international market and is hoping to have 5,000 soon. But, testing is only part of the problem. Afghanistan does not have the capacity in hospital beds, ventilators, and trained staff to administer the test, or to provide care for the sick, according to Afghan Public Health Minister Wahidullah Mayer (Saifullah, 2020). In addition, Afghanistan is unable to implement an effective lockdown, an important step in containing the virus. Afghanistan is one of the poorest nations in the world, and most Afghans depend on daily wages to survive. While the government has launched a program to help those in need of food or other essentials in a lockdown, it has not identified a mechanism in which this could take place and little very little food has reached those in need (Saifullah, 2020).

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Many Afghans are suspicious of government officials and are therefore unwilling to follow official orders. With a lack of public awareness about how the virus spreads and with a mistrust of medical officials many Afghans have taken matters into their own hands. They have largely avoided being tested, and even those who have contracted the virus have been reluctant to seek medical help. To make matters worse, many Afghans live in substandard housing with many people per room, making isolation impossible and enhancing the spread of the disease.

To add to the difficulty of fighting the disease, many parts of the country are controlled by the Taliban who have gotten ahead of the Afghan government in appearing to fight the disease (Jackson, 2020). In a number of propaganda videos made public by the Taliban, instead of showing brave Taliban fighters shooting guns, these new videos show footage of the Taliban in surgical masks going door to door conducting temperature checks and handing out hand sanitizers. The Taliban are obviously trying to show that they are undertaking a firm response to the pandemic, including the claim that returnees from Iran should be forced to quarantine for two weeks. The Taliban also claim that they are establishing public health information teams, a dispensary campaign, and even quarantine centers (Jackson 2020). While most Afghans suspect the Taliban intentions these videos are also playing on Afghans' mistrust of their own government.

Since Afghanistan does not have the resources or the organization to fight the virus effectively, and considering the activities of the Taliban, it is going to get worse before it gets better in Afghanistan as it navigates the coronavirus epidemic.

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Grant Farr is a Profesor Emeritus at Portland State University. He has lived and worked in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, and has published several articles and books on those countries. He is currently working on a major research project on Afghan refugees.