

Intention of Irregular Migration to Europe Among Afghans in Iran¹

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Abstract

Recent influx of irregular migration from the Middle East and Afghanistan to Europe has considerable social, demographic and political implications for the destination countries. It is, thus, important to examine the intentions and complex drivers and decision making processes of these migrants who are willing to take an illegal or irregular path to migrate to Europe.

Iran as host to around 2.5 million Afghans has been a leading source and transit country for irregular migration from Afghanistan to Australia (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2014; Koser and McAuliffe 2013; Koser and Mardsen 2013) and Europe. This paper aims to analyse data from the Survey of Afghan Migrants in Iran conducted during June-July 2015 in four cities of Mashhad, Tehran, Qom and Isfahan to examine the intentions and actions of Afghan refugees, their sources of information, social networks, communication strategies, and decision making process for irregular migration to Europe and other countries. The questions addressed in this paper include what are the social and demographic characteristics of Afghans who are considering migration to Europe? What are the sources of information for Afghans about their destinations? What are the reasons for choosing Europe as opposed to other potential destinations? What are the planned pathways for migration? And what role do family members and their networks play in the decision-making process?

The sample includes 1201 Afghan aged 18-44 the majority of whom were Hazara (63.8%) followed by Tajik (18.8%), Pashtun (8.5%) and other ethnic groups (9.1%). Respondents were asked about their intention and action for migration. Our preliminary results showed that around 35 % did not have any intention or plan to migrate to other countries and preferred either to stay in Iran or return to Afghanistan. Around 39% of respondents considered European countries for migration followed by Australia (22%) and Canada. Policy implications for concerning potential irregular migration to Europe is discussed.

Methodology

This study proceeded in two phases. First, utilising the existing data including the 2011 Iran Census (including 1.4 million Afghans) and the Second-Generation Afghans in Iran Survey (conducted in 2010 among Afghans aged 15-29 in three cities in Iran), their characteristics were examined and the sample size determined. The latter survey provided useful information for designing the survey questionnaire. For instance, information on the degree

¹ The results are drawn from a collaborative project between the Australian National University, University of Tehran, and the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

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of adaptation of respondents was useful in identifying which adaptation characteristics led to refugees being more likely to remain in Iran or to migrate to other countries. Respondents in the 2010 survey were also asked about their immediate and future intentions and plans about return to Afghanistan or migration to other countries. Accordingly, in our 2015 survey, we included similar questions to enable comparison with the results of the 2010 and 2015 surveys. The characteristics of Afghans in Iran from the previous surveys provided useful information for the design of the present sample survey in various cities in Iran.

The second phase of the study involved a quantitative survey conducted among Afghans who are considered as potential irregular migrants. This survey provides a unique window into the migration decision-making processes, the key role of networks in Afghanistan, Iran and other countries, intermediaries, and the changing context in Afghanistan in shaping movement.

The 2015 survey was conducted among Hazara Afghans as this group is by far the largest in Iran and its members are more likely to migrate to other countries. However, other ethnic groups (i.e Tajik, Uzbek, Pashtun, etc.) were included in the survey based on their proportionate size in Iran. The survey was conducted in Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan and Qom where most Afghans are living.

Questionnaire design

From March to June 2015, the questionnaire for the survey was designed based on various objectives of the survey. Simultaneously, the team of interviewers was recruited among Afghan students in various cities. After preparing the final draft of the questionnaire, five different workshops (two in Tehran and Qom, two in Mashhad, and one in Isfahan) were organized to discuss the research project and the draft questionnaire with the Afghan team leaders and interviewers. In each workshop, the language, sensitivity of the questions, and several other issues related to the fieldwork were discussed, and the questionnaire was revised based on the suggestions after each workshop.

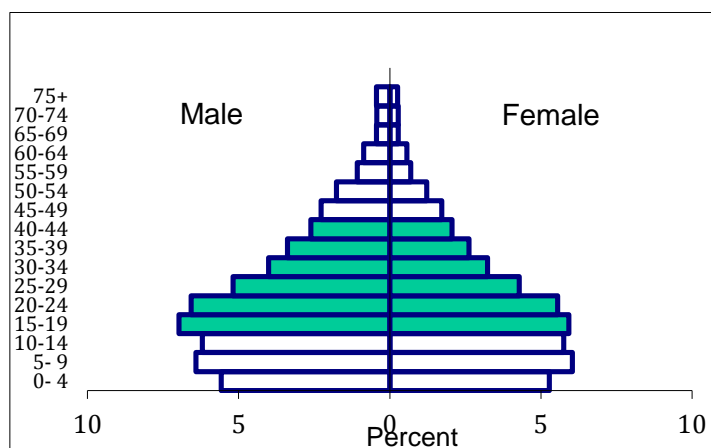
Prior to the data collection, the questionnaire was pre-tested in Tehran and Qom to check the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was then revised by the team based on the findings of the pre-test. This process ensured that the questionnaire is comprehensive, easy-to-follow and well prepared.

Sampling

The sample includes around 1,200 respondents who are aged 18-45 years. The sampling frame was designed based on the Iran 2011 Census. First, we calculated the number of Afghans in each city subdivided by such characteristics as district of residence, age group, and gender. There is no information on ethnicity in the census, but we used our earlier reports based on *Amayesh* data and consulted with our Afghan team leaders about the presence of various ethnic groups and their distribution in each city.

Around 1.4 million Afghan migrants were recorded in the latest census in Iran in 2011. They are quite a young population and a considerable proportion of them are in the working ages (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Age pyramid of Afghans migrants population in Iran, 2011 Census



The result of the census indicated that the majority of Afghan migrants are living in four cities namely Mashhad, Tehran, Qom and Isfahan. The project targeted a sample size of 1200 cases in these four cities to fulfil the aims of the research. The sample was divided across the four cities based on the number of Afghan population in each city. The sample sizes for Mashhad, Tehran, Qom and Isfahan were 450, 400, 200 and 150 cases, respectively (Table 1). Our sample is not a statistically representative random sample. However, characteristics such as age, sex, local residence and ethnicity in the four selected cities were used in the sample selection. The sample size in each of the four cities was further divided based on the locations of Afghan migrants in the city.

Table 1. Sample size of Afghan Population aged 18-44 by city, Afghan Survey in Iran, 2015

City	Number			Percent
	Male	Female	Total	
Mashhad	225	225	450	37.5
Tehran	204	196	400	33.3
Qom	100	100	200	16.7
Isfahan	78	72	150	12.5
Total	607	593	1200	100.0

Preliminary findings

The data analysis of the project has already commenced and we will continue the analysis and writing up the paper prior to the conference.

Our preliminary findings suggest that:

- Total number of respondents in the survey includes 1201 Afghan aged 18-44 who resided in Tehran, Isfahan, Mashhad, and Qom.
- The majority of respondents were Hazara (63.8%) followed by Tajik (18.8%), Pashtun (8.5%), Uzbek (0.4%) and other ethnic groups (8.7%).
- 83% of the respondents were Shiite and 17% were Sunni Muslims.
- The sample includes slightly more females (50.3%) than males (49.7). This is due to the accessibility of females for the interview at the time of the survey.

- 44% were never married, 53% were married, 1.5% were divorced, and 1.1% were widowed.
- Respondents were asked about their intention and action for migration. In general, 35.1 % did not have any intention or plan to migrate to other countries and preferred either to stay in Iran or return to Afghanistan. Around 38.5% of respondents considered European countries for migration, and Australia is the next most considered destination for migration (22.5%).
- Countries considered for migration were, in order, European countries, Australia, Canada, America, Turkey, Arab countries, Pakistan, and other countries.
- It is notable that even prior to the recent movements to Europe, the respondents were less likely to take the risk of attempting to go to Australia.

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