What’s Behind Iran’s Shift in Policy Toward Afghan Refugees?

For decades, Iran has been a key player in the Middle East, wielding a broad array of tools to project its influence and achieve strategic goals. Among the most potent of these tools has been the recruitment of foreign fighters—chiefly Afghans—who played pivotal roles in Iran’s proxy wars, most notably in Syria in support of the Assad regime.

But as Iran’s influence has waned in certain areas and as regional and global dynamics have shifted, its reliance on this strategy has markedly diminished. The outlines of a new policy are emerging—one that could be described as an abandonment of the very fighters who once served its interests. This shift raises critical questions about its underlying causes and potential ramifications.

From Shelter to Exploitation

With every war that ravaged their homeland, Afghans have sought refuge in neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan. Afghan migration to Iran dates back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, coinciding with Iran’s Islamic Revolution.

At the time, nearly two million Afghans fled to Iran. Today, estimates suggest

that as many as six million Afghans—both documented and undocumented—live in Iran. Half of them arrived in 2021 alone, fleeing Taliban rule, and most lack legal documentation.

The majority live as undocumented refugees and migrants in remote villages, far from legal oversight. They work low-wage jobs in construction, retail, agriculture, and manufacturing—without contracts, health insurance, or labor protections—making them especially vulnerable to exploitation.

This massive Afghan presence has long served Iran's ideological and strategic needs. Many were lured into fighting with promises of monthly salaries ranging from $400 to $1,000, legal residency for themselves and their families, and even Iranian citizenship in some cases. Their families were offered healthcare and education, and in some instances, fighters were promised legal leniency or amnesty in exchange for military service.

These incentives offered a lifeline for many marginalized, impoverished Afghan youths. Iran systematically recruited and weaponized them—many with prior combat experience in Afghanistan—as strategic assets not only in Syria, but also in Iraq, Yemen, and even Lebanon, as part of Tehran's push to expand its regional footprint.

Refugees on the Frontlines

Iran's exploitation of Afghan refugees in warzones was driven by its broader proxy war strategy. Beyond supporting local militias like Hezbollah, Tehran built a transnational network of fighters, including Afghan Fatemiyoun, Pakistani Zainabiyoun, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, and Yemen's Houthis—all under the command of the Quds Force.

This approach provided Iran with a low-cost, highly effective fighting force, minimizing the risk of direct confrontation or domestic casualties. Afghan fighters helped Tehran sustain relatively low financial and political costs in conflicts like Syria, where they were crucial to preserving the "Axis of Resistance" and creating a land corridor from Tehran to Beirut via Baghdad and Damascus—facilitating the movement of arms and fighters.

Iran also capitalized on religious sentiment to frame its interventions as spiritual obligations. Many Afghan fighters, particularly from the Shia Hazara minority, were recruited under the banner of defending sacred shrines in Syria, such as Sayyida Zaynab's tomb. Units like Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun carried religious connotations, bolstering the perception that Iran's military campaigns were acts of divine justice.

Reports, however, document coercion and forced recruitment, including threats

of deportation for refusal to enlist. Some Afghan children as young as 14 were conscripted into Fatemiyoun, highlighting blatant violations of international law and a cruel exploitation of vulnerable populations.

Quiet Abandonment

As conflicts across the region de-escalate and Iran reconfigures its strategic posture, the need for vast numbers of foreign fighters has diminished. What once were considered strategic assets have become burdens.

This shift is most visible in recent mass deportations. Since early 2025, Iran has ramped up expulsions of Afghan refugees. After a March 10 deadline, over 640,000 Afghans have left Iran, 366,000 of them forcibly, according to UNHCR. Many had similar profiles to previous recruits—married, undocumented, and previously considered "untouchable" due to their service.

The latest wave followed Iran's recent conflict with Israel. UN estimates show nearly 500,000 Afghans have returned home since early June, with daily deportations exceeding 10,000. On some days, up to 40,000 crossed via the Islam Qala border crossing into Herat. Over a 12-day period, that figure reached 300,000. Since January, around one million Afghans have been expelled.

The deportations, often carried out with little notice or planning, have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan—already mired in economic collapse, Taliban rule, and donor fatigue. The returnees are flooding a country ill-equipped to support them.

A Subtle Purge

Beyond deportations, Iran has halted many of the incentives it once offered. Promised citizenships, stipends, and healthcare have evaporated. Residency permits were revoked or left unrenewed, leaving former fighters exposed and unprotected.

Former fighters now face arrest for "disrupting public order" or "membership in unauthorized armed groups." Others were jailed for overstaying expired permits—even those who had fought for Iran. Many returned home bearing both physical and psychological scars.

Some have spoken to international media about receiving blunt messages after their service: "Your role is over. Go home. We can't help you anymore." One Fatemiyoun veteran lamented, "After the war, we were no longer mujahideen. We were unwanted migrants."

Families of fallen or injured fighters, particularly those killed in Syria, have also been neglected, receiving little to no support. In contrast, Hezbollah fighters continue to enjoy generous benefits—underscoring Tehran's preferential

treatment of certain militias.

Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun fighters, once glorified in Iranian state media, have been scrubbed from military parades and resistance celebrations—a symbolic erasure reflecting their diminished status.

Changing Strategy, Diminishing Influence

Iran's shifting stance is rooted in changing regional priorities. After years of expansion in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, Tehran is recalibrating—adopting a more pragmatic, economically driven approach that includes thawing ties with Gulf states like Saudi Arabia.

The de-escalation in Syria, along with Assad's consolidation of power, has reduced Tehran's operational needs. Coupled with harsh economic sanctions and budget constraints, Iran is scaling back its foreign military spending, reducing fighter salaries and incentives.

Though Iran provides no direct aid to refugees, state estimates claim their presence costs Tehran around $10 billion annually due to subsidized goods, healthcare, and education.

Amid escalating tensions, particularly the 12-day conflict with Israel, Iran accused several Afghan migrants of espionage. Many were detained, deprived of basic needs, and charged exorbitant fees to cross the border. Iranian courts have since mandated deportations of all undocumented foreigners, further accelerating expulsions.

Iran also faces mounting international criticism over child soldier recruitment, human rights abuses, and the domestic toll of foreign interventions. Many Afghan fighters had little ideological loyalty, joining for financial gain. Some committed abuses that embarrassed Iran, undermining cohesion and complicating reintegration.

An Uncertain Future for Yesterday's Guests

Iran's abandonment of its Afghan fighters carries grave humanitarian and security implications. Mass deportations have worsened the plight of Afghans returning to an unstable homeland with few resources.

This policy shift raises ethical and political questions: What obligations do nations bear toward their proxy fighters? What becomes of those discarded after serving foreign agendas?

The UN has warned that forcibly returned, battle-hardened fighters could destabilize the region or fall into the hands of extremist groups. Tehran also fears some may return as security threats. Yet Iran isn't abandoning proxies

wholesale—it’s repositioning them.

It’s unlikely that Iran will completely dismantle Fatemiyoun. Instead, the group could be reconstituted as a reserve militia or rapid-response force, or even integrated into Afghan political life if conditions allow—extending Tehran’s reach.

Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, view such networks as existential threats. The fate of Iran’s foreign fighters serves as a chilling reminder of the human cost of geopolitical games—and the fragile future facing those used as instruments of war.

رابط المقال:https://www.noonpost.com/en/363648/