

MULTI-YEAR STRATEGY 2023 - 2025 ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



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1. Strategy

1.1 Executive Summary

The Islamic Republic of Iran, along with Türkiye, is the largest refugee-hosting country, with each hosting 3.4 million refugees. Despite challenges, Iran (Islamic Republic of) has maintained its inclusive approach by providing refugees and asylum-seekers access to healthcare and education within the national systems and to livelihood opportunities. However, economic challenges and an increased refugee and asylum-seeker population are making it harder for the Government to sustain its support, with Iran calling for improved international solidarity and responsibility-sharing to continue assisting refugees.

Guided by a Multi-Year Plan (2022– 2024), UNHCR will contribute to tangible improvements in the lives of refugees and asylum-seekers in Iran (Islamic Republic of) in 2024 by strengthening the protection environment, enhancing access to basic rights and promoting self-reliance and solutions. Close coordination and cooperation with the Government, particularly the National Organization for Migration of the Ministry of Interior, will be key. In 2024, UNHCR's strategy with partners includes assistance for refugees and asylum-seekers in urban areas, where most refugees live side-by-side with the host community, and in the 20 refugee settlements. UNHCR will advocate and work with the Government of Iran (Islamic Republic of) to further expand access to asylum and documentation for people forced to flee, particularly for newly arriving Afghans who may need international protection, and people at risk of statelessness.

Following the takeover of Afghanistan by the de facto Taliban authorities in August 2021, the Government of Iran (Islamic Republic of) estimates more than a million Afghans have fled there. By the end of 2023, it is estimated there will be 767,500 Afghan and Iraqi Amayesh/Hoviat cardholders in Iran (Islamic Republic of), in addition to almost 2.6 million head-counted Afghans. Many who enrolled in the headcount exercise are likely to have arrived in Iran (Islamic Republic of) since 2021. According to Government estimates, another 1.1 million Afghans are present there with various

stay arrangements and documentation types as well as a significant group without documentation.

In 2024, UNHCR will continue exploring opportunities for regional and cross-border programmes to enhance refugees' capacities and ensure opportunities exist for sustainable return in the longer term. Large-scale, safe, durable and dignified voluntary returns seem improbable in the foreseeable future. Other durable solutions remain limited for Afghans, but efforts will continue to expand and secure opportunities for resettlement and complementary pathways.

Promoting greater community engagement, particularly the need to prioritize assistance to the most vulnerable, such as women, girls, and children, will remain central to UNHCR's approach in 2024. It will continue to use cash assistance as a protection tool, particularly for households severely impacted by the challenging economic situation.

Launched in 2012, the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) remains at the core of UNHCR's strategic direction in Iran (Islamic Republic of). The SSAR Support Platform and Core Group will continue to play an important role in gathering like-minded stakeholders and harnessing collective efforts to build the self-reliance of refugees in 2024. Going forward, UNHCR will seek to capitalize on the momentum of the 2023 Global Refugee Forum to obtain tangible pledges from Member States that further these objectives and advance the Global Compact on Refugee framework.

1.2 Situation analysis

For decades, Iran (Islamic Republic of) has demonstrated generosity and hospitality by helping people forced to flee. However, economic challenges and an increased refugee and asylum-seeker population are affecting the Government's ability to sustain its policies. Refugees' needs and vulnerabilities have grown drastically, with most unable to afford basic food, goods and services, including documentation, health, education and housing. As a result, many have had to resort to harmful coping mechanisms. Iran (Islamic Republic of) continues to raise awareness of the need for more international support for refugees already in the country and for the large number of newly arrived Afghans in need of urgent help.

UNHCR is the largest and only UN agency in Iran (Islamic Republic of) with a longstanding presence outside the capital Tehran and offices in Esfahan, Kerman, Mashhad and Shiraz. As the leading agency for the refugee response, UNHCR plays an important representational and convening role between the Government and the international community, particularly regarding humanitarian issues. In view of refugees' increasing needs in the country and challenging international relations, UNHCR's convening role and active efforts to engage donors will be particularly important in 2024. UNHCR will also continue to use its strategic position to improve engagement with other UN and international and national non-governmental

organization partners to ensure a holistic humanitarian response in Iran (Islamic Republic of) that benefits refugees and host communities.

The Government is the custodian of refugee population data in Iran (Islamic Republic of). According to the latest information, some 736,998 refugees possess refugee cards (Amayesh cards for Afghan refugees and Hoviat cards for Iraqi refugees). In 2022, UNHCR welcomed the Government-led headcount exercise of the undocumented Afghan population, including the new arrivals. As a result, some 2.6 million Afghans received a slip granting them a form of temporary protection. In addition, according to Government estimates, an additional 1.1 million Afghans are present in Iran (Islamic Republic of) with some 500,000 potentially lacking any form of documentation. UNHCR continues to advocate that the Government provide disaggregated data and reiterate that the headcount exercise is not a replacement for an accessible asylum system. UNHCR also continues to advocate for more predictable protection status for this population and for the extension of the validity of headcount certificates, which expired in April 2023.

The Government of Iran (Islamic Republic of) estimates that between 1 million and 1.5 million Afghans have sought asylum in the country since the second half of 2021. However, not all new arrivals have remained or will stay in the country. Some may return to their country of origin, resettle in third countries, move to Türkiye or be deported.

A global non-return advisory for Afghanistan issued in August 2021 currently remains in place, having been reconfirmed in the “Guidance note on the international protection needs of people fleeing Afghanistan (update 1)” issued in February 2023. While UNHCR does not promote or favor voluntary repatriation, other durable solutions for Afghans in Iran (Islamic Republic of) are limited. Available resettlement quotas are far lower than the needs of refugees and opportunities for complementary pathways to third countries, such as family reunification, are inadequate. In the absence of such possibilities for durable solutions and considering economic conditions in Iran (Islamic Republic of) for refugees, there is a likelihood that vulnerable Afghans will be increasingly at risk of trafficking to Europe or other destinations, which can put them at greater risk of exploitation and abuse.

It is imperative that support to the Government of Iran (Islamic Republic of) to augment its capacity to host refugees is maintained and expanded in 2024. Consistent with the principles of the Global Compact on Refugees, this includes support for inclusive policies that allow Afghans to benefit from the same public services as Iranian host communities. The Government has already invested a great deal in the well-being of refugees, allowing them access to quality education and health services. Refugees have access to free primary healthcare and can enroll in national public health insurance to reduce their health expenditures, though affordability remains an issue. Refugees have access to free primary and secondary-level education. Iran (Islamic Republic of) also allows refugees to access certain livelihood opportunities, which UNHCR is aiming to bolster through advocacy.

Overall, support to the Government's inclusive policies, particularly in the health and education sectors, is of particular importance, while also addressing specific needs and supporting resilience building of forcibly displaced and stateless people. In collaboration with other UN agencies, enhanced support to Iranian host communities will be required.

Despite challenging international relations, emphasizing depoliticized international cooperation under the refugee-humanitarian domain provides an opportunity to advance responsibility-sharing led by the SSAR Support Platform and its Core Group. This will be critical in supporting Iran (Islamic Republic of) to maintain and implement its inclusive policies. In 2024, additional priorities will include greater engagement with private sector entities, non-governmental organizations, and academia as part of a broader strategy to enhance partnerships and promote international solidarity.

1.3 Vision and strategic orientation

UNHCR's priorities in Iran (Islamic Republic of) include maintaining asylum space, strengthening the protection environment and promoting self-resilience among forcibly displaced and stateless people.

All people in need of international protection must have unimpeded access to an asylum procedure. As Iran (Islamic Republic of) is a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, UNHCR will continue to appeal to the authorities to register and provide adequate documentation to new arrivals as well as Afghans already in the country with international protection needs so they can better access social protection systems and UNHCR's services and solutions.

Registered refugees in Iran (Islamic Republic of) need to renew their Amayesh and Hoviat refugee cards annually to maintain their refugee status. However, the high cost of documentation renewal remains a concern, particularly for refugee women and girls. In 2024, UNHCR will advocate with the Government to ensure documentation is affordable. It will also encourage the regularization of Afghan new arrivals through registration and documentation and underline the importance of receiving accurate and credible data to enable more targeted and effective programming.

While the country has commendably amended its nationality law to allow children born to Iranian mothers and foreign fathers to obtain Iranian citizenship, UNHCR will advocate that it becomes a state party to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. This would consolidate its commitments and progress made in eradicating statelessness. UNHCR will also work with authorities and partners to support access to birth registration for refugees at risk of statelessness.

In 2024, UNHCR will encourage greater access to data collection and analysis, which will help the organization better plan programmes and responses. In coordination with the Government, it will also seek to enhance communication with communities and

support community-based initiatives to boost inclusion and accessibility.

Thanks to the Government's progressive and inclusive policies, refugees can work in a small range of occupations, mostly in construction. However, accessing formal employment remains a challenge, particularly for undocumented Afghan refugees. Many have informal jobs that are unstable, risking further vulnerability. In 2024, UNHCR will look to assist the most affected populations to cover their basic needs through cash assistance while advocating that the Government expands refugees' employment opportunities.

Most Afghans are expected to remain in Iran (Islamic Republic of) in the mid- to short-term, as conditions in Afghanistan are unlikely to be conducive for large-scale returns and resettlement opportunities are limited. In 2024, UNHCR will work with the Government to strengthen inclusive policies and livelihood training that improve refugees' self-reliance, equip them with confidence and skills, and better prepare them to rebuild their lives when safe and durable returns to Afghanistan are possible.

UNHCR will promote resettlement as a strategic protection tool, targeting particularly vulnerable groups whose needs cannot be met in Iran (Islamic Republic of) and cannot return to Afghanistan. Greater engagement with the Government to improve the documentation and identification of vulnerable people will be crucial to resettlement success, as will the Government's commitment to facilitating the departure of new arrivals lacking documentation.

1.4 Age, gender and diversity

In October 2020, the Government shared updated refugee population figures for the first time since 2015. While this was a positive development, disaggregation by sex, age or location was not provided. Similarly, disaggregation has not yet been provided for the new 'head counted' individuals, said by the Government to amount to 2.26 million Afghans in December 2022.

UNHCR relies on extrapolation of existing Government figures, so it continues to advocate with the authorities on the importance of disaggregated data for designing programmes. A specific focus lies on the situation of the following:

- Female-headed households at heightened risk of gender-based violence;
- Survivors or people at risk of gender-based violence;
- People with disabilities or serious medical conditions;
- Undocumented people;
- New arrivals entering Iran (Islamic Republic of) through formal and informal routes;

- Children and young people, particularly those at risk of, or who have already, dropped out of school, as well as unaccompanied and separated minors.

The importance of including refugees within the national protection system has been central to UNHCR's engagement with Government counterparts, specifically the access of unaccompanied and separated children and survivors of gender-based violence to services supported by the State Welfare Organization.

As part of efforts to strengthen accountability to forcibly displaced and stateless people, UNHCR will continue working with the Government to ensure the views of affected populations are also integrated into programmes and activities are appropriately tailored to their needs. Moreover, UNHCR is proactively seeking to engage refugee communities more systematically in coordination with the Government. The information gathered from these activities will continue to improve ongoing and planned responses.

2. Impact statements

By end of 2024, all asylum-seekers have access to asylum systems and refugees and asylum-seekers enjoy improved access to social protection systems and UNHCR services following the adoption of progressive legal policies.

Impact area: Attaining favourable protection environments

Outcome statements

1.1 By 2024, national policies will be enacted to enhance access to documentation, legal assistance and legal remedies for persons in need of international protection

Outcome area: Protection policy and law

1.2. GBV survivors are identified, have access and are aware of existing/strengthened support services, including national support systems

Outcome area: Gender-based violence

1.3. Children are protected from violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation and discrimination and have access to child friendly procedures and inclusive national services

Outcome area: Child protection

1.4 Leverage partnerships among national and international stakeholders to increase knowledge and awareness around the situation of refugees, and asylum-seekers and, in so doing, promote greater collective engagement/tangible responsibility sharing and social cohesion

Outcome area: External engagement and resource mobilization

By 2024, inclusive policies of GIRI across all public services (health, education, social protection and financial inclusion) will continue to be maintained and become further refined, affordable and sustainable for refugees and asylum-seekers.

Impact area: Realizing rights in safe environments

Outcome statements

2.1. Services and assistance to support the most vulnerable people to cover their basic needs is extended and strengthened through an inclusive approach (where possible) with a particular focus on persons with specific needs

Outcome area: Well-being and basic needs

2.2 Refugees and asylum-seekers maintain an inclusive and equitable access to the primary and secondary education system in Iran over duration of multi-year plan

Outcome area: Education

2.3 Refugees and asylum-seekers maintain inclusive and affordable access to primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare over duration of multi-year plan

Outcome area: Healthy lives

2.4.1. General project management services (including warehousing) provided

Outcome area: Operational support and supply chain

By 2024, improved self-sufficiency and self-management is realized by refugees and asylum-seekers as a result of the advancement in inclusive economic policies and access to national social networks and community based mechanisms.

Impact area: Empowering communities and achieving gender equality

Outcome statements

3.1 By 2024, diverse refugees and asylum-seekers are better informed and are able to participate in a progressively more meaningful manner with UNHCR, the Government and partners in programme design, implementation and evaluation while also being able to access safe and effective feedback and response mechanisms

Outcome area: Community engagement and women's empowerment

3.2 By 2024, an increased number of refugees and asylum-seekers enjoy expanded and diversified livelihood opportunities

Outcome area: Self-reliance, economic inclusion and livelihoods

Durable solutions are secured for refugees and asylum-seekers, through a combination of local solutions/inclusion, voluntary return, complementary pathways and resettlement, when appropriate.

Impact area: Securing solutions

Outcome statements

4.1 Potential for voluntary return realized

Outcome area: Voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration

4.2 Increased number of people in need of resettlement identified, and submitted for resettlement

Outcome area: Resettlement and complementary pathways