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The plight of Afghan refugees in Iran

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Decades of war have led to generations of Afghan refugees in Iran. Their treatment under the current regime is worsening, but why now?

Afghan refugees in Iran are increasingly facing an unbearable situation as the state policies towards them become explicitly racist. They are the most vulnerable group of people in the country and they face continuing degrading and discriminatory policies dictated by a state, which ironically preaches ‘Muslim solidarity’. As president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad proscribes his ‘moral vision’ for all the ills of the world, second generation Afghan refugees are treated as second-class citizens in their own country. Some of the new policies towards Afghans take intolerance up to a new level, unprecedented in Iranian history.

I remember, as a child in Iran, my history teacher always spoke with an extreme sense of pride when he talked about the tolerant good old days of the Persian Empire; he was always going on about the fact that Cyrus liberated Jews from Babylon and issued the ‘First Declaration of Human Rights’. He always emphasised the importance of tolerance and how it shaped the ancient Persian Empire. Over the last a few months, as I kept reading the disturbing news about the situation of Afghans in Iran, I could not stop thinking about the paradoxes between the past and the present in my country. As part of the Iranian diaspora who enjoys an equal rights in my host country, I feel deeply embarrassed to see my Afghan counterparts facing such an appalling situation in my country of birth. It is particularly disheartening to see racist policies targeting

many children and young people who were born in Iran, yet face discrimination and humiliation on so many different levels.

Most Afghans who were born in Iran are unable to gain citizenship due to the Iranian law on immigration. Most Afghan children are unable to receive mainstream education and many basic rights are denied to them only because they were born into Afghan families. Intermarriages between Afghans and Iranians are discouraged by the state. Iranian nationality law does not easily recognise the children of such marriages as Iranian citizens. It is particularly harder if an Afghan man marries an Iranian woman.

There is no accurate figure, but there are over two million Afghans living in Iran. Most of them are refugees who fled their country, when Afghanistan became a proxy war zone between the Soviets and Americans from 1979 to 1989. In one of the bloodiest conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century, hundred thousands of people were killed and many more injured. Millions of people had no choice but to flee the burning flames of the war to find refuge in the relatively more stable neighbouring countries of Iran and Pakistan. Most of the Afghans who opted for Iran were ethnic Tajiks, Turkmen and Hazaras who have both linguistic and cultural links to the country, so in theory their stay would be potentially easier, but in practice their life has not been easy in many ways. Although for many years the Iranian state kept its borders open to Afghan refugees, the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has opted for an explicitly racist position towards Afghans.

Lately the government has started the process of forced expulsion of Afghans. These forced evacuations are taking place both at the time when many Afghan families have developed roots in Iranian towns and cities and when Afghanistan is far from being a safe place to force Afghans to return to. Now Afghans are only allowed to live in three provinces, they are not welcome in the remaining twenty eight provinces. Most cities have banned Afghans and the authorities will persecute anyone who offers them shelter or employment. Lately in Fars province the authorities went as far as banning selling food to Afghans. They demanded that all the shopkeepers and bakeries should check the identity of their customers before selling them food. They have warned local businesses that if they continue to sell food to the 'illegal foreign nationals' their businesses will be closed down. Denying basic needs like food and shelter is not only a fundamental violation of human rights, it is also a step towards ethnic cleansing.

Earlier this year during the festival of Sizdah-bedar, an ancient tradition celebrating nature enjoyed by both Afghans and Iranians, authorities in Esfahan openly banned Afghans from entering a major public park to celebrate the event, their reason being, to maintain 'safety and security' of the families. This event had some repercussions and many Iranians openly expressed their opposition towards this racist and humiliating decision against Afghans, but the reality is Afghans are facing systematic discrimination and often their suffering go without being noticed.

Some prominent Iranian cultural figures like Asghar Farhadi, the Oscar winning director, has openly voiced the plight of Afghans and some Iranian civil right groups have condemned the state for its openly racist policies. Nevertheless, the authorities remain determined to continue their new campaign against so-called 'illegal immigration.' Although controlling immigration is the right of any sovereign state, some of the policies targeting Afghans are completely inhumane

and unacceptable. These state policies have contributed to the already hostile attitudes towards Afghans in some grassroots corners of the country. Accordingly, many violent incidents have taken place in which innocent Afghans have been brutalised by the mob purely because of their ethnicity. Not surprisingly, the state is not very responsive towards such crimes.

This raises the question of why, after thirty years, the Iranian state has suddenly become extremely hostile towards Afghans? The first explanation has an external dimension. Tehran is extremely uncomfortable with Afghanistan signing a security pact with the United States. Kabul's closeness with Washington adds to Tehran's sense of insecurity in this fast changing region. The US-Afghan strategic partnership, which officially went into effect in July 2012, is expected to provide the legal status for US forces in Afghanistan. This strategic partnership will provide access to and use of Afghan facilities by US personnel beyond 2014 and insures the US Commitment to seek funding from Congress on an annual basis, so that support can be maintained for the Afghan security forces.

Although the Afghan authorities have repeatedly reassured Iran over their commitment to regional peace, Tehran is highly suspicious of this new strategic alliance in its own backyard. It is possible that Iran is putting pressure on Afghans in Iran to reciprocate what they perceive as the hostile Afghan alliance with 'the Great Satan'. If such a correlation is in place, the situation is going to get much worse for Afghans in Iran as both Washington and Kabul are determined to maintain their mutually beneficial alliance.

A second explanation could relate to the existing Iranian economy which is badly in trouble, so at a time of instability, when the international sanctions have started to bite, the Iranian state is quick to find scapegoats. Although the regime has not officially blamed Afghans for its economic problems, it wants to show that it is in control. By symbolically pushing the 'foreign elements' away from the workforce, it wants to be seen as a 'patriotic regime', which prioritises jobs for Iranians.

Although these two factors may explain Tehran's antagonistic policies towards Afghan refugees, they never act as a justification. The truth is that Afghans are facing an impossible situation, and this should justify the demand for international condemnation of the Iranian state for the way in which it treats these refugees.

Under no circumstances should human rights be a hostage of political conditions and the Iranian state should be reminded about its empty rhetoric and its complaints about the missing 'morality' and 'compassion' in the management of world politics. While President Ahmadinejad continues to lecture the world about a new world order based on 'justice' and 'friendship', the violation of human rights remains systematic in Iran. Maybe before taking it onto the world stage his 'moral leadership' ought to start from home.