Iran: migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons

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Each year, thousands of people are moved illegally – often in dangerous or inhumane conditions – into, through and from Iran.

Trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling are only two forms of irregular migration; the term ‘trafficking’ describes movements of persons against their will, whereas ‘smuggling’ refers to voluntary movements of the migrants. Due to the clandestine nature of irregular migration, it is difficult to estimate the number of persons being trafficked or smuggled and the illegal status of victims tends to prevent them reporting incidents to government authorities.

Trends and dynamics in Iran

Because of its geopolitical situation, Iran is a country of origin, destination and transit for traffickers and smugglers. Long shared borders with countries in crisis led to mass irregular immigration from Afghanistan and Iraq. During the last twenty years, 2.5 million Afghan and Iraqi immigrants have returned to their homes but there are still one million illegal Afghan immigrants in Iran who have either overstayed their legal stay or entered Iran illegally with the assistance of organised criminal smuggling groups.

Due to Iran’s particular location as a bridge between Asia, Europe and the Middle East, people are both trafficked into Iran from Afghanistan, and trafficked through Iran to the Arabian Peninsula and the southern Mediterranean region. Statistics indicate that trafficking of people both into and out of Iran is on the increase.

Recent newspaper reports, supported by the declarations of judicial and law enforcement officials, acknowledge the existence of organised criminal networks involved in the trafficking of narcotics, and small arms as well as people. In this context, of particular concern are reports of trafficking of children (Afghans, as well as Iranians) from Iran to the Persian Gulf Region littoral states for both camel riding/racing and sexual exploitation, as well as from Iran to Pakistan and Afghanistan for drug trafficking. The data is indicative of weak border management as well as established human trafficking networks, particularly along the Afghan border with Iran and Pakistan.

Recent policy initiatives

In recent years, Iran has made progress in combatting migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons at national, regional and international levels.

Legislation: In 2004, the Iranian Parliament ratified a law prohibiting trafficking of persons and other laws to punish both migrant smugglers and illegal migrants.

Prosecution: Iran has increased its law enforcement efforts against trafficking and smuggling. A woman and her accomplice husband, for example, were arrested and convicted for trafficking young girls and women to work in a brothel in Qazvin, as were 20 members of a human trafficking ring in the city of Bileh Savar. During 2004, the Iranian Border Force arrested over 253 Pakistanis smuggled into Iran, some of them seemingly victims of trafficking. According to the local newspapers, in August 2007 police arrested a group including 15 Uzbek women and 10 Iranian men who were trafficking women for the purpose of sexual exploitation from central Asian countries to Arabian countries like UAE and Qatar through Iran. And in September 2005, domestic media reported the Tehran police chief as stating that eight human trafficking networks smuggling mostly Bangladeshis, Afghans and Pakistanis had been broken up and their members arrested.

Protection: The Iranian State Welfare Organization assists victims and those at risk of trafficking through mobile and fixed social emergency centres. These centres provide counselling, legal services and health care. The State Welfare Organization also manages temporary shelters for ‘troubled women’ and facilities for young runaway girls that are available to victims of trafficking as well.

International initiatives: While Iran has become party to several of the relevant Conventions, it has not signed some others. It has however signed separate Memoranda of Understanding with the International Organization of Migration and the International Labour Organization to enhance the capacity of its institutions in combating human trafficking and on security cooperation with Turkey and Afghanistan focusing, among other things, on campaigns against human trafficking at bilateral and regional levels.

Have these policies been effective?

Despite the growing awareness and the increasing literature on this subject, available information in Iran about the magnitude of the problem remains limited. The lack of awareness about the differences between migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons, insufficient information about the causes of all forms of irregular migration and suspicions and reservations towards multilateral cooperation hindered effective action against these crimes over the past decade in Iran.

Many countries punish unauthorised arrivals and do not offer protection for victims of trafficking but it is unfair when a victim is treated the same as a criminal offender. Detention and deportation should not be
Iran therefore urgently needs to:

- conduct information campaigns to educate potential victims about the risks and realities of irregular migration
- provide shelters for those captured in trafficking groups
- train border and law enforcement officers in the differences between the two crimes and how to distinguish victims from criminals.

Meanwhile, it is better to treat all illegal migrants as potential trafficking victims until investigations prove otherwise.

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1. According to the UN Protocol on Trafficking, trafficking is defined as ‘…the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by the threat or use of abduction, fraud, deception, coercion, or the abuse of power or by the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation…’ and in the smuggling protocol, smuggling is defined as ‘…the procurement of the illegal entry into or illegal residence of a person in a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.’
