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Iran Sending Thousands of Afghans to Fight in Syria

Refugees, Migrants Report Deportation Threats

(New York) – **Iran’s** Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has recruited thousands of undocumented Afghans living there to fight in Syria since at least November 2013, Human Rights Watch said today, and a few have reported that Iranian authorities coerced them. Iran has urged the Afghans to defend Shia sacred sites and offered financial incentives and legal residence in Iran to encourage them to join pro-Syrian government militias.

Human Rights Watch in late 2015 interviewed more than two dozen Afghans who had lived in Iran about recruitment by Iranian officials of Afghans to fight in Syria. Some said they or their relatives had been coerced to fight in Syria and either had later fled and reached Greece, or had been deported to Afghanistan for refusing. One 17-year-old said he had been forced to fight without being given the opportunity to refuse. Others said they had volunteered to fight in Syria in Iranian-organized militias, either out of religious conviction or to regularize their residence status in Iran.

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Peter Bouckaert
emergencies director

“Iran has not just offered Afghan refugees and migrants incentives to fight in Syria, but several said they were threatened with deportation back to Afghanistan unless they did,” said Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director at Human Rights Watch. “Faced with this bleak choice, some of these Afghan men and boys fled Iran for Europe.”

Iran hosts an estimated 3 million Afghans, many of whom have fled persecution and repeated bouts of armed conflict in Afghanistan. Only 950,000 have formal legal status in Iran as refugees. The Iranian government **has excluded the remainder from accessing asylum procedures**, leaving many who may want to seek asylum undocumented or dependent on temporary visas.

Funerals for Afghan fighters killed in Syria are frequently held in Iran, sometimes **attended by Iranian officials**. While Iran officially claims that thousands of Afghans living in Iran have volunteered to join the militias, their vulnerable legal position in Iran and the fear of deportation may contribute to their decision, making it less than voluntary. Many said that the threat of arrest and forced conscription in Iran was an important contributing factor in their decision to leave Iran.

Among the cases documented by Human Rights Watch are a 17-year-old Afghan boy who was detained in Tehran with his 17-year-old cousin. The first boy was forced to go to military training and then fight in Syria against his will. His cousin, deemed unfit for military service, was deported. Others were two brothers, ages 32 and 20, and a 16-year-old boy, all of whom were detained in Tehran and coerced to fight in Syria or face deportation.

Other Afghans told Human Rights Watch that they had been detained by Iranian authorities and given the choice between deportation and fighting in Syria, and had chosen deportation. Still others said they had volunteered to receive military training or to fight in Syria on Iran’s behalf, although they cited the need to regularize their status in Iran as an important factor in their decision.

While Iranian law allows conscription by the Iranian military, it is limited to Iranian nationals. The conscription of anyone else, including Afghan nationals, by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps falls outside the conscription allowed by Iranian law, and is thus arbitrary.

Six of those interviewed said that Iranian forces had trained them or their relatives in military camps near Tehran and Shiraz in 2015, and four had fought in Syria for pro-government militias commanded by Iranian officials. Two of the six had joined voluntarily, while the other four said they or their relatives had been coerced or forced to fight.

They said that based on their own experience fighting in Syria and information from others who had fought in Syria, Afghan fighters organized and commanded by Iranian military officials were fighting in many areas of Syria, including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Deir al-Zor, Hama, Latakia, and in areas near the Syrian border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. They said that their Iranian commanders had forced them to conduct dangerous military operations such as advancing against well-entrenched ISIS military positions with only light automatic weapons and without artillery support. They said that in some instances, Iranian commanders threatened to shoot them if they failed to obey orders to advance under fire.

Masheed Ahmadzai, 17 (whose name has been changed, as have those of others interviewed, for safety reasons), said that Iranian security officers had detained him in June 2015 and sent him to Syria to fight. “They did not give us a choice,” he said. “They forced us to train and fight.” He said he spent three months fighting in Syria near Homs and Aleppo, in units commanded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards military officials. Following a short leave in Tehran, he escaped to Turkey and then to Greece.

Baktash Ahmad told Human Rights Watch in October that Iranian police had detained his two brothers in Tehran a year before, and coerced them to fight in Syria, threatening to deport them to Afghanistan if they refused. The family had received no news from one of the brothers for six months. Alireza Muhammad, 28, said that he had volunteered to fight in Syria to obtain money for medical treatment, and had undergone two rounds of military training in Tehran and Shiraz, but that his family persuaded him to run away.

Two Afghan boys, a 16-year-old and the 17-year-old, said they had fought in Syria, and another Afghan, Alireza Muhammad, who underwent military training but did not go to fight in Syria, said that he personally knew Afghan boys as young as 12 fighting in Syria in Iranian-organized groups, and that a 12-year-old boy he knew had been killed in the fighting. International law applicable in Syria prohibits both government forces and non-state armed groups from forcibly recruiting children under 18 or using them in hostilities.

Iranian officials have in recent years limited legal avenues for Afghans to claim asylum in Iran, even as conditions in Afghanistan have continued to deteriorate. These policies pose a serious risk to Afghan asylum seekers who are not among the minority who were previously recognized as refugees, and makes them vulnerable to deportation threats, as well as the reported coercion to fight in Syria.

Threatening registered Afghan refugees with deportation to Afghanistan if they refuse to fight in Syria would amount to refoulement, a practice prohibited under international law. While the cases Human Rights Watch documented involve Afghan nationals living in Iran who had not applied for refugee status, there are ongoing obstacles to registering and obtaining refugee status in Iran. That means that many Afghans living in Iran may be entitled to refugee status, and their return to Afghanistan may amount to refoulement.

“Iran should be offering greater protection to Afghan refugees, not coercively recruiting them to fight for Assad,” Bouckaert said.

For details of interviews with the Afghan men and boys, please see below.

Masheed Ahmadzai

Masheed Ahmadzai, 17, who arrived on a rubber boat on Lesbos Island in Greece, told Human Rights Watch on October 13, 2015, that he had been living undocumented in Tehran for four years, working in construction, when police detained him and his cousin in June. He said the police took them to a military base where there were numerous other detained Afghans, and that military officers selected the men most physically fit:

The military officers selected us, and then they separated us into those fit to fight, and those not fit to fight. They took me with a group of 20 men, but did not select my cousin and deported him to Afghanistan...They did not give us a choice; they forced us to train and fight. They said, “You will fight in Syria and become a martyr, and that is a good thing.” They forced all of us who were physically fit to fight.

He said they took the men to another military base in Varamin, a small city 60 kilometers south of Tehran:

There were about a thousand Afghans and Pakistanis; the Pakistanis were about one-third. Many of the Afghans there told me the Iranian authorities forced them to be at that base. It is true that others had volunteered at the mosques to fight, but the Iranian military officers were much nicer to those volunteers and they were trained at a different base; many went to fight for money. But on our base, the people I talked to said Iranian authorities had forced them to go to the training.

He said religious leaders repeatedly sermonized at the base, telling them they were going to defend the Shia faith in Syria. He said the men had 21 days of military training, including how to dig trenches and use radio communication. The weapons training included the use of heavier weaponry such as rocket-propelled grenades.

In July, he said, the Iranians divided the men into fighting groups of 180, drove them to the military wing of Tehran's airport in buses with blackened windows, and boarded them on flights to Damascus. On arrival, he said, Iranian military officials gave his group weapons and uniforms, and drove them to Homs to fight in an area called Tadmor (also known as Palmyra), in a mixed group of Syrians and Afghans for 20 days. Then their Iranian commanders took them to fight near the Homs' oil refinery, forcing them to advance against Islamic State fighters there:

Daesh was advancing, and the Arabs were retreating. The Syrians were too afraid to fight. So they ordered us to the front to fight against Daesh. There were almost no Syrians with us. They said that if we refused to advance, they would shoot all of us, saying we could not retreat. If people still refused, the commander would shoot them in the leg. He shot two people in my group that way. The commander was Iranian, Hodji Heydar, also called Abu Hamed, from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

He said he fought for three months in Syria, while Afghans who volunteer fight two-month tours of duty. He said that Iranian authorities promised him a 3 million tomans (approximately US\$1,000) per month as salary, but that he only received a total of 5 million tomans (approximately US\$1,650) for his three months of service. The Iranian

authorities flew him back to Tehran in late September, gave him 15 days of leave with a pass allowing him to move freely in Iran, and ordered him to return for a second round of duty. Instead, he fled to Turkey and made his way to Greece on an overcrowded boat. The Iranian authorities warned him that if he didn't return to duty, his family members would face arrest.

Ilya Aziz

Ilya Aziz, 27, tried to flee Afghanistan in September 2015, hoping to cross Iran and reach Western Europe. On the border between Afghanistan and Iran, Iranian border guards fired at his group of 16 people, and then detained them. In the detention camp, the guards separated out Shia men from among the detainees, and pressured them to go Syria to fight, threatening them with deportation and offering them a monthly salary if they agreed:

They tried to put psychological pressure on us, trying to scare us. They said Afghanistan is not a safe country and that the deportation process is dangerous. They said all of this to urge us to fight in Syria. They knew some of us had been born and raised in Iran and had never been to Afghanistan. But we chose deportation over Syria.

All the men were deported to Afghanistan. Ilya then tried again to enter Iran, succeeded, and fled to Turkey and then Lesbos, where Human Rights Watch interviewed him.

Baktash Ahmad

Baktash Ahmad, age unknown, told Human Rights Watch on October 10, 2015, on Lesbos, that Iranian police detained two of his brothers, Mahmoud Ahmad, 20, and Rahman Ahmad, 32, in October 2014 in Tehran as they were going to work. Both men were threatened with deportation to Iran unless they agreed to fight in Syria, he said:

A year ago, they took two of my brothers from the streets to fight, and for a long time we had almost no news from either of them. My young brother came back from one round of fighting and was briefly in Tehran. We saw him for one day and he gave us some money.

We have had no news from my older brother, Rahman, for the past six months. They arrested him a year ago and threatened to deport him to Afghanistan if he didn't go fight in Syria. The authorities said they would deport him to Afghanistan, and we said ok, but when I called Afghanistan and asked my relatives where he was, they said they did not know. After a while, some of his friends came back from fighting in Syria and told us that they had seen him fighting there. His friends have come back, but we have no news from him. He didn't go voluntarily. They arrested him and forced him, he told his friends who fought with him in Syria. His wife and children are here with us [in Greece].

I had to flee because I am so scared of being sent to fight myself. All of my family panicked; my mother became scared for me and said we have to leave Iran, so we came to Greece.

Ali

Ali, 14, told Human Rights Watch by phone from Afghanistan that Iranian border guards detained him together with some 150 other Afghans after they tried to cross from Iran into Turkey. "They took us to a police station near the border, and we had to walk barefoot. They beat us with sticks like animals," he said. "Then they put us on a truck and ordered us to keep our heads down; if we raised our heads they would beat us again."

At the police station, the officers offered the men and the boys in the group the choice between going to fight in Syria or deportation to Afghanistan: "They said to us, 'if anyone wants to go fight in Syria, we will take care of you; otherwise, we will deport you.'" None of the men in the group agreed, and they deported all of them to Afghanistan.

Before his attempt to flee to Turkey, Ali said he lived in the city of Qum, working as a day laborer. Ten undocumented Afghans sharing his hostel said they were going to fight in Syria, he said, "partly because they had no money and feared deportation. They went to the mosque where they would register to fight. The Mullah registers you, and then the army collects you [for training]."

Hamid Ali

[NOTE: Hamid Ali volunteered to fight in Syria, and was not coerced by the Iranian authorities, although he did tell Human Rights Watch that his decision was influenced by being arrested twice in one month and facing possible deportation. His statement is

included here because some of the other Afghans he commanded were coerced, and because of the level of detail he provided Human Rights Watch about Afghans being coerced to fight in Syria by Iranian officials.]

Ali, 24, whom Human Rights Watch interviewed in Norway in early November, said he fled Afghanistan in May 2014, when his commander in the Afghan police tried to detain him on trumped-up charges following a personal dispute. He went to live in Tehran that month as an undocumented worker, but police detained him twice in his first month. He paid a bribe to secure his release the first time, and had an uncle bring his own son's residency card to the police station to secure his release the second time. He found a job as a guard, he said but an Afghan man encouraged him to fight in Syria, citing the need to defend sacred Shia shrines, and gave him a phone number to call. For financial reasons and to escape police harassment, he said he decided to volunteer.

When he called the number, an Iranian official told him to come meet a group of Iranian recruiters who asked him his motivation for wanting to fight in Syria, confirmed that he was an Afghan citizen, and checked his legal status in Iran. After they were satisfied with his answers, they made him sign a series of documents and photographed him. He said the two detentions played an important role in his decision to volunteer. He said that other members in his unit told him Iranian authorities had coerced or pressured them to join, including an Afghan man who said Iranian police had jailed him following a motorbike accident and offered him early release if he went to fight in Syria, which he did to escape prison.

Following his acceptance as a volunteer, Ali was sent to a military training camp called Padegan-e Shahid Pazouki, in Varamin, 60 kilometers south of Tehran, where he trained with other Afghan, Pakistani, and Arab volunteers. They received 19 days of basic military training.

Then they were flown to Damascus, where they first visited the Sayyida Zaynab shrine, an important Shia pilgrimage site. His first deployment was with the all-Shia and mostly Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade for two months in Aleppo, and he received 2 million tomans per month in salary, plus 650,000 tomans in leave money for 21 days of leave. During his second deployment, he was made deputy commander of a unit of Chaharda-o-Neem and spent three months and five days deployed near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

He said the elite Iranian Quds forces were in charge of the Fatemiyoun Brigade:

The Quds Force organized all of this. We could see it from their uniforms. Some of the commanders supervising the Fatemiyoun told us they were Quds Force. They were supposed to wear the uniform specific to the Fatemiyoun, but they said they were Quds.

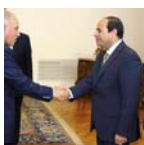
He said the Fatemiyoun force in Syria has military bases in Aleppo, Hama, Lattakia, Damascus, and Homs, and has at least 3,000 to 4,000 fighters active in Syria.

Without receiving any military leave, his unit was then redeployed to the Iraqi border region with a unit of 400 Afghan fighters. “They did not give us any heavy artillery or anything other than our AK-47s,” he said. “We were not even told where we were being taken until we arrived there. They just put us in a truck and pulled a tarpaulin over us, and only allowed us to come out when we got to where we were supposed to be deployed.” Within days, 200 of the 400 fighters were killed in combat.

Badly outgunned, Hamid decided to flee his unit, and made his way back to Tehran to get money to flee. While in Tehran, Iranian officials repeatedly called him and his family, saying he would be imprisoned if he did not immediately return to duty, and threatening unspecified harm to his relatives if he didn’t return to military duty. After he fled, his relatives had to change homes in an attempt to evade Iranian authorities and the consequences of his flight.

Region / Country Afghanistan, Middle East/North Africa, Iran, Syria

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