Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies

ISSN: 2576-5949 (Print) 2576-5957 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rmei20

Adaptation Strategies, Practices and Challenges of Afghans in Iran and the Role of Digital Interaction

Jussi S. Jauhiainen

To cite this article: Jussi S. Jauhiainen (28 Apr 2026): Adaptation Strategies, Practices and Challenges of Afghans in Iran and the Role of Digital Interaction, Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, DOI: 10.1080/25765949.2026.2661132

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2026.2661132

Published online: 28 Apr 2026.

ASIAN JOURNAL OF MIDDLE EASTERN AND ISLAMIC STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2026.2661132

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Adaptation Strategies, Practices and Challenges of Afghans in Iran and the Role of Digital Interaction

Jussi S. Jauhiainen[a,b]

[a]Department of Geography and Geology, University of Turku, Turku, Finland; [b]Institute of Ecology and the Earth Sciences, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

ABSTRACT

This article examines the adaptation strategies and challenges of Afghans in Iran, which hosts over three million Afghans across diverse legal, economic, and social contexts. Based on survey data from more than two thousand Afghan respondents—refugees, legally authorised migrants, and undocumented individuals—supplemented by field observations, the study identifies differentiated and constrained adaptation trajectories, with particular attention to the role of Afghans' digital interaction. Afghan adaptation in Iran is shaped by tensions between individual agency, restrictive institutional frameworks, and societal structures. While some Afghans seek assimilation or integration, barriers imposed by Iranian authorities and host-society resistance largely impede this. Many respond through strategies of spatial separation grounded in strong Afghan identity affiliations and reinforced by digitally mediated ties with Afghanistan and co-nationals. Undocumented unemployed Afghans face the greatest risk of marginalisation, exacerbated by Iran's economic decline and the pre- to post-pandemic crises. Adaptation is a stratified and dynamic process shaped by legal status, economic precarity, and digital practices.

KEYWORDS

Afghans; Iran; adaptation; integration; digital interaction

1. Introduction

This article examines adaptation processes of Afghans in Iran within a broader socio-political, legal, and digital contexts. With over three million individuals—about 3–4% of Iran's population—Afghans constitute a highly diverse and stratified population in terms of legal status, socio-economic background, and regional residence.[1] Their experiences and outcomes of adaptation are shaped by shifting national and global politics, fluctuating economic conditions in Iran, and increasingly, by digital connectivity that extends within and beyond Iran.

CONTACT Jussi S. Jauhiainen jusaja@utu.fi Department of Geography and Geology, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

[1]'Operational data portal Iran', UNHCR, (10 February 2026), available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/irn.

Afghans in Iran live under a complex legal regime comprising recognised refugees, legally authorised immigrants, and undocumented individuals, the latter sometimes and in some places tolerated by the authorities, other times actively deported. This legal stratification produces Afghans' unequal access to rights, services, and opportunities, resulting in varying adaptation strategies and practices as well as integration trajectories. Furthermore, many Afghan migrants arrive from disadvantaged backgrounds, with limited education levels and from economic hardship that impact their potential and position in Iran. The Iranian state plays a decisive role in shaping adaptation outcomes through evolving national and local policies. As a result, Afghan position in Iran ranges from consensual and cohesive to fragmented and conflictual, mirroring the heterogeneity of both the Afghan population and their reception by Iranian society.[2] Not all Afghans in Iran in all regions and over extended time are treated and feel similarly. Detailed attention to periods and places helps to understand adaptation processes at individual, community and societal levels.

Immigrants' adaptation and integration remains a central concern in academic and policy arenas. A vast body of research has explored how immigrants interact with host societies, and how these encounters lead to cultural transformations on either or both sides.[3] Adaptation in this study refers to the psychological and behavioural adjustments Afghans make while living in Iran—learning the language, building social networks, engaging in education and employment, and maintaining emotional well-being. Integration is viewed as a broader, multi-dimensional and reciprocal process including cultural-emotional, structural, social, and spatial dimensions, requiring active participation from both Afghans and the host society.[4] Crucially, as digital interaction is becoming ubiquitous, it is necessary to consider also the use of smartphones, internet, and social media in shaping immigrants' adaptation experiences, cross-border ties, and migration aspirations. The article's attention to digital interaction contributes to scholarship of adaptation processes and the acculturation framework[5] as well as provides novel results about digital interaction's role in immigrants' adaptation prosesses in constrained societal contexts, thus responding to identified conceptual and empirical research gaps.

Two central research questions guide this study: (1) What adaptation strategies and practices do Afghans adopt in Iran? (2) How reciprocal are adaptation strategies and practices between Afghans and the integration opportunities by Iranian institutions and society? The study foregrounds also digital interaction in these processes.

[2]J. Hyndman and W. Giles, Refugees in Extended Exile Living on the Edge (Routledge, London, 2016); H. Crawley and E. Kaytaz, 'Between a rock and a hard place: Afghan migration to Europe from Iran', Social Inclusion 10(3), (2022), pp. 4–14.

[3]J. Kunst, 'Are we facing a 'causality crisis' in acculturation research? the need for a methodological (r)evolution', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 85, (2021), pp. A4-A8.

[4]L. Zandi-Navgran, A. Askari-Nodoushan and H. Afrasiabi, 'Integration of Afghan immigrants in Iran: a multi-grounded theory study', Journal of Intercultural Studies 46(3), (2025), pp. 423–444; C. Ward, 'Down the rabbit hole: acculturation, integration and adaptation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 100, (2024), p.101978.

[5]J. Berry, 'Theories and models of acculturation', in S. Schwartz and J. Unger, eds., Oxford Handbook of Acculturation and Health (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 15–27.

Earlier research on the topic[6] used widely applied J.W. Berry's acculturation framework.[7] The study about Afghan youth and young adults in Iran indicated their diverse adaptation strategies and practices, influenced by legal status, ethnicity, and media consumption. They found the studied Afghan population divided into all four dimensions of acculturation: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation. More recent qualitative research identified key factors affecting Afghans' integration: origin and destination conditions, policies, individual characteristics, and social agency.[8] Despite long-term cultural convergence, structural and identity integration remains elusive for many Afghans in Iran—demonstrating the limitations of acculturation without structural inclusion or policy reform. In addition, after interviewing stateless Afghans in Iran, it was found that in everyday lives, these Afghans were ignored as nonexistent and second-class Muslims, they felt institutional discrimination, and their future was unpredictable.[9] Even second- and third-generation Afghan youths' integration efforts in Iran often failed due to negative host society responses and a perceived climate of discrimination.[10]

Recent research on first- and second-generation Afghan immigrants in Iran indicate that they face distinct but overlapping adaptation challenges.[11] First-generation immigrants often adopt purposefully a separation strategy, maintaining strong ties within Afghan networks and viewing Iran as temporary due to limited rights and their weak sense of belonging there. Second-generation immigrants experience a paradox of belonging though having been born and raised in Iran. Despite gradually achieved social integration, persistent discrimination and exclusion lead them to oscillate between voluntary attempts of assimilation and externally exposed marginalisation, often prompting thoughts of re-emigration. These acculturation patterns reflect Afghans' social conditions, particularly how they are treated by the majority population of Iran. Afghans' different strategies emerge in response to experiences of contact, exclusion, and structural barriers that evolve over time. As a result, Afghans' first and second generations exhibit fluid and contingent adaptation—marked by slow progress, identity tension, and aspirations for onward migration.

Methodologically, the article draws on an original dataset comprising over 2,000 responses from Afghan refugees, legally authorised immigrants, and undocumented individuals in Iran, collected through a semi-structured survey in different parts of the country. The analysis employs descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and logistic

[6]M. Abbasi-Shavazi and R. Sadeghi, 'Socio-cultural adaptation of second-generation Afghans in Iran', International Migration 53(6), (2015), pp. 89–110.
[7]J. Berry, 'Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(6), (2005), pp. 697–712.
[8]L. Zandi-Navgran, A. Askari-Nodoushan and H. Afrasiabi, 'Integration of Afghan immigrants in Iran: a multi-grounded theory study', Journal of Intercultural Studies 46(3), (2025), pp. 423–444.
[9]H. Farahani, M. Nekouei Marvi Langari, L. Golamrej Eliasi, M. Tavakol and T. Toikko, 'How I can trust people when they know exactly what my weakness is?', daily life experiences, and resilience strategies of stateless Afghans in Iran', Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies 23(2), (2023), pp. 322–337.
[10]S. Keshavarzi, J. Jetten, A. Ruhani, K. Fuladi and H. Cakal, 'Caught between two worlds: social identity change among second-generation Afghan immigrants in Iran', Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology 35(4), (2024), pp. 1–17.
[11]L. Zandi-Navgran, J. Berry and H. Afrasiabi, 'The acculturation and adaptation of Afghan immigrants in Iran: a grounded theory study', Journal of Intercultural Communication Research 54(4), (2025), pp. 244–264.

regression to explore their adaptation strategies and practices and integration outcomes. Field observations were also conducted to support the analysis and interpretations.

The results highlight how legal status, origin conditions, digital access, and social agency intersect in divergent pathways of Afghans' adaptation and integration. While some Afghans have accessed education and healthcare under Iran's past moderate policies, key rights—such as employment, property ownership, internal mobility, and naturalisation—remain severely restricted.

This study empirically focuses on the pre–COVID-19 period, while the concluding discussion also reflects on post-pandemic developments up to the mid-2020s. The article contributes by incorporating digital interaction into adaptation processes and acculturation framework, highlighting its significance in constrained social contexts, as exemplified by Afghans in Iran. It concludes by synthesising the findings and outlining directions for future research.

2. Immigrants' adaptation to the host society

Adaptation is a dynamic and multifaceted process shaped by individual agency, social interaction, and structural conditions. It unfolds across multiple life domains and is influenced by generational change, digital practices, and the broader geopolitical context of migration and settlement. Rather than a uniform or linear trajectory, adaptation involves ongoing negotiation between agency, structural opportunity, and transnational engagement[12], which evolve over time and are experienced differently across individuals and locations within the host country.

Immigrants' success in host societies depends not only on individual resources, strategies, and practices—such as education, language proficiency, and work experience—but also on the structural and attitudinal openness of the receiving society. Adaptation thus emerges from the interaction between individual agency and societal conditions. While some immigrants adapt more easily due to accumulated advantages, others face significant constraints stemming from restrictive legal frameworks, insecure residency, limited rights, and xenophobia. These dynamics are clearly evident in the case of Afghans in Iran.

Adaptation is commonly understood as the psychological and behavioural adjustments immigrants make to manage everyday life in a host society. It encompasses emotional well-being, a sense of belonging, and effective participation in education, work, and social relationships.[13] These processes unfold both individually and collectively, as immigrants engage with diaspora communities, host populations, and

[12]J. Berry, 'Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(6), (2005), pp. 697–712; A. Ager and A. Strang, 'Understanding integration: a conceptual framework', Journal of Refugee Studies 21(2), (2008), pp. 166–191; J. Berry, 'Theories and models of acculturation', in S. Schwartz and J. Unger, eds., Oxford Handbook of Acculturation and Health (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 15–27.

[13]J. Berry, 'Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(6), (2005), pp. 697–712.

institutions. Key factors shaping adaptation include self-identification and external categorisation, institutional navigation, and exposure to discrimination.

Adaptation outcomes reflect individuals' ability to function within both their own community and the wider society. Three interrelated dimensions are often distinguished: psychological adaptation, referring to emotional well-being and self-esteem; sociocultural adaptation, involving competence in everyday social, educational, and work-related contexts; and intercultural adaptation, which concerns the development of positive cross-cultural relationships characterised by mutual respect, low prejudice, and support for multiculturalism.[14]

Empirical studies have identified several drivers impacting adaptation, including immigrant's education, length of stay in the host country, local language skills, and familiarity with host norms.[15] Migrants culturally closer to the host population tend to adapt more easily, while strong attachments to the country of origin, especially when combined with cultural or political distance, can hinder adaptation process.[16]

Initial motivation to migrate to the host country also matter. Refugees and others with long-term settlement intentions in the host country are more likely to invest in language learning and social participation, increasing the likelihood of deeper integration to the host society.[17] Migrants arriving for primarily non-economic reasons tend to form deeper social bonds. On the contrary, economic migrants often achieve faster material integration but not necessarily in other domains.[18]

Contextual factors influence adaptation outcomes. Spatial concentration of co-ethnic immigrants impacts integration opportunities as then immigrants tend to form deeper social ties with co-ethnic networks than with natives.[19] Furthermore, also gender dynamics[20] and domain-specific barriers[21] affect adaptation. Ultimately, national immigration and integration policies, local practices and civil society participation matter:

[14]J. Berry, 'Theories and models of acculturation', in S. Schwartz and J. Unger , eds., Oxford Handbook of Acculturation and Health (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 15–27; C. Ward, 'Down the rabbit hole: acculturation, integration and adaptation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 100, (2024), pp. 1–13.

[15]E. Snel, G. Engbersen and A. Leerkes, 'Transnational involvement and social integration', Global Networks 6(3), (2006), pp. 285–308; A. Miglietta and S. Tartaglia, 'The influence of length of stay, linguistic competence, and media exposure in immigrants' adaptation', Cross-Cultural Research 43(1), (2009), pp. 46–61.

[16]E. Janská, J. Hasman and Z. Čermák, 'How transnational migrants integrate: the case of Moldovans living in Czechia and Italy', Czech Sociological Review 57(3), (2021), pp. 267–292.

[17]T. Fokkema and H. de Haas, 'Pre- and post-migration determinants of socio-cultural integration of African immigrants in Italy and Spain', International Migration 53(6), (2011), pp. 3–26; G. Wachter and F. Fleischmann, 'Settlement intentions and immigrant integration: the case of recently arrived EU-immigrants in the Netherlands', International Migration 56(4), (2018), pp. 154–171.

[18]R. Luthra, L. Platt and J. Salamońska, 'Migrant diversity, migration motivations and early integration: the case of Poles in Germany, the Netherlands, London and Dublin', LEQS Discussion Paper Series 74, (2014), pp. 1–65.

[19]E. Agliari, A. Barra, P. Contucci, A. Pizzoferrato and C. Vernia, 'Social interaction effects on immigrant integration', Palgrave Communications 4, (2018), p. 55; V. Fajth and Ö. Bilgili, 'Beyond the isolation thesis: exploring the links between residential concentration and immigrant integration in the Netherlands', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 46(15), (2020), pp. 3252–3276; M. Gilmartin and J. Dagg, 'Spatializing immigrant integration outcomes', Population, Space and Place 27(2), (2021).

[20]S. Cheung. and J. Phillimore, 'Gender and refugee integration: a quantitative analysis of integration and social policy outcomes', Journal of Social Policy 46(2), (2017), pp. 211–230.

[21]M. Navas, M. García, J. Sánchez, A. Rojas, P. Pumares and J. Fernández, 'Relative acculturation extended model (RAEM): new contributions with regard to the study of acculturation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(1), (2005), pp. 21–37.

integration across domains is weakest where multicultural and welfare regimes are poorly coordinated.[22]

Digital interaction with diaspora communities inside and beyond the host country also plays a significant role in adaptation. Earlier adaptation and acculturation frameworks paid limited attention to digital interaction, as intensive cross-border interaction through digital means was relatively uncommon. However, currently it is a ubiquitous feature of immigrants' daily lives.[23] Recent research highlights the concept of digitally mediated acculturation where digital technologies such as smartphones, the internet, and social media reshape migrants' adaptation experiences by facilitating both cross-border ties and host-society engagement.[24] Empirical studies show that online cultural participation through digital platforms influences users' psychological and sociocultural adaptation.[25] It plays a role in migrants' well-being and social integration, usually enhancing well-being by being able to interact also with the country of origin. Social media use has also been linked to ethnic minorities' adjustment processes, indicating the growing relevance of digital interaction in migrant adaptation frameworks.[26] Additionally, research on digital diasporas demonstrates how migrants use online networks to maintain identity, engage in homeland politics, and build global networks online influencing their sense of belonging and integration within host countries.[27]

To explain immigrant adaptation and integration, traditional models typically describe adaptation as a sequential process, often ending with immigrant's cultural assimilation as normatively preferred alternative by the host country, or integration as the most adaptive strategy when politically achievable. However, contemporary theories offer more nuanced, multidimensional views.[28]

First, the *incorporation framework* emphasises that integration outcomes depend on both individual attributes (e.g., human capital) and the reception context of the host society, including government policies, public attitudes, and the co-ethnic networks. Social distance plays a key role: immigrants seen as culturally close are more readily included, while those perceived as distant face greater barriers.[29]

Second, the *life course framework* stresses the evolving interaction between immigrant's agency and the host society's structure across time.[30] Migration disrupts life

[22]R. Koopmans, 'Trade-offs between equality and difference: immigrant integration, multiculturalism and the welfare state in cross-national perspective', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 36(1), (2010), pp. 1–26.
[23]K. van der Zee and J. van Oudenhoven, 'Towards a dynamic approach to acculturation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 88, (2022), pp. 119–124; C. Moran, 'The 'connected migrant': a scoping review', Convergence 29(2), (2023), pp. 288–307.
[24]J. Stuart, C. Ward, J. Karl and R. Musizvingoza, 'Digitally mediated acculturation: intercultural contact in the digital age', Advances in Psychology 6(1), (2025), pp. 1–21.
[25]T. Zhang and B. Ren, 'International students' acculturation: online cultural participation, cultural self-awareness, and cultural identity clarity', Current Psychology 43, (2024), pp. 34484–34495.
[26]J. Hofhuis, M. van Egmond, F. Lutz and K. von Reventlow, 'The effect of social network sites on international students' acculturation, adaptation, and wellbeing', Frontiers in Communication 8, (2023), pp. 1–12.
[27]J. Stuart, C. Ward, J. Karl and R. Musizvingoza, 'Digitally mediated acculturation: intercultural contact in the digital age', Advances in Psychology 6(1), (2025), pp. 1–21.
[28]K. van der Zee and J. van Oudenhoven, 'Towards a dynamic approach to acculturation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 88, (2022), pp. 119–124.
[29]A. Portes and R. Rumbaut, Legacies: the Story of the Immigrant Second Generation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
[30]F. Peters and M. Vink, 'Naturalization and the socio-economic integration of immigrants: a life-course perspective', in G. Freeman and N. Mirilovic, eds., Handbook on Migration and Social Policy (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016).

trajectories, forcing migrants to reconfigure their biographies amid unfamiliar institutions and uncertainties in the host country. It highlights adaptation as a longitudinal and context-sensitive process.

Third, the *transnational digital interaction framework* emphasises multicultural, transnational and digital dimensions of adaptation. Immigrants increasingly maintain active cross-border ties, are connected to various cultures and may construct hybrid, mobile identities.[31] While digital platforms can enhance their resilience and support in the host country, they may also complicate integration by reinforcing detachment from the host context or generating identity ambivalences.[32]

Fourth, the *relative acculturation extended model framework* emphasises interaction between immigrant and host group acculturation strategies, which shapes intergroup relations. It differentiates ethnocultural origin and the influence of psychosocial, behavioural, and demographic variables, indicating the gap between preferred and actual acculturation strategies. Most innovatively, it recognises variation in adaptation across life domains (e.g., housing, work, leisure), showing that immigrants may succeed in adaptation in one domain while struggling in others.[33]

Fifth, the *reciprocal acculturation framework* consists of strategies and practices (Figure 1). Individual immigrants may shift between them across time or domains and the society responds to these.[34] Assimilation means that an immigrant adopts the host culture and discards one's origins—often shaped by power imbalances in a societal melting pot. Integration means that an immigrant is able to maintain one's heritage culture while engaging with the host society that adjusts to accommodate immigrants, recognising their rights and inclusion through multiculturalism along social, cultural, structural and spatial dimensions.[35] Separation refers to preserving one's heritage while limiting engagement with the host society. While it can function as a protective strategy, it may also result in social isolation: sometimes fostering strong intra-ethnic support, but often restricting access to key social, economic, and institutional domains. Marginalisation, by contrast, involves exclusion from both heritage and host cultures

[31]M. Merisalo and J. Jauhiainen, 'Asylum-related migrants' social media use, mobility decisions, and resilience', Journal of Immigrants and Refugee Studies 19(2), (2021), pp. 184–198; K. van der Zee and J. van Oudenhoven, 'Towards a dynamic approach to acculturation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 88, (2022), pp. 119–124.

[32]J. Jauhiainen, D. Eyvazlu, J. Junnila and A. Virnes, 'Digital divides, Internet and social media uses among Afghans in Iran', Technology in Society 70, (2022), pp. 1–10; C. Moran, 'The 'connected migrant': a scoping review', Convergence 29(2), (2023), pp. 288–307.

[33]M. Navas, M. García, J. Sánchez, A. Rojas, P. Pumares and J. Fernández, 'Relative acculturation extended Model (RAEM): new contributions with regard to the study of acculturation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(1), (2005), pp. 21–37; M. Van Ham and T. Tammaru, 'New perspectives on ethnic segregation over time and space, a domains approach', Urban Geography 37(7), (2016), pp. 953–962.

[34]J. Berry, 'Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(6), (2005), pp. 697–712; J. Berry, 'Theories and models of acculturation', in S. Schwartz and J. Unger, eds., Oxford Handbook of Acculturation and Health (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 15–27.

[35]A. Ager and A. Strang, 'Understanding integration: a conceptual framework', Journal of Refugee Studies 21(2), (2008), pp. 166–191; L. Zandi-Navgran, A. Askari-Nodoushan and H. Afrasiabi, 'Integration of Afghan immigrants in Iran: a multi-grounded theory study', Journal of Intercultural Studies 46(3), (2025), pp. 423–444; L. Zandi-Navgran, J. Berry and H. Afrasiabi, 'The acculturation and adaptation of Afghan immigrants in Iran: a grounded theory study', Journal of Intercultural Communication Research 54(4), (2025), pp. 244–264.

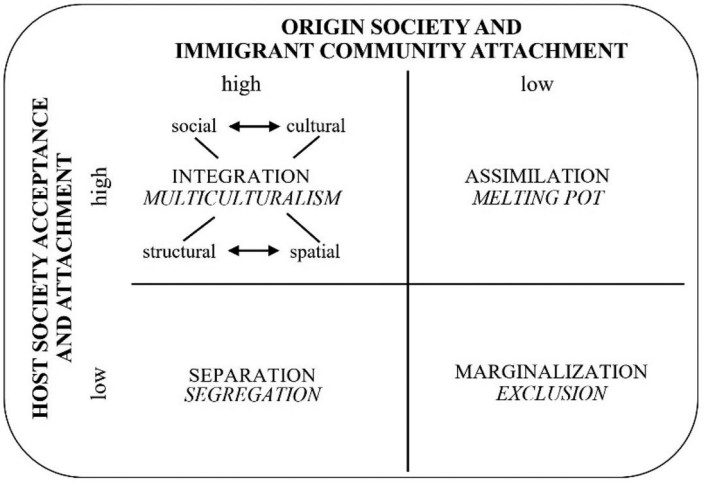

Figure 1. Adaptation-integration framework. Modified from Berry (2017) and Zandi-Navgran et al. (2025a; 2025b).

and is closely linked to legal and social barriers.[36] Developed from the 1980s onward, this framework remains influential but has not incorporated digital interaction, as it largely assumes geographical proximity the factor between immigrants, host-society members, and the country of origin. Today, however, frequent and wide-ranging digital connectivity increasingly reshapes acculturation processes by weakening this geographical determinism.

3. Material and methods

This study draws on survey data from 2,003 Afghans–refugees, legally authorised immigrants, and undocumented individuals–residing in Iran. The 2017 questionnaire included 50 structured, 17 semi-open, and 12 open-ended questions. The 2019 version retained most of these, with a few additions reflecting recent developments. The questions covered respondent backgrounds, migration histories, housing, employment, future migration intentions, and use of smartphones, internet, and social media.

Data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic across diverse legal, geographic, and socio-economic contexts in Iran. The survey was conducted in two phases: the first in October 2017 (638 respondents, 31.9%) in Khuzestan, Kerman, and Razavi Khorasan—covering rural, semi-urban, and refugee settlement areas—and the second between June and September 2019 (1,365 respondents, 68.1%) in the urban areas of Tehran, Isfahan, Kerman, and Mashhad, as explained in detail later below. Pandemic-related restrictions later prevented further fieldwork in the country.

[36]R. Bourhis, L. Moise, S. Perrault and S. Senecal, 'Towards an interactive acculturation model: a social psychological approach', International Journal of Psychology 32(6), (1997), pp. 369–386; J. Berry, 'Theories and models of acculturation', in S. Schwartz and J. Unger, eds., Oxford Handbook of Acculturation and Health (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 15–27.

Fieldwork was authorised by Iranian national authorities and administered in Farsi—a language widely understood by Afghans, particularly Dari speakers. The survey was conducted by one or both of the article's authors, supported by local male and female Afghan and/or Iranian research assistants. Respondents were approached in selected case study areas, and participation was voluntary. Researchers explained the study purpose, assured confidentiality and anonymity, and obtained verbal consent. Surveys were self-completed when possible; otherwise, interviewers assisted by reading questions and recording answers. Daily monitoring ensured the demographic profile of respondents (age, gender, occupation) reflected the observed diversity of Afghans in the study areas—important due to the absence of official statistics on this population. Field observations were conducted and notes taken to support survey.

Survey data entry and coding were conducted by trained assistants under the supervision of a lead author with expertise in survey-based migration research. Open-ended responses were translated into English and coded thematically using NVivo, focusing on themes such as employment, migration, and digital technology use. Quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS and included descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and logistic regression. Model fit and explanatory power were assessed using Nagelkerke R^2 values. Field observation notes complemented the survey results and helped to interpret them.

The survey sample reflected a relatively balanced gender distribution among Afghan respondents: 51.9% male (1,035) and 48.1% female (959). Respondents spanned a wide age range, with a youthful profile—43.1% were aged 19–29, followed by 32.8% aged 30–49, and smaller shares in the 15–18 (10.2%), 50–64 (10.4%), and 65+ (3.4%) brackets. In fact, the majority of Afghans in Iran are below 40 years of age.

Slightly over half (58.2%) of respondents were born in Afghanistan, while a significant 41.8% were born in Iran, highlighting the long-term presence of Afghan families in the country. In terms of educational attainment, 16.1% (317 respondents) had attended university, indicating a rather small share with higher education experience.

Legal status of respondents varied considerably: 60.5% (1,207) held official refugee recognition by Iranian authorities and the UNHCR, 22.3% (445) were legally authorised immigrants, and 17.2% (344) were undocumented. Living arrangements reflected this legal diversity. Among refugees, over half (53.3%) lived in large cities, 44.9% in designated refugee settlements (*mehmannshahr*), and a small number (1.8%) in other locations. In contrast, undocumented migrants were entirely absent from refugee settlements, with the majority residing in major urban centres (78.5%) and the rest in smaller towns or other small locations (21.5%).

Geographically, the largest share of respondents lived in Tehran (29.5%, 590 individuals in Tehran City and Shahr-e Rey, Qarchak, Pishva, Varamin, Pakdasht, Rudehen, Islam Shahr, and Shahriar districts in the Tehran metropolitan area), followed by Isfahan (17.3%, 346 individuals in Zeinabiye, Hasseh, and Sabzeh Meidan neighbourhoods, an industrial area in the north of Isfahan City and Rahnan, Dolat Abad, Qahjavarestan, and Marchin metropolitan areas), Mashhad (12.0%, 240 individuals in Golshahr, Tollab, Panjtan, and other neighbourhoods), and Kerman (9.4%, 189 individuals in Sar-Asiyab, Sarbaz, Modiriyat and other neighbourhoods, as well as from the Sharf-Abad semi-urban area in the northwest city). An additional 4.8% (96 individuals) lived in smaller urban or rural areas in Kerman and Razavi Khorasan, while 27.1% (542 individuals) resided in

refugee settlements in Bani Najjar, Bardsir, Rafsanjan, and Torbat-e-Jam in different parts of the country.

About two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents were digitally active. Of respondents, 70.9% owned a smartphone with internet and 73.7% used the internet in Iran, 58.9% at least weekly. Among respondents from 2019, 75.5% used social media. However, internet and social media use was significantly lower among those born in Afghanistan, aged 50+, or living in refugee settlements—mainly due to limited skills, finances, or infrastructure.[37]

4. Results: Afghans' adaptation agency and digital interaction in Iran and societal and structural responses

In Iran, the adaptation of Afghans—majority of whom are displaced refugees or undocumented migrants—is shaped by a complex interplay of individual characteristics, social environments, and institutional frameworks. Factors such as education level, familiarity with Iranian society, and age at arrival or country of birth significantly influence the ease of adjustment. The linguistic closeness between Dari and Farsi facilitates communication, while having young children often promotes social contacts through schools and neighbourhood networks. Despite these advantages, Afghans' limited legal rights, economic insecurity, and pervasive discrimination continue to hinder their deeper integration.[38]

As a background, Afghan population in Iran can be broadly categorised into five main groups, reflecting varying legal statuses and rights in the country. In Iran, an estimated 3 to 4 million Afghans, that is roughly 3.5–4.5% of the total population, form a diverse and complex migrant population.[39] Below the focus is on their legal and societal position rather than their internal demographic and ethnic differences.

First, a small group of around 30,000 Afghans have acquired Iranian citizenship and are thus naturalised citizens of Iran. While they enjoy nearly full rights, certain positions remain reserved for Iranian-born citizens. Since 2019, citizenship by birth has become legally more accessible for children born to Afghan-Iranian families, signalling a modest shift towards greater inclusion.[40]

Second, approximately 311,000 Afghans hold Afghan passports with long-term Iranian visas, and they are legally authorised immigrants. These individuals typically include university students, researchers, professionals, and entrepreneurs. Their presence in Iran is formally tied to their educational or business activities, making their legal status subject to policy fluctuations. Survey respondents belonging to this group

[37]J. Jauhiainen, D. Eyvazlu, J. Junnila and A. Virnes, 'Digital divides, Internet and social media uses among Afghans in Iran', Technology in Society 70, (2022), pp. 1–10; C. Moran, 'The 'connected migrant': a scoping review', Convergence 29(2), (2023), pp. 288–307.

[38]S. Keshavarzi, J. Jetten, A. Ruhani, K. Fuladi and H. Cakal, 'Caught between two worlds: social identity change among second-generation Afghan immigrants in Iran', Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology 35(4), (2024), pp. 1–17.

[39]'Operational data portal Iran', UNHCR, (10 February 2026), available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/irn.

[40]S. Siavoshi, 'Afghans in Iran: the state and the working of immigration policies', British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 51(1), (2024), pp. 209–223.

were least likely to leave Iran, i.e., having 1.234 odds to remain in Iran. This result was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$; Nagelkerke 0.184) in logistic regression model.

Third, roughly 758,000 Afghans are recognised refugees who hold refugee status, officially approved by both the Iranian government and the international refugee authority UNHCR. Most arrived before 2004, or are descendants of earlier waves. Post-2003, Iran ceased granting refugee status to new arrivals, reflecting shifts in its stance on Afghanistan's security.[41] Refugees are restricted to specific provinces, barred from border regions, and still 4% reside in designated refugee settlements[42], many of which offer limited infrastructure and services. Refugees are allowed to be employed in low-level qualifications.

Fourth, about 1.1 million Afghans fell into a 'tolerated migrant' category before 2025. This includes 275,000 migrants regularised through state programs in the 2010s and another 800,000 who received temporary headcount codes in 2016–2017 and 2022. While tolerated and allowed to reside in Iran, they lack proper employment rights to higher-level jobs. However, their children are generally permitted to attend public schools.

Fifth, the number of undocumented Afghans in Iran has fluctuated annually, typically ranging from 800,000 to 1.8 million. This population consists largely of young and middle-aged men, although families are also present. Official attitudes towards undocumented Afghans vary geographically. In some localities, authorities tolerate their presence due to economic necessity, as many work in labour-intensive sectors such as agriculture, construction, and industry. At the national level, policies and practices shift over time. Annual deportations, around 500,000–750,000 between 2022 and 2024[43], reflect responses to internal and external political pressures, with migrants often targeted to deflect broader societal tensions. Despite deportation, many return irregularly for seasonal work, creating recurring cycles of circular migration. For some young men, such mobility also functions as a rite of passage into adulthood.[44]

In the post-COVID-19 period, Iran's approach towards "tolerated" and undocumented Afghans has changed considerably. Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, more than one million Afghans arrived in Iran. In February 2025, however, the Iranian government announced that headcount slips would not be extended beyond 20 March 2025, and that slip holders would thereafter be treated as undocumented migrants, with only limited exemptions. This policy shift triggered large-scale returns from Iran to Afghanistan, involving approximately 1.9 million people, of whom around 1.3 million were directly deported.[45] Survey respondents belonging to this group of urdocumented migrants were the most likely to leave Iran, with only 0.584 odds of

[41] F. Adelkhah and Z. Olszewska, 'The Iranian Afghans', Iranian Studies 40(2), (2007), pp. 137–165.
[42] 'Operational data portal Iran', UNHCR, (10 February 2026), available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/irn.
[43] 'Returns emergency response #27', UNHCR, (2025), available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120209.
[44] A. Monsutti, 'Migration as a rite of passage: young Afghans building masculinity and adulthood in Iran', Iranian Studies 40(2), (2007), pp. 67–85.
[45] 'Returns emergency response #27', UNHCR, (2025), available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120209.

remaining. This result was statistically significant ($p = 0.005$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.184$) in the logistic regression model.

Iran also serves as a major transit country for Afghans, often undocumented, seeking to reach Türkiye and the EU. These irregular journeys, frequently lasting weeks or months, are shaped by shifting political and economic dynamics across Iran, Afghanistan, Türkiye, and the EU, and were significantly disrupted during the COVID-19 mobility restrictions.[46] More recently, stricter interception practices by Türkiye and intensified EU pushback measures have further reduced the likelihood of completing such migration routes successfully.[47]

Afghans' adaptation opportunities in Iran are shaped by interconnected political (legal status and rights), economic (access to employment), and cultural (social norms and relationships) structures that evolve over time and vary across the country. While these structural factors strongly influence Afghan immigrants' experiences, individual agency—expressed through self-perception, resilience, and adaptation strategies—remains central to how they navigate and respond to these constraints. However, restrictive legal and societal conditions in Iran limit Afghans' adaptation regardless of individual resources, as suggested in adaptation incorporation framework.[48]

The empirical results utilise the terminology from the acculturation framework[49], however, supported by the relative acculturation extended model framework observing domains[50] as well as recognising Afghans' digital interactions.[51] It allows to examine how Afghans' adaptation processes in Iran reflect the interaction between individual choices, Afghan and Iranian communities' responses and systemic structural conditions. As the following section will demonstrate (for details, see Table 1), Afghan respondents' adaptation processes illustrate diverse personal and collective adaption experiences and outcomes within Iran's shifting structural, legal and social landscapes.

4.1. Assimilation—melting pot

For assimilation into a societal melting pot to occur, legal and social conditions must support perceptions of similarity and inclusion between immigrants and host-society members—here, between Afghans and Iranians. In Iran, such conditions remain highly restrictive. The constitution and national legislation draw a clear distinction between

[46] J. Jauhiainen and D. Eyvazlu, 'Undocumented migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic: similar and dissimilar COVID-19 stories comparing Finland and Iran', in S. Brunn and D. Gilbreath, eds., COVID-19 and a World of Ad Hoc Geographies, pp. 1193–1215. (Berlin: Springer, 2022).
[47] M. Ambrosini and M. Hajer, Irregular Migration (Cheltenham: Springer, 2023).
[48] A. Portes and R. Rumbaut, Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
[49] J. Berry, 'Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(6), (2005), pp. 697–712; J. Berry, 'Theories and models of acculturation', in S. Schwartz and J. Unger , eds., Oxford Handbook of Acculturation and Health (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 15–27.
[50] M. Navas, M. García, J. Sánchez, A. Rojas, P. Pumares and J. Fernández, 'Relative acculturation extended model (RAEM): new contributions with regard to the study of acculturation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(1), (2005), pp. 21–37.
[51] J. Jauhiainen, D. Eyvazlu, J. Junnila and A. Virnes, 'Digital divides, Internet and social media uses among Afghans in Iran', Technology in Society 70, (2022), pp.1-13; C. Moran, 'The 'connected migrant': a scoping review', Convergence 29(2), (2023), pp. 288–307.

Table 1. Afghan respondents' adaptation to Iran (%).

	When I am in Iran, I feel like I belong to Iran				Having close Being Iranian friends employed				Most likely I will live the rest of my life in Iran			
	agree	do not know	disagree	N	yes	N	yes	N	agree	do not know	disagree	N
Status												
Non-camp refugee	24.9	17.1	57.9	630	63.3	640	53.6	638	28.7	39.4	31.9	652
Camp refugee	. .	. .	. .				52.6	542	40.0	34.8	25.2	503
Legal immigrant	27.7	15.2	57.1	429	72.1	444	57.3	424	24.7	34.2	41.1	433
Undocumented	17.2	12.4	70.4	267	48.5	268	69.3	336	23.7	23.4	53.0	338
Gender												
Man	26.1	14.9	59.0	685	64.3	697	77.8	1024	29.3	31.1	39.6	1006
Woman	21.9	16.5	61.6	638	62.6	652	33.8	1024	30.2	37.9	31.9	918
Age												
15–18	25.6	16.5	57.9	121	68.3	123	44.7	197	20.9	39.8	39.3	196
19–29	21.6	16.5	61.9	649	65.6	660	56.5	832	24.2	32.3	43.5	835
30–49	26.1	13.7	60.2	394	63.0	403	63.3	640	30.0	37.8	32.2	624
50–64	25.8	15.6	58.6	128	52.7	131	61.0	200	51.2	28.1	20.7	203
65–	40.0	17.1	42.9	35	44.4	36	22.1	68	58.2	28.4	13.4	67
Country of birth												
Afghanistan	22.6	13.0	64.5	648	52.6	661	60.1	968	34.4	30.7	34.9	964
Iran	26.1	18.1	55.8	667	73.6	679	53.3	689	22.4	38.2	39.4	696
Total	24.2	15.6	60.2	1332	63.3	1358	56.8	1946	29.8	34.3	35.9	1932

Source: Own surveys conducted among Afghans in Iran (see 3. Material and methods).

citizens and non-citizens, granting citizenship by birth only through Iranian parentage. Children of Afghan–Iranian marriages may qualify for naturalisation[52],but only after meeting strict criteria, including adulthood, years of legal residence, a clean criminal record, and other administrative requirements. In practice, very few Afghans are naturalised each year, and even naturalised citizens are excluded from certain political, economic, and legal positions reserved for Iranians by birth. Although recent reforms have eased citizenship access for children of mixed marriages, these affect only a small share of Afghans; overall, roughly 1% of Afghans in Iran are naturalised.

Assimilation also presupposes societal acceptance. Prior research indicates that many Iranians hold attitudes of cultural or ethnic superiority towards Afghans, resulting in widespread ethnically-based discrimination.[53] Even for naturalised Afghans, full social inclusion is not guaranteed, especially when linguistic or physical differences persist. Our field observations in the Mashhad region suggest that some second- and third-generation Afghans, particularly Tajiks with less pronounced physical distinctions between them and Iranians, may assimilate more easily, while visibly distinct groups such as Hazaras, who are overrepresented among undocumented migrants, face greater barriers.

Despite these constraints, some Afghans expressed a strong desire to assimilate, particularly those seeking long-term residence in Iran. Many have never lived in Afghanistan or even visited it and maintain few ties to it, sometimes distancing

[52]S. Siavoshi, 'Afghans in Iran: the state and the working of immigration policies', British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 51(1), (2024), pp. 209–223.
[53]H. Farahani, M. Nekouei Marvi Langari, L. Golamrej Eliasi, M. Tavakol and T. Toikko,'How I can trust people when they know exactly what my weakness is?', daily life experiences, and resilience strategies of stateless Afghans in Iran', Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies 23(2), (2023), pp. 322–337.

themselves from other Afghans in Iran. For them, assimilation offers a way to redefine identity by aligning with Iranian society. However, persistent legal and social barriers often frustrate these aspirations, undermining well-being and fostering psychological alienation, declining life satisfaction, or interest in onward migration, particularly to Türkiye or the EU. When aspirations to assimilate are not met, these individuals' perceptions of Iran's political, economic, and social environment tend to deteriorate—similar to immigrant communities in the EU facing challenges to intentional assimilation into the mainstream population.[54]

Partial or domain-specific assimilation nevertheless occurs as suggested in relative acculturation extended model framework.[55] Some younger, upwardly mobile Afghans adopt Iranian names, nicknames, clothing, and cultural preferences in music and fashion, as observed in the field. Previous research shows assimilation to be most strongly associated with long family residence in Iran, Iranian schooling, Tajik ethnicity, Shi'a affiliation, female gender, residence in affluent Iranian neighbourhoods, exposure to Iranian media, and higher life satisfaction in Iran.[56]

In the present survey, assimilation-related indicators included a strong sense of belonging to Iran and an intention to remain long term. Among the 2,003 respondents, 24.2% reported feeling they belonged in Iran and 29.8% intended to stay for life—most commonly refugees living outside formal settlements and legally authorised migrants, particularly in Razavi Khorasan and Tehran. These groups were also less engaged with Afghanistan and migration-related digital information networks. Their use of smart phones and the internet did not substantially differ from younger host society population. While some older Afghans reported belonging after decades in Iran, this reflected local rootedness rather than full assimilation. Structural and societal barriers persist, and Iran remains far from a melting-pot society.

4.2. Integration—multiculturalism

The integration of Afghans in Iran is shaped by the interplay of legal structures, political constraints, societal attitudes, and individual agency. Integration here does not necessarily imply full equality with Iranian citizens but rather the possibility of stable coexistence and social participation in a partially multicultural society. In principle, integration can benefit both immigrants and host society by strengthening social cohesion, creativity, and economic activity through diversity.

In practice, integration opportunities in Iran are primarily regulated by national authorities and reinforced by societal actors. For nationalist and conservative segments of Iranian society, Afghan integration is often perceived as a threat to national identity and economic opportunities. Consequently, authorities maintain extensive restrictions

[54]R. Alba, 'Bright vs. blurred boundaries: second-generation assimilation and exclusion in France, Germany, and the United States', Ethnic and Racial Studies 28(1), (2005), pp. 20–49.
[55]M. Navas, M. García, J. Sánchez, A. Rojas, P. Pumares and J. Fernández, 'Relative acculturation extended model (RAEM): new contributions with regard to the study of acculturation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(1), (2005), 21–37.
[56]M. Abbasi-Shavazi and R. Sadeghi, 'Socio-cultural adaptation of second-generation Afghans in Iran', International Migration 53(6), (2015), pp. 89–110.

on Afghans' rights, including limits on property ownership, public-sector employment, business activities, high-quality jobs, and residence in certain provinces. Some restrictions have been eased—such as access to driver's licences, SIM cards, and public healthcare[57], but Afghans remain excluded from political participation, including voting and candidacy. These structural exclusions constrain both legal and social integration[58], and Iran has not developed into a genuinely multicultural society. As a result, Afghans tend to be integrated in specific domains such as language, work, or social relations but not across legal, political, and economic spheres simultaneously (Table 1).

A notable change occurred in 2015, when Iran allowed all Afghan children, including undocumented migrants, to enrol in public schools. Field observations nevertheless indicate continued unequal treatment by peers and teachers. Although Afghan students may access higher education, many face post-graduation employment barriers and, in some cases, compulsory return to Afghanistan, discouraging degree completion. These institutional constraints limit professional advancement and longer-term integration.

Despite these barriers, many Afghans, especially second- and third-generation residents, pursue integration in everyday life. They share schools, workplaces, and leisure spaces with Iranians, and in some sectors Afghan skills have been incorporated into local labour markets. Linguistic integration is widespread: nearly all survey respondents were fluent in Farsi, including native Pashto speakers. Indicators of higher integration included being born in Iran or residing there for decades, strong neighbourhood attachment, female gender, and belonging to the youngest or oldest age groups. Yet 80.2% of respondents reported difficulties obtaining long-term residence permits, often prompting consideration of onward migration, mainly to Afghanistan or the EU. Those most locally integrated were the least interested in migrating abroad.

Employment provides integration in at least one societal domain. the majority of respondents (56.8%) were employed, with very high employment rates among men aged 30–49 (89.7%) and Afghan-born respondents living outside large cities (81.3%). Among employed Afghans, the majority (56.3%) worked with Iranian colleagues (17.9% with many and 38.4% with at least one), suggesting moderate opportunities for social integration through the workplace.

In the free time leisure domain, friendships with Iranians were a key indicator of integration. Nearly half of respondents (47.1%) reported having at least one Iranian friend in their current residential neighbourhood (14.5% had many and 32.6% had one). Having Iranian friends was most common among those born in Iran (73.6% vs. those born in Afghanistan, 52.6%); the youngest aged 15–18 (68.3% vs. the oldest over 65, 44.4%); legally authorised immigrants (72.1%, vs. refugees, 63.3%, or undocumented migrants, 48.5%); and among those with higher educational attainment. Afghans interacted also digitally with Iranian friends. Gender and employment status showed no significant effect. Despite such social ties, many still considered leaving Iran.

[57]J. Christensen, 'Guests or trash? Iran's precarious policies towards the Afghan refugees in the wake of sanctions and regional wars', DIIS Report 2016, (2016), p. 11.
[58]A. Ager and A. Strang, 'Understanding integration: a conceptual framework', Journal of Refugee Studies 21(2), (2008), pp. 166–191.

A sense of belonging to Iran was most common among respondents aged 65 and over, though even in this group it was expressed by only 40.0% and often referred primarily to the local neighbourhood. Feelings of fair treatment varied by religious affiliation: fewer Shi'a respondents (22.1%) reported being treated well compared to Sunnis (33.9%), reflecting unmet expectations of intra-religious solidarity.

Intentions to remain in Iran for life may indicate either integration or resignation in the absence of alternatives. Older and married respondents were more likely to plan permanent residence, while undocumented migrants were less likely to do so, consistent with their insecure legal status. Interestingly, unemployed respondents were more likely than employed Afghans to intend to remain in Iran, suggesting that employment alone does not ensure long-term integration, as many employed Afghans view their stay as temporary.

4.3. Separation—segregation

In contexts where assimilation and integration are structurally obstructed or socially discouraged, separation can emerge as a purposeful and preferred adaptation strategy. In Iran, many Afghans reside in spatially and ethnically segregated communities in specific neighbourhoods in major cities or entire refugee settlements tha are composed predominantly or entirely of Afghans, as observed across all refugee settlements and several urban areas included in the fieldwork. Separation may also be a conscious choice through which Afghans preserve their identity and manage everyday challenges, reflecting individual agency rather than mere exclusion.

Remaining within culturally homogeneous peer groups provides psychological security, facilitates the continuity of cultural practices, and offers social support in the face of discrimination. For many first- to third-generation Afghans, this orientation reinforces identification with Afghanistan. These individuals often assert a distinct exclusively Afghan identity and do not perceive simultaneous belonging to both Afghan and Iranian cultures. Adaptation under protracted insecurity and repeated crises is non-linear and reversible across time and generations as discussed in life course adaptation framework.[59]

Consistent with earlier research[60], separation was particularly pronounced among undocumented migrants, driven by experienced or anticipated discrimination and fear of detection and deportation. Legal vulnerability thus intensifies social withdrawal. Adaptation strategies, however, may differ between public and private domains. While public expressions of Afghan nationalism are discouraged by Iranian authorities, field observations indicate that within private spaces—homes and community gatherings—symbolic expressions of Afghan identity, including decorations, clothing, food, music, and national imagery, are widespread among separation-oriented individuals.

[59]F. Peters and M. Vink, 'Naturalization and the socio-economic integration of immigrants: a life-course perspective', in G. Freeman and N. Mirilovic, eds., Handbook on Migration and Social Policy (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016).
[60]M. Abbasi-Shavazi and R. Sadeghi, 'Socio-cultural adaptation of second-generation Afghans in Iran', International Migration 53(6), (2015), pp. 89–110.

Empirically, separation was reflected in minimal engagement with Iranian society and limited interpersonal ties with Iranians. A majority of respondents born in Afghanistan (52.6%) reported having no close Iranian friends. Separation through not having any Iranian friends was especially high in refugee settlements (89.0%) and in Khuzestan (87.9%), and remained prevalent in Kerman (53.4%). It was also common among undocumented migrants (48.5%) and respondents aged 65 and over (44.4%).

Digital practices provide an additional lens on separation. A small subgroup (8.4%) of internet-using respondents followed developments in Afghanistan while avoiding digitally mediated information about Iran or Europe, or digital interaction with Iranians. These individuals, primarily older, Afghan-born, and legally authorised migrants in Tehran and Isfahan, were both physically and digitally oriented towards Afghanistan. Notably, over half (59.5%) nonetheless reported having at least one Iranian friend, suggesting that strong identification with Afghan identity does not necessarily exclude all cross-cultural interaction.

4.4. Marginalisation—exclusion

Marginalisation constitutes an undesirable and disempowering adaptation outcome in which immigrants fail to achieve meaningful inclusion in either the host society or their own ethnic community, resulting in societal exclusion. Among Afghans in Iran, marginalisation emerges both from structural constraints—most notably undocumented legal status—and from unsuccessful attempts at assimilation, where individuals no longer identify with Afghan communities or never did so, yet are not accepted as Iranian. In such cases, discrimination is experienced from both sides of the identity spectrum.

In the Iranian context, marginalisation is primarily driven by structural barriers, including limited legal protection, restricted access to stable employment, constrained mobility, and weak social ties. These conditions have been intensified by external shocks such as COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions on social interaction, as well as international economic sanctions that sharply reduced job opportunities in labour-intensive sectors where Afghans are overrepresented. National policies have further reinforced exclusion, as Afghans are at times blamed for broader social and economic challenges.

Empirically, marginalisation was reflected in cumulative disadvantage across multiple domains: unemployment, lack of Iranian social ties, weak or absent feelings of belonging to Iran, perceived poor treatment, and pessimism about the future. Only about 1% of respondents exhibited all these characteristics simultaneously and were also detached from Afghan culture. However, a substantially larger share experienced partial or domain-specific marginalisation, indicating layered exclusion rather than a single uniform condition. These individuals typically lacked access to supportive social, economic, and human capital, struggled to manage everyday life, and remained excluded from key relational, occupational, and civic spheres. Gendered patterns of marginalisation were evident in specific domains. Employment rates among female Afghan respondents were low, with only 33.8% employed and none among those aged 65 or older, highlighting persistent gender- and generation-based exclusion from public and economic life.

Consistent with earlier findings[61], marginalisation was not confined to the least educated or economically poorest Afghans. Many marginalised individuals were men with relatively high education, Hazara background, Iranian schooling, legal residence, and even affluent family origins. This indicates how human capital alone cannot offset exclusion when societal attitudes, institutional barriers, and ethnonational hierarchies restrict upward mobility.

Digital practices further differentiated experiences of marginalisation. Many marginalised respondents lacked access to digital resources and skills, leaving them disconnected from Afghan diasporas and developments in Afghanistan. In contrast, a smaller subgroup maintained regular digital contact with Afghans but only in Europe and actively sought migration-related information. Although excluded in Iran, these individuals developed transnational orientations, using digital interaction to imagine alternative futures beyond their immediate constraints. Finally, younger respondents were significantly less likely to intend to remain in Iran. Those under 30 had substantially lower odds of staying (odds ratio = −1.568), a statistically significant result ($p < 0.001$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.184$), indicating that marginalisation combined with future-oriented digital engagement fuels aspirations for onward migration.

5. Conclusions

This article examined the adaptation strategies of Afghans in Iran, focusing on how individual agency interacts with structural and societal constraints in a highly restrictive context. Drawing on Berry's acculturation typology[62], adaptation is conceptualised as a fluid and dynamic process rather than a linear or stable outcome. Afghans in Iran navigate between assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalisation within a society that offers limited space for multiculturalism or meaningful integration.

Empirically, the analysis focused on the pre-pandemic period and is based on large-scale survey data, enabling a more fine-grained assessment than much of the existing literature. Despite cultural, linguistic, and religious affinities with Iranians, Afghans' adaptation remains constrained by structural barriers such as insecure legal status, economic precarity, and pervasive xenophobia. Language proficiency and access to education improve adaptation prospects, particularly for those aiming at long-term settlement. Some Afghans sought assimilation through linguistic adaptation and cultural alignment, although these efforts were often unsuccessful. Others adopted deliberate strategies of separation by residing in spatial enclaves that sustained strong Afghan ethnic ties and cultural distinctiveness. Some undocumented and unemployed Afghans, lacking legal rights and supportive networks, were pushed into marginalisation. Individuals planning onward migration or return tended to remain less socially

[61] M. Abbasi-Shavazi and R. Sadeghi, 'Socio-cultural adaptation of second-generation Afghans in Iran', International Migration 53(6), (2015), pp. 89–110.

[62] J. Berry, 'Acculturation: living successfully in two cultures', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(6), (2005), pp. 697–712; J. Berry, 'Theories and models of acculturation', in S. Schwartz and J. Unger, eds., Oxford Handbook of Acculturation and Health (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 15–27.

included. These findings align with recent research[63], but the article advances the field by providing more systematic and detailed empirical evidence on Afghans' differentiated adaptation in Iran.

This study contributes to incorporation theory[64] by showing how restrictive legal and societal conditions in Iran constrain Afghans' integration regardless of individual resources, producing fragmented rather than holistic incorporation. It strengthens a life-course perspective[65] by demonstrating that adaptation under protracted insecurity is non-linear and often reversible across time and generations. The study also extends theories of transnational digital interaction[66] by evidencing how connectivity can both supports resilience and identity while simultaneously reinforcing separation and detachment in constrained settings. Finally, it enriches the relative acculturation extended model[67] by highlighting gaps between preferred and realised acculturation strategies and strong variation across life domains. A key novel contribution is the inclusion of digital interaction in acculturation frameworks:[68] adaptation emerges as a multi-layered process shaped by intertwined offline and online practices. While frequent smartphone and social media use helps many maintain Afghan identity through sustained ties to Afghanistan, for others digitally mediated connections beyond both Afghanistan and Iran deepen disengagement from the host society as well as local Afghan networks.

The adaptation context has become increasingly adverse in the 2020s. Iran's economic deterioration driven by sanctions, inflation, and currency collapse has weakened Afghan employment opportunities, social security, and remittance capacity.[69] The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified precarity by restricting mobility, access to services, and employment. Broader geopolitical developments have increased external pressures on Iran, while rising anti-immigrant sentiment, amplified by state rhetoric and online misinformation, has coincided with stricter controls and deportations,

[63]For example, H. Farahani, M. Nekouei Marvi Langari, L. Golamrej Eliasi, M. Tavakol and T. Toikko, 'How I can trust people when they know exactly what my weakness is?',daily life experiences, and resilience strategies of stateless Afghans in Iran', Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies 23(2), (2023), pp. 322–337; S. Siavoshi, 'Afghans in Iran: the state and the working of immigration policies', British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 51(1), (2024), pp. 209–223; L. Zandi-Navgran, A. Askari-Nodoushan and H. Afrasiabi, 'Integration of Afghan immigrants in Iran: a multi-grounded theory study', Journal of Intercultural Studies 46(3), (2025), pp. 423–444; L. Zandi-Navgran, J. Berry and H. Afrasiabi, 'The acculturation and adaptation of Afghan immigrants in Iran: a grounded theory study', Journal of Intercultural Communication Research 54(4), (2025), pp. 244–264.

[64]A. Portes and R. Rumbaut, Legacies: the Story of the Immigrant Second Generation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[65]F. Peters and M. Vink, 'Naturalization and the socio-economic integration of immigrants: a life-course perspective', in G. Freeman and N. Mirilovic, eds., Handbook on Migration and Social Policy (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016).

[66]C. Moran, 'The 'connected migrant': a scoping review', Convergence 29(2), (2023), pp. 288–307.

[67]M. Navas, M. García, J. Sánchez, A. Rojas, P. Pumares and J. Fernández, 'Relative acculturation extended model (RAEM): new contributions with regard to the study of acculturation', International Journal of Intercultural Relations 29(1), (2005), pp. 21–37.

[68]J. Berry, 'Theories and models of acculturation', in S. Schwartz and J. Unger , eds., Oxford Handbook of Acculturation and Health (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 15–27; see also J. Stuart, C. Ward, J. Karl and R. Musizvingoza, 'Digitally mediated acculturation: intercultural contact in the digital age', Advances in Psychology 6(1), (2025), pp. 1–21.

[69]Hyndman and Giles, 2017; H. Farahani, M. Nekouei Marvi Langari, L. Golamrej Eliasi, M. Tavakol and T. Toikko, 'How I can trust people when they know exactly what my weakness is?', daily life experiences, and resilience strategies of stateless Afghans in Iran', Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies 23(2), (2023), pp. 322–337.

especially under post-pandemic political conservatism.[70] Following the re-establishing of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan in 2021, Afghans started to flee to Iran due to insecurity, social biases, economic hardships, and the appeal of return diminished.[71] Episodes of internal and regional unrest in the mid-2020s resulted in hardened policies towards Afghans, who are frequently targeted during periods of instability, a common destiny of immigrants in uncertain times. Iran's recent national policies have intensified the legal precarity of Afghans residing in the country, fostered by large-scale deportations to Afghanistan.[72] At the same time, migration options to other destinations remain limited, as post-2015 EU border and asylum regimes have significantly constrained irregular routes towards Europe. As a result, many Afghans in Iran are trapped in a condition of prolonged economic and political limbo, with few viable prospects for stability or onward mobility.

The article concludes by calling for further research on how immigrants' legal status, social positioning, and digital practices intersect in shaping their adaptation in contexts of exclusion and constraint, such as that faced by Afghans in Iran.

Acknowledgments

Johanna Junnila and Ada Virnes are acknowledged for their support in the analysis of the empirical material.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Funding

The fieldwork was supported by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland project URMI.

ORCID

Jussi S. Jauhiainen http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8095-8240

[70]S. Keshavarzi, J. Jetten, A. Ruhani, K. Fuladi and H. Cakal, 'Caught between two worlds: social identity change among second-generation Afghan immigrants in Iran', Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology 35(4), (2024), pp. 1–17; S. Siavoshi, 'Afghans in Iran: the state and the working of immigration policies', British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 51(1), (2024), pp. 209–223; 'Operational data portal Iran', UNHCR, (10 February 2026), available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/irn.

[71]R. Sadeghi and L. Zandi-Navgran, 'Taliban takeover and migration to Iran: a qualitative study of dimensions and factors of migration decision-making among Afghan immigrants in Tehran', Journal of Social Problems of Iran 16(1), (2025), pp. 71–93.

[72]'Returns emergency response #27', UNHCR, (2025), available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120209.