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Acute Crisis Fuelling Chronic Insecurity: Migration Dynamics in the Context of the US–Israel v. Iran Conflict (2023–2026)

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Abstract

The study examines how long-standing structural human insecurity in Iran is likely to evolve into a large-scale migration crisis following the sanctions and recent U.S. military intervention in 2026. Rather than interpreting migration solely as an immediate reaction to war, the study conceptualizes it as a rational risk-management process in which accumulated structural deficits—democratic, demographic, and developmental (3D)—interact with individual migration capacities (4C: financial, social, human, and physical capitals). The military intervention did not create migration from scratch; rather, it acted as a catalyst that intensified pre-existing insecurity and pushed it toward a life-threatening threshold, thereby activating latent displacement dynamics. At the regional level, established Iranian diaspora networks in neighbouring countries, particularly Türkiye, generate a “magnet effect” that lowers migration costs and facilitates cross-border mobility. In contrast, individuals with limited physical capacity often experience “forced immobility,” becoming trapped within the country despite high migration motivations. At the global level, highly skilled individuals tend to transform the crisis into an opportunity for status restoration by pursuing migration to Western destinations. Overall, we argue that Iran-driven displacement is not a purely spontaneous humanitarian response but a structured process shaped by the interaction of structural vulnerabilities and individual capacities. As such, it constitutes a broader stress test for regional governance systems and the global migration regime.

Keywords: Insecurity, Crisis, Iran, USA, Israel, War, Conflict Model of Migration, Türkiye, Migration

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Introduction

Two of the authors of this article teach at a university in Van, the eastern city of Türkiye bordering with Iran. Van and the long land border along the city's mountainous eastern frontier represent the main gateway for population movements, exclusively one-way traffic, between Iran and Türkiye. Political troubles in Iran and further east have historically increased pressure on this land border and the city. Van is a vibrant, ethnically Kurdish city spreading around the south-eastern shores of Lake Van and is a regional hub for trade and culture.

Mass population movements are seen as reflecting a structural and persistent human insecurity rather than being solely the result of momentary crises (Vietti & Scribner, 2013). In the Iranian context, this insecurity goes beyond individual shocks and permeates daily life, representing a chronic state that has persisted since the 1979 Islamic Revolution and has deepened with the escalation of sanctions, particularly since 2018. This situation can be described as a multidimensional spiral of structural violence, where worsening economic sanctions, environmental disasters, political crises, and socio-cultural identity conflicts are intertwined.

In this article, we explore the long-term trends and the potential impact of the most recent war on population flows in the region, with a focus on Iran. However, we must acknowledge that the current spread of the war covers a vast geography stretching from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Therefore, a much wider impact on regional and global population movements should be expected. These movements are likely to be disproportionate in certain migration routes and types, which are widespread in the Gulf countries and the Middle East in general. Like the logistic crisis already appearing since the start of the Israeli-US attacks and Iran's retaliation, migration routes (both regular and irregular) are going to shift.

First, we outline the conceptual framework centred on human insecurity that revolves around the concept of human insecurity and the conflict model of migration, integrating the cultures of migration perspective. Secondly, we offer a summary of historic and current trends of Iranian migration with a focus on the Iran-Türkiye corridor. Then we elaborate on potential trends for now and the future in reference to the current international crisis.

Iran, with a population exceeding 90 million today, accounts for approximately 1.1% of the world's population and holds a strategic position as the 18th most populous country globally (Fattahi et al., 2019; Mirzaei & Sadeghi, 2023). Due to its strategic location connecting the Middle East and the Caucasus, Iran shares extensive land borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan to the east, and Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Armenia to the west. Some studies include Iraq in this broad neighbourhood due to interactions along the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz (Lob, 2024). Within these neighbourly relations, the Türkiye-Iran border is unique in nature, with a length of approximately 312 miles and historical continuity based on the 1639 Treaty of Kasr-i Shirin. This border has remained largely unchanged ever since, and serves not only as a diplomatic border in the modern era but also as a critical geopolitical barrier in terms of irregular migration, cross-border smuggling, and security corridors (Y. Chen, 2021). With the fertility rate declining sharply from approximately seven children per woman in the 1980s to 1.7 by 2021, Iran has undergone a significant demographic transformation, leading to the working-age population exceeding 70 per cent. Iran's population is heterogeneous, comprising Persians (over 50%), Azeris (7%), Kurds (7%), Lurs, Arabs, Balochs, Turkmen, Gilaks and Mazanderanis (Khalaf & Abbas, 2023; Fattahi et al., 2019). On the other hand,



although the principles of equality for all ethnic groups and distributive justice are emphasised at the constitutional level, perceptions of regional and ethnic-based inequalities persist (Khalaf & Abbas, 2023). This socio-political diversity in Iran is combined with a state that possesses one of the world's richest oil and natural gas reserves and whose economic prosperity is largely dependent on energy revenues (Verdinejad & Gorji, 2010).

Years of international sanctions, high inflation, and currency devaluation in Iran have pushed large segments of the population to the brink of poverty and made livelihood insecurity a permanent norm of life (Mohammadi-Nasrabadi et al., 2023). The convergence of economic collapse with environmental crises, particularly drought and water stress, has escalated food insecurity into a national public health issue (Ghalibaf et al., 2022). Indeed, national meta-analyses reveal that more than half (55.9%) of the healthy population experiences household food insecurity (Arzhang et al., 2022; Behzadifar et al., 2016). Securitisation policies and severe marginalisation, particularly in border regions (peripheries) densely populated by ethnic minorities such as Kurds, Arabs, and Baloch, lead to the alienation of these groups (Lob, 2024). Gender-based insecurity, restrictions on women's rights and freedom of expression, and harsh state responses to civil dissent normalise human rights violations and create a climate of constant fear (Gabbay, 2022).

The Conflict Model of Migration explains migration dynamics and this rigid picture in Iran corresponds to the “3Ds” framework (Democratic, Developmental, Demographic deficits) (Sirkeci et al. 2019). The blockage of democratic institutions and civil participation channels (Democratic Participation Deficit), the collapse of economic prosperity (Development Deficit), and the existence of a large youth population struggling with inequality of opportunity (youth bulge) (Demographic Deficit) are the structural drivers of human insecurity in the country. These three gaps have gone beyond being merely a governance crisis and created a widespread “Environment of Insecurity” (EOI) that threatens all domains of life (Sirkeci, 2006). In order to analyse any decision, action, or international movement originating from Iran, it is essential to first understand this chronic “environment of human insecurity”. The most recent military intervention contributing to this EOI may have just escalated mass migration because in Iran, this EOI has evolved into a chronic and multidimensional crisis between 2023 and 2026 following the US’ withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in 2018.

The Development Deficit featuring inequalities is escalated by the international sanctions on Iran (Aloosh et al., 2019; Mohammadi-Nasrabadi et al., 2023). By 2025-2026, inflation is expected to remain permanently above 40%, with food inflation exceeding 70%, pushing more than a third of the population below the absolute poverty line and making insecurity a norm in the country (Millington & Scheba, 2021).

This is intertwined with the Democratic Deficit. A governance structure that does not guarantee fundamental rights and freedoms and where channels for political participation are blocked by authoritarianism reinforces the perception that there is no “legal outlet” (voice) within the system to reform it from within. The process that began with the Mahsa Amini protests (“Women, Life, Freedom” movements) in 2022 and continued with the further narrowing of the civil space in the 2023-2026 period, thereby creating a chronic environment of fear and tension particularly for minorities (Lob, 2024) (Mankoff, 2022).

The third structural factor fuelling migration pressure is the Demographic Deficit. Despite having a highly educated and dynamic “youth bulge,” Iran's current economic and political system is unable to absorb this demographic potential. Unemployment rates among young people, exceeding official estimates and reaching 40%, coupled with economically-driven delays in the transition to adulthood (marriage, independent living, gaining a profession), are creating a significant “youth depression” and a state of social exclusion (Salehi-Isfahani & Egel, 2007) .

The latest military intervention is a catalyst that pushes the accumulated Democratic, Demographic and Development (3D) deficits to intolerable levels and eventually pressing for a mass migration crisis (Sirkeci et al., 2019) . This can also be considered in relation to the Uncertainty Theory in social psychology which explains the dramatic acceleration in individuals' decision-making processes about migration during an acute crisis feeding into aversive emotions such as anxiety, fear, and helplessness in individuals, producing a serious sense of loss of control (FeldmanHall & Shenhav, 2019) . Nevertheless, we leave that discussion outside the current paper.

In Iran, the acute threat to life posed by the US-Israel intervention is likely to trigger migration motivation among people already contemplating migration. We are elaborating this possibility of heightened migration flows from Iran in the current crisis and the aftermath from a human insecurity and culture of migration perspective (See Sirkeci, 2006; Cohen and Sirkeci 2011).

In the following sections, we will elaborate the theory and context to establish an understanding of the current and future migration trends and patterns emerging in Iran with a particular reference to Türkiye-Iran corridor which has carried most of emigration from the country historically.

Relevance of Conflict and Insecurity to Human Mobility

In order to understand the nature, causes, and mechanisms of international mobility from Iran, migration is perceived not merely as an act of relocation but as a dynamic process where structural imperatives intersect with individual strategies. According to the Conflict Model of Migration macro-level “structural deficits” (“3Ds”) trigger migration as these deficits are translated into a perception of “human insecurity” at the individual level. Then the will to move is moderated by individuals' financial, social, human capitals, and physical capabilities (4C), rather than a random act (Sirkeci et al. 2019). The “push-pull” models and aspirations are only capturing partial views of the migration processes, and it is no different in the case of Iran. However, from an insecurities perspective, the true and dynamic process of human mobility can be captured (Sirkeci & Utku, 2020; Sirkeci, 2006) as people react to the deep sense of insecurity fostered by material and non-material vulnerabilities (Şeker and Akman Direkçi, 2024). The decision to migrate or realisation of that decision can only be possible when the perception of insecurity meets capabilities (Lloyd & Sirkeci, 2022; Sirkeci et al., 2019) .

Migration capacity can be described through this 4C framework which acts as a filter determining who migrates, when, where, and under what conditions during crises such as in Iran (Kosyakova et al., 2025). First, financial capital covers the high costs of migration, including travel, visas, smuggling fees, and settlement expenses. Access to economic resources increases individuals' ability to manage risks and raises their likelihood of migrating (Şeker &



Akman Direkçi, 2024). Those with sufficient savings can undertake safer, anticipatory migration, while poorer individuals face dangerous routes or remain behind. Second, social capital shapes route predictability and destination choice. Diaspora networks provide information, accommodation, and job connections, creating a “migration culture” that reduces uncertainty and costs (Demir & Yazgan, 2019). Third, human capital—education, skills, and language ability—allows professionals to access global labor and academic markets, often producing selective brain drain (Oruç et al., 2019). Finally, physical capacity affects the ability to endure migration journeys. Vulnerable groups often become “trapped populations”, forced into immobility or limited internal displacement (Lloyd & Sirkeci, 2022) and migration behaviour is ultimately shaped by the intersection of individual capacities and prevailing cultures of migration (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011).

Culture of Migration and the Iranian Experience

The “Culture of Migration” posits that people's decisions to flee an EOI are not merely individual and immediate reactions, but rather a structurally constructed social practice shaped by previous migration experiences, shared expectations, and established networks (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2011).

The EOI in Iran is not new. Reflecting decades long perpetual insecurities pushing people to move abroad, the size of Iranian diaspora is estimated to be between 4 and 5 million, of which largest segments are located in the US and Germany followed by Sweden, UK, Canada, Türkiye. This also reflects the existence of a culture of migration that sustains emigration from the country. These established networks and migration corridors both foster migration and indicate potential destinations and flow volumes. As a neighbouring country with sizeable Iranian diaspora, Türkiye represents a key destination for future emigration from Iran.

Human mobility between Iran and Türkiye has evolved over decades reflecting regional conflicts, regime changes, and economic sanctions directly. Türkiye long being considered a transit country, became a key destination country in the recent decade or so. Starting with the exodus around the Islamic Revolution in the 1970s, a steady flow of regular and irregular migration from Iran to Türkiye is evident (Table 1). Table 1 presents comprehensive data on regular and irregular migration for the period 1970–2026.

Table 1 Regular and Irregular Migration Movements Between Türkiye and Iran (1970–2026)

Year / Period	Regular Migration (Residence / Student / Incoming Migrants)	Irregular Migration / Asylum (Iranian)	Characteristic Factors of the Period
1970–1978	Too low to be reflected in statistical data	No significant mass migration	Low-volume academic and commercial mobility under visa exemption.
1979–1991	Entries under tourist visa status (no net record)	~1,500,000 people (cumulative transit) 1990: 800,000–1,000,000 active transit waits	Cumulative refugee influxes due to the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War.
1992–1999	No civil records were kept for regular migrants	>30,000 asylum applications 46% of all applications	Transition from political exile to “mixed flows” due to economic reasons.

Year / Period	Regular Migration (Residence / Student / Incoming Migrants)	Irregular Migration / Asylum (Iranian)	Characteristic Factors of the Period
2000–2012	Data held by the Security Directorate (Foreigners Department)	24,830 apprehended (2000–2013 cumulative) 1,308 deported (2003–2009)	The period prior to YUKK; the use of TürkiyeTürkiye as a transit route and police statistics.
2013–2014	2013: 10,848 residents, 3,947 students 2014: 18,856 residents, 4,043 students	2013: 757 apprehended (Iranian)	Establishment of the GİB, construction of civil data management, and entry into force of the YUKK.
2015–2016	2015: 14,276 residents, 3,830 students 2016: 16,000 residence permits, 15,539 incoming migrants	2015: 8,527 asylum applications 2016: 1,648 apprehended, 11,172 asylum applications	Triggering of the migration crisis towards Europe and increase in asylum requests.
2017–2020	2018: 31,922 arriving migrants 2019: 42,351 arriving migrants 2017 and 2019: ~1.8–2.5 million Iranian tourist entries (visa exemption)	2019: 8,753 apprehended (Iranian peak)	A sharp increase in migration figures in both categories due to US sanctions shaking the Iranian economy. - TürkiyeTürkiye is rising to become the second most popular destination for Iranian students after the US.
2021–2023	2021: 128,883 residences (peak), 66,984 arrivals 2023: 2,504,276 official entries - 2023: ~1,400 asylum applications (OECD data) - September 2023: total of 1,107,032 foreign residence permit holders (all nationalities)	2021: 3,503 apprehended 2022: 5,849 apprehended 2023: 7,295 apprehended - 2023: 254,008 total irregular migrants apprehended (nationwide)	TürkiyeTürkiye's transformation into a permanent “destination country”, property purchases and record residence figures. - In 2022–23, Russia and Iran were among the two largest nationality groups of new residence permit holders.
2024	- 82,172 residence permits 21,044 students - ~11,910 incoming migrants (5.9% of all foreign migrants arriving in TürkiyeTürkiye = $201,856 \times 0.059$) - ~10,530 work permits (~3.5% of 300,852 work permits)	7,614 apprehended - 585 international protection applications - 2024 all nationalities: 225,831 apprehended (Afghanistan, Syria and Turkmenistan leading the way)	Despite strict registration controls and closed neighbourhood policies, Iranians have reached the top in student residency. - Iranians rank second after Turkmenistan in residence permit ownership (82,172 persons).
2025 (January–September)	- September 2025: 71,401 Iranian residence permit holders (PMM data) - Total foreign residence permits as of September 2025: 1,104,430 Stability continues in the number of international students	2025 (full year): 9,346 apprehended - Q1 2025: 36,861 total irregular migrants apprehended (all nationalities) - Q2 2025: 36,630 total apprehensions (all nationalities)	Integrated border security walls and internal security controls show a downward trend in irregular crossings. - As of December 2025, 1.6 million Iranians worldwide have applied for asylum (UN data).



Year / Period	Regular Migration (Residence / Student / Incoming Migrants)	Irregular Migration / Asylum (Iranian)	Characteristic Factors of the Period
2026 (February–March) - NEW PERIOD	- ~74,000+ Iranians with residence permits (pre-war stock) - ~5,000 Iranians with refugee status - 28 February 2026: Increase of 50–100 vehicles during daytime crossings (border above normal, no mass migration) - Daily tourist crossings suspended (Kapıköy border gate)	- 26 February 2026: 1,312 apprehended (GİB sudden period data) - UN: No confirmation of mass border crossings from Iran (UNHCR, 2026) - Iranians' right to stay without a visa for up to 90 days limits the risk of large-scale irregular migration	28 February 2026: US-Israeli attacks on Iran begin. TürkiyeTürkiye condemned both the attacks and Iran's retaliation against the Gulf. Interior Minister Çiftçi held an emergency border security meeting; a decision was made to increase capacity along TürkiyeTürkiye's 560 km border with Iran. NATO air defence systems shot down a ballistic missile from Iran as it entered Turkish airspace (Dört Yol, Hatay).

Sources: *Göç Araştırmaları Vakfı (GAV)*, 2024, 2026; *Şahin & Düzgün*, 2015; *Kandemir*, 2015; *T.C.VEM*, 2009; *Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü (GİGM)*, 2015, 2016a; 2017a;2017b; *Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı (GİB)*, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c; *IMO*, 2022a; *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*, 2025; *OECD*, 2024; *Prague Process*, 2025; *Brookings Institution*, 2026; *Daily Sabah*, 2026; *Loft*, 2026; *Mixed Migration Centre (MMC)*, 2026; *Turkish Minute*, 2026).

Transit Migration Period (1979–2013)

The Iran-Türkiye migration corridor intensified after the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution and the following wars with Iraq. During this period, approximately 1.5 million refugees seeking safety entered TürkiyeTürkiye. Due to Türkiye's still existing geographical reservation to Article 1B(1) of the 1951 Geneva Convention, which limits Türkiye's obligations to individuals who become refugees as a result of events occurring only in Europe, these non-European groups were not granted official refugee status. As a result, the country continued to function as a transit route for many years. Consequently, Iranians were held in “temporary status” through the UNHCR until they reached the country where they would settle in Europe.

Between 2000 and 2013, the cumulative number of irregular Iranian migrants apprehended in Türkiye was 24,830 (Kandemir, 2015). According to the records of the Foreigners Branch of the Van Security Directorate, 2,711 Iranians applied for official temporary asylum between 2003 and 2009, and 1,308 Iranians were deported during the same period from the border city of Van alone (T.C.VEM, 2009). Between 1995 and 2005, more than 30,000 Iranians applied for asylum in TürkiyeTürkiye, accounting for 46% of all asylum applications received (Şahin & Düzgün, 2015).

From Transit to Destination Country (2013–2024)

The number of regular Iranian immigrants arriving in Türkiye was 15,539 in 2016, which gradually increased to reach 42,351 in 2019 and 66,984 in 2021 (GAV, 2024). During the same period, residence permit applications increased from 16,000 to 128,883, which illustrates Türkiye becoming a permanent destination (DGMM, 2026a). As of 2024, there were 81,753 Iranian residence permit holders and 21,044 students in Türkiye (GİB, 2024). In 2013, Türkiye

adopted a new Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), which also paved the way for Türkiye to become a destination country for Iranian immigrants. This development was linked to the new legal refugee status introduced in Article 62 of the LFIP, which Iranian asylum seekers could obtain directly in Türkiye. Even though this new “conditional refugee status” did not differ significantly from the temporary status provided by UNCHR, it enabled refugees fleeing events occurring outside European countries to reside regularly in Türkiye and to enjoy the same rights as refugees until their resettlement in a third country (Morticelli et al., 2018). Nevertheless, due to restrictions imposed by Türkiye, the number of Iranian asylum applicants decreased from 11,172 in 2016 (DGMM, 2016b) to just 585 in 2024 (GİB, 2026c).

Irregular Migration and Border Security (2013–2026)

As anywhere else, irregular migration is fostered by increasing restrictions on regular migration routes between Iran and Türkiye. The number of Iranians apprehended in 2016 was 1,817, but it increased to 8,753 in 2019 due to intensified sanctions (Ekhtiari & Aysan, 2021). Iranians represent a sizeable segment among 225,000 strong irregular immigrants apprehended in Türkiye (European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), 2025): 7,614 Iranians in 2024, 9,346 in 2025, and 1,312 as of 26 February 2026 (GİB, 2026b). Iran–Türkiye migration flows varied between 1979–2013, which is marked by transit flows, 2013–2021 when Türkiye became a destination, and 2021–2026 period marked by increased controls and stricter asylum policies.

Discussion

Similar to the cases of Syria and Ukraine (Aksu Kargin and Sirkeci, 2023; Teke-Lloyd and Sirkeci, 2022), outflows from Iran are expected to follow a step-wise pattern beginning with immediate flows into neighbouring countries followed by global spread of exodus benefiting more from existing “cultures of migration”.

The first wave of mobility triggered by the most recent crisis in Iran is expected to be shaped by established networks and regional border regimes. Hence, Türkiye is likely to be a transit country and a zone of confinement for most mobile groups at the initial stages. These flows in the aftermath of the recent military intervention illustrate a pattern shaped by geographical proximity, existing migration routes, and the strength of diasporic networks in neighbouring countries (Barnett & Nam, 2024). Culture of migration along with the insecurities are key drivers in this early stage (For Syrian case, see (Aksu Kargin & Sirkeci, 2023)). The “magnet effect” created by the Iranian diaspora which is estimated to be over half a million already settled in Türkiye, serves as a fundamental mechanism facilitating migration from Iran. Iranian culture of migration evident in this corridor shows capacity to attract and move sizeable new immigration flows. The skills acquired, academic recognition gained, and transnational relationships established during this period (i.e. Human and Social Capital) will also enable Iranians to pursue their future migratory objectives (Sadri & Chaichian, 2018; Zijlstra, 2020). Similarly, developed social capital may also facilitate Iranian immigrants bond and settle more in Türkiye (Keleş, 2024; Lloyd & Türk, 2021).

Forced Immobility and Vulnerable Populations

According to the 4C (capital/capacity) framework (Sirkeci et al., 2019), the ability of individuals to undertake international migration in times of acute crisis is linked not only to



financial and social resources but also to their physical capabilities. This is similar to the concepts of “involuntary immobility”, “precarious immobility” and “trapped populations” (Adams, 2016; Sengupta, 2025; Vanden Haute et al., 2025; Garcia et al., 2025) .

Following the US military intervention in February 2026, the incomplete data cues already show that the “high-capability” people (money, networks, and visas) promptly left the country as the vulnerable groups with low physical and financial capacity show immobility. According to field reports, approximately 100,000 people left Tehran within the first two days following the attacks mainly heading to nearby destinations (UNHCR, 2026) . As was the case in the past in Iraq and Syria, groups lacking the capacity to cross international borders such as Kurdistan provinces on the Turkish border are likely to gather along the border and ‘wait-and-see’. Consequently, migration for vulnerable groups in Iran is not a selective opportunity that transcends borders; rather, it is a constrained displacement experience within the country or to the nearest border.

Admission Systems: Visa and Temporary Protection Policies

With the most recent war on Iran, the admission systems, visa regimes and border management policies implemented by neighbouring countries (particularly Türkiye) are crucial in shaping exodus from the country. Türkiye is both a transit and main destination country; however, adopting a “security-first” approach, it fortified its 560-kilometre border with Iran with walls, trenches monitored by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Suspending daily border crossings and implementing controlled transit policies initially aimed to slow down a potential mass influx.

Externalisation policies of the European Union (EU) through readmission agreements and selective visa policies with TürkiyeTürkiye are reshaping the pace and direction of regional migration by pushing TürkiyeTürkiye into the role of a de facto “external border guard” (Laube, 2019; Özerim, 2018) or “gatekeeper at the EU’s external borders” (Sözen & Heimrich, 2020). Such international agreements largely aim to block refugees’ move to Europe, restricting legal entry, while simultaneously complicating the situation for individuals seeking asylum and forcing masses to “deviate” onto more risky, alternative irregular routes (Basok, 2022; Mesnard et al., 2024) . Another critical pillar of the reception systems in the region is “temporary protection” policies. The temporary protection regime previously applied to Syrian refugees in Türkiye, according to Temporary Protection Directive adopted on 22.10.2014, provides access to basic humanitarian services such as shelter, healthcare, and education during acute crises (Terzi, 2018; Morticelli et al., 2018) . However, the “temporary” nature of this protection status and its failure to offer a long-term, permanent legal integration perspective creates serious precariousness pressure on migrant populations over time. (Basok, 2022) . This structural insecurity direct individuals, in the medium and long term, to seek further migration towards the West, mainly the EU and Canada in search of security (Belliveau & Ferguson, 2021) .

We believe that while restricted admission systems in isolation may limit the initial surge of migration during acute crises, without being supported by sustainable legal solutions in the long term, they have the potential to trigger new and more disorderly secondary waves of migration by altering the scale of the crisis.

In the Iran crisis following the US intervention in 2026, these secondary migration dynamics could place significant pressure on the EU countries and North America in particular. The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) has warned that even partial destabilisation of Iran, with its population exceeding 90 million, could create an “unprecedented magnitude” of refugee movement globally. Indeed, border countries such as Greece have tightened their border monitoring mechanisms against potential waves of Iranian migrants arriving directly via TürkiyeTürkiye (Mellersh, 2026) . “Inevitable migration” scenario planning within the EU Commission predicts that between 500,000 and 2 million Iranians could head for EU destinations in the next 12-18 months, reviving the “2015 Refugee Crisis” syndrome within the EU. Despite this anticipated crisis, the policies implemented by destination countries vary considerably. Table 3 summarises the institutional responses and capacities of global destinations to secondary migration from Iran following an acute crisis:

Table 3. Secondary Migration Policies and Expectations of Global Destinations in the Iran Crisis

Destination Region	Policy and Admission System Characteristics	Expected Impact and Asylum Trends
European Union (EU)	Strengthening of external borders (Frontex) due to fears of a “2015 Syndrome”. Activation of “cross-border preparedness” (rapid screening and accommodation) models learned from the Ukraine crisis in countries such as Romania and Moldova.	Germany is the main destination (EU leader with a total of 163,000 applications in 2025). It is highly likely that secondary migration pressure will shift to Europe via Türkiye.
United Kingdom	Total asylum applications remain high as of the end of 2025; Iranians continue to be among the top five nationalities seeking asylum in the United Kingdom.	There is a risk of Iranian asylum seekers becoming permanently established and an increased tendency towards irregular routes such as crossings of the English Channel.
Canada / Australia	Special quotas and “quota-based humanitarian programmes”. However, legal uncertainty due to the expiry of Canada's open work permit and priority processing (temporary public policy) for Iranians in March 2026.	In 2023, over 15,000 Iranians (mainly protesters and human rights defenders) settled in Canada. New quotas are expected to be opened.
United States	A strict immigration framework and ongoing “travel ban” policies. Intensive security screenings for special visas.	Legal entries remain extremely limited due to tightened visas, leaving the diaspora's calls for a “humanitarian corridor” unanswered.

Source: Compiled from EUAA, IOM and official government bulletins. (Gov.uk, 2025; IOM Media Centre, 2026; Mellersh, 2026; Ranjbar, 2022; VisaHQ, 2026)

Capacity and Selectivity: The Global Opportunity Window for High Human Capital

The 4Ccapacity framework suggests that, in the midst of acute warfare, masses cannot move simultaneously and under equal conditions. During crises, international migration operates through a “self-selection” mechanism. The overwhelming majority of the first waves of evacuees from Iran to countries such as Armenia and Azerbaijan in the first weeks of the military crisis were foreign nationals and Iranian elites with high financial savings, diplomatic



passports or international networks (approximately 1,500 people), confirming how this capacity filter works in the field (APA News Agency, 2026; Bardouka, 2026).

For professionals, academics, and students with high human capital in particular, war and economic sanctions create a “restoration” pressure that makes international migration inevitable in order to compensate for the loss of status and income experienced in the country (Oruc et al., 2019). Number of Iranian students studying abroad has according to available estimates increased rapidly in recent years, exceeding 100,000 according to some estimates, with more than 70% of students not planning to return to the country after graduation (Bazoobandi, 2024; IMO, 2022).

The Iranian diaspora across the world ceases to be a passive external actor during acute crises and functions as an institutionalised “transnational infrastructure” offering support and guidance for new migrants (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009). In determining an individual's destination, the size and connections of the existing diaspora stock are the most prominent predictors; the diaspora transforms even distant and risky distances into rational, accessible options, placing migration on a “predictable route” (Curiel et al., 2023). In a weak economy, a collapsing currency (reaching levels of 1 USD = 1.66 million Riyals in early 2026), and under military attack, individual and collective aid sent by the diaspora is a critical informal safety net for the targeted population (Lotfalipour et al., 2022). This flow of funds, which exhibits a counter-cyclical character during periods of conflict (increasing as the crisis deepens), not only ensures the survival of those left behind but also directly finances the “financial capital” (4C) needed by individuals who make urgent migration decisions (Galstyan & Ambrosini, 2022; Lindley et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study examined, through the lens of the Conflict Model, how the long-accumulating EOI in Iran transformed into a mass migration dynamic following the acute U.S. military intervention in 2026. The findings demonstrate that international migration during conflict cannot be understood as a spontaneous or purely emotional reaction to war. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between structural vulnerabilities, individual capacities, and existing migration networks.

One of the main theoretical contributions of the study is its challenge to the conventional narrative of “chaotic flight” during armed conflict. The findings indicate that the U.S. intervention served not as an originating cause but as an accelerant that intensified pre-existing democratic, demographic, and developmental deficits (3D). These structural gaps had already generated chronic insecurity, and the military shock pushed this insecurity beyond a tolerable threshold.

Consistent with choice-centred approaches to conflict migration, the study shows that individuals continue to make migration decisions through rational calculations of risks, costs, and potential benefits, even under conditions of extreme violence. When economic collapse, political repression, and military escalation converge, migration becomes a strategic risk-management decision rather than a simple reaction to fear. Individuals and households seek to maximise future security by using available resources to escape uncertainty.

In this context, sudden military escalation does not eliminate rational decision-making; instead, it accelerates it. Once violence and insecurity exceed a critical psychological threshold, individuals who had previously adopted “wait-and-see” strategies often shift rapidly toward migration. Those with sufficient financial resources and social connections are able to mobilise these capacities quickly to organise their departure and secure safer migration routes.

The Iranian case therefore demonstrates that armed intervention alone cannot fully explain displacement dynamics. Migration emerges when acute shocks interact with underlying structural insecurities and individuals’ capacities (4C). In such contexts, military escalation creates an opportunity structure that transforms latent migration intentions into actual movement. Consequently, large-scale migration during conflict is not entirely unpredictable; when structural vulnerabilities and migration capacities are understood, the direction, speed, and composition of migration flows can be anticipated to a considerable degree.

At the geopolitical level, the crisis in Iran represents more than a regional displacement episode. It constitutes a broader stress test for the global security system and for the governance capacities of neighbouring states. Regional instability, combined with existing transnational networks and geopolitical rivalries, increases the likelihood that displacement will extend beyond neighbouring countries and evolve into wider international migration flows.

Overall, the findings emphasise that migration during conflict should be analysed as a structured and stratified process rather than a chaotic humanitarian emergency. Structural inequalities and uneven access to resources shape who is able to move, how they move, and where they ultimately resettle. Recognising these dynamics is essential for developing more realistic migration forecasting models and for designing policies capable of addressing both the structural drivers of displacement and the unequal capacities of individuals to respond to crisis.

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