



REFUGEE FLOWS AS A GEOPOLITICAL DETERMINANT: THE CASE OF AFGHANISTAN–IRAN RELATIONS AND REGIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the impact of refugee flows on interstate relations within the context of forced migration, specifically examining the case of Afghanistan and Iran. The study aims to identify how the refugee factor influences the political, economic, and security dimensions of the international system. Using a qualitative methodology, the research applies systemic and comparative analysis alongside a case-study approach. The findings show that Iran hosts several million Afghan refugees. Refugee flows are not merely passive humanitarian events; they function as significant geopolitical factors shaping the dynamics of interstate relations. Furthermore, these refugee flows contribute to the development of an interconnected political and security space across Central Asia. The scholarly novelty of the study lies in establishing refugee flows not as isolated phenomena, but as integrated determinants that directly affect the dynamics of interstate relations.*

Keywords: *refugee flows, forced migration, integrated determinant, Afghanistan, Iran, regional security, securitization, Central Asia.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, refugee flows have emerged as a pivotal issue within the global political system, significantly increasing their impact on interstate relations. Previously interpreted primarily as a humanitarian phenomenon, this process is now viewed as a complex phenomenon inherently linked to political, economic, and security factors

(Haddad, 2008:3; Betts, 2009:1). Consequently, refugee flows have become a crucial factor shaping the dynamics of interstate interactions.

In international relations theories, this issue is explained through various conceptual frameworks. The realist approach evaluates it as a strategic resource tied to state interests, while the institutional approach interprets migration processes as manageable socio-political phenomena. At the same time, according to securitization theory, the refugee issue is elevated to the security agenda through political discourse (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998:23-24). These approaches provide a theoretical foundation for analyzing the complex impact of refugee flows on interstate relations.

These theoretical perspectives are clearly reflected in practical processes, particularly amidst the ongoing political instability in Afghanistan. This situation has led to an increase in forced migration flows, creating new political, economic, and security challenges for host countries such as Iran (UNHCR, 2024:4). As a result, the flow of refugees is becoming a actor of strategic importance in interstate relations.

However, existing scholarly literature has not sufficiently and systematically addressed the complex impact of refugee flows on interstate relations, nor the nexus between theoretical approaches and practical processes (Castles & Miller, 2014:3). This specific research gap determines the relevance of the current study.

The objective of this research is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the political, economic, and security impacts of refugee flows on interstate relations, using the case of relations between Afghanistan and Iran as a primary example.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this research is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the political, economic, and security impacts of refugee flows on interstate relations within the framework of forced migration processes, specifically focusing on the relationship between Afghanistan and Iran.

To achieve this aim, the following scholarly tasks have been established:

1. To analyze the theoretical foundations and the role of forced migration and refugee flows within the system of international relations.
2. To determine the impact of political processes in Afghanistan on the dynamics of refugee flows.

3. To evaluate the influx of Afghan refugees into Iranian territory and its subsequent effect on interstate political and economic relations.
4. To synthesize the role of the refugee factor in the regional security system and in fostering interstate cooperation.

METHODS

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach. The impact of refugee flows on interstate relations was examined through systemic and comparative analysis methods. The theoretical analysis was carried out within the frameworks of realism, constructivism, and securitization theories; these concepts facilitated a comprehensive assessment of the political, economic, and security dimensions of the issue. The empirical analysis was performed using the case-study method, focusing on the relations between Afghanistan and Iran. The research utilized reports from the UNHCR, IOM, and the World Bank, as well as contemporary scholarly and statistical sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research analyzed the impact of refugee flows on interstate relations within the framework of forced migration processes, employing a systemic approach. The findings were synthesized across political, economic, and security dimensions, establishing a clear nexus between theoretical frameworks and practical processes. The results indicate that refugee flows are not merely passive humanitarian phenomena in international relations; rather, they constitute a key geopolitical factor shaping interstate relations.

1. The refugee problem and its political impact on interstate relations

Refugee flows serve as a significant factor exerting a substantial influence on interstate political processes. This process, arising from forced migration, affects the substance and direction of diplomatic dialogue and, in certain instances, plays a pivotal role in the formulation of foreign policy strategies.

According to the realist approach, refugee flows can be utilized as a political instrument, functioning as a lever of pressure in negotiations. As Loescher (2001:18) notes, under certain conditions, refugee camps emerge not merely as shelters but as infrastructure for political and military mobilization. This signifies the increasing degree of politicization of the refugee factor.

This perspective is linked to the concept of “refugee manipulation,” where states seek to achieve foreign policy advantages by managing refugee flows (Stedman & Tanner, 2003:6). Empirical observations indicate the presence of these elements in Iranian policy. Specifically, the flow of Afghan refugees is controlled under sanction conditions and utilized as a means of pressure against external actors (Demirbaş, 2023:52).

However, interpreting refugee flows solely as a tool of political pressure is insufficient. In some cases, it intersects with military-political processes, demonstrating an inherent link with security. For instance, the involvement of the “Fatemiyoun” brigades, formed from Afghan refugees, in regional conflicts is a practical manifestation of this nexus. This situation confirms the multifaceted nature of the problem.

The constructivist approach explains the formation of the refugee issue through political discourse. As Huysmans (2006:57) argues, the migration issue is often elevated to the security agenda, where social relations influence the substance of political decisions. Based on this, the flow of refugees is viewed as a factor affecting internal political stability.

At the regional level, refugee flows have become a complex object of political assessment in Central Asia. The process is interpreted in connection with ethnic, political, and security factors, appearing in some instances as an additional political resource in diplomatic relations (Israyelyan, 2019:272). This, in turn, influences the regional political balance.

Uzbekistan’s approach is characterized by a cautious and balanced nature. The country maintains a balance between humanitarian obligations and national security interests, employing a “transit humanitarian aid model” instead of mass refugee reception (Umarov, 2021:42). Supporting international initiatives through the “Termez Cargo Centre” and strengthening border controls are practical expressions of this policy (UNHCR, 2022:7).

In summary, refugee flows manifest as a crucial determinant shaping interstate political decisions and strategies. They directly influence political dialogue, contribute to the emergence of new geopolitical configurations, and exert an indirect impact on economic and social systems.

2. The refugee problem and its economic impact on interstate relations

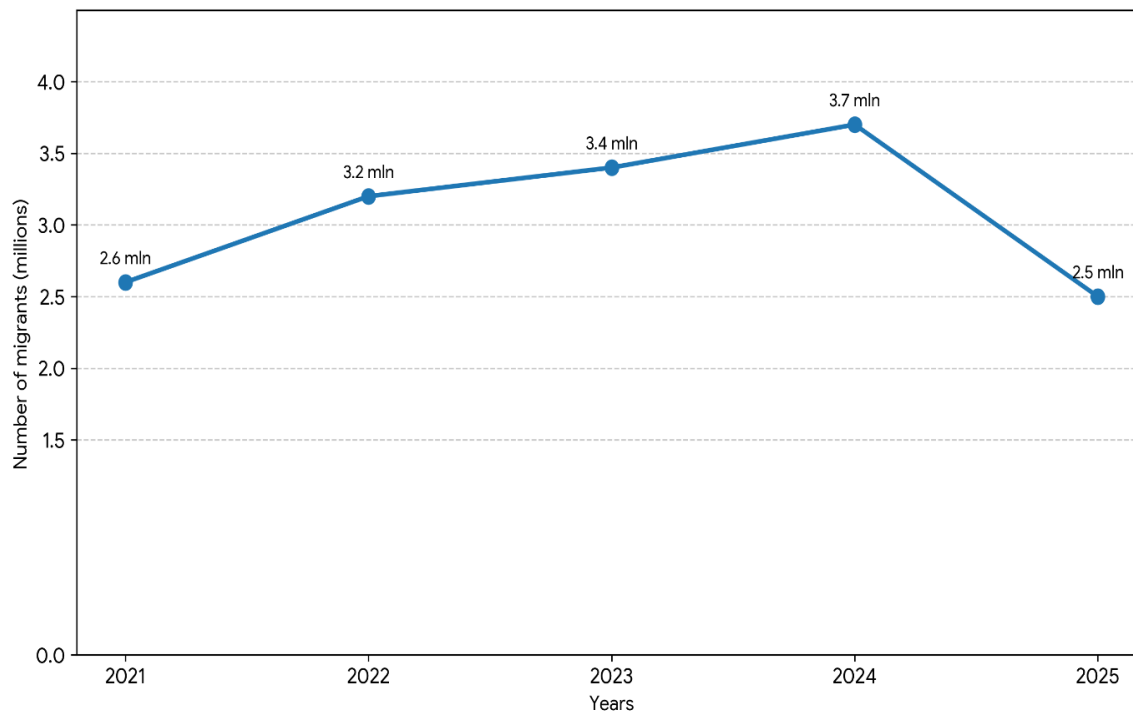
Refugee flows constitute a significant factor exerting a substantial influence on the economies of host countries. Forced migration processes directly affect the labor

market, state budget, social infrastructure, and economic policy, making the analysis of its economic dimensions a pressing issue at the regional level.

Migration studies demonstrate the dual nature of this process. On one hand, refugee flows intensify competition for jobs and resources, placing pressure on the economic system. On the other hand, they replenish labor resources and mitigate labor shortages in certain sectors. As de Haas (2010:235) argues, migrants ensure production continuity in critical segments of the economy. Therefore, a one-sided assessment of this process is not scientifically grounded.

Data from international organizations, particularly the UNHCR, confirm the multidimensional impact of refugee flows on the economic system. Consequently, the structure of the labor market undergoes changes, and production activity intensifies in sectors requiring low-skilled labor; simultaneously, social expenditures rise, increasing the burden on the infrastructural system. By managing this process, states strive to maintain economic stability.

Figure 1. Trends in the growth and decline of the number of Afghan migrants in Iran, 2021–2025



Source: UNHCR Global Data Portal; IOM Migration Data Portal, 2023–2025

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Data Portal and International Organization for Migration (IOM) Migration Data Reports (2023–2025).

The economic impact of refugee flows is particularly evident in the case of Iran. The increase in labor supply is notably felt in the construction, agriculture, and service sectors. Afghan refugees actively participate in these fields, ensuring production stability as a relatively low-cost workforce. Simultaneously, their involvement in the informal sector enhances the flexibility of the economic system (Ryazantsev, 2018:89).

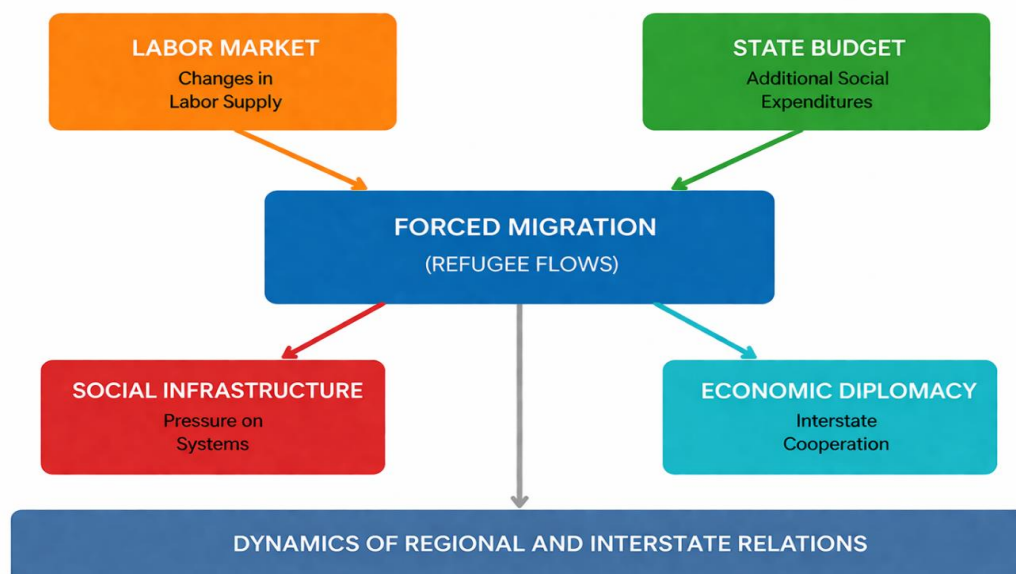
However, this process is complicated by international sanctions. The devaluation of the national currency and rising inflation negatively affect the incomes of refugees. At the same time, the increasing volume of social services imposes an additional burden on the state budget.

Economic pressure is also reflected in the social environment. Intensifying competition for resources and jobs leads to the formation of negative sentiments among the local population. Consequently, the refugee factor emerges not only as an economic issue but also as a factor affecting social stability.

Uzbekistan has adopted a balanced approach toward this process. Rather than mass refugee reception, the country employs a model of organizing humanitarian aid in a transit format (Umarov, 2021:42). The practical expression of this policy is seen in supporting international initiatives through the “Termez Cargo Centre” and strengthening border controls (UNHCR, 2022:7).

Furthermore, measures targeting the economic root causes are being promoted. It is envisioned to reduce migratory pressure by integrating Afghanistan into regional infrastructure projects, developing trade corridors, and creating new job opportunities.

FIGURE 2. IMPACT OF REFUGEE FLOWS ON THE ECONOMY



Source: Developed by the author based on Betts (2009) and de Haas (2010).

As illustrated in Figure 2, refugee flows influence the economic system through the labor market, state budget, social infrastructure, and economic diplomacy.

This influence manifests across the labor market, state budget, social infrastructure, and economic diplomacy, collectively shaping the dynamics of interstate relations in an interconnected manner.

The overall analysis indicates that refugee flows exert a dual impact on the economy: on one hand, they impose a burden on social infrastructure and the state budget; on the other hand, they replenish labor resources and support economic activity in specific sectors. At the same time, intensified competition for resources generates social tension, causing the process to transcend economic boundaries and assume a socio-political character.

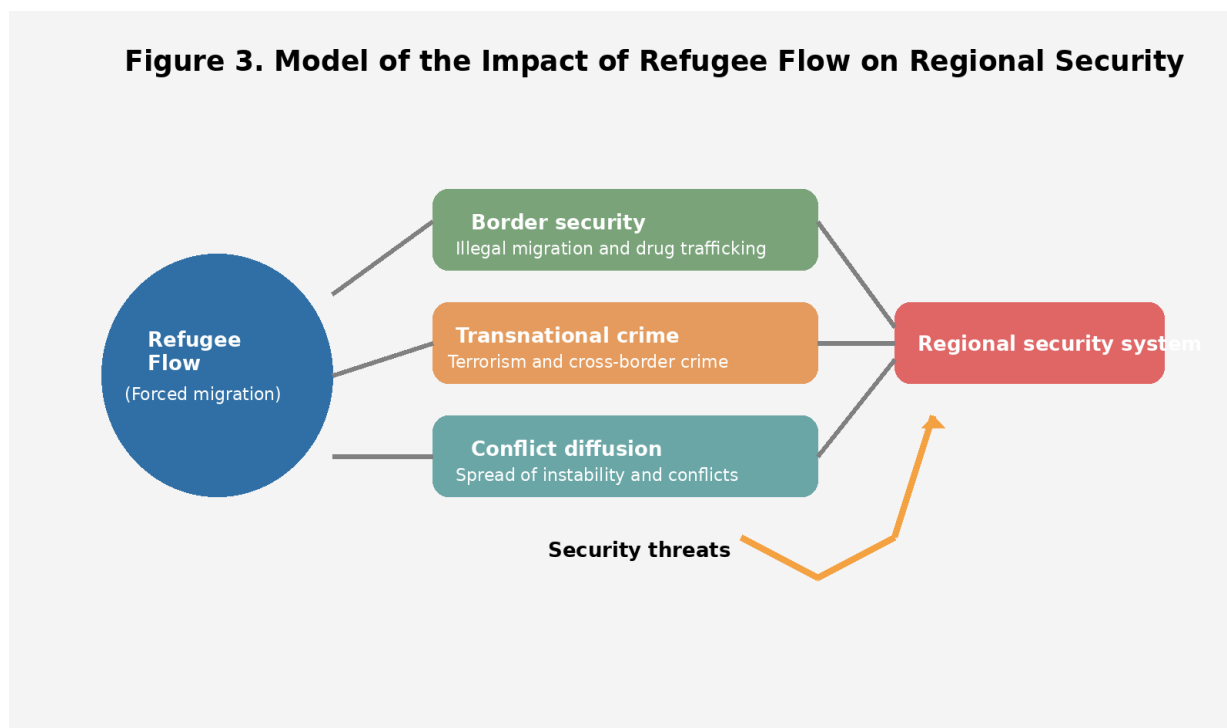
On this basis, it can be concluded that forced migration is not merely an economic process but emerges as a crucial factor shaping interstate relations and regional development strategies.

3. The refugee problem and its security impact on interstate relations

Refugee flows constitute one of the pivotal factors shaping the security environment within the global political system. Forced displacement processes, arising from armed conflicts, political instability, and economic crises, directly affect national and regional security systems, giving rise to new threats. Consequently, this issue is increasingly interpreted within the framework of the security paradigm (IOM, 2023:12).

As Myron Weiner notes, large-scale refugee flows exert a significant influence on the internal stability and security policies of host states (Weiner, 1995:103-105). As a result, social tensions intensify, the political balance shifts, and the state is compelled to re-evaluate its security mechanisms.

Securitization theory provides a deeper explanation of this process. As argued by Buzan and colleagues, the refugee issue is elevated from a humanitarian problem to the level of a security threat through political discourse (Buzan et al., 1998:23-24). In practice, this approach is observed in Iran and Central Asian states, where refugee flows are often interpreted in connection with the risks of radicalization and transborder crime (Umarov, 2022:48).



As illustrated in Figure 2, refugee flows impact the security system through several primary channels. They are inherently linked to border security, transnational crime, and conflict diffusion; the convergence of these factors results in the formation of complex threats. In some instances, there is a potential for intersection with illegal migration, drug trafficking, and smuggling networks, which compels states to strengthen their borders and reinforce control mechanisms.

Within the framework of relations between Afghanistan and Iran, this process has become a critical component of security policy. As Milani (2023:112) notes, the construction of engineering structures at the borders and the tightening of control measures are directly related to migratory pressure. This situation signifies that refugee flows are, in practice, being perceived as a security threat.

The refugee problem also creates complexities related to legal status. According to the “state of exception” concept proposed by Agamben (2005:1-2), refugees often appear as subjects excluded from full legal protection. Empirical experience shows that strict restrictive policies further exacerbate their social and legal vulnerability.

This process also exerts a significant influence on the Central Asian region. As Tolipov (2021:28) points out, Uzbekistan’s policy toward Afghanistan is aimed at ensuring security and stability, with strengthening border control and combating transnational threats established as priority areas.

According to research by Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006:340), refugee flows can lead to conflict diffusion. In other words, instability spreads from one territory to another, placing additional pressure on the regional security environment.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the impact of refugee flows on interstate relations is represented as an interconnected mechanism operating through political, economic, and security factors. This process shapes the dynamics of diplomatic relations, imposes a burden on the economic system, and generates new threats within the security environment.

On this basis, it can be concluded that refugee flows serve as a crucial factor forming an interconnected complex system within the Afghanistan–Iran–Central Asia region. They trigger processes related to border control, transnational crime, and regional stability. Therefore, analyzing this phenomenon in an integrated manner across political, economic, and security dimensions holds significant scholarly importance for contemporary international relations research.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research indicate that refugee flows in contemporary international relations are a complex phenomenon emerging at the intersection of political, economic, and security processes. Interpreting this issue solely as a humanitarian matter fails to fully reveal its geopolitical essence. On the contrary, the refugee factor manifests as a strategic determinant directly influencing the dynamics of interstate relations.

The analysis conducted on the case of Afghanistan–Iran relations confirms the multi-level functional nature of refugee flows. They shape the direction of diplomatic interactions, generate pressure and adaptation mechanisms within the economic system, and influence the priority areas of security policy. Simultaneously, this process contributes to the formation of an interconnected political and security space at the regional level.

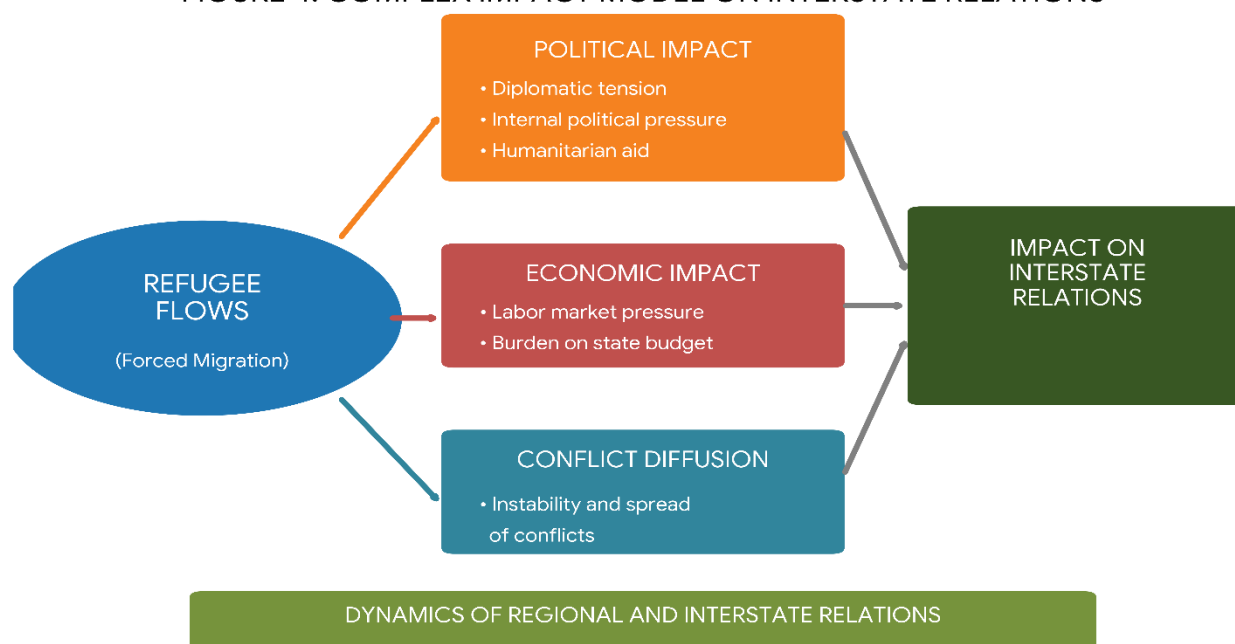
From an economic perspective, refugee flows exert a dual impact: on one hand, they impose a burden on the state budget and social infrastructure; on the other hand, they replenish labor resources and enhance the flexibility of the economic system.

From a security standpoint, they intensify threats related to border control, transnational crime, and conflict diffusion. The scholarly novelty of the study lies

in establishing the refugee factor not as an isolated occurrence, but as an integrated determinant that interconnects political, economic, and security processes.

In conclusion, refugee flows are a crucial geopolitical factor shaping interstate political strategies, economic policies, and security systems in modern international relations. Therefore, their effective management requires strengthening institutional cooperation, developing regional integration, and coordinating multi-level political mechanisms.

FIGURE 4. COMPLEX IMPACT MODEL ON INTERSTATE RELATIONS



Source: Author's conceptual model based on Buzan et al. (1998); Huysmans (2006); Betts (2009); de Haas (2010).

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