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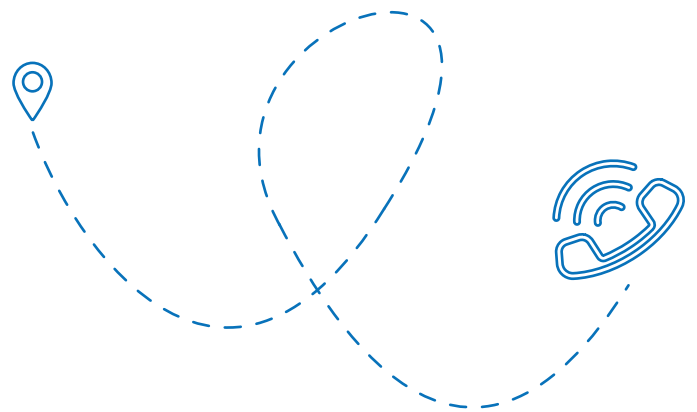
PROTECTION CONCERNS AMONG AFGHAN REFUGEES



Helpline & Field Insights #2
Shifting trends since
the ceasefire

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1. METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on interactions with over 3,440 Afghan refugees in Iran through the [UNHCR Helpline](#) between 8 April and 8 May 2026. This report builds on the findings of a [previous report](#) published by UNHCR in March which analyses Helpline data from 1-31 March 2026 through interactions with Afghan refugees in Iran. This follow-up report seeks to identify changes in the protection concerns and needs of Afghan refugees and other Afghans in need of international protection in Iran since the start of the ceasefire which came into effect on 8 April 2026. Between 8 April and 8 May 2026, the helpline received 38,252 calls, reflecting a broad range of protection concerns and priority needs. Several queries were handled by Interactive Voice Response (IVR), while trained operators individually counseled 3,440 Afghan callers.

This dataset is complemented by insights from refugees approaching UNHCR offices where individual counseling is provided. Together, these sources provide a consolidated overview of the key protection issues identified.

While these data provide valuable insights, they are subject to several limitations including coverage gaps, issues of representativeness, and access constraints. The findings should therefore be interpreted with these considerations in mind.

2. SITUATION OVERVIEW

Following the escalation of hostilities in Iran in late February 2026 and a subsequent ceasefire brokered on 7–8 April, the protection environment for Afghan refugees in Iran has evolved, with concerns remaining acute, though their nature has shifted. In March 2026, helpline callers' primary concerns were largely driven by conflict-related issues, including safety and security amid airstrikes, shelter damage in high-risk areas, and immediate basic needs resulting from temporary relocation and displacement. Since the easing of hostilities from 8 April, these concerns remain significant; however, they are increasingly accompanied by broader socioeconomic and legal challenges. Afghan refugees continue to report acute economic hardship, difficulties renewing documentation, and barriers to accessing essential services as key and growing areas of concerns.

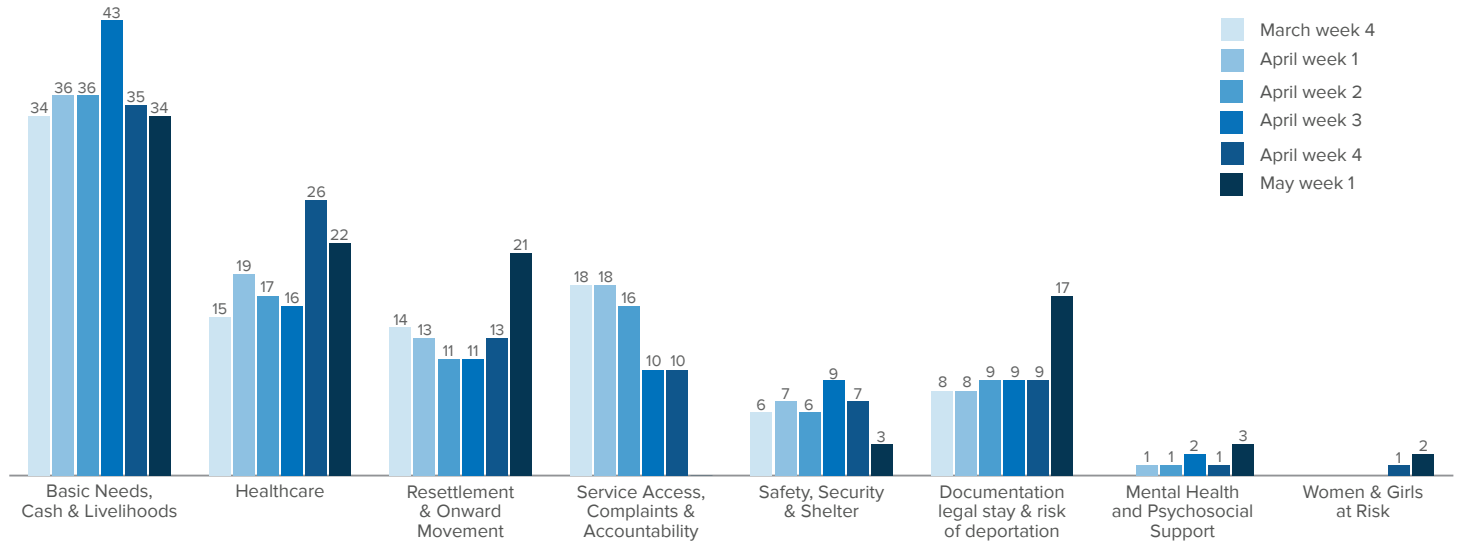
Basic needs – particularly cash for food, rent and medical care - were the most frequently reported concerns, alongside urgent issues related to legal status, driven by new documentation requirements and the high cost of health insurance and documentation renewal fees.

By early May, callers described overlapping protection challenges, with economic hardship and legal insecurity at the forefront, with conflict-related risks persisting but less prominent compared to rising costs, access barriers and ongoing psychosocial strain.

3. MAIN PROTECTION CONCERNS

Figure 1 | Main Protection concerns per week

Figures are in percentages. Multiple choice questions may add to over 100%.



Between 22 March and 7 May, over 5,300 Afghan refugees directly interacted with helpline operators. Figure 1 presents the weekly proportion of calls by main protection concern reported during this period, highlighting how the relative prevalence of different concerns evolved over time. The graph reflects the quantitative dimension of the data (the share and volume of calls associated with each protection concern) and does not capture the severity or intensity of the situations described by callers. These qualitative aspects are further explored in Figure 2. The narrative analysis below draws on both quantitative trends and qualitative insights to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving protection situation.



3.1 Safety, Security and Shelter

Conflict-related safety concerns, which were prevalent in March, persisted into April-May but became less dominant and took on different characteristics. While some callers continued to report direct impacts of hostilities – such as housing damage and temporary relocation - these incidents declined in frequency.

By early April, security concerns remained linked to ongoing airstrikes and proximity to high-risk sites, with ongoing reports of damaged housing and heightened fear.

However, from mid- to late April, shelter-related concerns were increasingly driven by economic factors rather than conflict. Rising rents and inflated deposits made housing unaffordable, with some landlords reportedly doubling previous rent levels. Callers described growing difficulties renewing leases or securing alternative accommodation, often linked to income loss from factory closures, layoffs, or unpaid wages.

By late April, eviction-related risks had intensified, with reports of landlord pressure, inability to pay rent, and adoption of negative coping strategies such as selling belongings or considering informal or precarious housing, including tents.

These trends continued into early May, with the economic impact of the crisis, putting more households at risk of eviction, displacement and in some cases homelessness.

Overall, while conflict-related safety concerns persisted, there was a clear shift from immediate physical threats to structural shelter vulnerabilities driven by rising housing costs, loss of livelihoods, and reduced coping capacity. New documentation requirements – particularly the proof of residence – further compounded risks, potentially affecting the legal status of Amayesh or Movaqat card holders.



3.2 Basic needs, cash and livelihoods

Financial assistance to meet basic needs remained the most frequent helpline request and became even more pronounced in April–May. Callers increasingly reported loss of income, unpaid wages, and widespread unemployment, particularly in factories, construction, hospitality, and informal sectors, driven by business closures and reduced hiring of Afghans. As a result, many households lacked any stable income and struggled to meet daily living costs.

By mid-April, financial concerns had overtaken immediate security issues, with most callers seeking support for food, rent, and medical costs. At the same time, requests related to documentation expenses - especially Amayesh renewal and mandatory health insurance – rose steadily, with these costs widely described as unaffordable and further compounding financial strain.

By late April and into early May, financial distress had deepened and broadened beyond immediate consumption needs to rent, deposits, school fees, and healthcare expenses, with many households unable to meet multiple obligations simultaneously. An increasing number of previously self-reliant families began seeking assistance, indicating a widening of vulnerability.

Negative coping strategies also intensified, including selling belongings, buying food on credit, and collecting recyclables. In extreme cases, reports included dumpster diving for food and consideration of organ selling.

Overall, compared to March, the data indicates a marked escalation and multidimensional expansion of financial vulnerability, reflecting a significant erosion of household resilience and a deepening basic needs and livelihoods crisis.



3.3 Healthcare

Health-related concerns remained prominent, but their nature has evolved from access to affordability and systemic constraints. While March, calls primarily reported disruptions and uncertainty around the Universal Public Health Insurance (UPHI) scheme, during April–May, concerns shifted towards the cost and accessibility of care. Three key issues emerged:

- Unaffordable mandatory health insurance costs, particularly premiums closely linked to Amayesh renewal (see 3.5):
- Limited access to subsidized coverage, with callers citing quotas, eligibility restrictions, and policy changes that excluded some individuals or conditions from free or reduced cost care. : some vulnerable patients were told that not all applicants could receive subsidized coverage due to limited quotas or policy shifts (e.g., reports that certain medical conditions were not automatically eligible for free coverage).
- Rising costs and reduced availability of treatment, including sharp increases in medication prices and reported shortages (e.g. the price of insulin reportedly tripled in a short period) especially affecting families of children with serious conditions (e.g. cerebral palsy) and patients with chronic illnesses.

Overall, health concerns evolved from fear of losing coverage to a broader affordability crisis. Growing out-of-pocket expenses, combined with constraints in accessing health insurance which have been exacerbated by the conflict, increasingly limited care for Afghan refugees. These challenges were compounded by the linkage between insurance and documentation, as inability to pay for health insurance coverage risks loss of legal status and increased exposure to arrest, detention, deportation and other heightened protection concerns.



3.4 Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)

Psychological distress among Afghan callers remained a significant and worsening concern, with a shift in underlying drivers. In March, distress was closely linked to conflict exposure, including bombardments, displacement, and fear in high-risk areas. By April–May, cumulative socioeconomic and legal pressures became the primary drivers of distress. Callers expressed heightened emotional strain, increasingly reporting financial hardship, eviction threats, debt and fear of losing legal status as key sources of anxiety. There was also a marked rise in demand for psychological counselling and worsening symptoms among those with pre-existing mental health conditions. Some callers, including a reported case of a minor, expressed suicidal ideation and attempts. Increased MHPSS cases are also linked to rising domestic violence driven by stress and economic hardship.

Overall, compared to March, MHPSS needs have worsened both in severity and urgency. While March distress was primarily linked to conflict exposure and trauma, April–May trends show increasing psychosocial strain driven by prolonged hardship and lack of solutions, with more frequent reports of severe mental health crises. This reflects a depletion in coping capacity and a deterioration in mental well-being as multiple pressures converge.



3.5 Documentation, legal stay and risk of deportation

Since early April, documentation renewal, particularly for Amayesh and Movaqat cards has emerged as a major protection concern, driven by new requirements including mandatory health insurance and proof of residence. From 8–12 April, helpline data show a clear rise in requests for financial assistance specifically to cover these costs, with medical insurance fees costing around 88 million Rials (~63\$) per person, posing a significant barrier.

Throughout April, these concerns intensified. Callers frequently sought UNHCR advocacy with authorities to reduce or waive fees. This financial burden is especially significant for larger households. At the same time, confusion and inconsistent practices at renewal centres – including reported confiscation of documents or instructions to leave the country despite seeking renewal.

Callers reported that challenges extended beyond affordability to include administrative barriers, such as obtaining proof of residence, which in some cases landlords refused to supply. Protection risks linked to non-renewal became increasingly prominent, including fear of loss of legal status, access to services, or deportation. Reports of arrests linked to expired documentation and high release costs reinforced perceptions of stricter enforcement. Individuals with specific risk profiles expressed heightened fear of forced return.

Compared to March, documentation issues have shifted from a secondary concern to a central protection risk. April–May data indicates that the affordability, complexity and accessibility of renewal processes are now key drivers of vulnerability with direct implications for legal stay, access to rights and overall protection outcomes.



3.6 Resettlement and cross border movement

Resettlement-related inquiries increased significantly in late April and early May, reflecting a shift from a mainly administrative queries to a broader coping strategy. While previously focused on case status or travel logistics, resettlement is now viewed as one of the few viable solutions to worsening economic and protection challenges.

By the end of April, requests had risen sharply, nearly reaching the volume of cash assistance requests for the first time. Many callers explicitly linked their interest in resettlement to the economic crisis and lack of prospects in Iran, stating that worsening living conditions had left them with no alternative.

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Resettlement is increasingly framed as an escape from overlapping pressures including financial hardship and documentation barriers, rather than solely a function of pending cases abroad. At the same time, some callers also explored informal onward movement options, such as to Türkiye, underscoring growing for pathways out of the current situation.



3.7 Women and girls at risk

Helpline calls continue to highlight severe protection risks facing women and girls, consistent with earlier findings, with increasing emphasis on barriers to accessing justice and support.

In April, several women reported threats of violence from family members or former spouses, and limited access to police protection, with – authorities perceived as unresponsive and complaints not adequately addressed, highlighting ongoing gaps in response to sexual and gender-based violence.

From late April to early May, female-headed households were increasingly identified as facing disproportionate economic hardship, with some women resorting to extreme coping strategies, such as selling hair or scavenging, to support their families.

While the volume of these cases remains relatively low their severity is high and sustained. Compared to March, risks for women and girls not only persist but are compounded by growing economic pressures and continued barriers to justice, increasing exposure to violence, exploitation and hardship. and heightened economic vulnerability.



3.8 Service access, complaints and accountability

Access to state services and complaint mechanisms remained constrained in April–May, with ongoing barriers to support and accountability, including reports of difficulty reaching other helplines.

Education access became a more prominent concern, as financial constraints increasingly prevented families from covering school fees and related costs, including devices for online learning. By late April and early May, some children were at risk of being withdrawn from school, with rising pressure to contribute to household income, raising child protection concerns.

At the same time, reports of discrimination and exploitation increased. Callers described growing instances of racism, harassment and labour exploitation, including coercive housing arrangements that reinforced debt and dependency.

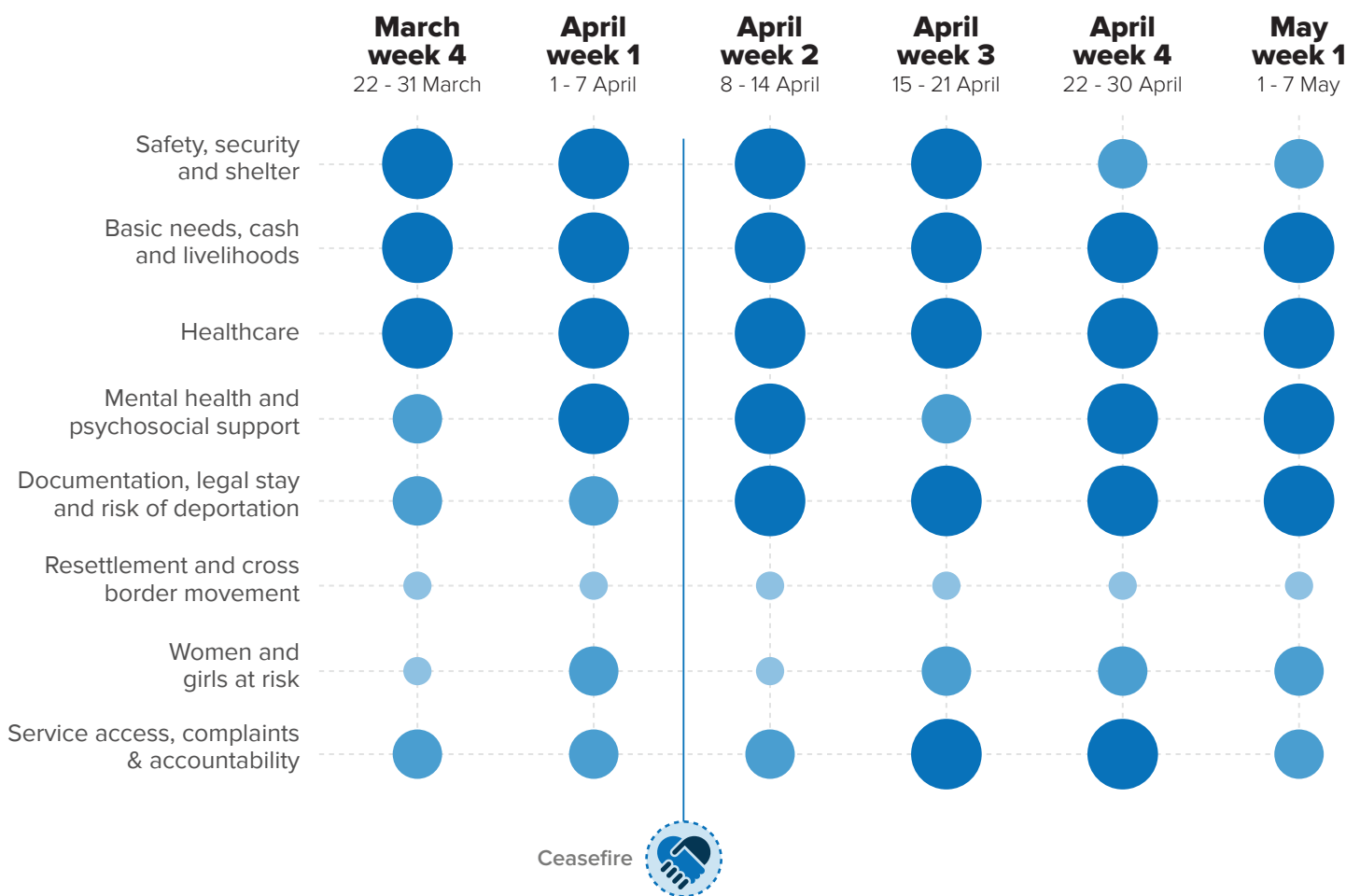
Compared to March, these trends indicate worsening conditions, with reduced access to services alongside heightened exposure to xenophobia, economic exploitation and protection risks.

4. RELATIVE INTENSITY OF MAIN PROTECTION CONCERNS




Reported via UNHCR Helpline, by week

The intensity scores (high, medium, low) are qualitative and indicate how prominently each protection concern appears during the calls, rather than precise call volumes. A concern is rated as high when it constitutes one of the main reasons for calling in a given week, medium when it is regularly mentioned but not dominant, and low when it appears only occasionally or in isolated examples. These ratings also consider whether concerns are increasing, recurring or stabilizing over time, in order to capture both the scale and persistence of protection issues reported by Afghan refugees calling the helpline.

Figure 2 | Main Protection concerns by intensity score per week



LEGEND

-  Low - appears only occasionally or in isolated examples
-  Medium - regularly mentioned but not dominant
-  High - one of the main reasons for calling in that week

Note: The qualitative intensity (low–medium–high) of each theme across the six weeks from 22 March – 7 May 2026. Intensity ratings are qualitative and based on the frequency and prominence of each theme in helpline narratives for this time period. It intends to illustrate relative trends over time rather than provide precise call volumes.

5. GEOGRAPHIC PATTERNS

Protection risks have shifted from geographically concentrated, conflict-driven impacts to more widespread, structural vulnerabilities. Geographical patterns in April-May indicate a transition toward more diffuse, non-location-specific risks. While Tehran and surrounding areas remain the primary hotspot for reports of shelter damage and acute protection concerns, needs are no longer primarily driven by direct exposure to hostilities.

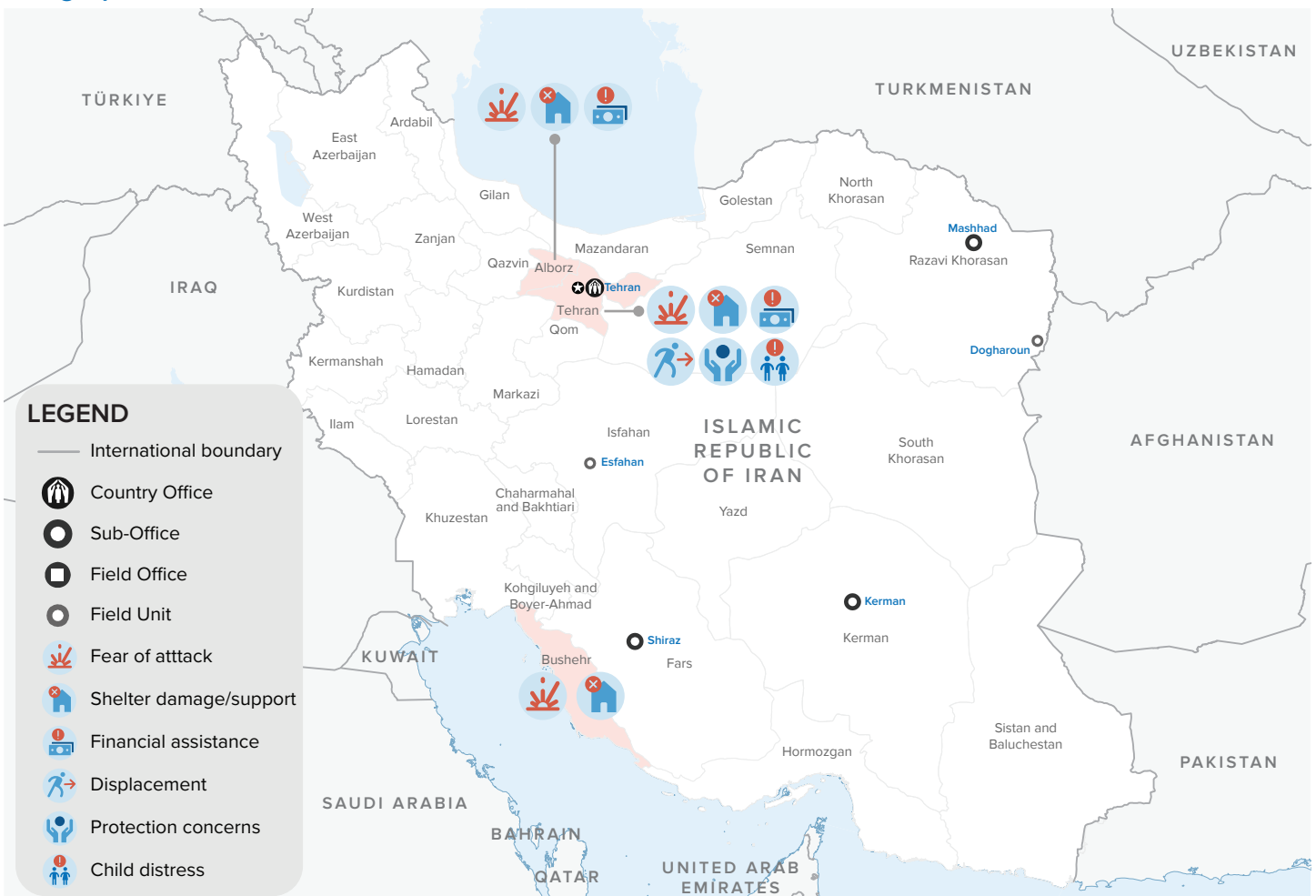
Tehran and neighbouring areas continue to concentrate reports of physical damage and urgent shelter needs, while other places that were previously major hotspots, such as Alborz were mentioned less by callers.

Across most locations, callers report economic hardship, documentation barriers, limited access to healthcare, and housing affordability challenges, with no clear geographic concentration. Without a clearly identifiable geographic concentration. These issues—particularly rent increases, Amayesh renewal costs, mandatory health insurance, and unemployment—appear systemic rather than location specific.

Emerging concerns related to rural and agricultural livelihoods in early May further indicate a broadening of vulnerability profiles.

Overall, the data reflects a shift from localized, conflict-related risks to dispersed, structural pressures affecting Afghan refugees across Iran.

Geographical concentration of risks and unmet needs



6. CONCLUSIONS AND OPERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Post ceasefire helpline data indicate a clear transition from conflict driven risks to structurally driven vulnerabilities affecting Afghan refugees.

Across both structured call data and qualitative counselling insights, the most frequently reported needs between 8 April and early May were:



While call volumes may highlight other issues, qualitative analysis shows that documentation concerns carry particularly acute protection risks. Callers consistently linked Amayesh renewal costs, especially mandatory health insurance requirements, to risk of losing legal status, reduced access to essential services, and fear of deportation. Documentation challenges were therefore not isolated administrative issues, but key drivers of broader vulnerability.

Inability to afford renewal was associated with reduced access to healthcare, barriers to education, and increased reliance on cash assistance, often compounded by -existing economic pressures, such as income loss and rent arrears. These overlapping constraints were also linked to heightened psychological distress and increased household protection risks.

Overall, data shows that protection risks are becoming increasingly interlinked, with economic vulnerability, documentation barriers, and limited access to services reinforcing one another. This convergence is driving a progressive erosion of resilience among Afghan refugees and other Afghans in need of international protection, underscoring the need for responses that address both immediate needs and underlying structural drivers of vulnerability.

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