

# Humanitarian consequences of the escalating conflict

## CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

By 12 March 2026, **an estimated 3.2 million Iranians had been temporarily internally displaced** following coordinated airstrikes targeting Iran's military, nuclear, and strategic infrastructure launched by the United States and Israel on 28 February, marking the beginning of a major regional escalation (UNHCR 12/03/2026). Iran responded with missile and drone attacks against Israeli and US-linked targets, expanding the conflict across the Middle East (UN News 28/02/2026; Reuters 01/03/2026). Communities across the country are experiencing an increase in humanitarian needs, particularly for **health, shelter, food, water, hygiene items, and mental health and psychosocial support, with access to healthcare, especially trauma care, being most acute** (IFRC 08/03/2026).

By 16 March, at least **1,444 people had been killed** in Iran, mostly civilians, and **over 18,550 injured** (AJ accessed 16/03/2026). Although there is no reliable disaggregation of the people killed because of information constraints, fatalities include at least 200 women, 168 children, 55 healthcare workers, and one humanitarian staff member (AJ accessed 16/03/2026; IFRC 15/03/2026). Airstrikes hit several cities including Ahvaz, Shiraz, Tabriz, and Tehran. Major cities, including Tehran, and southern provinces, such as Bushehr, Hormozgan, and Khuzestan, experienced repeated airstrikes, causing **widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and mass displacement** (AJ accessed 16/03/2026; The New Arab 04/03/2026; Iran Wire 09/03/2026). Reported figures for those killed and injured vary across sources and are likely to evolve as new information becomes available. They may also underestimate the true toll in areas where access is limited or casualties are not systematically recorded.

**Disruptions to communications networks** because of state restrictions and electricity supply reduce civilians' access to timely information on potential attacks, increasing the risk of being caught in hostilities and heightening exposure to protection risks. Between 28 February and 5 March, according to monitoring by Netblocks, internet connectivity across the country had dropped to about 1% of normal levels (NetBlocks X 05/03/2026; The Conversation 06/03/2026; Iran International 09/03/2026).

In the first two days of conflict, more than 100,000 people fled from Tehran to other provinces, **indicating significant internal displacement**. The conflict has already affected over 150 cities and villages and triggered hundreds of air raids, disrupting daily life and essential services nationwide (UNHCR 05/03/2026; The New Arab 04/03/2026).

**Among the most affected groups are Afghan nationals** in Iran, estimated at 4.4 million by January 2026, including registered and unregistered refugees (UNHCR accessed 17/03/2026). Afghans are particularly at risk because they experience a combination of pre-existing socioeconomic marginalisation, insecure legal status, and limited access to services with heightened exposure to displacement and forced return during the conflict. The escalating conflict has led **some Afghans living in host communities to self-relocate to camps**, placing additional strain on humanitarian services (UN News 12/03/2026).

## ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

**Rising internal displacement:** the number of displaced people is anticipated to rise further as hostilities, infrastructure damage, and insecurity continue, indicating a significant increase in humanitarian needs throughout the country, primarily in healthcare, WASH, shelter, and food (UNHCR 12/03/2026). Internal displacement is likely to continue from major urban centres targeted by strikes, particularly Tehran, towards northern and rural provinces perceived as safer because they are geographically distant from targets. Prolonged conflict could also trigger cross-border movements into neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Türkiye (UN 05/03/2026; AA 05/03/2026).

**Cross-border displacement:** if conflict continues throughout March and April, cross-border displacement, especially to Azerbaijan and Armenia, is likely to increase. In Azerbaijan, arrivals are expected in southern districts and Bilasuvar, Lankaran, and Yardimli. An estimated 15–23 million ethnic Azerbaijanis live in Iran's northwest provinces, representing the population potentially exposed to cross-border displacement to Azerbaijan (IFRC 10/03/2026; Euro News 06/03/2026). A surge exceeding

500 arrivals within 72 hours would likely strain local reception capacity in southern districts bordering Iran, leading to congestion and immediate unmet needs, including water, hygiene, shelter, first aid, and mental health and psychosocial support, alongside risks of family separation and loss of communication because of crowding and chaotic movement (IFRC 10/03/2026). During the 12-day escalation between Israel and Iran in June 2025, Azerbaijan opened a humanitarian corridor that primarily facilitated the transport of foreign nationals (including Chinese, Russian, and Tajik citizens) to Baku for departure, with some Azerbaijani citizens also returning (AJ 19/06/2025).

Similarly, an estimated 60,000–80,000 ethnic Armenians in Tehran and northwest Iran are potentially exposed to displacement to Armenia, including to the Syunik region. If 300 people started arriving at reception centres in Armenia every day for three consecutive days, the government response would likely be insufficient and humanitarian intervention could be required (IFRC 06/03/2026). Drinking water, ready-to-eat food, hygiene items, emergency medical services, psychological support, NFIs, shelter, and emergency cash assistance are likely needed at reception points near border crossings expecting arrivals (Astara border crossing in Azerbaijan and Nurduz–Agarak in Armenia) (IFRC 10/03/2026 and 06/03/2026).

**Regional escalation:** it remains uncertain whether the conflict between Iran and Israel/US will escalate further, drawing in additional countries such as Azerbaijan, the Gulf states, Türkiye, or Yemen. A broader regional escalation would likely expand the geographic spread of attacks, trigger new displacement movements within and across borders, and further disrupt airspace and transport routes, constraining humanitarian access and aid operations across the region (Reuters 13/03/2026; The New Arab 05/03/2026; Atlantic Council 03/03/2026; NYT 13/03/2026; Euronews 13/03/2026; Eurasianet 06/03/2026).

**Ground invasion:** a highly uncertain scenario is a potential ground invasion operation in Iran. Growing regional escalation and external pressure from the US and Israel have increased discussion of armed groups, mainly the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, launching a ground operation in Iran. Kurdish militias are allegedly consulting with the US on whether and how to attack Iranian security forces in western Iran and potentially open a new front against Tehran (Reuters 04/03/2026; RNZ 06/03/2026). If a ground operation happens, humanitarian consequences may include intensified cross-border attacks, civilian casualties, and displacement,

especially from Kurdish-populated areas near the Iran–Iraq border towards the Kurdistan autonomous region of Iraq. In such a scenario, needs may include shelter, health, and protection, especially among Kurdish IDPs already living in the area (ABC 12/03/2026). Such an operation would most likely originate from bases in the Kurdistan autonomous region of Iraq and target Iran’s northwest provinces, particularly West Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, although the mountainous Zagros terrain would make large-scale ground advances difficult and favour guerrilla-style clashes (Al Araby 11/03/2026). In this instance, fighting would likely involve Kurdish opposition groups – such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran and Komala – confronting Iranian security forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, potentially alongside continued Iranian strikes on Kurdish bases across the Iran–Iraq border (Al Hurra 06/03/2026; RNZ 06/03/2026).

**Ethnic and sectarian tension:** the conflict creates conditions that could aggravate longstanding, documented ethnic and sectarian grievances in multiethnic border provinces (e.g. Kermanshah, Sistan and Baluchestan, and West Azerbaijan), where minorities such as Azeris, Baluchis, and Kurds have faced recurrent crackdowns and politicised mobilisation during previous periods of unrest, although no large-scale clashes or new tensions had been reported by mid-March 2026 (France 24 06/03/2026; New Lines Institute 28/02/2026; Azer News 26/01/2026; P.A. Turkey 08/03/2026; Iran HRDC 28/01/2022). If tensions escalate, for example through clashes between communities or between protesters and security forces, plausible humanitarian consequences include localised displacement, civilian casualties, damage to civilian infrastructure, and disrupted access to food, water, health, and shelter services, particularly affecting mixed urban and rural populations. This scenario remains highly uncertain and is not currently observed at scale.

## CRISIS IMPACTS

### Protection

Widespread air and missile strikes across most provinces are causing high civilian damage and casualties, with information blackouts and movement restrictions increasing people's exposure to attacks and other protection risks. By 6 March, strikes had affected 30 of the country's 31 provinces (with North Khorasan the only province not hit), with the highest concentration of air and drone strikes recorded in Isfahan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and Tehran (IFRC 08/03/2026; ACLED accessed 18/03/2026). Between 28 February and 16 March, at least 1,444 civilians were killed, including 200 children, and over 18,550 injured as a result of strikes (AJ accessed 16/03/2026; UNICEF 11/03/2026). In a single incident on 28 February, a US military investigation concluded that a US Tomahawk missile hit a girls' school in the city of Minab, killing over 170 children, most of them schoolgirls (AJ 12/03/2026; NYT 11/03/2026). Between 28 February and 12 March, approximately 304 missile and drone attacks were reported across the country, highlighting increasing protection needs (ACLED accessed 12/03/2026).

Shortly after the strikes began, Iranian authorities imposed a near-total internet blackout and blocked international connectivity, reducing internet traffic to as low as 1–4% of normal levels. The restrictions mirror an earlier nationwide shutdown during the January 2026 protests, in which around 92 million people were cut off from global internet access and experienced severely limited phone and messaging services. The Government has also attempted to block satellite internet connections and limit access to platforms such as social media and messaging applications, forcing citizens to rely primarily on state-controlled domestic networks (Juristnews 09/03/2026). Civilians may be unable to receive real-time updates about airstrikes, evacuation routes, or safety instructions during attacks, preventing coordinated evacuations and the deployment of real-time alert systems used in other Middle Eastern countries, increasing civilian harm. Millions of Iranians have been unable to contact relatives inside or outside the country, creating distress and complicating family reunification during displacement or evacuations (Iran International 10/03/2026; Access Now 11/03/2026).

To gain internet access during shutdowns, people often try to use Starlink or a VPN. During the January 2026 shutdown, however, such avenues were severely restricted, as Iranian authorities targeted Starlink users (Iran International 17/03/2026). Very few households could access the internet, while VPN access was largely blocked or unstable (BBC 14/01/2026).

### Displacement and shelter

By 12 March, an estimated 3.2 million people had been internally displaced across Iran by the escalating conflict, largely following a city-to-rural pattern. People are mainly fleeing major urban centres targeted by airstrikes, particularly Tehran and other large cities such as Ahvaz, and moving toward rural districts and northern provinces near the Caspian Sea, which are perceived as safer and less likely to be targeted (UNHCR 12/03/2026; WSJ 12/03/2026).

Most displaced households are not staying in formal shelters or camps; instead, they are living with relatives, friends, or host families in villages and smaller towns, or in vacant houses or temporary rural accommodations (WSJ 12/03/2026; AP 10/03/2026). This dispersed displacement pattern reduces the immediate need for large camps but places pressure on host communities, increasing overcrowding in households and straining local services, food supply, and livelihoods in rural areas with limited infrastructure to support sudden population increases.

By 12 March, domestic reports indicated widespread damage to civilian infrastructure, including over 24,500 civilian units damaged in various sectors, of which nearly 19,800 were residential units (Radio Zamaneh 12/03/2026). If the destruction of civilian housing stock continues, a short-term need for displacement sites and shelter provision is likely, with a long-term need for widespread civilian reconstruction.

By 10 March, there had been no large-scale movements of Iranian nationals to neighbouring countries. While thousands of cross-border movements from Iran have been reported, the overwhelming majority of these have been foreign nationals (especially Afghans) leaving Iran with a small number of Iranian truck drivers to Afghanistan (IOM 13/03/2026). Iran currently hosts approximately 750,000 registered Afghan refugees and an estimated 2.6 million undocumented Afghans, with estimates suggesting that 78% or more live in urban areas currently the focus of attacks (ISPI 26/02/2024; UNHCR accessed 18/03/2026).

## Health

Iran's health system, already weakened by years of sanctions, is struggling to cope with the surge in trauma cases and repeated attacks on health facilities, leading to rising unmet health needs. By 15 March, up to 20 hospitals had sustained damage, resulting in the deaths of eight health workers. These attacks have not only cost lives but also undermined access to essential medical care at a time of rising need, as health facilities and emergency services are facing heavy pressure from the surge of injured patients (WHO 11/03/2026; IFRC 08/03/2026; ANF News 15/03/2026).

Prior to the conflict, Iran's healthcare sector faced serious structural challenges, contributing to the strain it is now facing. Health facilities had already reported shortages of drugs and supplies, with higher costs the result of longstanding economic sanctions, complicated banking, and high transport costs for essential medicine and medical equipment (Iran International 19/02/2025; Mohamadi et al. 21/11/2024). The exodus of health professionals and rising price of medicine was straining service delivery and increasing unmet health needs, weakening the system's capacity to provide timely care or deal with shocks, such as a large-scale conflict (Iran International 10/11/2024).

Environmental hazards are also an increasing health concern in Iran. Petroleum fires and smoke from compromised infrastructure have subjected nearby communities to toxic pollutants, potentially inducing respiratory issues, ocular and dermal irritation, as well as contaminated water and food sources. This pollution will likely have both short- and long-term effects, such as increased rates of waterborne disease and increased risk of cancer from burning chemicals (including benzene and methylene chloride) respectively. Tehran has been particularly affected, with strikes hitting the Aghdasieh oil warehouse in the city's northeast, the Shahrān oil depot in the north, and an oil depot in Karaj, west of Tehran (Time 08/03/2026; WHO 11/03/2026; Nature 11/03/2026). Concerns also persist regarding nuclear facilities. While some nuclear-related sites, such as the Natanz nuclear enrichment facility, have suffered minor damage, the International Atomic Energy Agency has found no evidence of off-site radiation leaks. Any military activity near nuclear infrastructure raises the risk of radiological or chemical contamination, however, posing serious environmental and public health risks (Mezha 04/03/2026; AJ 03/03/2026).

## WASH

Damage to water infrastructure and electricity networks is compounding Iran's chronic water crisis and increasing the risk of water shortages and disease outbreaks, particularly in areas hosting large numbers of displaced people, including rural areas. By 16 March, around 204 locations of Iran's water supply infrastructure, including transmission lines, pumping stations, storage tanks, electrical equipment, and the Qeshm desalination facility in Hormozgan, had been damaged. Government sources report that, despite the damage, drinking water continues to be supplied nationwide via emergency management and alternative resources, although experts believe the system is strained (CarbonBrief 13/03/2026). Repair and reconstruction are underway (Tasnim News 16/03/2026).

Iran was already experiencing a severe, long-term water crisis driven by climate change, drought, unsustainable groundwater extraction, and inefficient agricultural water use. Several regions face chronic shortages, and dam reservoirs supplying major cities such as Tehran have reached historically low levels. In recent years, authorities warned that prolonged drought could lead to water rationing or even evacuation of parts of Tehran if rainfall remains insufficient (Geopolitical Monitor 12/02/2026; AP 07/11/2025). Damage to water infrastructure, electricity cuts affecting pumping, and new IDP concentrations in already water-stressed areas are compounding this pre-existing crisis, increasing the risk of shortages and waterborne disease outbreaks.

## Food security and livelihoods

The conflict is aggravating an already severe economic and food price crisis, further eroding households' purchasing power and livelihoods, especially for low-income urban households, informal workers, and refugees who were already struggling to meet basic needs. Even before the conflict, Iran faced severe economic pressure and high food inflation, with retail food prices rising about 42% year-on-year in September 2025, driven by sanctions, currency depreciation, and structural economic issues. Between January–December 2025, rice rose from the equivalent of USD 0.57/kg to USD 2.66/kg, a 367% increase (IFPRI 06/03/2026; NBC 13/03/2026).

Iran will likely also be affected by the global rise in oil and food prices resulting from the 2026 conflict. Higher global energy prices increase transport and production costs, contributing to inflation and higher food prices inside the country, reducing households' purchasing power and access to basic goods, especially poorer urban populations who spend a large share of income on food (Iran International 11/03/2026). Even though Iran continues exporting oil, particularly to China, domestic economic pressures persist as inflation and currency depreciation drive up the cost of imported food and agricultural inputs (CNBC 11/03/2026). To mitigate the impact on households, the Government approved a 60% increase in the national minimum wage starting on 21 March 2026, a step taken annually with the start of the Persian new year (Shafaq News 16/03/2026; Arab News 16/03/2026). In the month prior to the escalation, the minimum cost of basic survival and necessary calories for a family of three was estimated at USD 380, while the approved minimum wage stood at USD 128 per month, approximately 30% of what was needed. In 2025, the annual minimum wage increase was 45% (Iran International 16/03/2025). It is unlikely the planned increase will outpace inflation.

By 12 March, over 4,500 business units had been damaged by Israeli/US airstrikes, with potentially significant economic and livelihood consequences for residents of the affected areas (Radio Zamaneh 12/03/2026). The internet shutdown also affects livelihoods across the country. During the protests between December 2025 and early February 2026, the last time the Government imposed an internet shutdown, online commerce dropped by around 80%, causing significant losses for small businesses and service providers (AJ 02/02/2026; Chatham House 26/01/2026; Iran International 29/01/2026). The total losses suffered by the Iranian economy during these blackouts alone were estimated at approximately USD 33 million per day (AJ 02/02/2026).

## Education

All schools and universities have been closed until further notice, with remote and online learning implemented where possible (DPA 02/03/2026; Iran Wire 09/03/2026). By 9 March, 65 schools and educational institutions across Iran had been damaged or targeted. The Minab school strike by US forces caused extensive destruction to the school, killing 168 – including over 100 children – and causing large-scale mental health and psychosocial distress for survivors (AI 16/03/2026; AA 09/03/2026).

Access to remote education during periods of school closures and internet shutdowns are likely to be challenging for all children, severely disrupting education. Such disruptions are likely the worst for students from poorer households, refugee groups, informal workers, and other low income segments of the population, aggravating existing inequities in learning opportunities.

## HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

### Humanitarian constraints

Telecommunications disruptions and internet outages are hindering humanitarian responders' capacity to conduct comprehensive needs assessments, share information, coordinate emergency response, and communicate with affected populations, while intermittent electricity cuts reduce access to health services (IFRC 08/03/2026; The Conversation 06/03/2026).

The operating environment for humanitarian responders remains highly constrained by airstrikes, movement restrictions, and damaged infrastructure. Missile and drone activity, along with mobility and service disruptions, continues to hinder access, coordination, and aid delivery (IOM 11/03/2026; Reuters 06/03/2026). By 12 March, at least 16 Red Crescent centres, 21 rescue vehicles, and 19 ambulances had been damaged, alongside the death of one humanitarian staff member on 8 March (Radio Zamaneh 12/03/2026; IFRC 15/03/2026).

Iran and several other countries in the region, including Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, continue to face significant airspace restrictions, flight suspensions, and heightened aviation security measures. Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have implemented partial airspace closures and precautionary controls, resulting in widespread disruptions to civilian air travel across the Middle East. These developments are disrupting civilian mobility and commercial routes, hindering humanitarian staff rotations and supply movements. Humanitarian needs are increasing across the region as displacement rises, access becomes more restricted, and essential services are placed under greater pressure (IOM 11/03/2026; Flightradar24 17/03/2026).

As a result of the conflict, the Strait of Hormuz has been effectively closed to most commercial shipping since late February, despite ports in Bandar Abbas and Bandar Lengeh remaining partially operational for limited domestic traffic (*Iran International 15/03/2026*). The suspension of maritime transit and airspace restrictions over Gulf countries has unsettled global markets, driving up energy prices and delaying shipments of essential goods, including humanitarian supplies (*Carra Globe 10/03/2026*; *UNCTAD 10/03/2026*). Shipments from Dubai's Humanitarian Hub (a key staging point for Middle East relief) are being rerouted via costly overland routes through Saudi Arabia to the Levant, avoiding the strait entirely, while global energy and fertiliser price surges compound logistics costs (*WFP 08/03/2026*; *CFR 12/03/2026*).

INGOs such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the WHO, and the IOM store emergency supplies in Dubai to quickly ship to the Middle East and other crisis zones, but rising operational costs – compounded by major donor cuts and emergency shipping surcharges – are straining budgets. This means that organisations may be forced to reduce delivery volumes, prioritise essential supplies, or delay scale-up (*Logistics Cluster 10/03/2026*; *Reuters 06/03/2026*).

The rising cost of fuel as a result of insecurity is another constraint that could scale down humanitarian operations – particularly emergency food, water, and medical supply distributions – while transportation and insurance expenses are also on the rise. As such, the IFRC may have to cut deliveries to the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) (*Reuters 06/03/2026*).

## Response capacity

On 10 March, the IFRC launched an emergency appeal to expand IRCS efforts, targeting five million people across 30 affected provinces over the next 16 months with priority health, shelter, WASH, relief items, and psychosocial support assistance. The IRCS has been responding since the 28 February escalation; by 10 March, 529 IRCS branches had been involved across 30 provinces and 197 cities. More than 2,100 response teams focusing on search and rescue, first aid, relief distribution, and emergency shelter support, alongside 6,500 staff and volunteers, have been deployed to assist affected communities (*IFRC 10/03/2026*).

Despite the deteriorating security environment, the UNHCR in Iran remains operational, with functioning offices, reception centres, and helplines to support refugees, asylum seekers, and other displaced populations, including an estimated 4.4 million Afghan nationals. The organisation is adapting its response to the growing needs resulting from the conflict, working closely with national authorities and responders to assess emerging requirements, strengthen preparedness, and ensure timely protection and assistance as population movements increase (*UNHCR 12/03/2026*). Priority needs of Afghan refugees often include protection, cash assistance, and support accessing services such as healthcare, education, and livelihoods (*UNHCR 16/02/2026*). Following the start of the conflict, some reports indicate that more Afghan refugees living in host communities are moving to camps, increasing pressure on WASH, shelter, and protection services within these settlements (*UN News 12/03/2026*).

By 8 March, the WFP had provided assistance to around 33,000 refugees in Iran, including Afghan refugees living in settlements throughout the country (*BWC 08/03/2026*). By 18 March, there were no reports of the WFP scaling up assistance in Iran.

Key humanitarian response gaps include access constraints in airstrike-affected provinces, logistical disruptions from regional transport restrictions, and sanctions-related financial barriers to international aid delivery (*Think Global Health 13/03/2026*). Airstrikes and rising insecurity will likely continue limiting operations in intensely targeted areas such as Tehran and Isfahan, while funding shortfalls, including the lack of a dedicated Iran appeal beyond the IFRC, threaten responders' ability to scale up health, food, and shelter assistance (*UN News 12/03/2026*).

## COMPOUNDING/AGGRAVATING FACTORS

### Pre-crisis economic and political stress

Iran has been experiencing a prolonged and severe economic crisis characterised by very high inflation, currency depreciation, and rising poverty rates (around 30% of the population is living in poverty), eroding households' capacity to cope with additional shocks (WB 10/2025). Inflation exceeded 48% in 2025 while the minimum wage increased by only 45%, failing to keep pace with rising living costs and resulting in a continued erosion of purchasing power (Iran International 16/03/2025). Staple food prices rose even faster: fruit prices increased by 75% and bread and grain prices nearly doubled nationwide in some periods. Longstanding international sanctions and domestic governance challenges have constrained Iran's access to foreign currency, limited medicine and equipment imports, and reduced the Government's fiscal space to maintain public services and social support. As a result, economic growth slowed sharply to around 0.3–0.6% in 2025, with recession risks heightened if conflict persists, while exports declined and foreign currency inflows weakened (AA 15/01/2026; Asia Times 07/03/2026; SCR 11/03/2026).

These macroeconomic pressures leave households with minimal financial resilience to absorb additional shocks from the conflict, while the Government's constrained revenues and weakened economic capacity limit its ability to provide social support, maintain public services, and respond to rising humanitarian needs.

These structural weaknesses mean the current conflict occurs amid widespread poverty and economic fragility. Declining living standards have triggered recurrent protests, which have been met with security responses that further strain service access and erode civilian–state trust. In this context, the escalation is likely to aggravate inflation, disrupt key food import, fuel, and medicine supply chains, and overwhelm already fragile public services. Combined with sanctions and limited fiscal capacity, these pre-existing pressures significantly constrain Iran's ability to fund humanitarian response, maintain health/WASH services, and subsidise basic needs amid rising shocks (Facctum 10/03/2026; EC 29/01/2026; AI 26/01/2026; AJ 16/01/2026).

### Afghan refugees

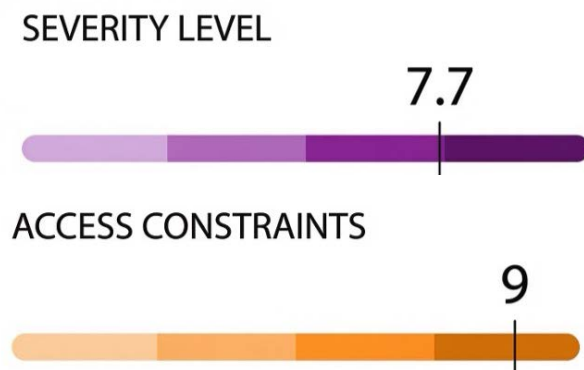
The escalation of the conflict has worsened conditions for Afghan refugees in Iran. Reports of restricted movement, heightened security measures in cities, increasing food prices, and loss of livelihoods, alongside rising psychosocial distress and growing concerns about gender-based violence, have prompted many to leave the country (UNHCR 10/03/2026; Devdiscourse 11/03/2026). Between 28 February and 7 March, nearly 19,000 undocumented Afghans returned from Iran to Afghanistan through the Herat and Nimroz border crossings (IOM 11/03/2026). Since 28 February, about 1,700 Afghans have been crossing the border from Iran into Afghanistan daily (Devdiscourse 11/03/2026). By 10 March, around 110,000 Afghans had returned from Iran since the start of 2026, as rising insecurity and increasing prices makes life difficult for them (UNHCR 10/03/2026).

Aside from the direct pressures of conflict and displacement, returnees face overcrowded border crossings in Afghanistan's Herat and Nimroz provinces, limited access to basic services (such as food, water, shelter, and healthcare), and pre-existing economic hardships in Afghanistan. Protection risks are heightened because crowded and insecure reception points, lack of privacy, disrupted family structures, and limited access to psychosocial support increase the likelihood that women, children, and unaccompanied minors experience gender-based violence, exploitation, and psychological distress. The cumulative effect of these pressures increases the likelihood of long-term displacement, secondary migration, or coping strategies with potentially harmful effects, further straining humanitarian response capacities in Iran and Afghanistan (UNICEF 10/03/2026; WFP 03/03/2026; 8am 11/03/2026).

Funding shortages are restricting UNHCR monitoring of Afghan returnees and limiting the provision of necessary humanitarian assistance. Alongside this, returnees are going back to a country engaged in escalating conflict with Pakistan, resulting in new displacement and rising humanitarian needs (AtlasPress News Agency 11/03/2026).

According to the INFORM Severity Index, the displacement crisis from Afghanistan to Iran scored a 7.7 (high) by February 2026 and a 9 (very high) with regards to ACAPS humanitarian constraints by December 2025.

Figure 1. Iran's INFORM Severity Index and Access constraint scores



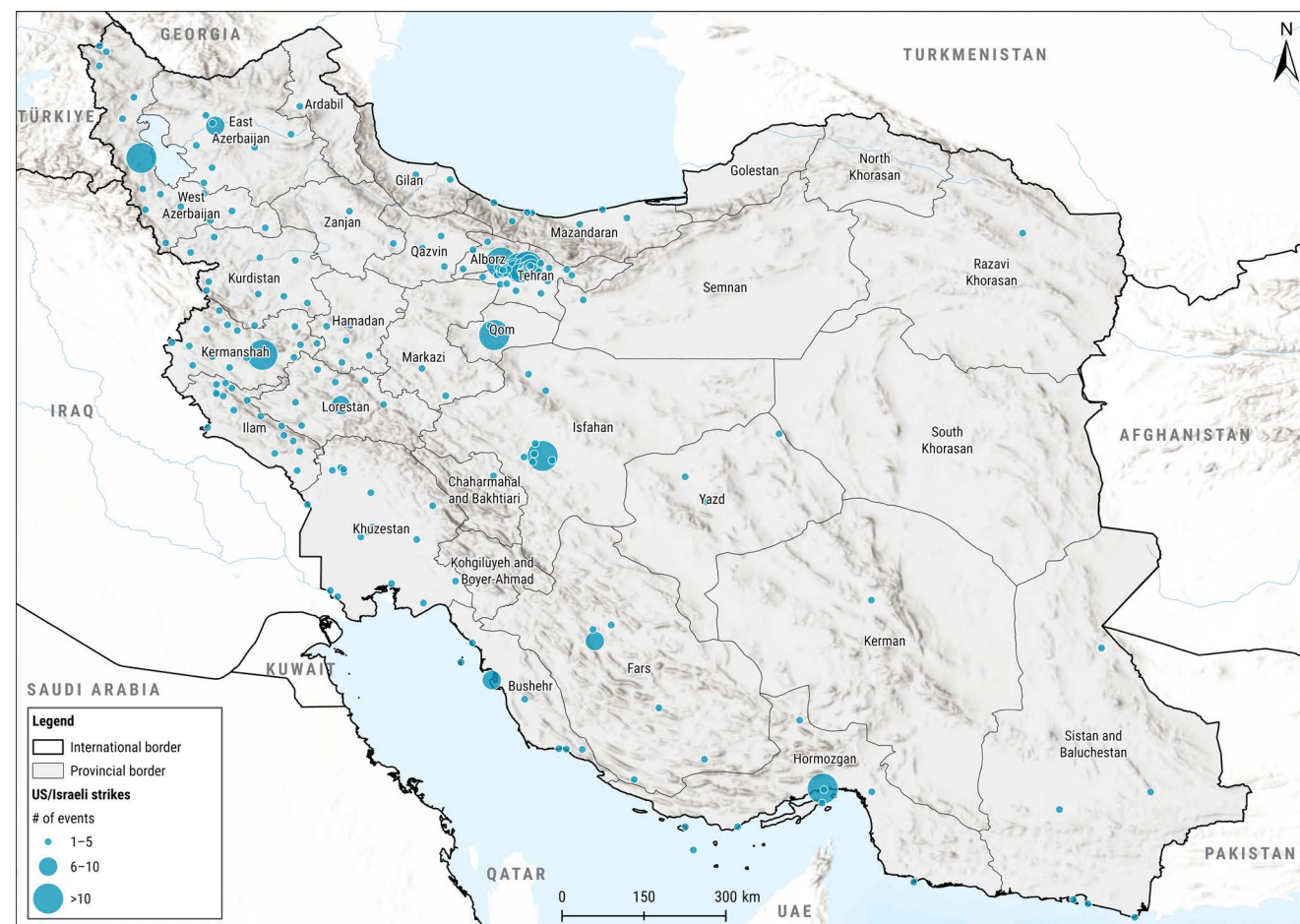
Source: ACAPS (accessed 14/03/2026); ACAPS (12/2025)

### Information gaps

Key information gaps include the following:

- up-to-date, disaggregated subnational data on humanitarian needs across sectors
- more detailed information on the situation of specific groups, including women, children, people with disabilities, and non-Afghan foreign nationals, such as Iraqis and Pakistanis
- systematic data on the functionality of health, WASH, and education services in heavily affected areas.
- Over the coming weeks, priority monitoring questions include how displacement patterns evolve, how access restrictions and economic pressures affect basic service delivery, and whether cross-border movements into neighbouring countries accelerate.

MAP 1. ISRAELI/US ATTACKS ON IRAN (28 FEBRUARY TO 14 MARCH 2026)



Source: ACLED (accessed 15/03/2026)