

Iranian Cultural Awareness Guide

Effective engagement with recently arrived Iranian migrants requires an understanding of Iran's diverse ethnic makeup, the political repression and conflict many may be fleeing, and the historic mistrust of state authorities held by some communities. Awareness of cultural norms surrounding honour, privacy, and family can support more informed and effective interactions.

Cultural competence enables officers to build rapport, enhance credibility and improve opportunities to identify safeguarding concerns and gather intelligence relating to organised immigration crime and smuggling networks. This is not about applying the law differently, but about understanding context to deliver policing that is effective, proportionate, and fair.



Introduction

What follows is a short guide looking at different sections of the Iranian culture designed to support officers and staff in understanding Iranian cultural, historical, and social contexts that may be relevant when engaging with individuals with lived experience of Iran. This guide should be used alongside existing legal, procedural, and safeguarding guidance.

No single guide can represent every individual experience. Officers are encouraged to remain curious, reflective, and willing to seek further advice where required.

Historical and Political Context

Iran has a long history of authoritarian governance and surveillance. Iran's modern political history includes the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s, decades of political repression, and more recent crackdowns (e.g., the Green Movement, ongoing protests). Many migrants—especially Kurds, political dissidents, or minorities—have experienced or fear state surveillance, arrest, or persecution, meaning they may well be deeply wary of uniformed authority.

Since the 1979 Revolution, religious laws heavily influence daily life from social norms to legal structures. There has been much recession and hardship on the population.

They may fear that information they share could reach Iranian authorities or endanger family members.

Iran relies heavily on its resources, particularly crude oil classed as 'black gold' to boost its economy. Sanctions are way of life for Iranians and inflation is high. The state is much more dependent on China and Russia for good imports.

Iran's proxies

Iran has a network of armed groups and political movements that are trained, funded, and receive weapons and strategic direction from **Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)**. They form the Axis of Resistance and are namely:

- Hezbollah in Lebanon – the most powerful and long-standing proxy of Iran.
- Hamas in Gaza – A Sunni Palestinian Islamist movement.
- Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza & West Bank.
- Houthis in Yemen – they have been attacking regional targets and shipping.
- Iraqi militias – Various Shiite groups.
- Syrian militias.
- Bahraini groups.



Ethnic diversity and internal discrimination

Iran has a population of approximately eighty-six million. Iran is not culturally homogenous. Persians are only about half the population; large minorities include Turks, Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, Gilak and others. Kurds who make up about 10-12% of the population in Iran, in particular face discrimination and surveillance.

Officers should avoid assuming “Iranian” equals “Persian”.

Ethnic identity may strongly influence trust, trauma, and willingness to talk.

Ask the migrant if they are comfortable with the interpreter’s ethnicity, gender, and accent and avoid interpreters from rival ethnic groups unless the migrant explicitly agrees.



A Kurdish migrant may not trust a Persian interpreter; a Baluchi may fear retaliation from co-ethnic smugglers.

The official language is Persian (Farsi), but other languages spoken include Azeri (Turkish), Kurdish Sorani, Kurdish Kurmanji, Balochi, Arabic and Lori. Most will speak Farsi but migrants may often speak a little of other languages too.

Dialects can be a good indicator of where in the region migrants originate from as the map below indicates, there can also be clues in the accents and phrases used:

Standard Persian – if the Persian sounds very “neutral” and fast, dropping of final consonants.

Turkic dialects (mostly Azerbaijani Turkish) – If Persian suddenly has Turkish words mixed in, also the use of rolling r’s and short, clipped vowels.

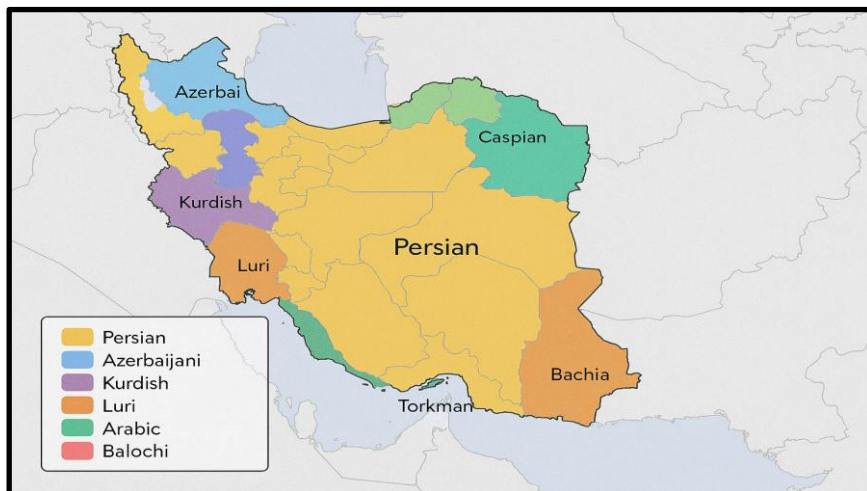
Kurdish – If the accent is firm, clipped, and strong consonants.

Lori and Bakhtiari – Listen out for old sounding vocabulary and strong rhythm.

Caspian (Gilaki / Mazandarani) - Nasal vowels.

Arabic – If Persian is mixed with Arabic expressions.

Balochi – Heavy stress patterns, vocabulary unrelated to Persian.



Recent conflict and displacement pressures

Escalating conflict involving the US and Israel has intensified fear, instability, increased economic hardship and mass displacement. Analysts warn that even modest escalation could produce refugee flows in the millions.



Migrants arriving via irregular routes to the UK may be considered as having committed Immigration offences however they may well be traumatised, exhausted, and uncertain about their future. They may have travelled through multiple countries and smuggling networks, each adding layers of exploitation.

Iranian smuggling routes often involve:

- Local facilitators in Iran
- Kurdish or Turkish smugglers in border regions
- Balkan-route intermediaries
- UK-based debt collectors or community enforcers

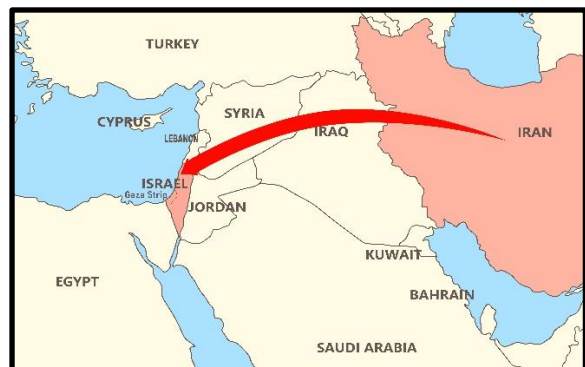
As well as the conflict, recent protests are also a factor to consider, Iranians have been subject to deaths and injuries at the hands of their own government from protests in Iran since January 2026 are in the 10s of 1000s, (source: Country Bulletin Iran: Protests of December 2025 to January 2026

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69eb6a1f20a498c16734af59/IRN_Country_Bulletin_Protests_of_December_2025_to_January_2026.pdf) Trauma levels may be

extreme and politically linked, not solely war-related and may invoke further fear responses, distrust, and reluctance to speak about political activity. Credible reports that individuals were detained, interrogated, beaten, and executed may explain migrants' extreme anxiety about names, fingerprints, recordings, or photographs.

Winners and losers

Iranian people have differing opinions on the war according to media reports. Some are relieved about the current cease fire (as at time of writing this briefing), due to the high stress and traumatic recent times, others are saddened that they feel the Regime has not been toppled and they must continue to endure the regulations and constraints.



The Islamist hard-liners may well feel emboldened by the current situation, that despite losing many of their leaders they could argue that they are still very much in control, having withstood attacks from the US and with the Strait of Hormuz still closed.



Cultural Norms That Affect Police Engagement



Authority and Trust - Many Iranians associate state authorities with coercion, surveillance, and punishment. Past experiences with Iranian authorities, may well have instilled feelings of fear, distrust, and a reluctance to engage.

UK policing is unfamiliar; officers must explain their role clearly, explaining the differences with security services and avoid abrupt questioning styles. Techniques such as trauma-informed practices, culturally sensitive, consistency over time to build trust, access to information and rights will all support engagement and empowerment.



Family, Honour, and Privacy - Family reputation (“āberu”) is a powerful cultural value. Sensitive topics—financial hardship, debt bondage, exploitation, sexual violence, or criminal involvement—may be shame-laden.

Migrants may protect smugglers who are also relatives, co-ethnics, or community figures.



Religion - Iran is officially Islamic, but many migrants are secular, non-practising, or from minority faiths.

Officers should avoid assumptions about a migrant’s commitment or intensity to their faith or political alignment.

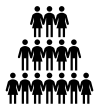
Zoroastrianism was the official religion from the 6th century. By and large other religions are respected. Islam stemmed from the seventh century, have Shiism (majority in Iran) and Sunnism, that traces back to early days of Islam and Prophet Muhammad. Sunni Islam believe the successor should be followers of Muhammad, Shiite believe Ali as a relative should be the successor. Iraq and Syria wars featured these differences.

Officers need to be aware that the Iranian Calendar is different to ours, sometimes called Jalali and Persian calendar.

https://www.iranchamber.com/calendar/converter/iranian_calendar_converter.php



Food and drink - Halal food is a must. Iranians will eat (and write) solely with their right hand for etiquette and will tend to not to eat before the host. Iranians will usually not consume alcohol, at least in public, but may consume in private.



Diaspora Dynamics - The Iranian diaspora is politically fractured—royalists, reformists, leftists, ethnic activists, apolitical migrants. These divisions can influence who trusts whom and who fears retaliation abroad.

Migrants may often arrive with deeply ingrained gender role beliefs and expectations, which can cause tension within a more modern society.

Learning of the language and UK systems can prove a challenge for many. British social norms can end up being a complete cultural shock.

Many will have untreated trauma that can hugely impact on their ability to integrate into society and engage with services.

Iranians have immense pride in their rich heritage and hospitality. Iran is known as the land of the offering and Iranians will often say ‘this is your home.’



Communication style

- Iranians place emphasis on indirect communication.

Meaning is communicated via tone, context, and non-verbal cues as opposed to words.

This contrasts to the more direct way of communicating in the UK and as such can create situations for potential misunderstanding.

- There is a respect for hierarchy.

Younger people may be reluctant to disclose information and appear more passive amongst older people/members of authority.

- The male head of the household may look to speak on behalf of the whole family.
- There may also be a reluctance to speak about feelings and emotional or mental health.

Direct eye contact with those in authority may be viewed as disrespectful and should not be assumed to be disengagement or a sign of dishonesty.

- Personal space and physical contact – officers should take the lead from those engaging with, if they initiate a handshake for instance, then can reciprocate.



Migration from Iran

Iran is a country of origin, transit, and destination for migrants. Iran hosts one of the largest migrants and refugees' populations, the majority of whom come from Afghanistan.

Until 9th March 2026, the number of conflict-related internally displaced persons (IDPs) remained at 100,000. By 11 March 2026, the most recent figures reported at the time of writing, IDP numbers had risen to between 1.9 and 3.2 million, representing between approximately 2% and 3.5% of the population. (*Source: Country Bulletin Iran: Security situation, March 2026*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69ef146420a498c16734af9d/IRN_Country_Bulletin_Security_situation.pdf)

Reasons for migration include:

- **Political persecution** – Families or individuals are exposed to threats and violence if they oppose the regime in any way. This could be by association with family members who are known opposers or direct involvement within protests.
- **Religious minority groups** – Christians, Jews and other minorities face discrimination, restricted access to education, employment opportunities, and services.
- **Economic hardship** – restrictive sanctions, prolonged economic stability, results in families looking for a better life abroad.
- **War** – the current political situation means that many Iranians will feel they have no choice but to leave their homeland to seek safety.
- **Social restrictions and oppression** – Strict control over dress code, social mixing and interaction, expression of beliefs including online with authorities using various means of control and heavily monitoring the internet, all mean many will look to escape for a freer way of living. Some women may have flee due to domestic, coercive, or honour-based control. LGBTQI people, and ethnic and religious minorities suffer systemic discrimination and violence.

A person fearing persecution from the Iranian authorities on account of their online activities is likely to fall within the **Refugee Convention** on the grounds of actual or imputed political opinion, race, and/or religion.

Primary routes include:

- Iran to Turkey – a dangerous mountainous route.



- Turkey to Greece – over-crowded, small boat crossing via the Aegean Sea or land routes through buffer zones.
- Via the Balkans – Land route through Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Croatia.
- Calais to UK – lorry and small boat Channel crossing.



The journey to the UK can take from several weeks to up to a year, depending on money available and route taken.

Migrants may have fled suddenly with little documentation, be separated from family, have incomplete knowledge of events affecting relatives and show distress when asked about home locations or contacts.

The implications for an individual having left their country should be considered, further up to date information can be obtained from the NCA ILO or the FCDO website and the document [here](#).

Most Common Unlawful Entry Routes for Iranian Nationals

Small boat crossings (primary route – dominant pattern)

This is by far the most prevalent method of unlawful entry, accounting for approximately 89% of all detected illegal arrivals to the UK (2025) [Data source](#)

Iranian nationals are consistently among the top nationalities using this route, in 2024, Iranians made up 12% of small boat arrivals.

Clandestine entry (lorries, ferries, trains) – now less common

Historically the main method: Concealment in HGVs, freight, or vehicles via ports or Eurotunnel. Now significantly reduced due to increased border security and detection technology.

Inadequately documented air arrivals (small but notable route)



Around 7% of illegal entry detections using false documents, borrowed/stolen passports and often claiming asylum on arrival or shortly after.

Port arrivals and other minor methods - Exceedingly small proportion. Includes attempted entry at ferry ports and opportunistic concealment methods.

‘Zina’ (sex outside of marriage and adultery)

- Definition & legality - Zina refers to sexual intercourse between a man and woman not married to each other. Zina is a criminal offence in Iran, punishable by flogging or death depending on circumstances.
- Risk groups - Women who commit zina are considered a particular social group (PSG) but men who commit zina are not considered a PSG under the Refugee Convention.
- Likelihood of prosecution/conviction - Married women are most likely to be prosecuted and convicted. Men are unlikely to be convicted unless adultery involves a married woman. Unmarried women are unlikely to face conviction if evidential thresholds are not met or prosecution is not pursued.
- Risk of harm - Where there is a real risk of conviction, this can amount to persecution/serious harm due to severe penalties. Officers should be aware of honour-based violence does occur, primarily affecting women and girls suspected of or involved in zina.
- [Link](#) for further information.



Iran Sanctions

Purpose of the sanctions – to address human rights abuses, deter hostile activity and threats to UK/international security. They are implemented under the Iran (Sanctions) Regulations 2023.

Sanctions are about behaviour and security risks, not nationality alone—being Iranian does not automatically mean someone is sanctioned.

Restrictions on designated persons include asset freezes, travel bans (immigration restrictions), director disqualification (cannot run UK companies).

If encountered in the UK, individuals subject to travel bans/exclusion from the UK may indicate identity concealment, use of false documents, immigration offences alongside sanctions breaches.



Financial restrictions - It is illegal to deal with funds/assets belonging to a designated person, provide money or resources directly or indirectly to them. Assets must be frozen immediately and reported to Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI) OFSI if identified.

Officers must be alert to suspicious financial transfers, cash movements linked to sanctioned names and use of third parties to move money.

Trade and goods restrictions - Prohibited activities include supplying or assisting with goods used for internal repression (e.g. policing/surveillance equipment), telecommunications monitoring/interception technology, strategic goods (e.g. military, missile/Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, UAV-related items). Providing technical assistance, brokering or financial services connected to these goods is also prohibited.

Circumvention is an offence. It is illegal to intentionally circumvent sanctions and help others bypass restrictions. Examples would include using intermediaries to hide ownership, routing money through third countries, mis-declaring goods, or recipients.

Offences and enforcement - Breaching sanctions is a criminal offence. Penalties include fines and imprisonment. Enforcement bodies include OFSI (financial) and HMRC (trade/customs)

Officers may encounter sanctions issues as part of wider investigations (fraud, terrorism, organised crime) and intelligence referrals. Officers should not treat sanctions as purely immigration—they are primarily financial/trade offences.

Reporting obligations - Suspected breaches must be reported to OFSI with supporting evidence/intelligence, names, aliases, financial details, links to entities or transactions.



Operational Considerations for Intelligence Gathering

Understand the Smuggling Context - Many Iranian migrants rely on complex, multi-stage smuggling networks that operate across Turkey, the Caucasus, and Europe.

Migrants may fear smugglers more than police, especially if smugglers have threatened their families.

Build Trust Before Extraction - Research on policing minority communities shows that trust is the foundation of cooperation. Without it, intelligence gathering fails.



Officers should:

- Use relationship-based practice rather than transactional questioning.
- Demonstrate transparency about what will happen with the information.
- Avoid rushing into questions about routes, facilitators, or payments.
- Use a slow pace, calm tone, non-threatening posture to build rapport.

Be Alert to Transnational Repression - Some migrants fear that Iranian intelligence services operate abroad. UK parliamentary reports confirm that transnational repression is a real concern.

Officers should:

- Reassure migrants that UK police do not share information with Iranian authorities.
- Recognise that fear of retaliation may inhibit disclosure.

Avoid Reinforcing Racialisation - Research on policing migration shows that racialisation and discretionary stops can damage trust and cooperation.

Officers should:

- Avoid assumptions about criminality based on ethnicity or migration status.
- Use culturally aware, non-judgmental language.

Near total internet blackout due to the recent conflict may have implications:

Inconsistent or vague accounts are often environment-driven, not deception.

Migrants may genuinely not know the fate of relatives or hometowns.

Avoid interpreting knowledge gaps as evasiveness.



Practical Engagement Techniques

Build rapport through:

- Respectful curiosity about the person's background without stereotyping.
- Consistency—same officer, same interpreter where possible.

Avoid:



- Pressuring migrants to “inform” before trust is established.
- Avoid rapid-fire questioning or authoritative tone.
- Suggesting that cooperation affects asylum outcomes (it must not).
- Using interpreters from rival ethnic groups unless the migrant is comfortable.

Use:

- Trauma-informed interviewing.
- Victim/Community liaison officer is familiar with Iranian diaspora dynamics.
- Patience—information often emerges gradually.

Operational Red Flags for Smuggling/OCGs

Officers should note if migrants mention:

- A “kafil” (sponsor) who controls debt.
- A “rahbar” (route leader).
- Payments owed after arrival.
- Threats to family in Iran.
- Confiscated phones or documents.
- “Safe houses” in Europe or the UKUK-based “helpers” who take money or documents.

These are indicators of organised criminality.

Interview Prompts for Intelligence Gathering

The following question prompts will not be appropriate in every circumstance and are NOT to replace formal debriefing guidance but can be used to sensitively gather information from Iranian migrants in appropriate circumstances.

Designed for trust-building and cultural sensitivity.

Start with journey and wellbeing, not criminality. Normalise fear: “Many people feel unsafe after arrival.” Reassure about confidentiality and non-cooperation with Iranian authorities. Allow time—information often emerges gradually.

1. Opening, Trust-Building Prompts

Can be useful before any intelligence gathering questions:



- “Can you tell me a little about your journey and what brought you here?”
- “What has been the most difficult part of your travel?”
- “Is there anything you’re worried about now that you’re here?”
- “Who are you most concerned about back home?”
- “How can I make this conversation more comfortable for you?”

These will assist to reveal trauma, fear of smugglers, and family pressure.

2. Route & Journey Prompts (Non-Threatening)

- “Which countries did you pass through on your way here?”
- “Who helped you arrange each part of the journey?”
- “How did you first make contact with the people who organised your travel?”
- “Did you travel with a group or mostly alone?”
- “Were there people you had to pay at different stages?”

These questions map the network without implying wrongdoing.

3. Smuggler Behaviour & Structure Prompts

- “How did you find the journey? /How were you treated along your journey by the facilitators?”
- “What rules/guidance did the people who organised your travel provide you with?”
- “Did anyone hold your documents or phone?”
- “Were there people you were told to avoid or obey?”
- “Did anyone threaten you or your family?”
- “Who collected the money for your travel at each stage, and how was it paid?”

These reveal hierarchy, coercion, and financial flows.

4. UK-Based Network Prompts

- “Has anyone contacted you since arriving in the UK?”
- “Is anyone asking you for money now?”
- “Did the people who arranged your journey tell you who to meet here?”
- “Do you feel safe where you are staying?”

These identify UK facilitators, debt collectors, and information about accommodation provided.



5. Ethnic & Community Dynamics Prompts

- “Are there people from your community you trust here or who have said they can assist you?”
- “Are there people you are trying to avoid?”
- “Is there anyone you fear who might report back to Iran?”

These may uncover diaspora power structures and intimidation.

6. Closing Prompts

- “Is there anything you want us to know that we haven’t talked about yet?”
- “What would help you feel safer going forward?”
- “Is there someone you trust that you would like us to contact?”

These reinforce safety and may produce late disclosures.



NGO support agencies/further information:

International Organization for Migration (IOM), UK – Iran information page - <https://iran.iom.int/>

Iranian Association - <https://iranianassociation.org.uk/about-us/>

Iranian Community network - <https://icn-uk.org/>

Home Office Iran: country policy and information notes:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/iran-country-policy-and-information-notes>

Feedback:

We welcome your feedback on this guide and suggestions for future guides we produce, we would appreciate you accessing the short form via the QR code below or the link here: <https://forms.office.com/e/2wZSS6Pr6Y>

