



Social and Cultural Determinants of Iranians' Attitudes Toward International Migrants

Milad Bagi ¹ | Herish Rezaei ² | Mohsen Jasim Zadeh ²

1. Corresponding author, Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan, Iran. E-mail: M.Bagi@basu.ac.ir
2. Master of Demography, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan, Iran. E-mail: heresh2013@gmail.com
3. Master of Social Science Research, Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, Tehran, Iran.
Email: Mohsenjasimzadeh7@gmail.com

Article Info

ABSTRACT

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received: 07 June 2025

Received in revised form: 25 August 2025

Accepted: 01 November 2025

Published online: 22 December 2025

Keywords:

Attitudes toward Migrants, Afghan Migrants, Iranians, International Migration, Social Trust, World Values Survey

With the expansion of migration flows in recent decades, one of the major challenges facing host societies is shaping public attitudes toward international migrants and patterns of interaction with them. This study examines the attitudes of Iranian citizens toward international migrants and the factors that influence these attitudes.

To this end, we conducted a secondary analysis of data from the seventh wave of the World Values Survey, implemented in Iran in 2020, based on a sample of 1,499 respondents. More recent data on attitudes toward migrants are not collected in any national surveys; therefore, up-to-date information is unavailable, and we relied on the 2020 survey.

The findings indicate that 25.5% of respondents hold negative attitudes toward migrants, while 17% express positive attitudes. Analyses show that materialist values, social trust, and exposure to mass and digital media are significantly associated with more favorable attitudes toward migrants. Conversely, feelings of social insecurity and a high sense of Iranian national identity are linked to more negative attitudes. Path analysis further reveals that social trust has the strongest effect on the formation of positive attitudes toward migrants.

Accordingly, strengthening social capital, reducing perceptions of insecurity through public education, and promoting positive narratives about migrants in the media can contribute to improving societal attitudes. This is particularly important given the anticipated rise in migration flows in the coming years.

Cite this article: Bagi, M., Rezaei, H., & Jasim Zadeh, M. (2025). Social and Cultural Determinants of Iranians' Attitudes Toward International Migrants. *Social Studies and Research in Iran*, 14(4):691-715.
<https://doi.org/10.22059/jisr.2025.396921.1629>



©Author(s) retain the copyright.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22059/jisr.2025.396921.1629>

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

1. Introduction

Migration is a key demographic response to changing societal conditions, undertaken to improve living opportunities and meet individual needs. As fertility and mortality rates stabilize at low levels, migration has become the primary driver of demographic change in many countries. It now plays a central role in shaping patterns of human settlement both within and across national borders (Thomas, 2024). Available statistics indicate a substantial rise in international migration over the past three decades: the global number of international migrants has increased from 153 million in 1990 to 281 million in 2020 (International Organization for Migration, 2024). This rapid growth has made migration a significant global concern, presenting societies—regardless of their level of development—with a range of diverse economic, social, cultural, and political challenges.

Alongside its positive outcomes—such as sociocultural adaptation, the transfer of surplus labor to countries in need, the balancing of demographic structures, the inflow of capital, and the transfer of technology to sending regions, and the remittances sent to origin countries (Zanjani, 2013: 1)—migration also entails negative consequences. The out-migration of labor can lead to economic imbalances in sending areas. Changes in migrants' values and worldviews, increased cultural diversity and the resulting cultural frictions, growth in social problems, discrimination between migrants and natives, erosion of local sociocultural identities, intensified ethnic and racial prejudice, income-expenditure mismatches, difficulty securing appropriate employment that contributes to rising unemployment, and feelings of frustration among both migrants and natives due to stagnant socioeconomic conditions are among these adverse effects. Migration may also harm the interests of low-skilled native workers, fuel ethnic bias, undermine meritocracy, increase crime, and create disruptions in national and territorial security (Shah Heydar & Saligheh, 2016).

The statistics on the number of international migrants in Iran are not very precise, mainly because of the lack of proper infrastructure and comprehensive migration data collection systems (Bagi, 2024). According to Iran's latest national census in 2016, there were 2.6 million foreign-born

residents. International estimates for 2021 indicate there are 2.8 million international migrants living in Iran (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021), and the most recent UN data shows an increase to 3.8 million in 2024 (United Nations, 2024). Most migrants in Iran come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey, with Afghans and, to a lesser degree, Iraqis making up the majority (Statistical Center of Iran, 2016; Sadeghi et al., 2016). It's important to highlight that most of these people are refugees. According to UNHCR estimates, approximately one million refugees lived in Iran in 2021, and that number surpassed three million by 2023 (Global Migration Data Analysis Centre, 2025). This increase was mainly driven by political changes in Afghanistan, including the Taliban's return to power. Unofficial estimates of Afghan migrants in Iran are much higher than the official numbers. Additionally, in recent years, the number of Iraqi nationals in Iran has grown to over 80,000, many of whom moved to the country to attend Iranian universities for higher education (Mehr News Agency, 2024).

Public attitudes toward these two major migrant groups may differ substantially, partly because their geographic distribution within Iran varies. Iraqi migrants are concentrated mainly in the western provinces, whereas Afghan migrants reside predominantly in the southern, central, and eastern regions. Both groups experienced large-scale migration to Iran during the early years following the Islamic Revolution. However, the number of Iraqi migrants declined sharply over time, while the Afghan population followed a very different trajectory. In the early post-revolution period, public sentiment—shaped by strong narratives of solidarity—supported welcoming and assisting Afghan refugees. Today, however, this sentiment has weakened considerably, and negative attitudes toward Afghans have become more prevalent. Since 2022, such negative views have intensified. A survey conducted in Tehran found that nearly 43% of respondents believed the presence of Afghans created employment problems, about 30% attributed increased crime and insecurity to their presence, and 18% felt that Afghan migration disrupts the demographic composition of the population. These negative perceptions further escalated after the 12-day Israeli attack on Iran and were accompanied by a wave of mass deportations.

Negative attitudes toward migrants and the lack of societal acceptance can intensify ethnic and racial tensions, as attitudes play a central role in shaping social behavior and patterns of interaction. Individuals' views on social issues are influenced by multiple factors, among which personal, familial, and cultural characteristics are particularly significant. These variables have become increasingly important in the context of contemporary cultural, economic, and social transformations. Unlike in the past—when societies were predominantly traditional and less exposed to rapid change—modern societies have undergone substantial shifts in the transition from traditionalism to modernity. These transformations have influenced attitudes toward other societies, nationalities, and ethnic groups. With the growing scale of cross-cultural migration and mobility occurring each year, the importance of these factors in shaping public perceptions has increased considerably (Bigvand & Rajabloo, 2014). Consequently, examining the determinants of attitudes toward migrants provides valuable insights into these broader shifts and their implications.

Drawing on data from a national survey, this study investigates Iranian citizens' attitudes toward international migrants and seeks to answer the following questions: What is the general pattern of attitudes toward migrants in Iran? Do these attitudes vary across demographic subgroups? And which cultural factors exert the strongest influence on attitudes toward migrants?

2. Literature Review

The empirical literature on migration in Iran is extensive, with considerable attention devoted to topics such as migration intentions, migrant adaptation and integration, brain drain, and migration flows—particularly among young people. However, this breadth does not extend to research on public attitudes toward migrants, where studies remain notably limited. The existing research focuses predominantly on attitudes toward Afghan migrants, which has geographically concentrated most investigations in the southern, central, and eastern provinces of the country. Nearly all of these studies have relied on survey-based methods conducted in specific localities.

Keshavarz and Naderpour (2018) found that 77.6% of residents in Qazvin held negative attitudes toward Afghan migrants. Vossoughi and Mohseni (2016) reported that in Mashhad, the most negative attitudes among local citizens were related to perceived social harms. In Shiraz, Palizdan et al. (2024) showed that individuals' economic status had a significantly negative effect on their attitudes toward Afghan migrants. Shatrian et al. (2016) demonstrated that in Kashan, Iranian cultural values negatively shaped residents' attitudes toward Afghan migrants. Mohammadifar and Kermanian (2024) examined public attitudes in Ardakan—particularly among middle-aged residents—and found that they were largely negative. Their results indicated that local perceptions linked the presence of migrants to the erosion of social values and norms, rising crime and social problems in recent years, and a pronounced decline in the sense of security. In a different line of research, Firozi et al. (2024) assessed Afghan migrants' attitudes toward Iranians and found that their views of the host society were above average and generally positive. In contrast, Zandi-Navgran et al. (2023) argued that Afghan migrants' emotional experiences in Iran reveal that they experience more negative than positive emotions.

Alizadeh (2024), in one of the few studies not limited to Afghan migrants, reports that residents of Gilan Province generally hold negative attitudes toward non-local migrants. Migrants who demonstrate a stronger sense of belonging to their environment and who more closely adhere to local cultural, religious, and social norms tend to receive more positive evaluations from host communities. In contrast, criminal behavior by migrants reinforces negative perceptions among hosts. Nasr-Esfahani (2020) identifies both economic and cultural factors as primary and independent determinants of anti-migrant sentiment, noting that negative attitudes are more common among lower socioeconomic groups—likely because these groups experience greater contact with migrants and face economic competition over limited resources. Panahi and Alavioon (2018) also argue that generational differences influence attitudes toward migrants. Additionally, findings by Beigvand and Rajablu (2014) indicate that the Gini coefficient has the strongest effect on societal attitudes toward migrants.

Dennison and Dražanova (2018) examine attitudes toward migrants in European societies from both macro- and micro-level perspectives. They argue that attitudes toward migrants are multidimensional and complex. At the individual level, factors such as age, education, employment, and life satisfaction are influential, whereas at the macro level, economic development is one of the most significant determinants. Countries with higher per-capita GDP and lower unemployment rates generally display more welcoming attitudes toward migrants. McLaren and Paterson (2019) suggest that generational change can shape these attitudes. They also note that political elites and anti-migrant extremist movements exert a particularly strong influence on negative perceptions. However, they argue that European countries can mitigate these effects through educational initiatives targeted at younger generations.

Overall, A review of domestic and international literature shows that research on attitudes toward migrants—both in Iran and globally—has largely concentrated on direct external factors, while giving comparatively little attention to mediating social mechanisms such as social and institutional trust. Furthermore, most existing Iranian studies have been geographically restricted and seldom conducted at the national or comparative level. Although these small-scale studies offer valuable insights into local contexts and region-specific social conditions, the lack of a broader framework limits the ability to analyze variations and patterns in attitudes across geographic regions, ethnic groups, and age cohorts. In addition, much of the research in Iran has focused specifically on attitudes toward Afghan migrants rather than the wider migrant population. Therefore, the present study aims to examine national-level attitudes toward international migrants by emphasizing the central role of social and institutional trust as mediating mechanisms and by using a nationally representative survey.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study draws on several intellectual traditions. First, value change theory argues that as modernization advances and existential security increases, individual values shift from materialist to post-materialist orientations, leading to greater

tolerance. This shift fosters conditions for enhanced social trust and a higher acceptance of “the other” (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). The notion of post-materialist values originates from Inglehart’s theory of value transformation. According to this theory, in societies where material and security needs are largely satisfied, individuals gradually move away from materialist priorities—such as survival, economic stability, and social order—and toward post-materialist values, including individual freedom, tolerance, political participation, and quality of life. These post-materialist values emphasize self-expression, individual rights, and openness to diversity, thereby providing a foundation for more positive attitudes toward “the other,” including migrants. The second theoretical perspective employed in this study is identity theory, which includes Social Identity Theory and the Common Ingroup Identity Model. These frameworks emphasize the importance of redefining the boundaries of “us.” The broader and more inclusive these boundaries are, the more social distance and negative stereotypes are reduced, creating a favorable environment for the development of social trust (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Social trust refers to individuals’ tendency to trust others in both interpersonal and societal contexts and reflects positive expectations regarding others’ fair and cooperative behavior. High levels of social trust reduce intergroup anxiety, strengthen social cohesion, and promote cooperative interactions, ultimately fostering more positive attitudes toward out-groups.

Third, theories of intergroup threat and conflict suggest that narratives emphasizing resource scarcity or cultural threats generate pessimistic expectations and heightened perceptions of competition between groups. In the present model, rather than directly measuring perceived threat, this dynamic is conceptualized through pathways that either weaken or strengthen social and institutional trust, providing a simpler and more focused theoretical framework (Blumer, 1958; Stephan et al., 1998). Institutional trust, grounded in social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) and research on political legitimacy, refers to citizens’ confidence in formal governance, executive, and legal institutions. This type of trust reflects individuals’ beliefs regarding the effectiveness, fairness, and integrity of institutional performance in managing public affairs. In other words, institutional trust indicates the extent to which individuals perceive that formal

institutions have both the capacity and the willingness to safeguard public interests and address social issues—including migration—fairly.

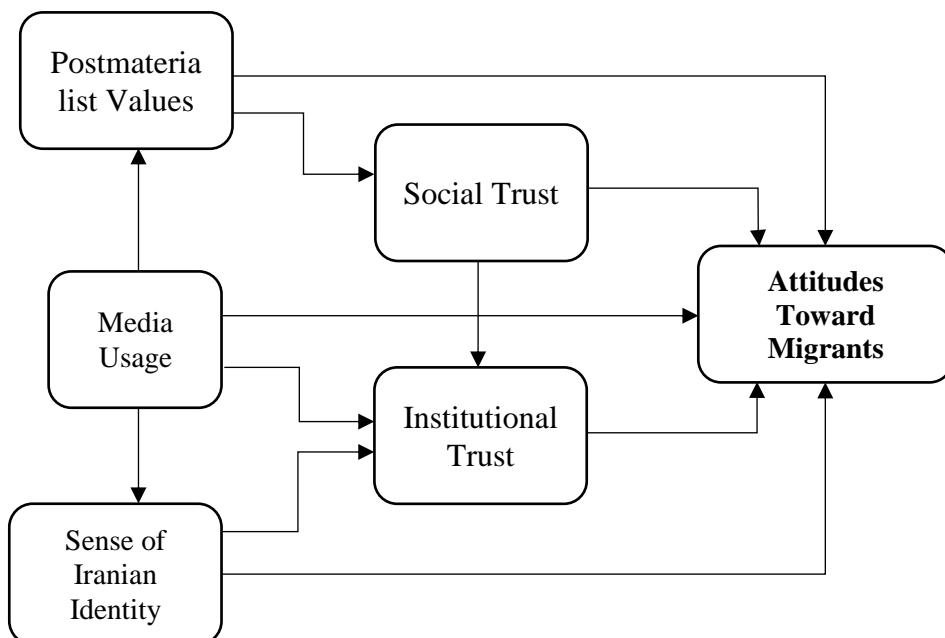
Post-materialist values broaden the scope of the “moral us” and foster tendencies toward generalized trust and normative optimism. Consequently, individuals are less likely to interpret social interactions as hostile and more open to out-groups, including migrants. Media consumption, however, can influence these attitudes in different ways: exposure to media narratives emphasizing the threats associated with migration tends to reinforce pessimistic expectations and erode social trust, whereas opportunity-focused and balanced narratives about migrants have the opposite effect, enhancing trust. The sense of Iranian identity also plays a significant role, depending on how it is defined. When identity is inclusive and civic-based, the “us–them” boundary diminishes and social trust increases. Conversely, when identity is exclusive and ethnocentric, boundaries are reinforced, trust declines, and negative attitudes toward migrants are more likely to emerge.

Social trust, which reflects generalized expectations about the reliability of others, increases the likelihood of interpreting out-group behavior benevolently. By reducing suspicion, it facilitates coexistence and positive interactions—a core aspect of social capital that fosters intergroup tolerance. Institutional trust operates through a complementary pathway: when citizens have confidence in the competence and fairness of institutions responsible for managing migration, perceptions of justice and controllability increase, and concerns about the consequences of migrant presence diminish. Even when the media emphasize threatening narratives, institutional trust can buffer against the development of exclusionary attitudes. Overall, the combination of social and institutional trust serves as a cognitive–affective assessment of the social environment and represents a key determinant of individuals’ value orientations toward migrants. Higher levels of trust are associated with more positive attitudes toward migrant populations.

In the research model presented in Figure 1, institutional trust and social trust occupy a central role as mediating mechanisms, acting as intermediaries that channel the effects of other independent variables on attitudes toward migrants. Post-materialist values, media usage, and

Iranian identity not only have direct effects on attitudes but also shape the trust mechanism, influencing attitudes indirectly by strengthening or weakening social and institutional trust. Consequently, trust serves as an intervening construct that consolidates individuals' expectations of both others and formal institutions, thereby guiding overall judgments about migrants. Higher levels of social and institutional trust increase the likelihood of positive attitudes, whereas erosion of trust creates conditions that favor the emergence of negative attitudes.

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Factors Influencing Attitudes Toward Migrants



4. Methodology

The present study employs a secondary analysis approach. The research data were drawn from the seventh wave of the World Values and Attitudes Survey conducted in Iran in 2020. The statistical population comprised all Iranian residents aged 15 and older. Sampling was performed using a multistage cluster method. Initially, Iran was divided into nine regions, with Tehran province treated as a separate region and the remaining provinces grouped into eight additional regions. Within each province, urban and rural areas were identified. Each area was then

subdivided into distinct blocks, and households within each block were randomly selected. Finally, one individual from each selected household was randomly interviewed. The final sample consisted of 1,499 respondents.

The unit of analysis in the survey was the individual, which is also the unit of analysis in the present study. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. In addition to capturing individual characteristics, the survey gathered information on social, economic, and moral values and attitudes, as well as perspectives on security, migration, political structures, administrative corruption, social capital, and post-materialist indicators.

Data analysis was performed using Stata 17. In the descriptive stage, mean scores of attitudes toward migrants were reported both overall and according to individual and cultural characteristics. For bivariate analyses, ANOVA tests, mean comparisons, and Pearson correlation coefficients were employed. Multivariate analysis was conducted using path analysis.

In this study, the dependent variable is attitudes toward migrants. The independent variables comprise a combination of individual and household characteristics—such as gender, age, place of residence, marital status, education, social class, and ethnicity—as well as cultural characteristics, including postmaterialist values, social trust, institutional trust, media usage (both mass and digital), and attachment to Iranian identity. The items used to measure the dependent variable and other research indicators are presented in Table 1.

To assess the reliability of the indicators, Cronbach's alpha was employed. The results, shown in Table 1, indicate that all measures exhibit good reliability. The study's validity is of the face validity type; the survey items for each indicator were developed by the researchers based on their expertise and in consultation with specialists in the field.

Table 1. Items used for the measurement of indicators and the dependent variable

Indicator Name	Items Used to Measure the Indicator	Cronbach's alpha
Postmaterialist Values	1) "Please indicate which of the following is most important to you personally: high economic growth; ensuring our country has strong military and defense capabilities; ensuring people have more influence over how things are done in society and at work; efforts to beautify cities and villages." 2) "Which of the following is more important: maintaining order in the country; people's role in key government decisions; fighting rising prices; supporting freedom of expression." 3) "Which of the following is more important: economic stability; moving toward a more humane society; moving toward a society where ideas matter more than money and capital; fighting crime."	0.741
Institutional Trust	How much trust do you have in each of the following institutions? Mosques, Armed Forces, Press, Television, Labor Unions, Police, Courts, Government, Political Parties, Parliament, Universities, Elections, Large Corporations, Banks, Environmental Organizations, Women's Organizations.	0.842
Social Trust	Please indicate how much you trust each of the following groups: your family, your neighbors, people you know personally, people you meet for the first time, and followers of other religions. Generally speaking, most people can be trusted, although one should be very cautious when dealing with others.	0.693
Media Usage	To what extent do you use the following news sources to access information: newspapers, television news, mobile phone, email, internet, social media (Telegram, Instagram, Twitter, etc.)?	0.707
Sense of Iranian Identity	To what extent do you take pride in being Iranian? To what extent do you feel a sense of belonging and attachment to living in Iran? To what extent do you feel a sense of belonging and attachment to the province and city where you live?	0.788
Attitudes Toward Migrants	Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: 1. When job opportunities are limited, employers should give priority to citizens of our own country rather than to migrants. 2. How do you evaluate the contribution of international migrants to Iran's development? 3. Migrants are employed in essential and important jobs that Iranian workers do not perform. 4. Migrants enhance cultural diversity in our country. 5. Migrants increase the level and rate of crime in our country. 6. The country should provide asylum to political migrants who are persecuted elsewhere. 7. Migrants increase the risk of terrorist activities in our country. 8. Migration to Iran provides people from poorer countries with the opportunity to live better lives. 9. Migrants cause an increase in unemployment in our country. 10. Accepting migrants leads to conflicts and tensions in our society. Regarding individuals who come to Iran for work, what should the government do? • The government should allow anyone who wishes to work in Iran to enter the country. • The government should allow migrants to enter only as long as there are sufficient job opportunities. • The government should impose strict limits on the number of foreigners who can come to Iran. • The government should prohibit the entry of individuals migrating from other countries altogether.	0.811

5. Findings

The total score of each respondent on the items of each index represents their overall attitude score. Attitude scores ranged from a minimum of 8 to a maximum of 36, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward migrants. To facilitate categorization, participants were divided into three groups based on their scores.

Table 2 presents the distribution of respondents according to their attitudes toward migrants. The findings indicate that the general public's attitude is predominantly neutral, with 57.5% of respondents expressing a neutral stance. This prevalence of neutral responses may reflect a lack of strong feelings—either positive or negative—or general indifference toward the issue of migration. In contrast, 25.5% of respondents hold negative attitudes, while 17% express positive attitudes toward migrants and their role in Iranian society. The higher proportion of negative attitudes compared to positive ones may suggest a notable level of concern, prejudice, or dissatisfaction toward migrants relative to acceptance and support.

Table 2. Attitudes Toward Migrants

Attitudes Toward Migrants	N	%
Positive	299	17.0
Neutral (neither positive nor negative)	777	57.5
Negative	345	25.5
Total	1421	100.0

Table 3 presents the distribution of respondents based on individual characteristics and their mean attitude scores toward migrants. Each respondent's total score on the items that make up the attitude index constitutes their overall attitude score. Scores range from 8 to 36, with higher scores reflecting more positive attitudes toward migrants. The mean attitude score for the entire sample was 20.5. Accordingly, scores below the mean indicate more negative attitudes, while scores above the mean indicate more positive attitudes.

The findings suggest that, among individual characteristics, gender and place of residence do not have a statistically significant effect on attitudes toward migrants. Women had a slightly higher

mean score (20.8) than men (20.3), and respondents living in rural areas (20.0) scored slightly lower than those in urban areas (20.2); however, these differences were not statistically significant. In contrast, marital status, education, age, and social class were significantly associated with attitudes. Individuals who had never married—mostly younger respondents—showed more positive attitudes toward migrants compared to other marital status groups. Education also had a positive effect: higher levels of education corresponded to higher mean attitude scores, indicating more favorable attitudes. Respondents from higher social classes scored higher on the attitude index compared to those from lower social classes.

Regarding age groups, both young adults and older adults demonstrated more positive attitudes toward migrants than middle-aged respondents. Ethnicity did not have a statistically significant effect; however, Kurds (22.1) had the highest scores for positive attitudes, whereas Arabs (19.5) had the lowest, suggesting relatively lower acceptance of migrants within this group compared to other ethnic groups.

Table 3. Distribution of Respondents by Individual Characteristics and Mean Attitude Scores Toward Migrants

Variable		n	Mean score of attitudes to migrants	Statistical test
sex	Male	51.1	20.3	t= -1.489 ^{ns}
	Female	48.9	20.8	
Place of residence	Urban	74.0	20.2	t= 1.298 ^{ns}
	Rural	26.0	20.0	
Marital status	Married	64.4	20.0	F= 8.91 **
	Divorced	2.8	20.6	
	Widowed	3.0	20.5	
	Never married	29.6	21.7	
Education	Illiterate	11.3	19.5	F= 5.49 **
	Primary	15.6	19.6	
	Secondary	45.7	20.5	
	Tertiary	27.3	21.2	
Age groups	18-34	38.6	21.3	r= -0.070 **
	35-66	55.2	19.9	
	65 and older	6.1	21.1	
Social class	High	0.4	21.7	F= 5.29 **
	Upper-middle	15.0	21.8	

Variable	n	Mean score of attitudes to migrants	Statistical test
	Middle	45.0	
	Lower-middle	26.2	
	Low	13.4	
Ethnicity	Persian	20.3	F= 1.43 ns
	Turk	20.5	
	Kurd	22.1	
	Lor	20.6	
	Baluch	20.8	
	Northern	20.7	
	Arab	19.5	
	Other	19.9	

Table 4 presents the distribution of respondents according to their cultural characteristics and the mean scores of their attitudes toward migrants. Regarding individual values, the smallest proportion of respondents belongs to the postmaterialist category. However, these individuals exhibit higher mean attitude scores compared to those with materialist values, indicating greater acceptance of migrants among the postmaterialist group. In terms of institutional trust, although most respondents fall within the medium category, there are more individuals with low institutional trust than with high trust. In contrast, for social trust, the distribution is reversed: a larger proportion of respondents report high social trust compared to those with low social trust. Additionally, individuals with higher social trust exhibit higher mean attitude scores toward migrants. Feelings of attachment to Iran are generally strong, with only 1.2% of respondents falling into the low attachment category. Respondents in the high attachment category have a mean attitude score of 25, which is above the overall sample mean. Interestingly, individuals with a strong attachment to Iranian identity display lower-than-average attitude scores toward migrants. Regarding media use, respondents who spend more time engaging with various types of media report higher mean attitude scores toward migrants.

All cultural indicators were measured at the interval level, allowing their relationships with the dependent variable to be assessed using Pearson correlation, as shown in the last column of the table. The results indicate that individual values, social trust, feelings of insecurity, attachment to Iranian identity, and media use (newspapers, television, and digital media) are significantly

correlated with attitudes toward migrants. In contrast, institutional trust does not show a significant relationship with migrant attitudes. Notably, the relationships of materialist values, social trust, and media use with attitudes are positive and direct: as scores on these variables increase, attitudes toward migrants become more favorable. Conversely, feelings of insecurity and attachment to Iranian identity are negatively associated with attitudes; respondents with higher scores on these indicators tend to hold more negative views of migrants.

Table 4. Distribution of respondents by cultural characteristics and mean attitude scores toward migrants

Variable	%	Mean score of attitudes to migrants	Statistical test
Individual values	Materialist	29.6	r= 0.061 *
	Mixed	55.6	
	Post-Materialist	13.9	
Institutional trust	Low	32.0	r= -.10 ns
	Middle	43.3	
	High	24.7	
Social trust	Low	9.3	r= 0.183 **
	Middle	65.5	
	High	25.2	
Sense of Iranian Identity	Low	2.1	r= -0.128 **
	Middle	10.5	
	High	87.4	
Media Usage	Low	5.8	r= 0.080 **
	Middle	49.6	
	High	44.6	

In Figure 2, the theoretical model was tested using path analysis, with standardized coefficients and their significance levels displayed on the respective paths. Table 5 presents the direct, indirect, and total effects of each independent variable included in the model. The results indicate that social trust exerts the strongest direct effect on attitudes toward migrants, and this effect is positive. Institutional trust, which showed no significant correlation with attitudes in the bivariate analyses, also has no significant effect on the dependent variable in the model. Among the indirect effects, post-materialist values demonstrate the largest influence. Regarding total effects, social trust has the greatest overall positive impact on attitudes toward migrants (total effect =

0.135), primarily through its direct effect. Conversely, feelings of insecurity have a significant negative total effect on attitudes toward migrants (total effect = -0.0937).

Figure 2. Tested Model of the Impact of Cultural Traits on Attitudes Toward Migrants

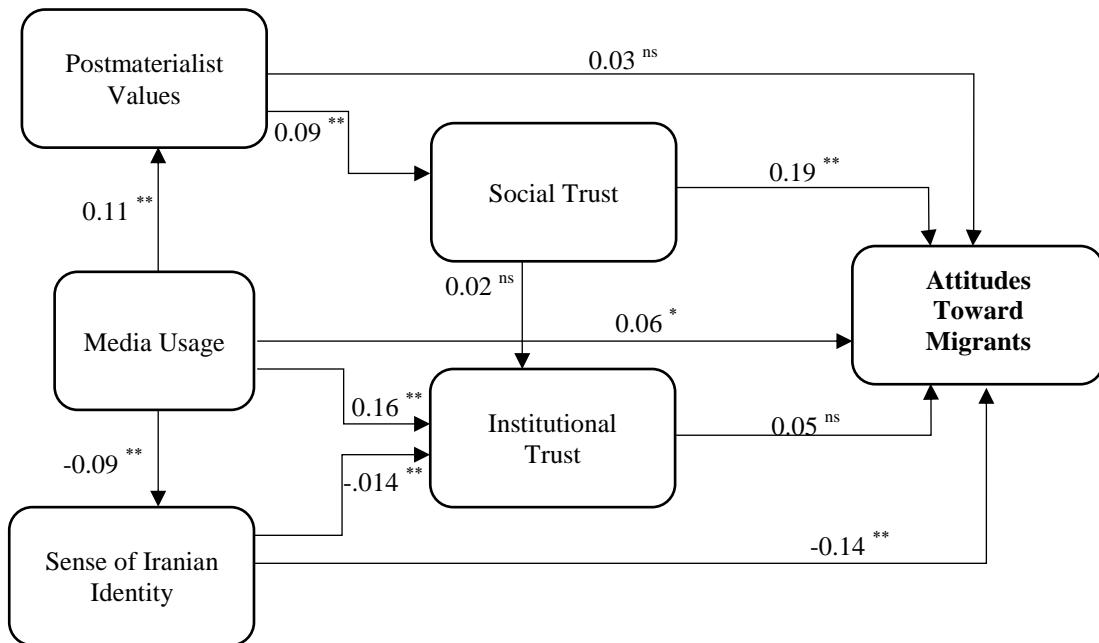


Table 5. Standardized Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Independent Variables on Attitudes Toward Migrants

Independent Variables	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Postmaterialist Values	0.030	0.016	0.047*
Social Trust	0.187	-0.001	0.186**
Institutional Trust	-0.050	-	-0.050 ^{ns}
Sense of Iranian Identity	-0.136	-0.006	-0.129**
Media Usage	0.058	0.008	0.067**

Table 6 presents the model fit indices and evaluates the extent to which the proposed model corresponds with the observed data. The chi-square value is statistically significant; however, since this index is sensitive to sample size and no definitive threshold has been established, it cannot be used alone to judge model fit. Therefore, examining other fit indices is essential. The

acceptable range for each index, based on a reliable source (Bashegh, 2014: 104), is provided in the third column of the table. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) falls within the desirable range, indicating a good fit between the model and the data. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) is also within the optimal range (greater than 0.9), confirming that the model adequately represents the data. In contrast, the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) is below the desirable threshold, indicating a less favorable fit, which may suggest a relative mismatch between the model and the data structure. However, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is within the acceptable range, supporting the adequacy of the model fit. Overall, considering that three out of the four indices fall within the desirable ranges, it can be concluded that the model demonstrates an acceptable level of fit.

Table 6. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Index Value	Acceptable Threshold	Status
Chi-square (χ^2)	35.059 **	-	-
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	0.048	0.08 and lower	Acceptable
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.937	0.09 and lower	Acceptable
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	0.729	0.09 and lower	Unacceptable
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	0.035	0.1 and lower	Acceptable

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In today's world, migration is increasingly recognized as a major phenomenon shaping human societies. In this context, public attitudes toward migrants can have significant political, economic, and social implications for host communities. Over the past decades, Iran has hosted substantial numbers of migrants from neighboring countries. In recent years, the rising influx of migrants has heightened concerns about the consequences of interactions between host communities and newcomers. This study, therefore, examines the factors shaping Iranian citizens' attitudes toward migrants. Conducting such research is essential, as it not only contributes theoretically to the scholarly literature on attitudes toward migrants but also offers practical insights for social and cultural policymaking aimed at improving relations between host communities and migrants.

The findings indicate that, overall, Iranian citizens' attitudes toward migrants are not yet deeply polarized or overtly critical, although negative attitudes are more common than positive ones. Analyzing attitudes by individual characteristics shows that social and cultural factors—such as education, marital status, and social class—exert a stronger influence on attitudes toward migrants than biological factors like gender or geographic factors such as place of residence. Individuals with higher education and socioeconomic status tend to exhibit more open attitudes toward migrants, likely due to greater access to information and more diverse social interactions, which facilitate acceptance of migrant presence. Similarly, Nasr-Esfahani (2020) found that individuals from lower social classes are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward migrants. Positive attitudes among youth and never-married individuals can be explained through psychological, sociological, and economic perspectives. Psychologically, young people—being in a developmental stage characterized by cognitive flexibility, openness to new experiences, and lower sensitivity toward unfamiliar groups—are more inclined to accept cultural and social diversity. This tendency is further reinforced by their limited exposure to established social and cultural structures, allowing for a more open and adaptable perspective.

From a sociological perspective, young people are exposed to a wider range of social interactions, particularly in increasingly globalized and multicultural educational or professional settings. Such interactions can help reduce prejudice and foster empathy toward marginalized groups, including migrants—a phenomenon explained by Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory. Conversely, younger individuals' limited experience with economic pressures, such as labor market competition or financial strains related to housing and livelihood, may hinder the development of negative attitudes. In contrast, such negative attitudes are more commonly observed among middle-aged adults or those with spouses, who may perceive migrants as economic competitors or feel heightened concern for their material well-being.

One of the key findings regarding attitudes toward migrants in Iran was the lack of significant differences across ethnic groups. One possible explanation for this could be the sample size, which may have been too small to detect subtle differences, particularly among smaller groups

such as Arabs and Balochs. Another plausible explanation is that individuals' attitudes may be influenced more strongly by socio-economic factors than by ethnic identity. However, it is noteworthy that, despite the absence of statistical significance, Kurds displayed relatively more positive attitudes (mean = 1.22) compared to other groups, which warrants further investigation. An important contextual factor is that in Kurdish-populated regions of western Iran, most migrants are Iraqi Kurds who have sought refuge in Iran over the past decades due to political conflicts and war in Iraq, while migrants from other countries, such as Afghanistan, are relatively rare. The more positive attitude of Iranian Kurds toward migrants can therefore be attributed to shared cultural, linguistic, and historical ties with Iraqi Kurdish migrants. From the perspective of Allport's intergroup contact theory and the concept of shared identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), these migrants share linguistic (Kurdish language), cultural (common traditions and rituals), and historical (experiences of marginalization and resistance) connections with Iranian Kurds. Such commonalities may reinforce a sense of ethnic solidarity, framing Iraqi Kurdish migrants not as "others" but as part of the broader Kurdish collective identity. Consequently, Iranian Kurds perceive these migrants less as "foreigners" and more as co-ethnics and co-cultural individuals in need of support under difficult circumstances. This phenomenon aligns with ethnographic research showing that cultural and linguistic proximity can reduce prejudice and enhance social acceptance (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

In contrast, Afghan migrants—who make up a significant portion of Iran's migrant population—are primarily concentrated in the central and eastern regions of the country. Linguistic differences (Dari Persian versus Iranian Persian), religious differences (predominantly Sunni versus Iran's Shiite majority), and behavioral differences (more modern versus more traditional) contribute to the perception of Afghan migrants as the "other." This perception is particularly pronounced among ethnic groups with direct contact with Afghan migrants and may be further intensified by economic competition (e.g., low-wage employment) or by negative cultural stereotypes, which have grown stronger in recent years. According to group threat theory (Blumer, 1958), native groups may develop more negative attitudes toward migrant groups perceived as threatening to

economic resources or cultural identity. This framework helps explain the relatively lower acceptance of Afghan migrants among non-Kurdish ethnic groups and highlights the role of perceived insecurity in fostering negative attitudes toward migrants. Similar findings have been reported by Mohammadifar and Kermanian (2024).

Multivariate analyses further indicate that individuals with postmaterialist values exhibit more positive attitudes toward migrants compared to those with materialist values, consistent with Inglehart's (1997) theory of value change. According to Inglehart, in postmaterialist societies—where basic material needs, such as economic security, are largely satisfied—values such as self-expression, acceptance of cultural diversity, social justice, and empathy toward marginalized groups, including migrants, are strengthened. These values help reduce prejudice and promote tolerance toward out-groups, particularly in contexts where cultural diversity is seen as a source of social enrichment. Using earlier waves of the World Values Survey, Inglehart and Welzel (2005) found that countries with postmaterialist value orientations, such as Sweden and Norway, demonstrate significantly more positive attitudes toward migrants and stronger support for multicultural policies. Similar findings have also been reported by Davido et al. (2008).

Social trust emerged as the most influential factor shaping attitudes toward migrants, with individuals who exhibit higher levels of social trust being more receptive to migrants than those with lower trust. This finding is consistent with Putnam's (2000) social capital theory, which identifies social trust as a key facilitator of positive intergroup interactions and a reducer of prejudice. Specifically, social trust helps mitigate biases and fosters tolerance toward out-groups, such as migrants, because individuals with higher trust are more willing to accept others and engage constructively with different social groups. By fostering a sense of security and reducing perceived threats, trust enables individuals to view cultural differences not as obstacles but as opportunities for learning and social enrichment. Conversely, communities characterized by lower social trust may exhibit more negative attitudes toward marginalized groups due to fear of “the other” or perceived competition.

A strong Iranian national identity and sense of belonging to Iran positively influenced attitudes toward migrants. This finding can be interpreted through Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, which suggests that individuals define themselves through membership in social groups (e.g., national, ethnic, or cultural) and tend to strengthen their in-group identity by distinguishing "us" (the in-group) from "them" (out-groups). A pronounced emphasis on in-group identity, such as Iranian national identity, may lead individuals to perceive migrants as an external group that threatens national values, culture, or social cohesion. These results are consistent with previous studies (Rouhani et al., 2015; Billiet et al., 2014).

Media consumption was found to be positively correlated with more favorable attitudes toward migrants, suggesting that individuals who engage more with media tend to hold more positive views. This finding can be interpreted through the lens of globalization theory. According to this theory, increased cultural and informational interactions facilitated by media can reduce prejudices and promote mutual understanding between cultures. Individuals with greater media exposure are more likely to encounter diverse information and global perspectives, which may foster more positive attitudes toward migrants. This is consistent with the concept of "cultural cosmopolitanism" in globalization theory, which emphasizes openness and empathy toward other cultures. However, it is important to note that both the type of media and the nature of the content consumed can influence this relationship.

The absence of a significant association with institutional trust suggests that attitudes toward migrants may be shaped more strongly by interpersonal and cultural factors than by perceptions of formal institutions' performance. It should also be noted that these findings reflect the situation in 2020 (1399 in the Iranian calendar) and may differ under current conditions, as the government has faced increasing criticism in recent years regarding its reception of migrants, particularly Afghan migrants.

Overall, the findings of this study have significant implications for cultural and social policymaking in Iran. The results indicate that approximately one-quarter of the population holds negative attitudes toward migrants. Among the factors examined, social trust has the strongest

influence on the development of positive attitudes. Therefore, policymakers can foster more positive attitudes toward migrants by focusing on strengthening social capital and trust among citizens through public education programs and community-based initiatives. Additionally, utilizing mass media and digital platforms to promote positive narratives about migrants can help counteract negative perceptions, particularly in contexts where a strong sense of national identity is associated with unfavorable attitudes. To ensure the effectiveness of these interventions, it is recommended that qualitative studies and multivariate analyses be conducted to examine the interactions among these factors and identify potential mediating variables. Implementing such policy measures can not only improve societal attitudes toward migrants but, given the anticipated increase in migration flows in the future, their importance is likely to grow substantially.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. This research was conducted independently without any external funding or institutional conflict.

References

Alizadeh, R. (2024). Investigating Rural Residents' Perspectives on the Migration of Non-natives to Guilan Province. *Geographical Studies of Coastal Areas Journal*, 5(2), 105-120.
<https://doi.org/10.22124/gscaj.2024.24024.1272>

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Addison-Wesley

Bagi, M. (2024). *Opportunities and Challenges Facing Official Statistics and Their Role in Shaping Population Policies*. Paper presented at the 17th Iranian Statistics Conference, 21–23 August 2023, University of Birjand, Birjand.

Beigvand, S., & Rajablu, J. (2014). A Sociological Analysis of Public Attitudes Toward Foreign Migrants. *Iranian Journal of Sociological Studies*, 4(14), 45–58.

Beshagh, M. R. (2014). *Structural Equation Modeling in the Humanities Sciences*. Tehran: Sociologists Publications.

Billiet, J., Meuleman, B., & De Witte, H. (2014). The relationship between ethnic threat and economic insecurity in times of economic crisis: Analysis of European Social Survey data. *European Journal of Political Research*, 53(4), 742–761. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mnru023>

Blumer, H. (1958). Race prejudice as a sense of group position. *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 1(1), 3–7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1388607>

Davidov, E., Meuleman, B., Billiet, J., & Schmidt, P. (2008). Values and support for immigration: A cross-country comparison. *Social Indicators Research*, 87(1), 37–54.

Dennison, J., & Drazanova, L. (2018). Public attitudes on migration: rethinking how people perceive migration. *The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)*.

Firozi, S. M. and Zare Shahabadi, A. (2024). Cultural factors related to the attitude of Afghan immigrants towards Iranians (Study case: Afghan immigrants living in Yazd). *Journal of Greater Khorasan*, 15(54), 93-111. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jgk.2023.355545.1074>

Gaertner, S. L., & Dovidio, J. F. (2000). *Reducing Intergroup Bias: The Common Ingroup Identity Model*. Psychology Press.

Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (2025). Total number of international migrants at mid-year 2024 in Iran, available at:
https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?cm49=364&focus=profile&i=stock_abs &t=2024

Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton University Press.

Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2005). *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*. Cambridge University Press.

International Organization of Migration (2024). World Migration Report 2024, available at:
<https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024>

Keshavarz Ghasemi, H. and Naderpour, B. (2018). Explaining the Implications of Immigration of Citizens of Afghanistan on the Iranian Society; Case Study of Qazvin City. *Geography (Regional Planning)*, 8(31), 289-305. https://www.jgeoqeshm.ir/article_69928.html?lang=en

McAuliffe, M. and A. Triandafyllidou (2021). World Migration Report 2022. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/WMR-2022-EN_1.pdf

McLaren, L., & Paterson, I. (2019). Generational change and attitudes to immigration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(3), 665–682. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1550170>

Mehr News Agency. (2024). *Over 80,000 Iraqi Students Studying at Iranian Universities*. Available at: <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/6338624/>

Mohammadifar, N. and Kermanian, R. (2024). Measuring the attitude of Ardakani citizens towards immigrants and its effect on the feeling of social security. Ferdowsi University of Mashhad Journal of Social Sciences, Published online at 21 December 2024. <https://doi.org/10.22067/social.2024.87337.1491>

Nasr-Esfahani, Arash. (2020). Iranians' Attitudes Toward Afghan Migrants. Sharqh Newspaper, 17th year, No. 3734, p. 13.

Palizdan, A., Madani, S., & Saei-Arsi, I. (2024). A Sociological Study of Citizens' Attitudes Toward Afghan Migrants in the City of Shiraz. *Urban Sociological Studies*, 14(51), 129–160.

Panahi, M. H., & Alavioon, S. A. (2018). Generational Gap in Iran: A Meta-Analysis and Critique of Previous Research. *Quarterly Journal of Intercultural Studies*, (36), 147–171.

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751–783.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster.

Rouhani, A., Ahmadi, H., Iman, M. T. and Goli, A. (2015). The Study of Iranian Negative Social Emotions' Towards Afghan Refugees (Case study: Shirazi Citizens). *Quarterly Journal of Social Development (Previously Human Development)*, 10(1), 67-96. <https://doi.org/10.22055/qjsd.2015.11937>

Sadeghi, R., Abbasi-Shavazi, M. J. and Shahriari, P. (2016). Fertility Differentials of Iraqi Immigrant Women with Iranian Counterparts. *Journal of Population Association of Iran*, 11(21), 119-148.

Shah-Heydar, Abdolkarim, & Saligheh, Mohammad Jafar. (2016). The Impact of Migration on Criminal Phenomena. Paper presented at the 1st National Conference on New Findings in Humanities and Social Security, Tehran. Available at: <https://civilica.com/doc/669740>

Shatrian, M., Nazari, H., & Emamalizadeh, H. (2016). Examining the Relationship Between Cultural Values and Attitudes Toward Afghan Migrants: A Case Study of Citizens Aged 18 and Above in Kashan. *Intercultural Studies*, 11(29), 143–165.

Statistical Center of Iran. (2016). *Results of the 2016 National Population and Housing Census*.

Stephan, W. G., Ybarra, O., Martnez, C. M., Schwarzwald, J., & Tur-Kaspa, M. (1998). Prejudice toward Immigrants to Spain and Israel: An Integrated Threat Theory Analysis: An Integrated Threat Theory Analysis. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 29(4), 559-576.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022198294004>

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). *An integrative theory of intergroup conflict*. In W. G. Austin, & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33-37). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Thomas, Richard K. (2024). *Demography: An Introduction to Population Studies*. Springer, 2024.

United Nations (2024). International Migrant Stock, available at:

Vossoughi, F., & Mohseni, M. R. (2016). Investigation of citizen attitudes on foreign immigrants resident in Mashhad. *Geographical Research*, 31(2), 4–18. Retrieved from
<http://georesearch.ir/article-1-51-fa.html>

Zandi-Navgran, L., Askari-Nodoushan, A., & Afrasiabi, H. (2023). Emotional experience of Afghan migrants in Iran. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 96, 101859.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2023.101859>

Zanjani, H. (2013). *Migration*. Tehran: SAMT Publications.