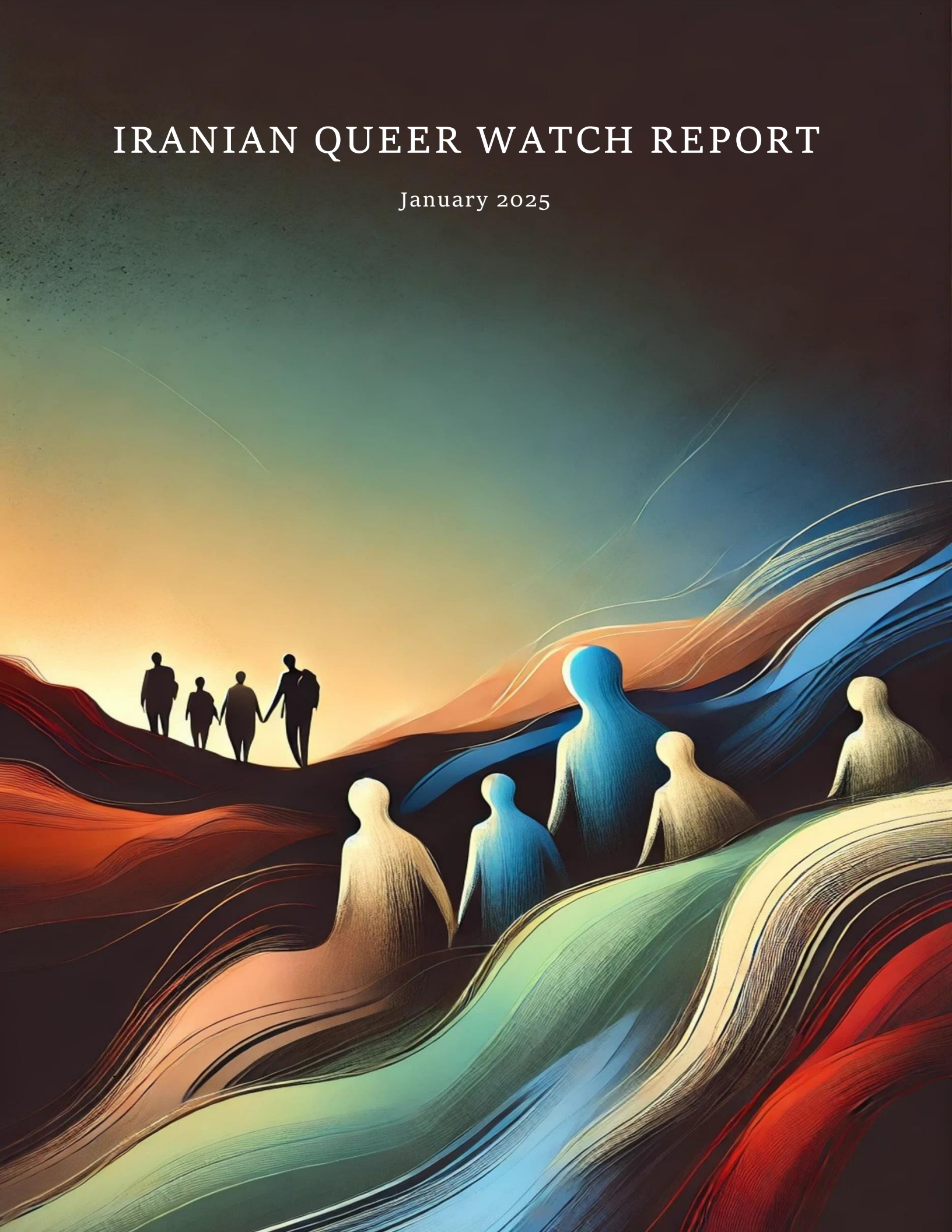


# IRANIAN QUEER WATCH REPORT

January 2025



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## Acknowledgment

As someone who has personally walked the path of persecution, displacement, and resilience, this report is deeply personal to me. It reflects not only the challenges and injustices faced by LGBTQ+ refugees but also their unyielding strength and courage in the face of unimaginable adversity. It is a testament to their perseverance and a call to action for all of us to do better.

The Iranian Queer Watch report is the result of tireless efforts by many individuals and organizations, and I am profoundly grateful to everyone who has contributed to its creation. To the LGBTQ+ refugees who shared their stories with us—your bravery in speaking out has been a guiding light for this work. You are the heart of this report, and your voices deserve to be amplified and heard.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to the International Railroad for Queer Refugees (IRQR) and the Marjan Foundation teams. Your relentless dedication to advocating for the rights and safety of LGBTQ+ refugees inspires me every single day. Your work has transformed lives and created hope where there was none.

To our partners, allies, donors, and volunteers, thank you for standing with us. Your support has been instrumental in ensuring that this report reflects the realities faced by LGBTQ+ refugees and serves as a resource to drive meaningful change. I am also grateful to the researchers and organizations who provided critical data and insights that enriched this work.

This report is more than just a collection of statistics and stories—it is a call for solidarity and action. It is a reminder of the systemic changes still required, the barriers that remain, and the lives at stake. I hope it will inspire governments, organizations, and individuals around the world to take decisive steps to ensure dignity, safety, and equality for LGBTQ+ refugees everywhere.

Together, we can create a world where no one is forced to flee their home simply for being who they are. Thank you for standing with us in this fight for justice.

With hope and solidarity,

Arsham Parsi

Executive Director, International Railroad for Queer Refugees



## Introduction

The Iranian Queer Watch report has served as a vital resource for understanding the experiences, challenges, and systemic discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals from Iran and neighboring countries. First published prior to 2018, the report aimed to shed light on the harsh realities of life for LGBTQ+ individuals under oppressive regimes and during their journeys as refugees seeking safety.

This updated edition of the Iranian Queer Watch report builds upon its original findings, covering the period from 2018 to 2024. It reflects the evolving socio-political climate, the impact of global crises, and the shifting challenges faced by LGBTQ+ refugees, particularly in Türkiye, which remains a key transit and host country. The report integrates new data, case studies, and insights gathered over the past six years to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of the ongoing struggles and resilience of this marginalized community.

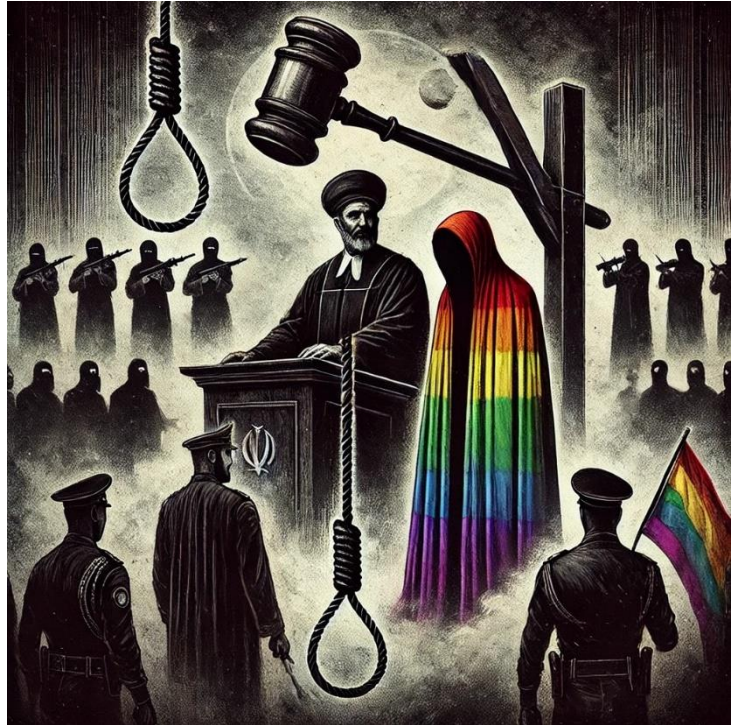
By documenting the systemic discrimination, legal challenges, and lived experiences of LGBTQ+ refugees, this report seeks to raise awareness, inform advocacy efforts, and inspire actionable change at local, national, and international levels.



## Legal and Social Environment in Iran

Iran continues to be one of the most repressive countries for LGBTQ+ individuals, where homosexuality remains punishable by death under the Islamic Penal Code. The revised code, introduced in 2013, prescribes capital punishment for consensual homosexual acts between men ("Lavat") and up to 100 lashes for same-sex relations between women ("Mosaheqeh"). Repeated offenses for women can also result in execution, creating a climate of fear for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Iranian officials, including the highest-ranking religious and political figures, have consistently promoted anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has characterized homosexuality as a form of "moral degeneration" and a Western plot to corrupt Iranian society, further dehumanizing LGBTQ+ individuals and justifying their persecution under Islamic law.



Former President Mohammad Khatami, widely viewed as a reformist figure, has also made anti-LGBTQ+ statements. Khatami once remarked that homosexuality was a disease of Western modernity and an attack on traditional Islamic and family values. Such remarks from even moderate figures underscore how deeply entrenched anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs are in the political establishment, cutting across both conservative and reformist lines.

In 2019, then-Foreign Minister Javad Zarif defended the execution of gay people in Iran during an international press conference, stating that Iran's legal system operates under religious and cultural norms that consider homosexuality a crime punishable by death. Zarif's comments drew international condemnation, yet they underscored the regime's commitment to enforcing its draconian anti-LGBTQ+ laws.

In recent years, former President Ebrahim Raisi, a staunch conservative, continued this narrative. Raisi declared during his presidency that "homosexuality and moral corruption are a threat to the future of humanity." He further denounced the LGBTQ+ movement as a "Western export," positioning his government as a defender of Islamic values against what he termed Western "degeneracy." His comments reflect the ongoing vilification of the LGBTQ+ community in Iran, which continues to fuel both legal and extralegal violence against them.

In September 2024, a diplomatic incident occurred when Iranian authorities summoned the Australian ambassador over a social media post by the Australian Embassy in Tehran, which celebrated *Wear It Purple Day*, an event supporting LGBTQ+ youth. The Iranian government condemned the post, describing it as an "affront to Islamic culture" and accused the embassy of promoting homosexuality, which is strictly illegal under Iranian law. This incident illustrates Iran's determination to suppress any form of LGBTQ+ visibility, even within diplomatic spaces.

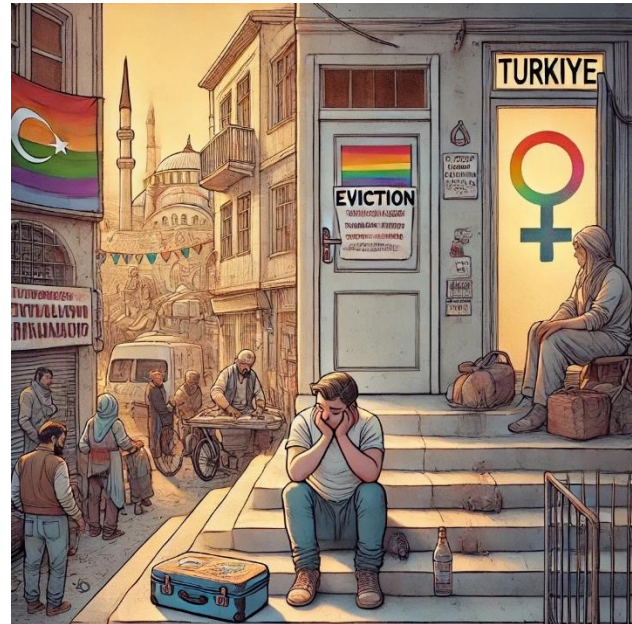
Iran's systematic persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals is evident in its judicial actions. While Zahra Sedighi-Hamadani and Elham Choubdar were not activists, they were accused of promoting homosexuality and "corruption on earth." Both were sentenced to death for their perceived involvement in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, although their charges were largely based on their association with LGBTQ+ individuals and activities deemed immoral by Iranian standards. Iranian authorities view such individuals as enemies of the state, interpreting their actions as a direct challenge to Sharia law and thus against Islam itself. This adds an additional layer of persecution for anyone associated with LGBTQ+ identities, whether they actively advocate for rights or not.

These charges make LGBTQ+ individuals, or even those accused of being associated with the community, vulnerable to extreme legal consequences, including death. The regime continues to label both LGBTQ+ activists and others as threats to Islamic values, equating any form of resistance to these laws with being an enemy of God—a crime that justifies execution in Iran.

The Islamic Penal Code, combined with the public statements of Iranian leaders, creates a culture of state-sanctioned violence, discrimination, and exclusion. The regime's sustained efforts to promote its anti-LGBTQ+ agenda, both domestically and in international diplomatic engagements, leave LGBTQ+ individuals at risk of persecution, imprisonment, and, in many cases, execution.

## Refugee Experience in Türkiye

The refugee experience in Türkiye has become increasingly difficult for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those fleeing persecution from countries like Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria. As of 2024, Türkiye hosts approximately 3.6 million refugees, the largest refugee population in the world. Among them, thousands are LGBTQ+ individuals who face additional discrimination and violence compared to the general refugee population. According to reports, about 2,200 LGBTQ+ refugees are currently registered with various organizations like the International Railroad for Queer Refugees (IRQR), primarily from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These individuals face a series of unique challenges, exacerbated by Türkiye's legal and social landscape.



### Right to Housing

LGBTQ+ refugees often face severe difficulties in securing housing due to societal discrimination. Landlords frequently refuse to rent to LGBTQ+ individuals, and many refugees report being evicted or harassed once their sexual orientation or gender identity becomes known. This leaves many LGBTQ+ refugees with no option but to live in precarious conditions, such as overcrowded housing or shared accommodation with other vulnerable individuals. A 2019 report from KAOS GL found that LGBTQ+ refugees in Türkiye are disproportionately likely to experience homelessness or unstable housing, as many landlords discriminate against them. The report estimated that 40% of LGBTQ+ refugees have been forced to leave their homes due to their identity.

### Right to Health

Access to healthcare is another major challenge for LGBTQ+ refugees in Türkiye. Refugees are supposed to have access to healthcare services, but in practice, many LGBTQ+ individuals face discrimination from healthcare providers. For example, some transgender individuals have been refused treatment for gender-affirming procedures, while others have been denied even basic healthcare. In emergencies, many LGBTQ+ refugees are required to pay out-of-pocket for healthcare services, which can be prohibitively expensive, particularly for those who are unable to work legally.



Mental health is a particularly pressing issue. LGBTQ+ refugees often suffer from PTSD and depression due to the trauma of persecution in their home countries and the ongoing struggles they face in Türkiye. However, access to mental health services is limited. Only a few organizations provide psychological support to LGBTQ+ refugees, and waiting lists are often long. For instance, in a survey of LGBTQ+ refugees, nearly 60% reported that they had no access to mental health services despite facing serious psychological distress. This gap in healthcare services leaves many refugees without the support they desperately need, contributing to a cycle of marginalization and vulnerability.

## Right to Work

While Türkiye offers work permits to certain refugees, many LGBTQ+ refugees struggle to obtain them due to the complex bureaucratic process and discrimination. Without legal work permits, many are forced to work in the informal economy, often in exploitative conditions. For example, a transgender refugee from Iran reported working 12-hour shifts in a garment factory for just \$5 a day, with no legal recourse or protection. Employers often take advantage of the refugees' vulnerable status, underpaying them and threatening to report them to authorities if they complain.

Working without a permit puts LGBTQ+ refugees at constant risk of deportation. If caught working illegally, refugees can face legal action, including fines, detention, or expulsion from Türkiye. Many refugees must balance the need to earn money for survival with the risk of being discovered and deported. In a survey conducted by refugee organizations, nearly 70% of LGBTQ+ refugees reported that they had worked without a permit at some point, and over 50% said they were afraid of being deported because of their illegal work status.

## COVID-19 and Refugees in Türkiye

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already dire conditions faced by LGBTQ+ refugees in Türkiye. The pandemic highlighted gaps in healthcare access, worsened economic conditions, and stretched the capacity of refugee support organizations like IRQR, which struggled to meet the increased needs of the refugee community during the crisis.

### Healthcare Access

While refugees in Türkiye technically have access to healthcare services, in practice, many LGBTQ+ refugees faced severe challenges in receiving care during the pandemic. Discrimination by healthcare providers, coupled with the fear of deportation among undocumented refugees, meant that many did not seek medical help when needed. Overcrowded living conditions further increased the risk of contracting COVID-19, while the limited access to mental health services worsened the psychological effects of the pandemic, leaving many refugees without the critical support they needed.

### Loss of Employment and Survival

The pandemic had a devastating impact on the already fragile livelihoods of LGBTQ+ refugees, many of whom worked illegally in the informal sector to survive. Lockdowns and business closures left refugees without any legal or illegal means of earning a living. Refugees who relied on these informal jobs to buy food and cover basic needs were left with no safety net. Reports show that a significant portion of LGBTQ+ refugees resorted to extreme measures to survive, as they had no legal protections or access to unemployment benefits.

### Impact on Service Organizations

The pandemic also severely affected organizations like the International Railroad for Queer Refugees (IRQR), which relies on individual donations to support refugees. Due to the economic downturn, donations dropped significantly, leaving IRQR and other organizations unable to meet the growing demand for food, shelter, and emergency assistance. As a result, many refugees were left unsupported during one of the most challenging periods in recent history. IRQR faced the overwhelming task of trying to assist an ever-increasing number of people with severely limited resources, creating additional pressure on both the organization and the refugees who depend on it.

### Turkish Government's Response

The Turkish government, while quick to implement lockdowns and health protocols, did not take specific measures to address the needs of refugees during the pandemic. The vast majority of the refugee population, including LGBTQ+ individuals, were left vulnerable as their precarious employment disappeared overnight. The government's general COVID-19 measures, such as restricting movement and enforcing curfews, disproportionately affected refugees who needed to work illegally to survive. Moreover, the government's healthcare system became overstretched,

further limiting the access of refugees to essential services. While some emergency cash payments were provided to refugees, they were insufficient to cover basic needs.

According to various reports, refugees and migrants were among the groups most affected by the economic and health impacts of the pandemic in Türkiye, with many unable to access adequate healthcare or income support. Refugees also faced stigmatization and were often blamed for spreading the virus, further isolating them from society and exacerbating their already precarious situations.

## Impact of the 2023 Türkiye Earthquake on Refugees

The February 2023 earthquake in southern Türkiye caused widespread destruction, killing tens of thousands and displacing millions. LGBTQ+ refugees, already living in vulnerable conditions, were among the hardest hit. The earthquake not only destroyed their already precarious shelters but also worsened their access to essential services and further exposed them to discrimination and danger.



### Loss of Shelter and Services

LGBTQ+ refugees, many of whom were living in makeshift shelters or overcrowded and informal housing arrangements, were severely affected by the earthquake. The destruction of these homes left thousands without safe shelter, forcing them into overcrowded camps or public facilities. These environments posed an increased risk of harassment and discrimination for LGBTQ+ individuals, exacerbating the already hostile social landscape they faced. Essential services, such as healthcare and food distribution, were also disrupted, further worsening their living conditions.

### Disruption of Aid and Humanitarian Services

The earthquake also heavily impacted the operations of humanitarian organizations. Many local NGOs and service providers had to halt or reduce their activities due to damaged infrastructure and affected staff. IRQR, which was already stretched thin by limited resources and growing refugee needs, was overwhelmed by the new influx of demands for emergency relief. Despite these challenges, IRQR and other organizations worked to the best of their abilities to provide urgent assistance, but the scale of the disaster meant that many refugees were left without adequate support for extended periods.

## Economic Hardship and Increased Vulnerability

The earthquake amplified the already critical economic situation for LGBTQ+ refugees, many of whom relied on informal or illegal employment to survive. Lockdowns, curfews, and the destruction of workplaces made it impossible for many refugees to continue earning even the meager wages they depended on. The lack of legal work opportunities and unemployment benefits left refugees with no means to meet their basic needs, pushing them into deeper poverty. This situation not only threatened their immediate survival but also compounded the long-term challenges they faced in accessing legal and social services.

## Impact on the Resettlement Process

The earthquake also created significant disruptions in the already slow resettlement process for LGBTQ+ refugees. Many refugees who had been waiting for years to be resettled found their applications delayed even further, as resources were redirected to respond to the immediate humanitarian crisis. Additionally, the destruction of local infrastructure and administrative offices slowed the processing of asylum applications and refugee status determinations, leaving many refugees in legal limbo.

## Expedited Canadian Refugee Sponsorship

Amid this crisis, IRQR successfully convinced the Canadian government to expedite the refugee sponsorship process for several LGBTQ+ individuals who were directly affected by the earthquake. These expedited cases allowed a few lucky refugees to find safety in Canada more quickly than they would have under normal circumstances. However, many others were not as fortunate. The vast majority of LGBTQ+ refugees in Türkiye remain trapped in dire conditions, waiting for resettlement opportunities that have become even more elusive due to the combined effects of the earthquake and the global refugee crisis.



coupled with the massive influx of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees, further strained the system, and many LGBTQ+ refugees remained stuck in limbo, waiting for their cases to be processed.

Biden's administration did take several steps to try to restore faith in the resettlement process. In addition to reversing Trump's ban, they restored some of the funding that had been cut for resettlement programs and worked to streamline the process. However, these efforts were hampered by the enormity of the backlog that had accumulated during the Trump years. Many resettlement organizations had closed or scaled back operations, and rebuilding those networks has taken time. As a result, the process has been slow, and the administration has not been able to reach its original resettlement targets.

## Political Situation in Türkiye

The political environment in Türkiye has also played a crucial role in shaping the refugee experience, with LGBTQ+ refugees often facing hostile attitudes from both the government and opposition parties. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government has adopted an ambivalent stance on refugees. While Türkiye has taken in more refugees than any other country, Erdoğan has frequently used refugees as political bargaining chips in negotiations with the European Union. He has also shifted between offering support and tightening restrictions on refugees, often using their presence to consolidate political power.

The opposition parties in Türkiye, on the other hand, have often been more openly hostile toward refugees. Several opposition figures have campaigned on promises to repatriate Syrian and other refugees, framing them as a burden on the Turkish economy and society. This rhetoric has led to a growing anti-refugee sentiment in parts of Turkish society, making life more difficult for LGBTQ+ refugees who are already marginalized.

For example, the Republican People's Party (CHP), the main opposition party, has pushed for policies that would forcibly repatriate refugees. This has created a tense political environment for refugees, who now face uncertainty not only from the ruling party but also from the potential policies of the opposition. The impact of this political divide on organizations like IRQR has been significant, as they must navigate a complex and often hostile landscape to provide support for LGBTQ+ refugees.

## Afghanistan and the Taliban's Return

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 triggered a new wave of refugees fleeing the country, including many LGBTQ+ individuals who are particularly vulnerable under the Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia law. LGBTQ+ Afghans have been targeted by the Taliban, facing persecution and violence for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many have fled to neighboring countries like Iran and Türkiye, hoping for resettlement through the UNHCR or other international programs. However, the global refugee system, already overwhelmed, has struggled to process this new influx of refugees, leaving LGBTQ+ individuals in increasingly precarious situations.

## Canada's Response to the Global Refugee Crisis

Canada has traditionally been a leader in resettling refugees, particularly LGBTQ+ individuals. In response to the global refugee crisis and the limitations imposed by the Trump travel ban, Canada increased its intake and has been one of the few countries actively seeking to provide asylum for LGBTQ+ refugees. Despite these efforts, the Canadian system has also struggled under the weight of the increased demand. The government set ambitious resettlement targets, but political and bureaucratic obstacles, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, have prevented Canada from fully meeting its goals.

The Canadian government has faced criticism for delays in processing applications and for failing to expand resettlement capacity quickly enough to meet the rising demand. While the Liberal Party has been more supportive of refugee resettlement, political opposition from parties like the Conservative Party has sometimes slowed progress. The Conservatives have called for stricter immigration policies and have criticized the government for what they see as overly generous refugee quotas. This political divide has created additional barriers to improving the resettlement process in Canada, despite the country's overall willingness to accept more refugees.

## Re-election of Donald Trump as President of the USA

The re-election of Donald Trump as President of the USA, alongside the Republican Party gaining control of all branches of government, has heightened concerns about the erosion of LGBTQ+ rights and the rights of refugees. The Republican Party has been vocal in opposing transgender rights and basic human rights for the LGBTQ+ community, and with full control of the government, they now possess the power to enact sweeping changes without significant checks and balances.

This new political reality has raised fears of significant rollbacks on LGBTQ+ rights within the U.S., including access to healthcare, protections for transgender individuals, and safeguards against discrimination. Moreover, Trump's track record from his first term provides a grim preview of potential immigration policies. His administration's anti-immigration stance, exemplified by the travel ban on predominantly Muslim countries and severe restrictions on refugee admissions, directly impacted the lives of refugees and the organizations working to support them.

Given this context, LGBTQ+ refugees seeking resettlement in the U.S. face not only an uncertain future but also the prospect of exclusion from systems that are supposed to protect them. For LGBTQ+ refugees, particularly those fleeing persecution from countries like Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria, the re-election of Trump signals a significant narrowing of opportunities for resettlement and safety.



## Fall of the Assad Government in Syria and Its Impact on Refugee Populations

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria marks a turning point in the country's tumultuous history, but the future remains deeply uncertain. While there is hope that the new government may respect human rights and work toward rebuilding the nation, there is no guarantee of stability, especially for those who fled Syria during the Assad regime. LGBTQ+ individuals, in particular, face heightened risks, as the systemic discrimination and persecution they experienced under Assad's rule may persist under a new administration if human rights are not prioritized.

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On the positive side, the voluntary return of millions of Syrian refugees to their homeland has provided some relief to the overburdened refugee systems in host countries like Türkiye, Europe and Canada. This shift creates an opportunity for the international community to refocus resources on other vulnerable groups, including LGBTQ+ refugees who have long been deprioritized.

However, the optimism surrounding Syria's new government is tempered by concerns over the feasibility of securing basic rights and safety for returning refugees. European countries have already begun halting the processing of Syrian refugee applications, citing the potential for return as a viable option. This stance has sparked debates within the international community, with some advocating for the cautious facilitation of returns, while others warn against premature repatriation without guarantees of safety and human rights protections.

For LGBTQ+ refugees, the situation remains precarious. Many fear returning to a society that may continue to reject and endanger them, regardless of regime change. The international community must remain vigilant, ensuring that repatriation is truly voluntary and that the rights of all Syrians, including LGBTQ+ individuals, are upheld in the rebuilding process.

## Woman.Life.Freedom Movement

The Woman.Life.Freedom Movement, which began in Iran following the tragic death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, represents a broad resistance to the systemic oppression faced by women under Iran's patriarchal regime. Amini was arrested by the morality police for allegedly violating the country's strict hijab laws and died under suspicious circumstances while in police custody. Her death sparked widespread protests across Iran, with women at the forefront demanding gender equality, personal freedoms, and an end to oppressive government policies.



The movement quickly evolved beyond hijab laws, encompassing broader calls for social justice, human rights, and an end to authoritarianism. While it began with a focus on women's rights, the movement also aligned with other marginalized communities, including the LGBTQ+ community. This alignment arises from the fact that the struggle for women's rights in Iran is inherently linked to fighting the same patriarchal system that oppresses LGBTQ+ individuals. In Iran, gender roles are strictly enforced, and the idea that a man can be 'reduced' to the status of a woman through homosexual acts is seen as a direct affront to patriarchal values. This explains why homosexuality is punishable by death under Iranian law, as it challenges traditional notions of masculinity and male superiority.

### LGBTQ+ Community Involvement and Targeting

Several people who were arrested and allegedly killed during the protests were members of the LGBTQ+ community. Iran's regime has a long history of persecuting LGBTQ+ individuals, and the protests provided a new context in which they were targeted. Many of these individuals were arrested not just for participating in the movement, but also because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, which made them additional targets for the regime's repression. LGBTQ+ individuals have been tortured, executed, or forced into exile due to their involvement in the protests and their sexual orientation.

This movement has become one of the few spaces where the goals of the women's rights movement and the LGBTQ+ rights movement intersect. Both are fighting against a patriarchal system that seeks to control bodies, identities, and expressions of freedom. The movement calls for the dismantling of this system, which has been used to justify the brutal treatment of women and LGBTQ+ individuals alike. In Iran, patriarchal interpretations of Islam underpin laws that criminalize both homosexuality and women's autonomy, so the fight for equality is inherently a fight against the structures that enforce these laws.

## Escalation of Refugee Crises

As the regime escalated its crackdown on the Woman.Life.Freedom Movement, many protesters had no option but to flee Iran. This exodus added a significant number of refugees to the already overburdened systems in neighboring countries like Türkiye. LGBTQ+ individuals fleeing persecution were particularly vulnerable, and their numbers increased dramatically as the crackdown on the protests intensified. Organizations like IRQR faced growing challenges in supporting this influx of refugees, with limited resources stretched thin.

While the global spotlight on Iran's human rights abuses has helped raise awareness, refugee support organizations have not seen a corresponding increase in resources or support. The crisis in Ukraine, the global economic downturn, and other trending issues have drawn attention and resources away from the Iranian refugee crisis, leaving LGBTQ+ refugees and others in peril. Despite this, the Woman.Life.Freedom Movement continues to inspire those both within and outside Iran, serving as a powerful symbol of resistance against an oppressive regime that targets anyone who challenges its authority.

## UNHCR and Resettlement Processes

In 2018, the UNHCR halted its Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process in Türkiye and handed over this responsibility to Turkish immigration authorities. This transition was a direct result of Türkiye's 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), which aimed to reform the country's asylum procedures and integrate them into its national legal framework. Before this change, the UNHCR played a pivotal role in determining the refugee status of non-European asylum seekers because Türkiye, under the 1951 Refugee Convention, only granted full refugee status to those fleeing European countries. For refugees from other regions, UNHCR's involvement in the RSD process filled this gap.

With the full implementation of the LFIP by 2018, Türkiye sought to consolidate control over its asylum system, granting the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) full responsibility for managing the RSD process. This move allowed Türkiye to independently manage asylum claims and reduce its reliance on the UNHCR. By nationalizing this process, the Turkish government aimed to streamline refugee determinations and create a system that was in line with its legal obligations under both domestic and international law.

### Changes in Turkish Law: The Role of the 2013 LFIP

The 2013 LFIP was designed to improve Türkiye's refugee management system by ensuring that asylum seekers would be processed under Turkish law, aligning with international standards. Under the new law, the DGMM was established as the body responsible for handling refugee claims, including conducting RSD interviews and issuing decisions. This law theoretically made Türkiye's asylum procedures more transparent and standardized.

Before 2018, the UNHCR had managed RSD for non-European refugees due to Türkiye's geographical limitation under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugees from Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan fell under this category, and the UNHCR facilitated their resettlement to third countries. However, the Turkish government, seeking more sovereignty over its refugee policies, decided to internalize this process through the LFIP and entrusted the DGMM with the task of RSD.

The UNHCR continued to play an essential advisory role, primarily focusing on the coordination of resettlement efforts with third countries, but the actual refugee status determination process became entirely a Turkish responsibility after September 2018.

### Challenges After the Transition

While the goal was to create a more efficient, nationally controlled system, this transition introduced several significant challenges, particularly for vulnerable groups like LGBTQ+ refugees. The Turkish system quickly became overwhelmed by the sheer number of cases, with

over 3.6 million refugees (primarily from Syria) in the country by 2023. Although the transfer of RSD responsibilities was meant to reduce delays, it has had the opposite effect.

**Delays and Bureaucratic Obstacles:** The Turkish immigration system, under the DGMM, has struggled with processing the large volume of refugee claims. Cases that once took between 18 and 24 months under the UNHCR have been extended to an average of 50 months. LGBTQ+ refugees, already marginalized and facing high risks, often find their cases deprioritized within this overburdened system.

Although the DGMM has more than 80 offices across Türkiye, most of these offices do not have the authority to make final decisions on refugee status independently. All major decisions, particularly those involving complex cases such as LGBTQ+ refugees, must be reviewed and approved by the central office in Ankara. This centralized decision-making process significantly contributes to the backlog, as it slows down the processing of cases from various provinces. Even though local offices can collect information and conduct interviews, they must send the cases to Ankara for final approval, creating a bottleneck in the system.

### Several key factors contribute to these prolonged delays:

**Capacity Overload:** Türkiye's refugee population is among the largest in the world. The DGMM, responsible for all refugee cases, lacks the resources and personnel to handle such a massive caseload.

**Centralized Decision-Making:** Despite the decentralized network of 80 offices, the need to send cases to Ankara for final approval causes significant delays. Local offices cannot independently resolve cases, which creates backlogs as cases wait for review in the capital.

**Bureaucratic Inefficiencies:** The transition from an internationally managed system to a national one has introduced bureaucratic bottlenecks. LGBTQ+ refugees, who face unique vulnerabilities, have found it difficult to navigate the legal system and receive appropriate protection.

**Global Crises:** The war in Ukraine, the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, and other global crises have exacerbated the problem. Resources meant for resettling refugees have been redirected toward other emergencies, leaving LGBTQ+ refugees in legal limbo.

### LGBTQ+ Refugees: Facing Additional Challenges

LGBTQ+ refugees are among the most vulnerable populations within Türkiye's already overburdened asylum system. They face compounded risks, including discrimination from society, government institutions, and within the refugee camps themselves. Many LGBTQ+ refugees report being harassed by landlords, police, and even other refugees, leaving them in precarious situations while waiting for their resettlement applications to be processed.

The DGMM lacks specialized knowledge or sensitivity toward LGBTQ+ issues, which the UNHCR had previously addressed through targeted policies. The prioritization of more visible groups—such as women and children fleeing active warzones—has led to the deprioritization of LGBTQ+ refugees, further extending their wait times. Many LGBTQ+ individuals live under constant threat of violence or deportation due to working illegally in the informal economy or lacking access to legal protection.

## Global Strain on Resettlement Processes

According to the 2023 UNHCR Global Resettlement Needs report, approximately 1.47 million refugees worldwide require resettlement. However, only a small fraction are resettled each year. In 2022, just over 57,500 refugees were resettled, which accounted for less than 1% of the global refugee population of over 20 million. LGBTQ+ refugees, despite facing extreme risks, are often deprioritized within these resettlement processes.

The global response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis has strained resettlement resources even further. While humanitarian efforts toward Ukraine are critical, the focus on this crisis has resulted in fewer resources and attention for other displaced populations, including LGBTQ+ refugees from the Middle East. Many LGBTQ+ individuals in Türkiye remain trapped in legal limbo, with no clear path to resettlement as resources continue to be diverted elsewhere.

## Canadian and International Response

Canada has been one of the few countries actively resettling LGBTQ+ refugees from Türkiye. In recent years, Canada has expanded its refugee sponsorship programs, accepting more LGBTQ+ individuals who face persecution in their home countries. However, the Canadian system has also struggled to keep pace with the growing number of applications, leading to significant delays in processing.

During the 2023 Türkiye earthquake, IRQR successfully lobbied for the expedited processing of several LGBTQ+ refugees affected by the disaster, securing their resettlement in Canada. However, these success stories remain the exception. Most LGBTQ+ refugees in Türkiye are still waiting for a chance to resettle, facing increasing challenges as they navigate a complicated and slow-moving asylum process.

## Challenges in Canadian Resettlement Efforts

While Canada has long been recognized as a leader in refugee resettlement, the system faces growing pressures. Recent global crises, such as the conflict in Ukraine and the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, have strained resources. This strain is especially pronounced in programs aimed at LGBTQ+ refugees, a particularly vulnerable group in need of urgent protection. Despite Canada's commitment, the government has been unable to significantly expand its refugee intake quota, leading to prolonged waiting periods for resettlement.



### Political and Budgetary Constraints

One of the primary reasons Canada has struggled to expand its refugee resettlement quota lies in the country's political landscape and budgetary limitations. Refugee resettlement is a costly process that requires substantial investment in infrastructure, housing, healthcare, and social services. In recent years, the Canadian government has faced pressure to prioritize domestic issues such as healthcare, housing affordability, and economic recovery post-COVID-19. This has made it politically challenging for the government to allocate additional funds for refugee resettlement without facing backlash from opposition parties and segments of the electorate.

The ruling Liberal Party, traditionally seen as supportive of immigration and refugee resettlement, has faced resistance from opposition parties, particularly the Conservative Party, which has called for stricter immigration controls and a focus on domestic concerns. This political divide has limited the government's ability to expand refugee programs without facing criticism for diverting resources from Canadian citizens.

Additionally, Canada's immigration and refugee budget is not only limited but also stretched thin by other pressing humanitarian needs. For instance, the special resettlement program for Afghan refugees, initiated in response to the Taliban takeover, and the urgent need to accommodate Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war, have consumed significant portions of the resettlement budget. This has left fewer resources available for other vulnerable populations, including LGBTQ+ refugees, whose resettlement cases have been deprioritized in the wake of these global crises.

### Canada's Private Sponsorship Program

Canada's **Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program** has long been a critical tool for resettling vulnerable groups. The program allows individuals, community groups, and organizations to sponsor refugees and cover their resettlement costs. However, in recent years, the program has not met its projected targets due to various factors.

For example, the **2022 target** for privately sponsored refugees was set at 22,500 individuals, but fewer than 17,000 were resettled. In **2021**, the target was similarly set high, at 23,500, but Canada fell short by nearly 5,000 refugees. This shortfall is largely due to backlogs in processing, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and the prioritization of government-sponsored refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine. The government continues to support the PSR program, but without additional capacity, it has not been able to meet its ambitious targets.

## Immigration Quotas and Political Debates

The Canadian government sets immigration and refugee quotas on a yearly basis, balancing the country's economic and humanitarian goals. While the **2023 Immigration Levels Plan** aims to welcome 500,000 new immigrants annually by 2025, this quota includes all categories of immigration, such as economic migrants, family reunification, and refugees. Refugees make up only a small percentage of this overall number, and within the refugee category, LGBTQ+ individuals are often not prioritized despite their heightened vulnerability.

The opposition Conservative Party has argued that Canada should focus on integrating the refugees already in the country before increasing the intake. Their platform stresses a need to address domestic challenges, such as housing shortages and healthcare wait times, before committing to larger resettlement goals. This stance has made it difficult for the ruling government to push for a significant expansion in refugee quotas, as any such proposal would likely be met with political resistance.

## IRCC's Temporary Suspension of Private Sponsorship Application Intake

In November 2024, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) announced a temporary suspension of new private sponsorship applications under the Groups of Five and Community Sponsors streams, effective until December 2025. This decision was made in an effort to address the significant backlog of existing applications and the lengthy processing times that have challenged Canada's resettlement system.

While addressing backlogs is an essential step in improving the efficiency of the system, the suspension has raised serious concerns about its impact on vulnerable populations, particularly LGBTQ+ refugees. Private sponsorship has long been a critical pathway for individuals fleeing persecution, offering them a lifeline when government-assisted resettlement programs are insufficient. The pause on new applications effectively leaves countless refugees in limbo, unable to access urgently needed support and resettlement opportunities.

The suspension has also highlighted systemic challenges within the refugee sponsorship program. For smaller grassroots organizations that rely on private sponsorship to provide direct assistance to LGBTQ+ refugees, this decision poses significant barriers. These organizations often play an outsized role in helping the most vulnerable individuals, yet they face resource constraints and now an additional obstacle in assisting new applicants.



Moreover, while the suspension may temporarily ease administrative burdens, it does not address the root causes of the backlog, including insufficient staffing, funding, and infrastructure within IRCC to manage the growing number of cases. This creates a risk that once the pause is lifted, the system may once again be overwhelmed, perpetuating the cycle of delays and inefficiencies.

For LGBTQ+ refugees, who face heightened risks of violence and discrimination in transit and host countries, any delay in resettlement can have life-threatening consequences. As such, it is imperative that Canada prioritizes finding solutions to support both current applicants and those in urgent need of new sponsorship opportunities, without relying solely on halting applications as a remedy.

## The Role of Public Opinion

Public opinion plays a crucial role in shaping Canada's refugee policies. While there is strong support for refugee resettlement among many Canadians, others are concerned about the economic impact of bringing in more refugees. Issues such as housing shortages, particularly in major urban centers, have fueled concerns that the country may not have the capacity to accommodate larger numbers of refugees without exacerbating these existing problems.

This has led the Liberal government to adopt a cautious approach, attempting to strike a balance between addressing humanitarian needs and maintaining public support. However, this cautiousness has come at a cost for LGBTQ+ refugees and other vulnerable groups who remain stuck in legal limbo, waiting for their resettlement cases to be processed.

## Increased Pressure on Organizations

The delays in refugee resettlement have placed immense pressure on organizations like IRQR, which are tasked with supporting LGBTQ+ refugees during the long wait for resettlement. These organizations rely heavily on individual donations, many of which decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, IRQR and similar organizations have been overwhelmed, struggling to provide essential support such as housing, food, and legal assistance to refugees in dire need.

The Canadian government's limited capacity has left these organizations to fill the gap, but without sufficient financial support, they are unable to meet the growing demand. This situation highlights the need for the government to not only expand its resettlement quota but also provide more funding and resources to the organizations working on the front lines of the refugee crisis.

## Conclusion

The Iranian Queer Watch report provides a comprehensive analysis of the ongoing challenges faced by LGBTQ+ refugees, particularly from countries like Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria. It highlights the dire circumstances of individuals who face persecution due to their sexual orientation or gender identity and the systemic barriers they encounter in their quest for safety and equality. While Türkiye has played a significant role in hosting refugees, LGBTQ+ individuals remain among the most marginalized and vulnerable. The 2018 transition of the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process from UNHCR to Turkish authorities has introduced significant delays and challenges, disproportionately affecting LGBTQ+ refugees.

Global crises such as the war in Ukraine, the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the COVID-19 pandemic have further strained resources and diverted attention from marginalized groups. Despite Canada's leadership in LGBTQ+ refugee resettlement, its system continues to face challenges in meeting its ambitious targets due to budgetary constraints, political divisions, and overwhelming demand. The re-election of Donald Trump as U.S. President and the fall of the Assad government in Syria add new complexities to the refugee landscape, raising concerns about the erosion of human rights and the long-term stability of returning refugees.

This report underscores the critical need for systemic reforms and international collaboration to ensure the safety, dignity, and rights of LGBTQ+ refugees. Advocacy efforts must be amplified to address the unique vulnerabilities of this population and to prioritize their resettlement and well-being.

## Recommendations

### 1. **Expand Canada's Private Sponsorship Program:**

- Increase resources and capacity to process LGBTQ+ refugee applications by addressing backlogs and streamlining the sponsorship process.
- Ensure smaller grassroots organizations have equitable access to funding to directly assist LGBTQ+ refugees.
- **Reinstate Private Sponsorship Application Intake:** Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) should resume accepting new applications for private sponsorship under the Groups of Five and Community Sponsors streams. Additionally, IRCC should expand its capacity to process applications more efficiently to address the growing demand for resettlement opportunities.

### 2. **Prioritize Vulnerable Groups in Global Resettlement Quotas:**

- International organizations like UNHCR should adopt policies that explicitly prioritize LGBTQ+ refugees due to their heightened risks of violence and discrimination.

### 3. **Strengthen Turkish Refugee Systems:**

- Provide training to the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) in Türkiye on LGBTQ+ rights to improve case handling.
- Address bottlenecks in Ankara's centralized decision-making system to reduce delays.

### 4. **Develop a Global Coalition for LGBTQ+ Refugees:**

- Establish a coalition to coordinate and monitor resettlement efforts, ensuring marginalized groups like LGBTQ+ refugees are not deprioritized in global emergencies.

### 5. **Address Health and Mental Health Needs:**

- Governments and NGOs should invest in accessible health and mental health services for LGBTQ+ refugees, addressing PTSD and other trauma-related conditions.

### 6. **Increase Funding for Grassroots Organizations:**

- Allocate targeted funding to smaller, community-focused organizations like IRQR and the Marjan Foundation, which directly address the needs of LGBTQ+ refugees.
- Ensure equitable distribution of funds to prevent monopolization by larger entities.

**7. Advocate for Global Accountability on LGBTQ+ Rights:**

- Intensify diplomatic efforts to pressure countries like Iran to decriminalize homosexuality and stop the persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals.

**8. Improve Response Mechanisms for Global Crises:**

- Develop emergency response strategies to mitigate the disproportionate impact of global crises, such as pandemics and natural disasters, on LGBTQ+ refugees.

**9. Enhance Public Awareness and Support:**

- Foster public support for refugee resettlement through education campaigns and community engagement, addressing misconceptions and highlighting the contributions of refugees.

**10. Monitor Post-Crisis Developments:**

- Track developments in Syria post-Assad to ensure returning refugees, particularly LGBTQ+ individuals, can safely reintegrate and have their rights protected.