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Navigating Precarity, Prejudice, and “Return”

The (Un)Settlement of Displaced Afghans in Iran and Afghanistan

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Introduction

Afghans have been in Iran in large numbers since the 1978 communist coup in Afghanistan. Since then, and indeed before, Afghans have been traveling back and forth between Iran and Afghanistan as conflicts, governments, economies, and refugee policies change. At the height of Afghan displacement to Iran, in 1991, an estimated three million Afghans resided in Iran in various states of legality (Adelkhah and Olszewska 2007: 141). Since 1991 the number of Afghans in Iran has varied, contracting most notably in 2018, when 773,125 Afghans relocated to Afghanistan (IOM-UNHCR 2019: 8). Given the high levels of cyclical migration that mark the context, an estimated 2.5 to 3 million Afghans remain in Iran today.

This chapter investigates the impacts of sociocultural, political, and legal regimes of inclusion/exclusion experienced not only by Afghans in Iran, but also by those Afghans who later relocate to Afghanistan. This analysis is undertaken for three reasons: to take stock of the impacts of long-term displacement upon Afghans in Iran, while also outlining ways they express agency, resilience, and resistance; to highlight the differential impacts of this extended displacement upon Afghans relocating to Afghanistan; and to illuminate new regimes of inclusion/exclusion encountered on arrival.

There is a fourth rationale for this analytical approach. By examining the life stories of relocated Afghans as they navigate regimes of inclusion/exclusion, this chapter complicates existing narratives of Afghan refugees. It challenges portrayals of Afghans in Iran as unintelligent or incompetent, drawing attention to the structural challenges they face. It counters narratives of those who relocate to Afghanistan as privileged and undeserving of assistance. It also contests the notion that Afghan refugees are passive victims of protracted displacement.

Given the chapter's focus on long-term displacement and relocation, the ensuing analysis deals with Afghan refugees who have spent extended periods of time in Iran. It does not explicitly deal with Afghan migrants who have traveled to Iran. The focus on long-term migration requires two caveats. First, the misnomer "returnee" is commonly applied to Afghans who were born and raised in Iran before relocating to Afghanistan. Although they may associate with Afghan identity and cultural forms, they may have never been on Afghan soil. It is, therefore, incorrect to label them as "returning" to Afghanistan. The social dislocation this term masks often becomes evident on relocation to their imagined homeland. Second, given the history of Afghan migration to/from Iran, the distinction between "refugee" and "migrant" is fluid. Many migrants became refugees, and many refugees became migrants.

To explore the regimes of inclusion/exclusion experienced by Afghans living in Iran and later Afghanistan, this chapter utilizes the concept of "precarity" as discussed by Judith Butler (2009). Butler argues that all humans experience a precarious life due to its interdependent nature. Additionally, social and political arrangements, often embodied within the nation-state, regulate how precarious lives are. "Precarity," however, designates a specific condition: "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection" (Butler 2009: ii).

Central to Butler's (2009: ii) notion is the politically induced nature of precarity, which can result in "maximized vulnerability" through exposure to violence perpetrated by the state or other actors, or through inadequate state protections. This chapter extends Butler's concept to the experiences of Afghans in Iran, including those who later relocate to Afghanistan. In doing so, it illuminates how precarity operates and the manner in which Afghans navigate the condition in Iran and Afghanistan. The chapter also highlights the variable nature of precarity, with Afghans each experiencing differing states of the condition. Lastly, it outlines the temporality of precarity, describing how the condition deepens or diminishes in Afghan lives over time.

Methods and Interlocutors

This chapter draws on interviews conducted with two Afghans born in Iran who now live in Bamyan, Afghanistan. Interviews were conducted in August 2019 in Persian and translated for the purposes of this chapter. The first interlocutor is Hekmat, a 31-year-old male who was born and grew up in Esfahan, Iran. He relocated to Bamyan Center (where his parents were born) in 2003. He is educated and employed with a well-paid job at a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Bamyan. Hekmat also identifies as Hazara. Hazaras are members of a historically marginalized ethnic category in Afghanistan. They are commonly viewed as originating from the Hazarajat (the Hazara homeland), speaking Hazaragi (the Hazara dialect of Persian), being Shi'i, having a recognizable Mongol phenotype, and being of low social status.

Sayid Basir, a nineteen-year-old male, is the second interlocutor. He was born in Zahedan, Iran, spending much of his youth in Esfahan (fourteen years) and Qazvin (five years) in Iran before relocating, in mid-2019, to Band-e-Amir (where his parents were born) in Bamyan, Afghanistan. At the time of the research, he had spent only six weeks in Afghanistan and had recently moved with his brother to Bamyan Center. He has a low level of education and works as a cook's assistant. Sayid Basir identifies as Sayid (Saadat [pl.]). Saadat are commonly viewed as members of an endogamous religious "caste" (based on their claimed descent from the Prophet Mohammad) within broader ethnic communities in Afghanistan. However, there is growing disagreement on whether Shi'i Saadat can be considered Hazara. A growing schism has developed between Hazaras and Shi'i Saadat—given changing political relations—since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. This has resulted in deepening interethnic tensions, with Shi'i Saadat increasingly identifying as members of a distinct ethnic category.

The research presented in this chapter is part of a larger and ongoing ethnographic project being undertaken by the author in Afghanistan. Initial research for this broader project was conducted from 2010 to 2012 in Bamyan and Kabul provinces. Analysis focused on post-Taliban political reconstruction in Afghanistan and its impacts upon interethnic relations in the Bamyan Valley.

Afghans in Iran: A History of Migration and Refugee Policy in Iran

Hekmat: My parents left Afghanistan when Hafizullah Amin came to power (1979). He was very bad for Afghanistan. The government under Amin was communist and they were arresting and killing many people. Political insta-

bility and the fear of being killed led my parents to escape to Iran My parents went to Herat, and they crossed the border legally.

Sayid Basir: My parents went to Zahedan (in 1998), two years before I was born. The Taliban had taken over Bamyan Center and were coming to Banded-Amir. My parents escaped. They went to Iran because it’s a Shia country. There was war in Afghanistan. They had no choice but to escape to Iran They went illegally as it was difficult for Afghans to get a visa. They paid to be taken secretly across the border into Iran.

Hekmat and Sayid Basir’s accounts of their parents’ journeys help illustrate the major flows of Afghans into Iran since the 1978 communist coup and subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Most Afghans fled to Iran in either the 1980s, the period in which the Soviets occupied Afghanistan, or in the 1990s, due to the Afghan Civil War and the emergence of the Taliban. Yet, Afghans had been migrating to Iran for many years. They traveled as nomads seeking pastureland, as migrants seeking employment, as pilgrims visiting the Shi’i Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad, and as soldiers and refugees embracing or escaping war (Monsutti 2008: 167, 170). See figure 2.1 for numbers of documented Afghans in Iran from 1979 to 2019.

At the time of the coup, a few hundred thousand Afghan migrants were working in Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2008: 4). Following the Soviet invasion in 1979, conflict between the government and *mujahidin*, or Islamic resistance, resulted in large numbers of Afghans seeking asylum in Iran. This was the case with Hekmat’s parents. At the same time, those Afghan migrants already in Iran declared themselves refugees and sought sanctuary.

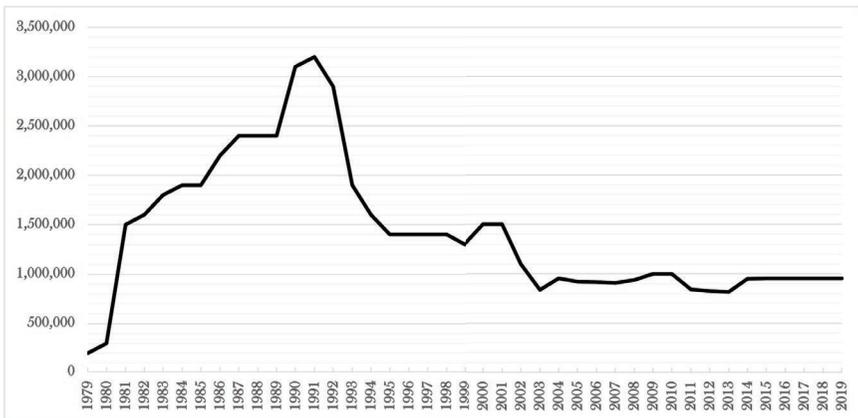


Figure 2.1. Number of Documented Afghan Refugees in Iran (1979–2019). The sources of data for this figure are Humanitarian Data Exchange (n.d.) and Abbasi-Shavazi et al. (2008).

Many refugees flowing into Iran were Hazaras who sought refuge with their coreligionists. In 2005, the ethnic breakdown of Afghans in Iran was estimated at 47 percent Hazara, 30 percent Tajik, 13 percent Pashtun, and 10 percent Baluch, Turkmen, Uzbek, and other (Adelkhah and Olszewska 2007: 143). The Iranian authorities labeled its Afghan visitors as *mohajerin* (involuntary migrants). Framing the refugee population as migrants fleeing religious persecution, Iran did not afford Afghans legal status as refugees (as per the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, ratified by Iran in 1976). Instead, Iran offered shelter to the Afghan *mohajerin* as a religious duty, rather than as a legal obligation (Safri 2011: 589).

The vast majority of Afghans in Iran were issued “blue cards,” extending them benefits such as the right to residence, food rations, the ability to apply for work permits (for manual labor only), discounted health services, and free schooling (Safri 2011: 589). Iran also rejected support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), maintaining direct control over the refugees (Ashrafi and Moghissi 2002: 91).

In the 1980s, the number of Afghans in Iran soared, surpassing three million by 1991. The following year saw the communist government in Afghanistan collapse, with the *mujahidin* taking control of Kabul. This, in addition to growing unemployment in Iran, led to a sea change in Iranian policy. The Iranian government stopped issuing “blue cards” and, for a fee, issued temporary permits. This move shifted Afghans’ status from that of *mohajerin* to *panahandegan* (refugees), a word with a pejorative connotation of impoverishment (Safri 2011: 592).

The new refugee policy focused on restriction of illegal entry to Iran, repatriation of registered refugees, and deportation of those who were unregistered. An unofficial policy of refugee harassment commenced. Many “blue cards” were confiscated and replaced by temporary permits. Employment for refugees was restricted, and social benefits (including subsidized health care, food rations, and free schooling) were withdrawn. The latter led to unofficial schools being established by the Afghan refugee community (see Hoodfar 2010). The mobility of refugees was also restricted (with travel permits being required for travel outside one’s designated area), and refugees were prevented from owning businesses and assets.

The Iranian government also collaborated with the UNHCR to begin repatriation. In 1993, more than 300,000 Afghans were repatriated and another 300,000 left voluntarily (Adelkhah and Olszewska 2007: 143). Many departing Afghans were unaccompanied males, heading to join the various *mujahidin* groups fighting for control of Afghanistan. This initiated a bidirectional refugee flow with combatants traveling to Afghanistan in the spring to fight and returning to Iran in the fall to work. A circular migratory pattern was established, which not only served to further blur the categories “refugee” and “migrant” but also made it almost impossible to track refugee numbers.

With the 1992–96 Civil War in Afghanistan and rise of the Taliban, hundreds of thousands of Afghans flowed into Iran. This continued until the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. In response to this influx of Afghans, the Iranian authorities took action in 2000. The Parliament issued Article 48, stating that all foreigners (the majority being Afghan) without documentation should leave by March 2001. This became the main framework for Afghan repatriation. Heavy fines and imprisonment were administered to employers of illegal workers. The government also initiated a new registration exercise called Amayesh to register all foreigners and facilitate repatriation. New Amayesh cards were issued that supplanted all previous documentation. The Amayesh exercise estimated the number of documented Afghans in Iran at just under 1.5 million, which, adding an estimated number of undocumented Afghans, placed the total between 2 and 2.5 million refugees. In the six months following the fall of the Taliban, an estimated 400,000 Afghans relocated to Afghanistan, driven by a combination of increasing Iranian pressure and the draw of new possibilities in Afghanistan (Turton and Marsden 2002: 19–20).

In 2003, articles were approved under the Iranian Constitution that further discriminated against Afghans. The articles targeted legal action at businesses that employed undocumented Afghans and limited access to banking and lodging for Afghans without documentation. The authorities also introduced a second round of the Amayesh registration process, establishing the system as the main tool for tracking Afghans in the country. Amayesh registration has since been carried out on an annual to biannual basis. Yet, in reality, only a small number of Afghan refugees arriving after 2003 have been able to register and obtain Amayesh cards (Human Rights Watch 2013: 32).

Since 2004, the Iranian regime has repatriated a minimum of 200,000 Afghans each year. To encourage repatriation from 2006 to 2008, many of the unofficial Afghan-run schools were targeted and closed by the Iranian authorities (Safri 2011: 592). Further steps were taken in 2012 to promote deportation. Iran’s Council of Ministers passed a new regulation stating that the 1.6 million undocumented foreigners were to be expelled by the end of 2015. In addition, voluntary repatriation of documented foreigners was to be actioned alongside the termination of 700,000 Amayesh cards (Human Rights Watch 2013: 20–21). This regulation followed the failure of the 2010 Comprehensive Regularization Plan (CRP), which aimed to facilitate registration for undocumented Afghans. However, due to prohibitive costs and problematic criteria, the CRP ended in 2012 (Human Rights Watch 2013: 49).

The Iranian government made concessions in 2015. All documented refugee children were permitted to enroll in school. In 2016, the government also allowed registered Afghans to access its national health insurance scheme. However, in both cases, only those holding Amayesh cards were eligible, and access is far from assured (European Commission 2017: 1).

Despite these promising steps, government coercion and harassment were stepped up in recent years to further encourage “voluntary” Afghan repatriation. In 2018, there were numerous reports of Afghans facing arbitrary detentions, torture, forced labor, and deportations from hospitals. There has also been an increase in the deportation of unaccompanied minors from Iran (BAAG 2018: 2). In addition, young Afghan men (mostly Hazaras) are being offered Iranian residency in exchange for fighting alongside Iranian-backed forces in Syria (Pro Asyl 2017: 42).

This systematic coercion of Afghans to vacate Iran is coupled with a new incentive to leave: Iran’s weakening economy. While Iran has suffered from economic challenges since the 1980s, the last few years have delivered a significant economic downturn, with a rapidly devaluing currency. The US sanctions reintroduced in 2018 have further compounded this decline (World Bank 2019). These factors have led to record numbers of undocumented Afghans, some 773,125, relocating from Iran in 2018. In 2019, 451,073 undocumented Afghans relocated from Iran (IOM 2019: 1). The years 2016 and 2017 also saw high levels of relocation, with almost 445,000 and 465,000 mainly undocumented Afghans relocating, respectively. With refugee flows back into Iran bolstering numbers, it remains challenging to estimate the size of the Afghan refugee population in the country. Official figures place 2.5 to 3 million Afghans in Iran; 951,100 documented and 1.5 to 2 million undocumented (IOM-UNHCR 2019: 4). Yet, recent trends indicate these numbers may be lower and declining.

Hyndman and Giles (2017: 59) describe refugee management in Iran as “a seemingly paradoxical combination of careful control and unpredictable exclusion from mainstream life.” Monsutti (2005: 129) frames this constantly changing context of Iranian tolerance and repression toward Afghans in their country as a game of cat-and-mouse, one that allows Iran to access much-needed Afghan labor while discouraging long-term residence in the country.

“We Became Tired of Iran”: Regimes of Inclusion/Exclusion and Afghan Agency in Iran

Sayid Basir: We were in Zahedan for two years. My father worked as an agricultural laborer. He told me it was difficult to make money. My father knew some people in Esfahan, so we went there for fourteen years. Life was better. But then drought came. There was not enough grass to feed our sheep. So, we moved to Qazvin, which is very good for livestock. We even found jobs, laboring on farms. If we did other jobs the police would deport us. Masonry was not allowed, so they put me in a camp to deport me. But I managed to escape by paying the police Moving to Qazvin was difficult. The Iranian police

have many checkpoints. They check the buses and if they find any Afghans without a valid document, they take you off the bus and deport you My father bought a house in Qazvin. He couldn't use his own name as he had no documents. Instead, he registered these things using his Iranian friend's identity. Afghans can't own houses or cars, open bank accounts or even register mobile phones without documents. Then there's the lack of work. All you can do is manual labor. All of my friends work long hours. Their bodies ache and they have health problems Afghans are harassed on a regular basis. Whenever we walked anywhere, Iranians would block our way and insult us. We usually fought. Once I was in the park with my friends. An Iranian boy threw his ice cream wrapper at me. When I asked him why, he said it was because Afghans are like garbage! We started fighting and my friend was stabbed in the back. We took him to the hospital. When the police came, he was arrested. He showed them his Amayesh card, but they took it, didn't return it, and made him wash the police station toilets before letting him go. This is how Afghans are treated every day in Iran. All of this made me tired of Iran.

Hekmat: When my parents arrived in Iran they went straight to Mashhad, where my uncle lived. But, they couldn't get a “blue card.” So, they went to Qom and stayed for eight years. Again, in Qom they couldn't get documentation. They ended up in Esfahan, where I was born, and they managed to get a “blue card.” They stayed in Esfahan; that's where they were registered During this period, my parents had many jobs. When I was a child, my father was a metalworker. Later, he was a carpenter. Before we left Iran, he was a mason. He was just a simple worker, because he wasn't allowed to own a business. My mother was at home caring for us, but she was often busy weaving scarves or de-shelling pistachios to sell Our biggest challenge was our identity as Afghans. It was hard to open a bank account, to buy a motorcycle, or a house. There were work opportunities, but tasks like digging a well or working in a quarry were reserved for Afghans. It was challenging, but Afghans accepted this situation—there was no alternative! It's obvious to me that all the obstacles Afghans faced had a bad impact. When you see you are not treated as a citizen, it makes you very tired The police behaved badly with Afghans. Once my brother and I were riding on a motorcycle. A policeman stopped us and immediately slapped my brother. I asked him, “Why?” He replied, “You are an Afghan, shut up!” He went on to say our motorbike had no license plate. And, he told us an Afghan shouldn't be driving a motorbike anyway. At that time, it was common for Iranians not to have license plates. They may have had to pay a small fine. But, for Afghans, the story was very different.

Sayid Basir and Hekmat's commentary indicates the challenges Afghans face in Iran and the highly precarious lives they lead (Olszewska 2015a: 44). They are constantly seeking employment, yet they are restricted to manual labor, typically working long hours in tiring and dangerous fields of employment. They are consistently subject to the possibility of detention

and deportation. Yet Afghans face this precarity with great resilience. One approach, implied by Hekmat, is “through [Afghans] adopting a strategy of quiet assent to the indignities of their position, working hard in the available occupations and gradually accumulating economic capital” (Olszewska 2015a: 27). Sayid Basir’s description of his family’s movement from Zahedan to Esfahan and, ultimately, Qazvin hints at not only this ongoing search for capital accumulation, but also the importance of social networks for employment, information, and associated forms of social and economic support (Monsutti 2008: 65).

Sayid Basir’s father’s purchase of a house in Qazvin indicates that social networks also encompass Iranians (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2008: 29). In interviews, both Sayid Basir and Hekmat spoke of maintaining good relationships with Iranians who provided companionship, opportunities, and support. Sayid Basir’s father’s utilization of his friendship with an Iranian to navigate government restrictions on his ownership of assets, albeit a small act, stands as a mode of resistance to the exclusionary legal regime that constrains him.

My interlocutors’ descriptions of life in Iran also highlight the social denigration that many Afghans suffer. Ashrafi and Moghissi (2002) point out that racism and prejudice targeted at Afghans in Iran emerged in the 1980s as Iran went to war with Iraq. According to Ashrafi and Moghissi (2002: 95), “Economic scarcity and the political and social crisis of the period made Afghans scapegoats for the problems faced by ordinary citizens.” Contributing to this phenomenon, they argue, is the Iranian media, which mainly publicizes sensationalized stories of violent crimes and sexual assault by Afghans with impunity and without corroboration (Ashrafi and Moghissi 2002: 95).

One major difference between Sayid Basir and Hekmat’s lives in Iran was their legal status. Hekmat’s family received a “blue card,” whereas Sayid Basir’s family lived illegally in Iran. While both Hekmat and Sayid Basir experienced harassment and legal and socioeconomic constraints, Sayid Basir was subject to severe restrictions on his movement, was detained and subject to detention, and attended a clandestine, informal school run by other Afghans. It was only in the last few years of Sayid Basir’s time in Iran that government education again became available to Afghans. Hekmat, on the other hand, had fewer constraints on his movement, was less likely to suffer detention or deportation, and attended Iranian schools. It should be noted that while the Afghan-run schools generally delivered schooling inferior to Iranian institutions, they are credited with creating a space for Afghans to reflect on their shared experience of exclusion, while cultivating a shared sense of both Afghan and Muslim identity (Hoodfar 2010: 175).

Another space of resilience, in which a communal sense of Afghan identity is negotiated, is found in Afghan poetry sessions in Iran. Olszewska

(2015b) contends that the production and recitation of Persian poetry among Afghan refugees in Iran both reframes and communicates issues of identity and social change in the context of exile. Furthermore, mastery of such poetry stands as one of the “few forms of cultural capital available through which young Afghans, who can legally work only in menial professions in Iran, might improve their lives” (Olszewska 2015b: 6).

Another expression of agency, which is not reflected in either Hekmat or Sayid Basir’s interviews given their one-time migration to Afghanistan, is the “normality of movement” that Monsutti (2008: 58) ascribes to many Afghans. He points out that, for Afghans, going back and forth to Iran has been a constant endeavor. Crucially, he argues that the development of transnational networks and ongoing mobility in the face of chronic instability is at the core of social and economic strategies developed by many Afghans. He is in essence arguing that ongoing migration, in the context of Afghan displacement to and from Iran, is itself an expression of agency (Monsutti 2008: 59).

The “Burnt Generation”: Regimes of Inclusion/Exclusion on Relocation to Afghanistan

Hekmat: My older brother was always saying he didn’t like Iran. And, that our country was peaceful. He said we could go back and live without any problems. He encouraged us to return. We came in 2003. Three families came together. This made it much easier . . . I went to Bamyan University. I could do that because of the education I received in Iran. Afterward, I got a good job with an NGO in Bamyan. I got that job through my university qualifications and because I learned English in Iran. Now I have a senior job with the organization. This is what allowed me to get married and build a house . . . When I returned to Afghanistan, I realized there were different ethnicities and that there were tensions between them. For many years, my mind was busy with this, thinking that Hazaras are superior and that Sayids [*sic*] had stolen our rights.

Sayid Basir: My parents came to Afghanistan two months before us. It was the first time they had visited in twenty years. My parents called us and said it was better in Afghanistan. You could earn more. Iran does not have a good economy these days. So, we sold our house and belongings and came to Bamyan . . . I know many people who went back to Iran, but I am staying because of the freedom. I’m a free man here. My mind works better here and psychologically I’m feeling good. There is no one here to stop me and ask me where my documents are . . . I searched for a job and after some time found one in a restaurant. My brother has a food stall, but he has few customers. I use all my salary to pay the rent. I’m not sure what else we can do. I don’t want to go back to Iran. After all, we are the “Burnt Generation.”

Both Hekmat and Sayid Basir relocated to Afghanistan after being born and living in Iran. Hekmat arrived in Bamyan in 2003, and Sayid Basir only recently; both intend to remain permanently. The excerpts of their interviews above outline the motivations, opportunities, and constraints associated with their relocation to Afghanistan. Their decision to relocate to and stay in Afghanistan, like that of more than 450,000 other Afghans in 2019, and the possibility of their return to Iran, is determined by a shifting calculus that impacts integration and the possibility of onward migration.

One of the most striking sentiments expressed by Sayid Basir upon relocating was a feeling of freedom (defined in terms of mobility and a removal of restrictions) and an associated improvement in mental health. Such perceptions are common among Afghans leaving prolonged displacement in Iran. Yet Sayid Basir also refers to financial difficulties and, through reference to the “Burnt Generation,” future uncertainty (see Kamal 2010). The moniker “Burnt Generation” refers to those born in Iran between 1963 and 1980 (although it is often applied to those born later), who have experienced significant social and political upheavals and ostensibly lack optimism for the future.

For Afghans who experience financial difficulties relocating to Afghanistan, remigration to Iran, as a survival strategy, becomes a possibility (Saito 2007: 2). Sayid Basir was initially motivated by financial survival to leave Iran. He explains that his family was escaping precarity and prejudice, but also a worsening economy in Iran, a factor of growing importance in contemporary migratory calculations (BAAG 2018: 1). Hekmat (and his family) also describe an escape from marginality and social denigration in Iran, while also seeking new possibilities in Afghanistan. His superior education and English language abilities allowed Hekmat to link his education (afforded to him in part by possession of a “blue card”) with his ability to hold a good job, get married, and establish a household—all steps toward successful integration.

Other important factors that impact successful resettlement, illustrated in both Sayid Basir and Hekmat’s accounts, are the planned and collective nature of relocation. Schuster and Majidi (2013: 224) remind us that “returnee preparedness” is important for successful relocation: “People are most likely to be able to settle if they have been able to prepare their return, to convert assets and send them home, or to set up opportunities or support structures.” Those deported from Iran, unable to suitably prepare themselves, have significantly higher chances of onward migration. Schuster and Majidi (2013: 226) found that in the context of Afghans deported from Iran, at least three factors lead to onward migration: “loss of economic and educational opportunities and the impossibility of repaying debts incurred from earlier attempts to migrate; transnational and local ties in the countries of destination, exile and return; and a sociocultural feeling of shame and perceptions

of ‘contamination.’” “Contamination” refers to stigma associated with “failing” in a host country and being deported, often in a state of indebtedness (Schuster and Majidi 2015: 642).

The forms of discrimination and social rejection experienced by Afghans relocating to Afghanistan can directly impact social integration and the likelihood of further migration (Saito 2007: 46). Abbasi (forthcoming) highlights the exclusionary nature of ethnic identities and her identity as “Iranigak,” both ascribed to her upon reaching Afghanistan. Iranigak, literally meaning “little Iranian,” is a derogatory term applied to Afghans who were born and raised in Iran. Abbasi describes the manner in which she became cognizant of her Hazara ethnicity before being discriminated against by non-Hazaras. She also found she was excluded (by Afghans who never left Afghanistan) on the basis of being Iranigak. These experiences contributed to her onward migration from Afghanistan.

Hekmat reflected on this ethnicization:

In Iran, I didn’t know there were ethnicities. I thought Hazara was another word for Afghan. In Iran we were outsiders, we were all Afghans. Iranians didn’t know about our ethnicity. It wasn’t important for them, and it wasn’t important for us. When I returned to Afghanistan I learned about the different ethnicities. I started reading history books. I realized Pashtuns had dominated Afghanistan and had killed many Hazaras. This is what changed my mind. At the University of Bamyan I met many Sayids [*sic*] who thought they were superior to Hazaras. I turned against them. This had a major impact on my behavior. Now, I think it’s useless. It’s just a way of dividing people.

Hekmat’s case illustrates how Afghans in Iran define their identity primarily in relation to Iranians, viewing themselves (and being viewed) as “outsiders” (Saito 2007: 43). Ethnic identity formation developed in Afghanistan, for Hekmat, through digestion of accounts of collective trauma (in pro-Hazara history books) and through interaction with Afghans deploying ethnic identity in relation to him. Although Hekmat has now come to terms with the functioning of ethnicity, he has passed through a profound reconsideration of his social location in Afghanistan.

As indicated above, two distinct sets of challenges were frequently articulated by Hekmat and Sayid Basir during interviews. Sayid Basir was concerned with securing the means to survive, whereas Hekmat would often mention his experience of ethnicization. This is more than just a reflection of the length of time they have spent in Afghanistan. Saito (2007: 2) explains that “the problems faced by less educated and low income respondents tend to be in relation to material survival and physical security, while more educated respondents, particularly women, tend to face greater social and emotional contradictions during the reintegration process.” These are challenges with which Hekmat and Sayid Basir, to differing degrees, will continue to

grapple. These concerns will inform their social and economic strategies moving forward.

Conclusion: “Return,” (Un)Settlement, and Onward Migration

Hekmat and Sayid Basir experienced “extended exile” in Iran (Hyndman and Giles 2017: 1). They (and their families) faced continuously evolving, yet mainly restrictive regimes of legal, social, and economic inclusion/exclusion. They lived in politically induced conditions of sustained precarity and prejudice, states of “maximized vulnerability” to borrow Butler’s (2009) term. These experiences shaped their lives, regulating their mobility, crafting their identities, restricting employment and educational opportunities, and impacting their physical and mental wellbeing. Yet, within these structural constraints, Hekmat and Sayid Basir demonstrated resistance and resilience through leveraging relationships with Iranians, participating in Afghan-run schools, and utilizing migration as an expression of agency.

Their engagements with these regimes were, of course, not homogenous. Hekmat’s family received a “blue card” as a result of the timing of their journey to Iran, whereas Sayid Basir’s family remained undocumented. Among other divergences, this affected their educational opportunities: Hekmat gained access to high-quality Iranian education, and Sayid Basir attended an informal Afghan-run school of inferior quality. This variance in experiences of protracted displacement and precarity in Iran contributed to the employment opportunities secured post-relocation to Afghanistan. The ability to access quality educational opportunities in Iran (albeit not without its challenges) importantly translated into upward class mobility for Hekmat (Hugo, Abbasi-Shavazi, and Sadeghi 2012: 276; Olszewska 2015a).

Relocation to Afghanistan was no panacea for either of the interlocutors. This “return” is, in effect, another displacement, characterized by ongoing exclusion and, if unsustainable, onward migration. While Sayid Basir, Hekmat, and their families benefited from preparation prior to departure from Iran and social networks of support in Afghanistan, they were faced with fresh challenges and new regimes of inclusion/exclusion upon arrival. Sayid Basir continues to live with the effects of previous exclusion and strives to secure employment that will allow him and his brother to survive financially. Hekmat has struggled with social discrimination and adjustment to new social realities.

Hekmat and Sayid Basir are some of the more fortunate Afghans to relocate to Afghanistan. In the first ten months of 2018, for example, 20 percent of Afghans relocating to Afghanistan required humanitarian assistance, and 72 percent were displaced upon arrival, unable to settle in their or their

parent’s place of origin (BAAG 2018: 3). They effectively become internally displaced and unable to obtain sustainable sources of income, without which “food insecurity looms and negative coping mechanisms range from unsustainable debt to child labor” (Norwegian Refugee Council 2018: 3).

Moreover, the context into which they are arriving is deteriorating. COVID-19 has driven the poverty rate to an estimated 72 percent, with Afghans facing shrinking access to food, shelter, healthcare, and education (World Bank 2020). The Taliban is resurgent and continues to make territorial and political gains. Conflict is widespread across Afghanistan, with consistently high levels of civilian casualties (Council on Foreign Relations 2019). Displacement in Afghanistan is also worsening: “Afghanistan has experienced unprecedented levels of return in recent years and, compounded by exponential rises in internal displacement, the situation now constitutes a major humanitarian crisis” (BAAG 2018: 1). This humanitarian crisis is driven by deteriorating security and resurgent natural hazards. In 2019, natural hazards internally displaced 295,900 Afghans, and conflict drove 417,400 people from their homes (OCHA 2019: 1).

Taken alongside Iran’s declining economy and the Iranian government’s growing use of coercion, the deteriorating state of affairs in Afghanistan is also harming coping strategies and migration options. While it appears that both Hekmat and (to a lesser extent) Sayid Basir are managing to build lives in Afghanistan, the ability of many Afghans to successfully resettle in Afghanistan and break the momentum of displacement is far from guaranteed.

Caught between the carryover effects of long-term precarity in Iran and the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, it seems likely that many Afghans relocating to Afghanistan will remain trapped in protracted states of displacement. Relocating to one’s homeland may not change the state of marginality experienced by many Afghans in Iran; indeed, a state of (un)settlement may be experienced upon relocation. This ongoing (un)settlement will, for many Afghans, be defined by continuing precarity and enduring prejudice. In such circumstances, it is likely that onward migration will be the primary coping strategy. Yet, with Iran exhibiting declining economic opportunities and increasing government harassment, and Afghanistan providing limited alternatives, the space for Afghans to navigate precarity, prejudice, and “return” is diminishing. Sayid Basir’s lament at being a member of the “Burnt Generation,” and the pessimistic view of the future this implies, may not be too far from the truth.

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