



AFGHANISTAN XIV. AFGHAN REFUGEES IN IRAN

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Afghan refugees make up a population of up to 3 million people of various ethnicities, who have settled in Iran from the communist coup of 1978 in [Afghanistan](#) to the present. The number of Afghan refugees in Iran climbed steadily throughout the 1980s, and, according to Iranian government estimates (UNHCR, 2001), it peaked at 3 million people in 1991. Refugee registration exercises in 2001 and 2003 yielded detailed demographic information on the Afghan population in Iran for the first time and enabled observation of changes in the population. In 2006, Shi'ite Hazāras (see [HAZĀRA](#)) at 39 percent constituted the single largest ethnic group, followed by Tajiks at 22 percent, Pashtuns at 9 percent, and the remainder divided between smaller numbers of Sadat, Fars, Baluch, Turkmen, Uzbeks, and others (UNHCR/BAFIA, 2006). However, each of these figures is probably higher in reality, since ethnicities in this breakdown were self-declared, and the 10 percent who only declared the names of their subtribes could be divided among the major ethnicities. According to UNHCR/BAFIA (2007), the majority of Afghans live in the provinces of Tehran (31 percent), Khorasan (15 percent, including Mashad), Isfahan (13 percent), Sistān and Baluĉestān (8 percent, including Zāhedān), Kermān (6 percent), and Qom and Fārs (6 percent each, the latter including



Shiraz). In 2005, the gender balance was 44 percent female and 56 percent male. 46 percent, or almost half, were children aged 17 or younger (UNHCR/BAFIA, 2005). Approximately 1 million Afghans were living as families and had been in Iran for an extended period of time by the 2001 registration exercise (UNHCR, 2004b, p. 9). Figures for the year of arrival indicate two major emigration waves, with 40 percent arriving in the years 1978-85 (the early years of the Soviet occupation), and 36 percent arriving between 1996 and September 2001 (the years of the Taliban rule; see UNHCR/BAFIA, 2005).

Afghan migration to Iran, however, is of a mixed nature. It is estimated that approximately 500,000 undocumented Afghan refugees and economic migrants reside in Iran illegally, working in the construction and agricultural sectors (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., p. 1). Movements across the border for social or trade reasons are common, and transnational migration for employment in Iran has become a crucial economic strategy, a safety net, and a way of life for many people in Afghanistan, aided by social networks on both sides of the border (Stigter, pp. 15-28).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has operated in Iran from 1983; on the part of the Iranian government, refugee affairs are administered by the Ministry of the Interior's Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs (BAFIA). A limited number of national and international non-governmental or charitable organizations have also provided services to refugees in Iran. UNHCR's limited funding, and international donors' unwillingness to fund its operations in Iran, bear some of the responsibility for increasingly restrictive policies towards refugees in Iran.

Afghan Migration to Iran: History. Up to the middle of the 19th century, Iran had claimed sovereignty over much of today's Afghanistan, in particular the city of Herat, while its eastern border was not clearly demarcated until 1905 (Kashani-Sabet, pp. 30-33). There has been considerable movement throughout this region for centuries, and Iran's influence in western Afghanistan and the intermingling of peoples continued well after the territories separated (Adelkhah and Olszewska, pp. 149-65). Inhabitants of today's Afghanistan frequently visited Iran as seasonal workers, pilgrims, or merchants. Those who settled and integrated into Iranian society in the 19th and early 20th century, most of them Hazaras fleeing the subjugation of their region by Amir 'Abd-al-Rahmān (r. 1880-1901, see [AFGHANISTAN x.](#)), eventually became Iranian citizens and came to be classified as an ethnic group known as Kāvāri



or Barbari (Monsutti, pp. 124-26). Large numbers of single young Afghan men sought temporary employment in Iran from the 1960s onwards, particularly during the terrible famine that struck the northwest of Afghanistan in 1971-72 (Monsutti, p. 126). In addition, many young Afghan Shi'ite men studied at the *howzas*, or religious seminaries, in Iran, bringing new ideas and ideologies back with them to Afghanistan in the 1960s and 1970s (Roy, pp. 139-40). Thus, several hundred thousand citizens of Afghanistan were already living in Iran at the time of the 1978 coup d'état by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in Kabul, at which point they declared themselves to be *mohājerin* (refugees) and remained in Iran (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, p. 151).

During the three decades of conflict that followed the coup, Afghans migrated to Iran for different reasons at different times. In the early 1980s, both Sunni and Shi'ite clergy faced persecutions at the hands of the PDPA, and many were arrested and killed. In 1979, massacres occurred during uprisings of the Hazaras in Kabul and of the population of Herat. These uprisings were particularly brutally suppressed because many people who participated in them were Shi'ites and the government accused them of being Iranian agents (Dorronsoro, pp. 114-21). Other frequent reasons for leaving Afghanistan included fear of rocket attacks, persecution for political activity, forced conscription, loss of homes and livelihoods due to warfare, or the desire to protect the honor of wives and daughters (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., pp. 14-15), particularly with regard to the new family law and compulsory education imposed by the communist government (Hoodfar, p. 147). In the case of the Hazaras—the largest ethnic group among the refugees in Iran—ethnic discrimination, poverty, and war were mutually-reinforcing factors that drove large-scale emigration to Pakistan and Iran (Monsutti, p. 123). Later in the 1980s, infighting between the various Shi'ite *mojāhedin* groups in the Hazārajāt also led to emigration. Another large wave of the Hazara emigration came after 1996, when the Taliban took control of much of Afghanistan and Shi'ites were persecuted and massacred.

Legal Status. Afghans who arrived in Iran in the 1980s were granted refugee status on a *prima facie* basis and issued with “blue cards” confirming their status as *mohājerin*, granting them indefinite permission to stay legally in Iran. Registered refugees were entitled to various social rights, including access to free education and adult literacy training, health care, food subsidies, and employment. Most were able to settle freely on the outskirts of cities rather



than in refugee camps, and in cities such as Mashad many were able to own property through customary contracts of sale or lease (*rahn*; see Abbasi-Shavazi et al., p. 19). However, despite Iran being a signatory of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, policies towards them have undergone many shifts and demonstrated a degree of arbitrariness that leads to a pervasive sense of insecurity among the Afghans in Iran. It has been argued that this situation of alternating toleration and harassment or expulsions is intended to allow the Iranian economy to benefit as much as possible from cheap Afghan labor in poorly-regarded occupations, without allowing them to settle permanently in the country (Monsutti, p. 129).

In the early 1990s, particularly after the fall of the communist government of Najib-Allāh in Afghanistan in 1992 and shifting domestic economic and social concerns such as unemployment in Iran, refugees began to be harassed by Iranian law enforcement authorities and pressured to leave. Children were prevented from attending state schools, and identity cards were confiscated. Afghans without legal residence also risked mass deportation, beatings, and extortion (IRIN, 2002). In 1993, over 500,000 temporary registration cards were issued to unregistered Afghans or new arrivals, and these were extended several times but eventually declared invalid in 1996.

New registration exercises (*āmāyeš*), largely intended to facilitate repatriation and refugee management by standardizing refugee documents, were carried out by BAFIA in 2001 and 2003, but the cards issued in the latter exercise were only valid for three months for individuals and for six months for families (UNHCR, 2004a, p. 5), requiring periodic extension procedures. As of the beginning of 2004, 1.4 million documented refugees remained in Iran (UNHCR, 2004b, p. 8), a figure which had fallen to just over 900,000 by 2007 (IRIN, 2007a) thanks both to the voluntary repatriation program, carried out jointly by the UNHCR and the Iranian government, and to “spontaneous” returns.

A joint agreement between BAFIA and the UNHCR in 2000 contained provisions that some categories of people would have access to a refugee status determination procedure, including undocumented Afghans fearing persecution, unaccompanied children, women and elderly, patients and the injured, and university students (UNHCR, 2000). However, it is not clear to what extent this procedure has ever been implemented.

There are reportedly up to 40,000 marriages between Afghan men and Iranian women, who cannot pass their citizenship to their foreign husbands or to their



children. As a result, up to 100,000 children of such marriages lack Iranian birth certificates and identity documents (Zahedi, pp. 225-26). They are known as *maškuk al-howiya* (of uncertain identity) and are deprived of the right to an education, formal work, or marriage (Adelkhah and Olszewska, pp. 158-59). This has led to a civic campaign for gender equality in citizenship rights, and of a legal amendment was passed in 2006, which allows children born in Iran to Iranian mothers to apply for citizenship on reaching the age of 18, under certain conditions, which include registration of the marriage with the state (Zahedi, pp. 235-39). However, at least 26,000 marriages of Iranian women and Afghan men are unregistered, leaving them in a legal limbo (Zahedi, p. 226).

Repatriation, Expulsion, Resettlement. The first formal repatriation program for Afghans was created after the fall of Afghanistan's communist government in 1992 by a Tripartite Agreement between Iran, Afghanistan, and UNHCR. During 1993, over 300,000 Afghans repatriated under this program, and close to 300,000 more returned "spontaneously" (Turton and Marsden, p. 12). In 1995, the government announced that all Afghans must leave Iran, but repatriation was suspended until 1998 when the joint program with UNHCR resumed.

In 2002 Iran, Afghanistan, and UNHCR signed a new agreement to provide assistance to refugees wishing to repatriate voluntarily. This began in April 2002, lasted for a year, and was later extended annually until the most recent program ended in March 2008 (IRIN, 2007a). The operation is facilitated by a number of Voluntary Repatriation Centers run by UNHCR throughout the country, which provide some financial assistance and conduct a de-registration procedure to ensure that returnees do not re-renter Iran (IRIN, 2004b). In practice, many Afghans who have repatriated find their way back to Iran in some way.

Between April 2002 and the beginning of 2007, 848,311 Afghans returned from Iran under the repatriation programs, and almost the same number returned "spontaneously" without assistance (UNHCR, 2007b, p. 2). Most reports on the subject of refugees' attitudes to repatriation noted that, fearing continued fighting, ethnic tensions, a shattered economy, lack of security, work, education, and medical facilities, most were extremely ambivalent about returning (Turton and Marsden, pp. 49-53; Abbasi-Shavazi et al., pp. 37-50), particularly those who had been in Iran for a long time and had become well-integrated into their neighborhoods. Reports indicate that repatriation trends split along ethnic lines, with the Pashtuns from Pakistan returning in far



greater numbers than the Hazaras from Iran (UNHCR, 2004b, pp. 10-11). While the carrot-and-stick tactics of UNHCR and the Iranian government, along with the steps taken towards security and reconstruction in Afghanistan, have compelled many refugees to return, repatriation rates have leveled off in recent years.

Some 100,000 undocumented Afghans were deported in 1999 (USCR, p. 180), and round-ups and deportations of Afghans staying both legally and illegally still occur intermittently. In April 2007, the Iranian government launched a campaign to deport undocumented Afghans on an unprecedented scale. By June 2008, about 490,000 had been arrested, kept in deportation camps for days, and then expelled from the country. In the process, families were reportedly separated, people were beaten, abused, or told to pack their belongings at an hour's notice, and, in a minority of cases, women and children were deported without their families (IRIN, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e, 2008). The humanitarian crisis precipitated by these actions led to the sacking of two ministers from Afghanistan's cabinet, but remained mostly unremarked outside the country.

As the legal situation of refugees in Iran deteriorated, the UNHCR began to submit requests for resettlement to third countries in 1999, with a present average of 1,000 Afghan and Iraqi refugees resettled per year. The main resettlement countries are Australia, Canada, Sweden, and Finland (UNHCR, 2007, pp. 1-2).

War and Politics. The refugee communities in Iran were used as bases for the jihad against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s, albeit to a lesser extent than those in Pakistan. The Shi'ite resistance parties played an influential role among the refugees. They organized political meetings and cultural activities, provided services to refugees, and recruited fighters for the war effort. Iranian influence had already been growing in the Shi'ite-dominated central region of Afghanistan, the Hazārajāt, in the second half of the 20th century, thanks to young men returning from the religious seminaries of Qom and Najaf (Roy, p. 140). Following the Soviet invasion and the popular uprising against Marxist rule in Afghanistan, the Hazara resistance was consolidated in June 1979 into the Šowrā-ye Enqelābi-e Ettefāq-e Eslāmi-e Afġānestān (Revolutionary Council for the Islamic Unity of Afghanistan) under Āyat-Allāh Sayyed 'Ali Behešti, a former student of Grand Āyat-Allāh Sayyed Abu'l-Qāsem Kō'i at Najaf. This organization, run largely by moderate Shi'ite clerics and Hazāra Sayyeds, wrested control of the Hazārajāt from the Soviets



by 1981 and set up an autonomous proto-state, receiving limited financial support and arms from Iran through the office it set up in Tehran (Emadi, p. 376).

However, Iran soon shifted its support from the Šowrā's moderate clerics, followers of the politically quietist Ƙo'i who disagreed with the doctrine of *welāyat-e faqih*, to Khomeinist organizations that emerged in Qom: the Sāzmān-e Našr-e Eslāmi (Organisation for the Islamic Victory), founded in 1979 under the patronage of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and the Sepāh-e Pāsdārān (Revolutionary Guard Corps), founded in 1981 under Moḥammad Akbari and modeled on and supported by Iran's own Pāsdārān (Ibrahimi, pp. 16-18; Emadi, p. 378). These groups were critical of the "reactionary" and "feudal" Šowrā, and sought to bring about an Iranian-style Islamic revolution in Afghanistan. They were well-organized, drawing their recruits from Hazara clerics and intellectuals, who were given extensive training at military camps and paid salaries by Iran. Some were even sent to the war with Iraq for preparation (Emadi, pp. 377-78). The Našr-e Eslāmi, however, attempted to maintain political independence from Iran. Another group, the traditionalist Islamic Ḥarakat-e Eslāmi (Islamic Movement) under Shaikh Moḥammad-Āšef Moḥseni (another student of Ƙo'i), was founded in Qom in 1979, but some of its followers were expelled from Iran in 1980 because they accepted Khomeini's authority in religious but not political matters (Kakar, p. 94). Proponents of a wide range of political movements, from Hazara ethno-nationalism to Maoism, also existed among the Afghan refugees in Iran.

Našr-e Eslāmi and Pāsdārān militants eventually ejected Behešti from his headquarters in Bāmiān province and took control over some two-thirds of the Hazārajāt in 1984. Some 26,000 Hazaras were killed as a result of the fighting between these groups—more than at the hands of the Soviets, who had disengaged militarily from the Hazārajāt (Kakar, p. 95). But the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and a pragmatic turn in Iranian foreign policy favored Shi'ite unity for participation in national-level politics in Afghanistan once again (Harpviken, p. 94). This led to the amalgamation of most of the Shi'ite parties into the Ḥezb-e Waḥdat (Unity Party), under the leadership of 'Abd-al-'Ali Mazāri in 1989, which contributed to the rise of a Hazara political identity (see Canfield, p. 241-62). In the 1990s, Ḥezb-e Waḥdat enjoyed good relations with Iran, from which it received financial and military support. Its offices in Tehran and Mashad issued membership cards to refugees, which were



accepted by Iranian police in lieu of other documents, and often intervened with the authorities to halt expulsions (Monsutti, p. 129).

After the American-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, most overtly political organizations and parties relocated to Kabul, leaving behind their offshoots or new groups devoted to cultural and educational work. *Hezb-e Waḥdat* maintains an office in Mashad, which issues various documents to refugees, but its activity has dropped to minimal levels.

Livelihoods. Afghans form an essential part of the labor force in Iran and are well-known for their work in low-waged, low-status, or dangerous jobs, with a reputation for efficiency and reliability. It has been estimated that they contributed 4.4 percent of a GNP of USD 161 billion (that is, more than USD 7 billion) in 1994-95 (Farhang, pp. 43-49); more recent figures are not available. The Iranian economy particularly benefited from their labor during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88, see [IRAQ vii.](#)) and in the period of reconstruction that followed it; Afghan labor continues to fill an important niche in Iran's flourishing informal economy. Afghans work largely as unskilled laborers, night-watchmen, gardeners, well-diggers, or construction workers, and also in quarries, abattoirs, tanneries, and brick kilns. They are often organized in small, mobile work teams based on kinship principles (Monsutti, pp. 130-36). However, over time, despite restrictions on their employment, many have been able to experience some upward mobility, moving on to occupations requiring skills or assets, such as tailoring, bricklaying, hawking, and grocery shop-keeping, or to cultural work as teachers, translators, writers, and publishers (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., pp. 23-24). In fact, Afghan workers are in high demand in certain skilled construction jobs, such as installation of steel building frames, masonry, tiling, or decorative stuccowork. Those with religious training are also able to make a living by performing religious ceremonies in Afghan and sometimes even local Iranian mosques. A number of others work as traders distributing goods within Iran, or in import-export; these have the highest income, and their financial situation tends to be more secure.

Afghan women in Iran also frequently work, whether doing piecework at home in tailoring, weaving rugs, spinning wool, shelling pistachios, or cleaning saffron; or seasonally in fruit or vegetable harvests. Over 40 percent of women in one research sample in Mashad contributed to their family income (Hoodfar, p. 162). A small but growing number of educated youth, both men and women, work as teachers or administrators in informal Afghan



schools and educational centers, or informally (without social insurance policies) for Iranian companies. Over half of Afghan youth aged between 8 and 18 generate income for themselves or their families (Chatty and Crivello, p. 16).

Access to employment for undocumented Afghans, however, is more difficult. They have not been able to work legally without valid permits since 1993, and both employers and employees found violating this rule are heavily fined, although many are prepared to take that risk. As a result, during periods of increased government vigilance when men are stopped in the streets and arrested and deported if they do not have identity cards, undocumented men are forced to stay at home, and their households rely on the income of women and children in ill-paying jobs (ICRI, 1998, p. 1). In 2000 and 2001, Iran considerably tightened its legislation on the employment of foreign nationals, imposing heavy penalties on those who employed illegal foreigners and restricting Afghans with residence cards to sixteen categories of work, mostly manual labor (Turton and Marsden, p. 31; Abbasi-Shavazi et al., p. 17).

Education and Literacy. Attitudes to education and literacy among Afghans have changed during their time in Iran. Access to literacy and learning in pre-war Afghan society was restricted to urban areas and much smaller numbers of males in rural areas. Sending girls to public schools, which was made compulsory after the Communist coup in 1978, was seen as an affront to the honor of the men responsible for their protection (Hoodfar, pp. 147). With their exposure to Iranian society and media, however, many refugees have accepted education as a means to social mobility, as a religious injunction, and as a value in itself (Hoodfar, pp. 156-61).

According to a United Nations report, some 137,334 Afghan children were enrolled in Iranian public schools in 1998, of whom at least 47 percent were girls (Squire, pp. 5, 12)—unfortunately, these represented less than a third of the estimated number of Afghan children in Iran. In addition, over 18,000 Afghan children and over 300,000 adults were taught basic literacy skills between 1985 and 1999 (Squire, p. 13). Literacy rates and education levels rose after arrival in Iran, and, as reported in one study, 90 percent of household heads in Mashad were literate, and there was no illiteracy among children born in Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., p. 21).

However, children without refugee cards could not attend state schools, which led to the creation of dozens of informal schools, operated by Afghans for



Afghans and known as *madrashā-ye kōdgardān* (self-run schools). These have been periodically shut down by the authorities, while their teachers risk arrest for their activities (ICRI, 1999, p. 2; Squire, p. 15). At other times, their activities appear to be tolerated. Most follow the Iranian state curriculum and use Iranian textbooks, sometimes adding lessons in Afghan history, geography, and the Pashto language. The UN report estimated that in 1998-99 approximately 14,000 students were attending informal Afghan schools in Tehran and Mashad (Squire, p. 14).

Beginning in autumn of 2004, Afghan children could no longer attend state schools without paying a substantial fee, nor could they sit for university entrance examinations in the Islamic Republic of Iran. A number of Afghan women were arrested for publicly demonstrating for their children's right to education (Harrison, p. 1). Many of the informal schools subsequently expanded their intake and their number has grown. Their fees are substantially lower than those of the state schools. The diplomas issued by these schools are certified by the Afghan embassy, so that they can be recognized in Afghanistan once the children repatriate.

An unknown but significant number of Afghan youth have been educated in Iranian universities in a wide variety of subjects—until 2004, university education including living costs was free of charge for those who passed the highly competitive Iranian university entrance examination (*konkur*), and they were permitted to study at a number of major universities around the country. No statistics are available on the total number of Afghan university students, but between 1996 and 1999, a German scholarship fund disbursed over 700 scholarships to Afghan refugee students, the majority of whom were studying medicine and engineering (Squire, p. 24). In 2004, however, new regulations barred foreign nationals from taking the entrance examination. Since then, Afghan students have only been permitted to apply as fee-paying “foreign students” to a limited number of universities, although policies have continued to be inconsistent and changeable.

Another aspect of education with enormous significance for Shi'ite Afghans has been the ability of thousands of young Afghan men to study free of charge and with the provision of a stipend at the *houzehā-ye 'elmiya* (religious seminaries) in Mashad and Qom. This has given a number of Afghans a base for involvement in cultural and political activities, which have helped to sustain a positive Afghan identity—for example, many of the most important poets of the resistance era were *ṭalabas* (religious students)—leading to the



emergence of a politically-engaged Shi'ite Afghan intelligentsia in Iran.

Customs. At the visible level, most refugees attempt to integrate into Iranian society to the extent possible, in terms of dress, behavior, manners, customs, diet, and dialect. Afghan men of the younger generation wear European-style shirts and trousers just as Iranians do. Women's public dress, meanwhile, is the standard uniform of *mānto* (coat), *maqna'e* (head-scarf), and usually *čādor* (veil). Strictly observing the Islamic dress code and disciplined behavior are strategies for avoiding trouble by means of invisibility. However, not even the most religiously conservative Afghan women in Iran cover their faces with the *borqa* (face-cover) prevalent in urban areas in Afghanistan, and like Iranians they consider the *borqa* to be an oppressive garment. In Afghanistan, returnee women from Iran are beginning to introduce the *mānto* as suitable attire for women working outside the home.

Marriage customs reflect the cultural transformations taking place among Afghans in Iran. In Afghanistan, marriages were traditionally arranged by the families of the bride and the groom, often between patrilineal cousins or cross-cousins, and frequently for the purposes of cementing a political or economic alliance through the exchange of brides, or for settling a feud. Furthermore, ethnic groups in Afghanistan were and still are largely endogamous, and marriage has been a central and highly politicized institution of social reproduction and boundary maintenance. Among the Afghans in Iran, however, there is a greater tendency towards consultation of the prospective bride and groom. There has also been an adoption of the Iranian style of *k'vāstegāri* (matrimonial suit or marriage proposal), which broadens the social circle from which a spouse may be selected and potentially gives young people greater choice. The *k'vāstegāri* is used in the selection of brides for young Afghan men living in Western countries, a practice that helps to ensure group endogamy and the reproduction of the community in exile (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, p. 167) and also makes it possible to speak of Afghans as a transnational community. One study found that almost a quarter of households in a Mashad sample had arranged for an Afghan woman in Iran to marry an Afghan man abroad; these women were more attractive as brides than women from Afghanistan, while their families counted on extending their social networks and perhaps receiving future assistance from abroad (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., p. 35).

One major difference exists between Iranian and Afghan marriage practices, namely the payment of the *širbahā* (bride-price, lit. 'price for mother's milk,')



known in some regions of Afghanistan as the *gale* (*galla*, 'flock of livestock'), in cash to the bride's family before the marriage contract can be drawn up and the marriage ceremony (*'aqd*) carried out. This practice is less common among Iranians; instead, the *mahr*, or money to be paid to the wife in case of divorce or other difficulty, has skyrocketed in recent years. Among Afghans, however, the cost of *mahr* is often low while that of the *galla* is very high. These costs—along with the customary expectation that the groom's family will cover the costs of most of the ceremonies involved in the marriage, as well as the house and furnishings for the new couple—mean that the cost of marriage for young Afghan men is prohibitive (between 8-12 million *tomāns* in 2006, that is up to USD 13,300) and has compelled many to seek Iranian women as brides because they do not request a *širbahā* payment.

Women. Life in post-revolutionary Iran has dramatically affected the status of Afghan women in society. Their important economic contributions, access to education and adult literacy campaigns, and exposure to the Islamic Republic's ideology through media and state institutions have given them a greater public presence and self-confidence (Hoodfar, pp. 151-69). One area which illustrates this is attitudes to fertility and reproductive health. Although fertility levels among Afghan women remain higher than among their Iranian counterparts (Tober, p. 270), several studies have indicated an increasing acceptance of family planning among Afghan refugees, particularly the second generation (Piran, pp. 285-91; Hoodfar, pp. 151-53). This is partly due to straitened economic circumstances among refugees, and partly to edicts on its religious permissibility by Iranian Shi'ite and Sunni clerics.

There are over 2,500 Afghan female-headed households in Mashad alone, and probably many more around the country. While such households are ostracized and often unable to function in Afghanistan, in Iran they receive training and support from women's rights groups (Rostami-Povey, pp. 4-5). Widows and their children remain among the poorest of Afghan households in Iran, but they are generally able to live alone, own property, work, and earn a living independently and without harassment (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., p. 47).

Women and youth are the groups least willing to return to Afghanistan, fearing restrictions on their activities, poor health and educational infrastructure, and insecurity (UNHCR, 2004b, p. 13). Those who do return to Afghanistan bring with them the changed attitudes they have absorbed in their host country, and they often appear in the news on female pioneers in various domains, such as the arts, media, sports, or politics. They also,



unfortunately, figure in statistics on suicide and self-immolation of young women unable to adjust to the conditions in Afghanistan.

Arts and Culture. Literature is the most prominent art form among Shi'ite Afghan refugees in Iran, and the foremost cultural organizations among them have a literary focus: the Dorr-e Dari (Pearl of the Dari Language) Cultural Institute in Mashad (established 1999), and the Kāna-ye Adabiyāt-e Afġānestān (House of Afghan Literature) in Tehran. Both are offered limited material support by the Arts Center of the Organization for Islamic Propaganda (Howza-ye Honari-e Sāzmān-e Tabliġāt-e Eslāmi). They publish high-quality literary magazines: Kaṭṭ-e Sevvom (The Third Script) and Farġār (Ornament) respectively; the latter organization also holds an annual festival of Afghan youth literature, Qand-e Pārsi (The Sweetness of Persian). Notable Afghan poets who live or lived in Iran include: Qahhār 'Āṣi, Barāt-'Ali Fadā'i, Moġammad-Kāzem Kāzemi, Sayyed Abu Ṭāleb Moḡaffari, Moġammad-Šarīf Sa'īdi, Sayyed Nāder Aġmadi, Sayyed Faḡl-Allāh Qodṣi, Qanbar-'Ali Tābeš, Moġammad-Āṣef Raġmāni, Sayyed Reḡmā Moġammadi, Hoṣayn Heydarbeygi, Sayyed Žiā' Qāsemi, Mahbuba Ebrāhimi, Šokria 'Erfāni, Zahrā Hoṣaynzāda, Rafi' Joneyd, and Batul Morādi. Prose writers include Moġammad-Āṣef Šolṭānzāda and Moġammad-Hoṣayn Moġammadi. There are also many talented poets of the younger generation who have published volumes of poetry and won prizes at Iranian literary festivals. Some of those who have returned to Afghanistan are active in the Persian literary scene there, putting the skills they have acquired in Iran to use in reviving Afghanistan's arts and media (Olszewska, p. 213-23).

Other arts are also gaining popularity, particularly among the younger generation. There is a growing number of small community educational centers run by Afghans in refugee areas which offer classes, for example, in visual arts, handicrafts, photography, and filmmaking. In Mashad, there are several Afghan theatre groups which stage original dramas, make comedy films, and organize improvisational acting competitions. Wealthy Afghan merchants are important patrons of these grassroots arts, and they finance projects ranging from poetry publications to low-budget films. Educated Afghan youth are increasingly turning to new technologies such as blogging. Weblogs provide a forum for them to self-publish everything from poetry to memoirs or frank political and social criticism, and provide an online community for the exchange of views (Olszewska, p. 216).

Among the traditional crafts that have been preserved among refugees,



perhaps the most striking is *suzanduzi* (embroidery). Many older Hazara and Sadat women brought with them to Iran extensive collections of items (including handkerchiefs, Qur'ān wrappers, curtains, cushion covers, and *mohr-push* or wrappers for clay prayer tablets which are distinctive to these groups) embroidered with colorful flowers, birds, and animals that they had prepared themselves for their *jahāz* (trousseaus). Their daughters tend to prefer crocheting, macramé, and making artificial flowers, which they have learned in Iran. Meanwhile, traditional embroidery involving geometric patterns in silk thread on a background of the same color (*kāmakduzi*) may also be found in the bazaars of Afghan-inhabited areas, though today it is often done by machine rather than by hand. An Afghan rug-weaving industry is also present in cities such as Mashad, with more rustic and traditional rug designs than in their Iranian counterparts.

A traditional verbal art form popular among Hazara refugees is the *do-bayti*, or folk quatrain, in the Hazāregi dialect of Persian, often a witty short poem on the themes of love, politics, or life as a whole. These are still composed by the older generation, including women, and some young poets also exercise their wits in this tradition. Recordings of sung *do-baytis* can be bought at Afghan cassette shops in Tehran and Mashad. Hazara intellectuals are also taking a folkloristic interest in *do-baytis* and other forms of Hazara oral culture, and several collections of poems, maxims, and folktales with commentary have recently been published in Iran (Kāvāri, 1997; 2001; 2003).

Afghans in Iranian Eyes. While Afghans are undoubtedly a part of the social landscape in Iran, they continue to suffer both legal and social discrimination, disdain, and racism, often stirred up by populist forces seeking to link them to high unemployment figures (Monsutti, p. 128-29; Adelkhah and Olszewska p. 157-58; ICRI, 1999, p. 1). Among lower-class Iranians who are more commonly their neighbors, while there is sympathy for their plight, there is also a sense that Afghans are competitors for limited social services and resources (Tober, p. 274-75). There is little memory of the two nations' shared history, cultural heritage, and language among many Iranians; instead, there is a growing sense of exclusionary nationalism. Afghans are blamed for drug smuggling, crime, and the entry of infectious diseases into Iran (Tober, p. 264). This is reflected in Iranian cinema and television series, in which Afghans often play the role of villains. Even in some sympathetic cinematic portrayals, such as Majid Majidi's *Bārān* (Rain, 2001), they are presented as different, exotic, and unknowable, and are rarely given the opportunity to speak for themselves.



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