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Narratives of pride: Afghan migrant laborers in Iran

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Abstract

This article recounts the stories of Afghan migrants who have returned from Iran to Afghanistan. I frame these accounts of ordinary Afghans' life experiences as "narratives of pride," juxtaposing these stories with narratives of victimhood that dominate the immigration discourse on Afghanistan and more generally. In these narratives, migrants are predominantly characterized as victims in need of being saved. This article instead asks: why do returnees from Iran focus mostly on the positive parts of their mobility while downplaying the difficulties of dealing with the Iranian state, which does not have a good track record of dealing with migrants? In telling stories of years of living and working in Iran or other countries, I find that my interlocutors characterize themselves as sophisticated men of the world with a deep understanding of social and political phenomena that give them the ability to navigate life in foreign lands—an image far from victimhood as it is commonly portrayed in the literature and media. The article argues that in order to better understand the agency of migrants, it is crucial to form long-term connections with them to gain a more nuanced understanding of their experiences, rather than simply reproducing stories of victimhood.

Keywords: Afghan migrant laborers, Refugees, Afghan ethnic identity, Hazara identity, Migrants, Mobility

Introduction

Afghanistan is a country of people on the move. Next to conflict, and also because of it, 'mobility' is a key phenomenon that characterizes life in recent Afghanistan. In search of work, Afghans have moved from the rural regions to the cities and from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran. In search of safety, they have moved to refugee camps and cities in Pakistan and urban areas in Iran (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, 1988; Edwards, 1986; Stigter, 2005; Stigter and Monsutti, 2005). Some have moved around the country as fighters during lengthy violent conflicts. It is, therefore, difficult to understand social and political life in Afghanistan without paying attention to the population mobility. This paper is solely focused on mobility of Afghans as it relates to international migration. At

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its peak, in 1980s and early 1990s, around three million Afghans migrated to cities in Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2005, p. 16) and around 4.5 million to camps and cities in Pakistan, according to Collective for Social Science Research (2005, p. 38).[1] Unsurprisingly, those who move to Pakistan are mostly ethnic Pashtuns, as the majority-Pashtun provinces border Pakistan. Pashtuns are the plurality in the country and historically the rulers of Afghanistan. The ethnonym 'Afghan' is used to refer to ethnic Pashtuns. Ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras mostly move to Iran as they are Persian speakers. Besides, Hazara people, while they are the Shia minority in Afghanistan, they share the majority's religion in Iran. It is, however, the case that people from all different ethno-religious groups move to both Iran and Pakistan.

When I traveled to Afghanistan in 2017 as part of my dissertation field research, I was to study ordinary people's perceptions of the state and corruption. Instead, my interlocuters insisted on telling me about their experiences as migrant laborers in Iran. Contrary to my expectations, these stories often focused on how successful my interlocuters were in dealing with Iranian authorities and local people. I was surprised because my expectations of the migrant experience had been shaped by the frequently-portrayed image of migrants in literature and media. The figure of the migrant, i.e. all people who cross international borders, including refugees,[2] is often depicted as that of a helpless individual in need of assistance from state authorities, communities, and even researchers. Migrants are viewed as "wounded" in order for them to be recognized as genuine (Mannik, 2012, p. 263). Unless they are in tattered dirty clothing, they are not considered as "real." It troubles/puzzles a Western audience when they see photos and selfies of refugees smiling or laughing. As Franck (2022) aptly puts it, "the fact that they ha[ve] the audacity to smile, laugh, and celebrate [is] taken as additional evidence that they [are] clearly not *real* refugees" (p. 7).

This understanding of a "real" migrant is also unconsciously shared among researchers. Scholars often present the same picture to either appease the political right and state authorities and/or as an internalized approach to researching and portraying the figure of a migrant. As Anja Franck (2022) argues, migration scholarship has predominantly centered its analysis around suffering and tragedy and has presented a humorless depiction of migrants.

My interlocutors, on the other hand, portrayed another picture and told a different story. To echo my interlocutors' enthusiasm when telling me their Iran stories, I have called them 'narratives of pride.' In this article, I document how Afghan returnees who had worked in Iran as migrant laborers highlight positive aspects of their time as migrants. I juxtapose these narratives of pride with those of victimhood, a discourse that, according to Monsutti, claims "migration shatters social ties and inevitably induces psychological traumas" (2005, p. 5). More specifically, in the context of Afghanistan, I compare these narratives of pride with those depictions of despair that are often in circulation in Afghan and Western media. In narratives of victimhood, subjects are

[1] According to the UNHCR report, as of March 2024, there were 4.5 million Afghans in Iran and 3.1 million in Pakistan. The count of Afghans who moved to Iran and Pakistan after the Soviet occupation and the recent conflicts varies significantly due to the reliance on estimates, as there is a difference between the registered and unregistered Afghans in these two countries.

[2] In this article, I use the term migrant to include all the people on move crossing international borders. For the matter of terminology regarding how Afghans in Iran have been categorized by the Iranian authorities, look at Abbasi-Shavazi et al. (2005); also look at Monsutti (2007). For a more general debate concerning categorization of people on move look at Crawley and Skleparis (2018), Coninck (2020), and the first chapter in Hamlin's *Crossing* (2021).

dehumanized and deprived of any agency. Narratives of pride, however, render the narrator (the migrant) as a man of the world with the requisite skillset to successfully navigate challenges of life in Iran or other countries.

Moreover, I argue that it is through establishing long-term connections with their interlocutors that researchers can uncover more complex narratives regarding the mobility and movements of individuals and groups. This complexity is reflected in how mobile people recount their experiences of learning new things, navigating border crossings, finding jobs, developing friendships and connections, enjoying moments of fun, facing deportation, having their goods confiscated, and undergoing police violence. The *ordinariness* of stories within this complexity enables people to see migrants as capable actors, much like the ones who report on their movements in media, NGO employees who work with them, and researchers who study them.

These narratives, much like the real-life experiences that inspired them, do not depict the flat character of a victim in need of constant rescue by states and well-intentioned people. This black-and-white picture of victims and saviors, I argue, is often formed in short-term, interview-based interactions. In these interviews, the type of questions and the context often pre-determine the answers. The interlocutors, aware of the positionality of the researcher (often a Westerner with the means to provide aid or fund), assume the kinds of answers and stories the latter are looking for; they make strategic choices in terms of narratives to present. This is hardly surprising as reporters and researchers are often interested in stories of trauma than those of happiness (Coutin & Vogel, 2016). There is no interest, grant, funding, or money in happy, complex, ordinary stories.

In narratives of victimhood, which are one-sided stories, subjects are dehumanized and deprived of any agency. Narratives of pride, as I argue here, render the narrator as a man of the world capable of navigating the *difficulties of life* including networking, learning new skills, sending money back home, crossing borders, and maneuvering the mobility regimes enforced by nation-state authorities.[3] This ordinariness in narratives of pride contributes to the mobility literature that rejects “sedentarist metaphysics” (Cresswell, 2006, p. 26). The sedentarist approach to migration regards mobility as a pathology, unnatural, and the temporary interruption of natural order—i.e., sedentarism (Malkki, 1992; Salazar, 2017; Urry, 2016). Non-sedentarist approach views the people’s mobility more central to both the world and our understanding of it and seeks to “de-exceptionalise mobility” and avoid treating migrants as an “exceptional group in research frameworks” (Schapendonk et al., 2021, p. 3246).

Sedentarist view assumes methodological nationalism where sedentary life dominates the political imaginary. Methodological nationalism naturalizes “the logic of the modern nation state” assuming and reproducing an imaginary that there is a “natural congruence between national, territorial, political, cultural and social boundaries” which only emerged with the formation of modern nations states (Dahinden, 2016, p. 2209). In such a world, migrants become the object of special attention as they pose a threat to such order by violating sovereignty, loyalty, and the culture of the nation (Wimmer and Schiller 2002, pp. 308–10). In this worldview, immigration is construed as an anomaly.[4]

[3] For some case studies concerning the migrant’s agencies look at Zhang et al. (2018).

[4] For a critique of the dichotomy between mobility and sedentarism look at (De Haas 2021).

Seeing migrants simply as victims and their experiences as trauma and struggle has significant policy repercussions. In 2002, right after the establishment of an internationally supported interim government in Afghanistan, UNHCR began working with the neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan to facilitate Afghan repatriation (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2005). This is called one of largest missions of its kind managed by UNHCR where more than 3.5 million refugees returned to Afghanistan in "a voluntary repatriation program" (2005). While the mission was called "voluntary repatriation," the UN worked with neighboring Iran and Pakistan which were eager to force Afghans out. The speed with which decision-makers (mostly foreigners) decided to encourage Afghans living in neighboring countries to return to Afghanistan (Turton & Marsden, 2002) is rooted in the way mobile populations are regarded. Seeing migration as a pathology and repatriation as a remedy is directly related to how the phenomenon of Afghan migration is understood. A pathology rather than part of the Afghan economy which has been increasingly dependent on remittances.

This is not to deny the existence of migrants and the significance of migration studies as an important field within social science, but rather to reflect upon the 'normalization' of migrants as an exceptional group within research frameworks (Schapendonk et al., 2021), and of their image as speechless (Malkki, 1996) and voiceless (Pandir 2019) subjects of knowledge production. While mindful of the mobility regimes (Schwarz, 2020) that mobile people encounter along their paths, my research contributes to a growing body of literature which focuses on photos and selfies posted by migrants, including refugees. As a genre, it offers "migrants the possibility for self-archiving and self-narrating the experience of migration, both as individuals and as parts of collectives" (Risam, 2018, p. 20) where they can claim greater self-representation, reassert their humanity, and challenge "the subject-object binary" (Risam, 2018, p. 59). I argue that academic work should move towards that pole, and I hope that the long narratives presented in this article do that. These narratives portray complex stories of mobility. They are everyday life stories filled with humor, laughter, adventure as well as fear, police brutality, and state cruelty.

A note on methodology

This paper draws on fifteen months of participant observation research in Kabul's Mandawi Bazaar in 2017–2019—sitting in shops, accompanying vendors, and walking with cart pushers. Earlier in my field research, I conducted sixteen semi-structured interviews, but I soon learned that my interlocutors were less responsive to interview methods. This paper, therefore, relies mostly on the data generated through participant observation. As I met people, and sat in different shops, traders, customers, apprentices, merchants, and other visitors narrated their stories of Iran to an Iranian. This is while I hardly ever asked about life and work in Iran because I did not intend to research stories of migration to Iran. My interlocutors were all adult men, many of whom had lived and worked in Iran and, in a few cases, in Pakistan or the Persian Gulf countries. While the shopkeepers, in whose shop I often sat, saw me as a researcher coming from the US, I

generally positioned myself as someone who was writing a book about the bazaar. My interlocutors did not perceive me to be connected to any foreign aid agency or have any particular power.

All the interviews were conducted in Dari Persian, the lingua franca of Afghanistan, which is also my native language. I jotted down and reconstructed some of the conversations, while in other cases, I recorded them. Almost all of the conversations took place in public spaces, where there was no expectation of privacy. In fact, in almost all the interviews, the interviewees would invite others to join the conversation. Although some of the data used here are through the semi-structured interviews I conducted in the bazaar, the bulk of the data was generated through participant observations, where people would talk to one another or tell stories involving me without any prompt other than the fact that I was Iranian, and they wanted to share stories about Iran. I have changed the names of all my interlocutors to protect their identities and ensure their safety.

Narratives of despair: the migration discourse in Afghanistan

Meanwhile a conversation

In one of the many evening gatherings in Keramat House, my residence in Kabul, a conversation transpired about the life experience of Afghans in Iran. The treatment of Afghans in Iran is a sensitive and controversial subject, both in news media and on social media. In those spaces, it is often discussed that Afghans living in Iran are maltreated by both the state and the local people. Part of the conversation that night happened to revolve around the way Afghan people talk about their time in Iran and what the right way to understand and approach those narratives would be. Asad, an Iranian, brought up this conversation. This is an edited version of my notes from that conversation.

> *As Iranians, we should be careful not to tell anything to Afghan people that may remind them of before, of their time in Iran. Asad, then, shared his experience with taxi drivers in his early days in Kabul. Asad said that he used to ask taxi drivers about their time in Iran. They would repeatedly tell him, Asad said, that they had a great time in Iran, and their employer was so happy with them and still asked them to go back to work for them. Some of these returnees had shared with Asad that their employer had asked them to get married to their daughters. After a while, however, Asad had decided that all these stories could not be true and that there was something wrong, because we [the elite] know that Afghans have a very difficult time in Iran. Asad continued that he had decided these returnees' memories had been very painful and, as a defense mechanism, they had re-invented their past, in order not to think about this hurtful traumatic past life in Iran. Other people in the group agreed with Asad.*

Despite the fact that some migrant laborers described their time in Iran to Asad in terms of dignity, trust, and respect, Asad and others believed this to be a defense mechanism where the oppressed have repressed unbearable memories in order to construct a livable past.

The elite discourse on immigration re-interprets the words of migrant laborers based on the assumption that, because of migrants' positionality as the ones involved in the story, they are not objective. Asad, however, claims a position of objectivity. Yet

according to interpretivist methodology, no one stands out of time and space. People's positionality "impacts the accessing, generating, and analysis of data" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2015, p. xiii). Asad's position as a member of the elite, a researcher from the West, which is often not different from the standpoint of NGO administrators seeking grants for aiding the population, requires them to seek victims in need of help for the stories that they tell about Afghanistan.

Scholars are also shaped by their position, which, in turn, shapes the stories they tell and the stories that they are told. In her inquiry about the nature and scope of migratory movements to Iran, Elica Stigter studies the case of Faryab Province in northwestern Afghanistan. This inquiry is focused on the transnational networks that the migrant laborers develop to make both travel and finding employment possible and more successful. However, yet again positive perspectives of the participants in the research are missing. Migrants to Iran solely suffer and experience pain. One of the participants express those clearly,

> *I have lots of bad memories from Iran—the insults and abuses of Iranians, and that lots of our young boys are drug addicts and have been killed in Iranian prisons. Actually, I have no good memories from there; everything was pain, working, hearing abuses. (Stigter, 2005, p. 32)*

Stigter uses some Afghans as her research assistants to conduct interviews. In Afghanistan, any researcher who is either Western, as Stigter is, or connected with the foreigners, as her assistants are, is viewed as an NGO worker. The Afghan interviewees are, therefore, inclined to present their life stories in a way that might lead to gaining foreign aid. A case in point is how Coburn, a researcher in a small town near Kabul, was for a long time assumed by his interlocutors to be an aid worker, with the expectation that he would eventually begin distributing aid (2011, p. 9).

On the contrary, by developing long-term connections with my interlocutors, I was exposed to different stories. Because I was able to make it clear to them that I have no connection with foreign aid, my interlocutors made fewer assumptions about what I might like to hear. Relying solely on formal interviews, Stigter's research produces a narrative of victimhood which oversimplifies the life experience of people who have been mobile. The accounts by my interlocutors in the next section adds complexity to the narratives of mobility and goes beyond the one-dimensional characterization of individuals as mere victims in need of being saved.

Narratives of pride

Abdu: significance of life experience

In search of some plastic products, I was led to Barkat Market. It is one of the plastic clusters in Mandawi Bazaar. I formed a friendship with Abdu who was a shop owner in the market when he offered me a discount as a guest in his country. He also explained how the products in his shop came from Iran, even showing me pictures of trucks being loaded there. Abdu was a Pashto speaking man from Wardak, a province near Kabul. I visited him several times in his shop throughout my stay in Kabul where he told me,

> *I have traveled a lot. I was in Russia, lived in Moscow, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Ukraine. I lived and worked in all these places. I came back*

> *five years ago. When I was in Russia, I lived in my employer's house. My work and trade were there but then I got tired of being away and I came back. The employer with whom I was living got very upset. He had given me a room. His daughter and mom were also living there [in the same house]. He told me not to leave, to stay and work with them; he told me that if I didn't have money, he would give me more money. If there were any problems, his daughter was working in the intelligence service, they had given me a card that if someone troubled me, I could just show the card.*

Without me asking, Abdu told me the story of his journey to Russia rather than discuss Mandawi Bazaar which I wanted to know about. Emphatically, he underscored his closeness to the people for whom he was working as well as his connection to powerful people, i.e., Russian authorities. As we talked customers kept stopping by, shopping, or asking for a price and moving on.

> *He began a long lecture on how people should do business; "whether you are a trader or doing any other job, you should be content; it is a good thing to be content. If I give you all this shop, but you still are not content then no happiness for you, but if you are content, then one glass of water is enough to make you happy ..." and the lecture continued about honesty in business and superiority of moral behavior over any material gains.*
>
> *Abdu began talking about his own life. He said that he dropped out of school during the civil war (1992–1996) and left the country to go abroad. "After that, I did not go back to school, but now people who have finished the 12th grade (have a high school diploma) cannot read properly and cannot understand business and society." What Abdu meant to say was that he is better trained or as good as those with formal education.*

In the above excerpt, Abdu establishes himself as an honest worker, a virtue that helped him gain trust and respect when he was in Russia. Because of his honesty, Abdu believes, he was able to successfully navigate life in Russia and finally returned to his country of his own volition. Abdu does not talk about any unfortunate incidents related to his time in Russia. He is focused on his achievements. He talks bitterly about being deprived of formal education, yet he sees his years of working and *living* abroad as equal, if not superior, to formal training/education. Abdu attributes his current success to life lessons that he has learned through his mobility.

Ahmad: trust and be trusted

Another one of my interlocutors was Ahmad. He was from the North, a Tajik from Takhar province. His profession was to roast nuts, particularly sunflower seeds. Ahmad regarded his mobility as a part of life, learning, and the struggles that are integral to being alive. When a migrant laborer like Ahmad widens the lens temporally in remembering the past, he does not limit his journey to simply some shots of police violence and state oppression in crossing borders to Iran but a more complex story with moments of joy and success. He had moved to Iran and back to Afghanistan several times. Once, Ahmad

invited me to visit him in his house. The conversation below happened in Ahmad's house where he talked about his recurring trips to Iran.

> **Ahmad***: The first time I went to Iran, I stayed for 6 months. Then I got deported. Came back to Afghanistan. For one year I was here. Then I went back again and stayed for 18 months. I came back, and, then again, I went back and stayed for 22 months. That time when I came back, my wife told me not to go back. I did not listen to her. I went to Iran and was deported right away (laughing out loud).*
>
> *The last time I went to Shiraz [Iran], some of our people were working in construction in Shiraz. I wanted to go to Esfahan [400 km away] to work for my previous employer who owned warehouses. It was not safe to go from Shiraz to Esfahan; there are police checkpoints. We found someone who said he would get $14 to take me to Esfahan. An Afghan friend reassured us. We got on the bus. At 1:00 AM at a checkpoint, the police asked for identification, and I said I had none. I went to the cell. (Ahmad laughing) There were 40 or 50 more sleeping there, all Afghans. They all had got caught there. Then a little later, they woke us up, "Afghanis get up," to unload trucks. At that checkpoint, they check the loads of all trucks carrying things like rice or wheat or such things. They woke us up a few times to do that. Sacks to be unloaded and again loaded back to the truck. It was really unfair. Unjust. In the morning, by bus, they took us to Esfahan, and there we were delivered to the [immigration] camp in Esfahan and then deported to Afghanistan. We paid for our own deportation.*
> **Researcher***: I feel ashamed as an Iranian in the face of all this injustice and discrimination.*
> **Ahmad***: In any country to which you go illegally, there is this trouble. Another year, I got caught again; and from 12:00 AM until 5:00 AM, I unloaded and loaded stuff. We were four people and a whole 18-wheel truck. It was 6:00 in the morning. I told the colonel (sarhang) to let us go. "Because you finished this, you can go now," he said. We were not deported that time.*
>
> *I worked in Iran for three years. The employer was really good. God bless him. Once he sent me $2,500 and told me to go to the Iranian Consulate in Afghanistan to get an Iranian visa. I could not get the visa. I called and told him I have spent his money. I said I will come. I went illegally. I had to give the money back to my employer (arbab) who had trusted me. He had trusted me, and I had to pay him back no matter what. So, I went to Iran. When I was headed back to Afghanistan, my employer gave me another $1200 to spend on the way. When I left, he owed me $13,000. He told me to go back to Afghanistan, I will send you the money there. I came back. He transferred the money.*
> **Researcher***: Oh, thank God! For a second, I was afraid he had stolen your money.*
> **Ahmad***: No, he was good. I knew him. He was a good person. I worked with him for a long time. I used to go to his house. His son is also nice. But Mr. Mohsen [the researcher], Iran was a nice place, I miss it.*
> **Researcher***: Do you think the government knows about your whereabouts when you are in Iran?*
> **Ahmad***: They began to fine the employers $2,400 for any illegal Afghan workers.*

> *There was a lot of annoyance and a lot of issues. Iranian workers could not work well; Iranians could not do what Afghans were doing. Employers were really angry, wondering what to do with their government. In the Esfahan region, the sugar factories and flour productions, it was all Afghans. There were hundreds of Afghans. In all the warehouses, in all factories, in that region, there were Afghans. All the factories were in the control of Afghans.*
> **Researcher***: Would you go back again?*
> **Ahmad***: Iranian currency has lost a lot of its value [due to the US sanctions]; it is not worth the travel and trouble now. The Iranian hostility with the US has also affected us. In the North, our region, everyone was working in Iran. No one was left in the region; they were all in Iran. They bought land and car by working in Iran. It is common that brothers work in Iran. First, the older one gets married with the money they save. Then, the younger ones. Some are always working in Iran to send money home in order to get married and buy property here in Afghanistan.*

While these migrant laborers mention incidents of exploitation and maltreatment, they highlight the positive parts of their journey. I argue that one of the reasons the returnees choose to highlight narratives of pride in their mobility is to give meaning to their lives and establish themselves as people with agency and capabilities rather than as pure victims. This is not an act of forgetting but an act of selective memory as one chooses what to highlight in their event-laden active life as any other member of the species would do.

Ahmad sees the actions of the Iranian police as unfair when after an arrest, he and other Afghans were asked to labor for free in unloading and loading trucks. He does not shy away from talking about refugee camps. However, this is not the main story or the whole story. He also fondly remembers the great trust between him and his employer and his trips to the historic city of Esfahan with other friends to picnic. Ahmad stresses the centrality of Afghans to the Iranian economy. Moreover, he appreciates having learned a useful skill in Iran for which Haji Sahib, his current employer, kept him in Kabul and provided him and his family both with funds and a place to live. As another employee of Haji Sahib told me, "Haji likes Ahmad a lot." They go picnicking on Fridays in Haji's orchards in north of Kabul. Ahmad is proud of having built relationships founded on mutual trust and loyalty with employers on both sides of the border.

Zakir: intimate interactions with Iranians

The first time I visited Fateh, a shop-owner I had come to befriend, in his new shop, I met Zakir whose shop was across from Fateh. He was young, tall, with darker skin, and a short black beard. Zakir, a Tajik from northern Afghanistan, was 35 years old, a few years older than Fateh. Zakir had stories about his interactions with Iranians that went beyond employer-employee relationships and the workplace. Zakir's accent was not one I could place either in Iran or in Afghanistan and this ambiguity certainly had helped him in connecting with the wider Iranian society. What follows is part of my conversation with Zakir on one of the occasions he talked about his time in Iran.

> **Zakir***: When I was in Tehran, I would occasionally grow my beard like yours and no one would trouble me as I looked like a member of Basij [a state-supported mili-*

> *tia in Iran]. During the nights of 2009 or 2010 uprisings, we would go to the streets where demonstrations were held. There were a lot of these Basijis on motorcycles and on foot [to crack down on the protesters]. Because of my appearance, no one would trouble me; they would open the road for me and my friends. On my trips from bordering cities to Tehran, I did not have any documents but again I grew my beard and I made myself look like Basijis. At all the police checkpoints, while I sat in the front seat of the truck, no one asked me who I was and what I was doing. On the way, I was troubled nowhere. [Zakir continued his story of how he was able to pass as an Iranian by knowing which roles to play.]*
> **Zakir***: At a crossroad in Tehran, they were capturing illegal Afghan immigrants. I approached one of the officers asking what was going on. "We are arresting undocumented Afghans," he said. I had shaved off my beard. We were living differently there, no beard … nothing like this (he touched his long beard). If I go back to Iran like this [now], my friends in Iran would not recognize me. [Talking about his business in Iran] The trade we were doing in Iran was not [small] like what I do now; each night we would unload three truckloads of dates in the cold room. That quality of dates does not come to Afghanistan. I was in Tehran for 9 years. Such a great time. No trouble. No one troubled me. Can you see this date type, Kahlizi? My trade partner and I introduced this date to Afghanistan.*

As a successful trader, his story of success is rooted in steering clear of trouble and in the magnitude of the business he was able to conduct in Iran. Similar to Abdu's case, Zakir's shows that forming strong local connections can bring protection to migrants in the face of trouble with state agents. In his accounts of living in Russia, Abdu talks about his employer and their connections with Russian authorities. Similarly, Zakir talks about having formed connections with some powerful Iranian friends in Iran who would have come to his help had he gotten into any trouble regarding his immigration status. This is in addition to the transnational networks of support to move and secure work opportunities (Monsutti, 2007; Monsutti & Stigter, 2005; Stigter, 2005). Migrants try also to form some local connections to use particularly when they come into trouble with state authorities. Similarly, a cart pusher in the bazaar talked about his Iranian friends as 'connections' that "whenever I had any difficulty with authorities would help me." Networking with well-connected people is a common practice in Afghanistan. People commonly try to network to get things done with the Afghan state, to renew their passport, get a driver's license, or to avoid trouble with the Afghan police, similar to their experience in Iran.

Fahim: you should be good yourself

Once when I was sittings in Fateh's date shop, a customer began bargaining over the price of dates. He was not pleased with the dates, which came from Iran. Ninety percent of the dates in the bazaar were from Iran. The customer belonged to the group of people whom, upon returning from Saudi Arabia, talked disparagingly of Iranian dates because they didn't meet the high standards of the ones they had in Saudi Arabia. The customer, Fahim, had been working in Saudi Arabia for the last 5 years.

> **Fahim***: When you see the Saudi dates [compared to the Iranian dates in this market], your heart melts. The last time I came back from Saudi Arabia [where he works as a welder, something he had learned in Iran] I brought 30 kilograms of dates. You are Iranian; what are you doing here?*
> **Researcher***: I am here to see Afghanistan.*
> **Fahim***: How do you like living here?*
> **Researcher***: It was difficult at first. After a while, you get used to it. The traffic jam is what no one ever gets used to.*
> **Fahim***: It is a mess. Jeddah [in Saudi Arabia] is one of the largest cities in Asia. Countless cars are there but there is no traffic jam. Afghanistan is filled with old cars and not many streets; the quality of life is low here, unfortunately. You guys [Iranians] have 'thieves' [i.e., politicians] and we have 'thieves.' Your thieves built your country, and our thieves destroyed our country. I worked in Iran for 12 or 13 years. The value of the Iranian currency fell, so I came back here. A constant traveler I am. For a few years, the situation was good. Now I work in Saudi Arabia. I am a welder/blacksmith. In Iran, my brother lives in Shahrak Gharb (a wealthy neighborhood in Tehran). We Afghans are the ones who talk badly about Pakistan [but] the new generation who knows computer and English is because of Pakistan, they have studied there. People who are useful for this country now are the ones that have come from Pakistan. We are not grateful. The generation that knows vocational jobs have come from Iran. Of course, some addicts also came from Iran. I lived in Iran for 13 years and I was not treated badly. I did not commit adultery, trespass on others' properties and followed their rules. I knew where to go and places to avoid. It has been five years since I've been living in Saudi Arabia; because I am a good person and treat them well, they also treat me well. I respect them and am respected. I follow their rules, immigration rules. Whether the country is wealthy or not, you should respect their rules. (Fieldnotes, 01/02/2019)*

Fahim's work experience both in Iran and Saudi Arabia gives him a comparative perspective. In the above, Fahim subscribes to the common belief that if one respects the law of the land and treats people honestly, he is going to be treated fairly, regardless of the country they are in. Consequently, if one is treated badly, it must have been due to their own wrongdoing. Fahim considers himself successful in his movements across borders. In his observations, Afghans often complain about their neighbors, particularly Pakistan, but he believes they should be grateful for the help they have received from them. He has picked the profession he currently has as a welder in Iran and many other professional Afghans have come from Pakistan.

Like Fahim, many of my interlocutors emphasize the automatic reciprocity of proper behavior and respect. An example of this is when in a conversation with a shopkeeper, I mentioned how some Iranians are unkind to their employees. He, who had also spent years working as a migrant laborer in Iran, said, "you know, if you yourself are good, other people are good and treat you right" (*Fieldnotes*, 09/11/2018). This sentiment is echoed by Abdu, the returnee from Russia, who also stresses that if you are an honest person, people will treat you fairly; in other words, the way you are treated is a reflection of the way you deal with others. While I can't emphasize how strongly I disagree

with this understanding, considering the many maltreatments people, migrant or otherwise, undeservingly experience, I suggest adopting this perspective is yet another way migrants emphasize their agency and their skill in navigating various situations.

In many cases, my interlocutors recognize the sovereignty of other states over their territories and understand why they and their fellow countrymen might be deported when they are undocumented. The enforcement of law, however, should be done without violating the dignity of the migrants, according to them. This perspective, which recognizes the legitimacy of mobility regimes established by nation-states, is what Dahinden calls a powerful normalization process through which differences related to migration become essentialized and come to appear natural (Dahinden, 2016, p. 2210). Actors, mobile population as well as researchers, incorporate these ideas through their socialization. Interestingly, however, almost all of my interlocutors had violated these mobility regimes by crossing borders without any documents.

The *face* of Afghanistan: (in)significance of borders

Boundless brutality: the struggle of the poor at home and abroad

Migrants to Iran are poor and mostly from rural Afghanistan (Monsutti, 2005). They are victims of police brutality both in Iran and in Afghanistan, on both sides of the border. Yet, highlighting this similarity goes against methodological nationalism that looks at "national container" as "the most important category of difference" (Dahinden, 2016, p. 2210). During my fieldwork in Mandawi Bazaar of Kabul, I witnessed on numerous occasions the Afghan police beating Afghan vendors in the bazaar using sometimes the buttstock of AK-47 s, overturning carts full of goods, demanding bribes, and chasing people out of the bazaar or pedestrian walks. Unsurprisingly, the common thread among all these individuals was their poverty.

In both Afghanistan and Iran, the police force protects people who have money and power. If you are poor, you are insignificant whether you are on this side of the border or the other. A case in point is Shahed, my next interlocutor. Shahed was a Tajik employed as a shopkeeper in the dried fruit cluster in Mandawi Bazaar. As a contractor, he had worked in Iran in pistachio farming. He told me many stories of living in Iran. He was on the verge of tears, however, when explaining the process of extending his driver's license in his home country of Afghanistan:

> *I wanted to just get a driver's license, and I had to pay a bribe of $36. I extended my driver's license. You go there and say that you want to extend your license. Someone looks at you and says, 'why is your photo like this?' or they put you in line to go to the eye doctor. Then after that they ask you to get eyeglasses. They push you through the process to pay the bribe. I went to do the biometrics. I put my fingers on the machine and they told me that it did not recognize my hand. "Go and oil your hands with Vaseline for three nights, then put it in plastic bags, let it soften, and come back after three days." I was here in the shop praying. I got a call from the Traffic Office. They asked me to pay so they solve the problem. I did it. If I had not done it, they would have continued this frustrating process. I sat there; they processed it, recorded everything, and then they gave me the license. In this country of Afghanistan, we claim that we care for the poor, but God forbid if you have to deal with the bureaucracy. I paid $36 for one license. Is this government? Is this life? A Muslim is forced to pay*

> *bribes. (Fieldnotes, 10/11/2018)*

Dealing with the Afghan state is a painstakingly slow process for those who are poor and unconnected. You are no more privileged or significant here than you would be in another country like Iran.

Echoing Shahed's sentiments, another one of my interlocutors, Fateh, shared a story from Iran that further illustrates the brutalization of the poor, Iranian or Afghan, both sides of the border.

> *I was selling walnuts and my Iranian friend was selling olives. Municipal agents came and confiscated our goods because it was illegal to sell on the back of my pickup truck next to the pedestrian walk. I decided to go to the municipality office to retrieve my walnuts. I found my way to the supervisor's office. I said hello, and he asked where I was from because of my accent. I said I was from Afghanistan. He told me that it was audacious of me to go to his office [as an Afghan who illegally trades]. I explained the situation. After some back and forth, the supervisor wrote a note for me to retrieve my goods and my friend's olives. We promised not to sell in that area again. (Fieldnotes, 07/28/2018)*

In this story, similar to the earlier ones, state agents treated the poor, in this case both Iranian and Afghan, similarly by confiscating their goods, thereby depriving them of their livelihood. Similar to previous cases, the 'difference' that is more relevant in this situation is class, rather than being a 'migrant.' In the next section, I will further illustrate this point from the perspective of race.

The face of Afghanistan

During a gathering at Keramat House, my residence in Kabul, an educated Afghan, an ethnic Pashtun, asked me rhetorically, "why do you guys treat Afghans badly in your country [Iran]?" "For the same reason that you don't treat them well in Afghanistan. Racism!" I responded irritably. When I told Maryam, an Afghan friend, this story, she said she had not thought about the matter like this. She is a young Hazara girl from Ghazni province. She told me then about her recent trip to Herat province in Western Afghanistan: "When I was checking out at one of the airport gates, the guy asked for my passport. I told him that I am Afghan. 'No, you are Chinese,' the police officer told me even though I had repeatedly and furiously emphasized that I am Afghan."

Hazara people are an ethnic minority mostly living in central Afghanistan, where it is called *Hazara-jat*/Hazara-land. They speak Hazara dialect/*Hazara-gi* of Persian language. Two elements set them apart from the majority of the population in Afghanistan; first, they are Shia Muslims while most Afghans follow the Sunni branch of Islam; second, their "Asiatic"/"Turko-Mogoli" features distinguish them from the other people in the country (Mousavi, 2018, p. 26). Hazaras as a group enter Modern Afghanistan in the late nineteenth century when Abdu Rahman Khan, founder of modern Afghanistan, conquered the region which was mostly autonomous like many other parts of Afghanistan and confiscated their lands and enslaved the people.

In Afghanistan, 'Afghan' is more exclusively used for the ethnic Pashtuns. Growing up in Iran, on the other hand, the face of Afghanistan for me, and as I learned later for all

Iranians, is a Hazara person. There are two reasons for that: besides the difference in their facial features from the majority of Iranians, they are the group that more than any other migrated to Iran—many of them with their family members. Yet, I argue that it is the difference in appearance that makes them most visible and therefore a target for discrimination. Fateh [a Pashtun from Wardak] was telling me about some of his unending Iran stories:

> *I was once in in Tehran; the police were looking for Afghans vendors. I had two boxes of walnut on my shoulder; 'hey Afghani' the police called. I looked back. The police officer asked me [rhetorically] 'why are you looking, are you Afghani?' I said of course I am. He told me to get lost, because he could not believe that I am an Afghan. They believe only those with "Mogoli [Mogul-like]" eyes are Afghan. (Fieldnotes, 07/22/2018)*

In Afghanistan, Fateh is an Afghan while Hazara people and Tajiks don't identify as 'Afghan.' For the Iranian public and even for its police, however, the face of Afghanistan is a Hazara face. Tajiks and Pashtuns are not identifiable from other Iranians, as I was not seen as an Iranian in Kabul. Only after speaking, many in Kabul could tell that I am from Iran. Fateh was telling me that once he was invited to his employer's house for dinner. "The employer's grandson was there that night. 'Grandpa, you said you have invited an Afghan tonight, where is he?' 'Don't be silly, Fateh is Afghan.' 'No, he does not look like Afghans.'" Fateh was telling other people in the shop that "Iranians don't know other types of Afghans. They don't know; if you say you are Afghan, they say you are lying [if you don't look like Hazara people]" (*Fieldnotes*, 12/30/2018).

I suggest that the abuse of Hazara people in Iran and Afghanistan is related to 'looking different.' Scholars have connected the abuse of Hazara people to their being the minority Shia (Crews, 2015, p. 82). The case of Shia Sayyeds and Shia Qizilbash, however, reveal that ethnic difference is more significant. These latter Shia people in Afghanistan identify as an ethnic group/*qawm* (Dupree, 1980, p. 59; Rubin, 2002, p. 31). Despite being Shia, throughout the history of modern Afghanistan, they have been able to climb the ladder of power in all different historical periods. Similarly, they have been respected and treated well in Iran as Afghan migrants. Once I was sitting in another shop whose owner was a Hazara man. A man stopped by to talk business with him. The shop owner mentioned that I am Iranian. The man told me he lived in Iran and he did not have any problems [as a Sayyed who looks like Iranians]. He said that he does not like Iran because of the way Iranians treat Hazara people.

Zakir, in the previous section, mentioned that on his trip from border cities to Tehran he was less troubled because, by growing his beard, he looked like the Iranian Basijis/militias. He did the same in Tehran to join some specific circles as he could easily pass as an Iranian. Hamdullah and Shahed are both Tajiks from north of Kabul.

> **Shahed***: Mr. Mohsen [the Researcher,] whenever one asked me where I was from, I told them I was from Afghanistan, they would tell me, 'come on! You are Kurdish [from Western Iran]; no one believed me.*
> **Hamdullah***: I was sitting in a minibus. There were two Afghan boys, sitting on the front seats. Behind the driver. We were sitting a little behind them. The police officer opened the door, looked inside. He said, "oh handsomes, oh handsomes, give me your*

> *documents. So, you have nothing? Get off." No one cared about us. When we were working in the factory, the police would come and see us as Iranians, while they were there to catch Afghans. They would come in. We were drinking tea. They would drink with us, and then leave. In the 10 years I was in Iran no one cared, nothing happened to me, [was never detained] in no police station.*
> **Researcher***: It seems that only Hazara people were the target.*
> **Hamdullah***: Yes, those two in the front seat were Hazara. (Fieldnotes, 01/03/2019)*

What is interesting about the story, other than the police only arresting Hazara people in the minibus, is Hamdullah's way of telling the story. In the minibus, "There were two Afghans," he said, excluding himself and his companions. Apparently, he seems to have internalized the fact that, in the context of Iran, only Hazara are Afghans. Interestingly, some of the younger Hazara people who had come back to Afghanistan for the first time told me that in their own country they are not considered Afghan. In Iran, they are *the* Afghans and in Afghanistan, they are not.

In this article, I have primarily focused on the stories of Iran that I perceive to communicate accomplishments and achievements. However, since the very beginning, my Hazara interlocutors were very open about the abuse of 'our people' in Iran. What pains Hazara people the most is that while they see themselves as the closest people to Iranians, the latter treat them as an "other." Being Shia and speaking Persian, they cannot understand why non-Hazara migrants from Afghanistan are better off in Iran. Shia Hazara see Iran as their second home to which they have a sense of belonging. However, their maltreatment in Iran has created a sense of hate in them. While they are proud of Iran's strength and independence as the seat of the Shia power, they are, to put it mildly, bitter about and disappointed with being heavily discriminated against.

My non-Hazara interlocutors, such as Pashtun, Tajik, and Uzbek citizens of Afghanistan, had predominantly positive memories of their time in Iran. The Hazara population, as I suggest here, have been racially profiled on both sides of the border in Iran and Afghanistan. They are categorically discriminated against on the Iranian side of the border and, as a group, they are oppressed on the Afghan side of the border. As suggested above, for the poor and some ethnic groups like Hazara people, borders are not the main determining factor in shaping their life experiences.

Conclusion

I began this paper by asking why Afghan returnees from Iran and some other countries highlight the positive aspects of their migration journeys across international borders. Through participant observation and long-term field research in Afghanistan, I listened to migrant laborers sharing their stories with me outside of a formal interview setting. I suggested that in focusing on these narratives, my interlocutors present themselves as people in control, with agency to have effects on the outcome of their lives. These narratives of pride were contrasted with narrative of despair which postulate that migrants are helpless victims. Attention to mobility and narratives of pride present the opportunity to appreciate *life* and *ordinariness* in contrast to exceptionalism with which often a migrant life is photographed, narrated, and analytically studied. It is dehumanizing to exclusively reiterate narratives of violence and conflict and portrayal of miseries concerning a group

or population at the expense of all their other experiences. Reflecting on his scholarship, Shahram Khosravi writes that "As a migration scholar, I ask myself if my focus on migrants'/refugees' experiences of border crossings, journeys, camps, or asylum processes does not contribute to othering of them?" (Khosravi, 2020, p. 295). I contend that emphasizing only the hardships of their mobility indeed reinforces this othering.

Moreover, the paper suggests that because migrants to Iran are typically from the poorer strata of the society, they are often victims of police brutality in both Iran and Afghanistan. This situation challenges the concept of methodological nationalism, which emphasizes international borders and nationality as the primary categories of difference. Additionally, by discussing the life stories of Hazara people in Iran and Afghanistan, the paper argues that it is racial differences, particularly differences in appearance, that make Hazara people highly visible and thus targets for discrimination on both sides of the border. The paper argues that it is the racial difference which can explain the abuse of Hazara people in Iran and Afghanistan as opposed to sectarianism, Shia versus Sunni.

As a landlocked and resource-poor country, Afghanistan relies heavily on remittances to sustain its economy. A key aspect of addressing the country's economic challenges is understanding the significance of labor mobility. In the reconstruction plannings by the US and its allies, there was a focus on repatriation, with significant resources spent on bringing back Afghan migrants in other countries. The migrant labor phenomenon demonstrates years of organic network formation across borders to stabilize the family economy and, more broadly, the economy in Afghanistan. To effectively tackle the economic challenges facing Afghanistan, it is vital for any governing entity to understand the need for collaboration with neighboring states to integrate Afghanistan into the regional economy by breaking down barriers to economic activity, particularly the mobility regimes encountered by the mobile laborers.

With the Taliban's return to power in 2021, the issue of migration once again dominated news, particularly due to the disastrous evacuation of over a hundred thousand of Afghans from Kabul. Most of the educated and well-off elite migrated/evacuated to Europe and North America. The poor, however, without any economic opportunity at home, migrated to Iran and Pakistan. The number of migrants to these two countries has become highly politicized, with politicians campaigning on platforms of mass deportation. The normalization of population mobility is crucial for combatting bigotry and the mistreatment of people on the move.

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Declarations

Competing interests
There are no competing interests.

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