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Repatriation and reconstruction: Afghan youth as a ‘burnt generation’ in post-conflict return¹

Abstract

Coercive repatriation programs often create circumstances in which families move under less than optimal conditions to the land they had fled. The long-term fortunes of young refugees who return, as a result, to unstable post-conflict societies is difficult to determine. In this paper, I follow the movements and perspectives of four long-term Afghan refugee youth across a five year period. I will draw from in-depth interviews and participant observation in 2003, 2006, and 2007 to contrast the youth's pre-repatriation perspectives in Iran against their post-repatriation experiences in Afghanistan. I will demonstrate that where their parents often characterized themselves as the ‘burnt generation’ of the exile period, the youth feel that they themselves are bereft of opportunity post-‘return’ as building blocks for future generations in the country. Such perspectives are also tempered and change with time as they work through ambivalence over their relationship with Iran and changing circumstances in Afghanistan.

The implications of movement in Afghan life are the subject of some debate. In this volume, Monsutti presents transnationalism as an everyday aspect of Afghan nomadism, while Olszewska emphasizes distressing experiences of liminality in refugee experience. My contribution focuses on movement ‘back’ – specifically on voluntary repatriation, which has been framed as the optimal, durable solution in international political and legal frameworks since the early 1980s.

While still generally put into practice as the solution of choice, repatriation is no longer seen as an unproblematic end to the refugee cycle (Black and Koser 1999, Cornish et al. 1999). Indeed, support for repatriation programs has waned with growing awareness of their less than exemplary methods, with the coercive nature of some state-sponsored ‘voluntary’ repatriation programs and unstable post-conflict conditions awaiting returnees prompting ambivalence on the ethics of assisted return (Bakewell 2000, Blitz et al. 2005, Bradley 2006, Chimni 2002, Stein 1997, Stitger 2006).

However, there is as yet insufficient understanding of the longterm prospects for returnees in their home country (Bradley 2006, Eisenbruch 1997, Chimni 2002, Zetter 1994) to comprehensively address the policy and theory implicated in repatriation studies. In particular, the dearth of investigations on the repatriation perspectives of refugee youth with little or no experience of their family’s country of origin (Cornish et al. 1999, Kantor and Saito in this volume) has not been fully explored in existing research. This paper presents a limited account addressing these latter concerns, tracing the stories of four Afghan youth as embedded in their peer and family contexts at three points over a five-year period: in 2003, as they faced the prospect of ‘voluntary’ repatriation at the hands of the Iranian government; in 2006, as they situated themselves vis-a-vis Afghanistan in the early flush of ‘return’² to their home country; and in 2007, as they described their hopes and aspirations in view of their growing understanding of their new context.

In general, Afghan refugee youth, often under-investigated in large-scale surveys of male or female heads of refugee households, warrant particularized attention – thick description – to investigate how adolescents influence and are affected by the repatriation choices of their families. The stories I present below offer a longitudinal examination of repatriation from the perspective of long-term forced migrant youth, drawing out themes of concern as embedded in their particular context. While not representative in any scientific sense, their experiences present a small window into the lives of young Afghan men and women repatriating from Iran.

Refugee youth and repatriation

44% of the world's 21 million refugee population is comprised of youth aged 18 years or younger (UNHCR 2005). Youth in exile have been characterised as conflicted and burdened: enduring a loss of cultural pride (Vargas 1999, Blitz et al. 2005), feeling marginalised in the host community (Vargas 1999, Zetter 1999, 1994), and facing constant uncertainty over their futures (Anderson 2001). Bash and Zezlina-Phillips (2006) argue that the 'neither here nor there' psychological limbo of refugee identity along with transition into adulthood can make the emotional instability of refugee adolescence fraught with turmoil. They suggest that within such uncertainty, refugee youth do demonstrate resilience in that they can 'act as managers of their own, many sided, frequently fluid, identities in their search for cultural anchors' (2006: 126). Such resilience is not without cost, however: in maintaining and proclaiming the multiple identities required by their context, refugee youth risk undermining the personal cohesion for which they strive.

Refugee youth are often differentiated from the older generation by both their ability to cross cultural boundaries more fluidly and their looser affinity to their country of origin. Refugee youth, in more easily absorbing host country modes of being, can represent a demarcation in refugee families between before and after relative to their parents (Rousseau et al. 2001). Seen within their family networks, refugee youth have been described as a vehicle for the retention of their parent's culture and memory (Dhruvarajan 1993) or a conduit for interpretation of and connection with the host community (Anderson 2001).

For refugee youth, the prospect of return to a land in which they have never been or barely remember can invoke multiple anxieties. Refugee youth can face rekindled uprootedness (Eisenbruch 1997), loss of prosperity and mismatched skill sets when engaging with their new, often rural, environments (Bradley 2006), and risk becoming reverse refugees in their country of origin (Zetter 1999). Given their limited experience of the family's country of origin, youth at times distance themselves from the older generation's nostalgic longing to return (Kakoli 2000, Zetter 1994, Rousseau et al. 2001) even as they can be influenced by those discourses into visualising an idealised home (Cornish et al 1999). Refugee youth's reasons for wanting to return are often different and more politicised than the sentimental discourses of their parents, reflecting claims to rights and property (Zetter 1999, 1994, Rousseau et al. 2001) or more idealistic desires to rebuild their country (Blitz et al. 2005).

Dona and Berry's (1999, in Cornish et al. 1999) model of re-acculturation posits that long term forced migrants' difficulties upon return are similar to their struggles adapting to life in their host country. Cornish et al. (1999) used the re-acculturation model to study the experiences of Malawian refugee youth upon repatriation. They found that young Malawian refugees experienced 'acculturative stress and ambiguity regarding self and national identity' after

repatriating from Zambia (:281). Their study investigated a sample of youth refugees born in exile and brought up in the knowledge of their difference without having experienced transition from their family's original context. They found that for many of the youth, feelings of being outsiders did not abate upon return, but in some cases were actually exacerbated. Some of the youth became unsure of their nationality, and some of the youth seemed to identify themselves with a 'returnee' identity.

Afghan refugee youth in Iran

Unlike Pakistan, which has received significant support for its refugee population, Iran has hosted Afghans as one of the largest refugee populations in the world for over 20 years with very little international support. Most Afghan refugees in Iran are integrated with the local population, with only a small percentage living in refugee camps. With the fall of the Taliban, Iran renewed efforts it had made since the 1990s to discourage refugee inflows and promote repatriation. In 2003, the Iranian government signed a tripartite agreement with the government of Afghanistan and UNHCR to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Afghans. Iran also passed 11 articles entitled 'Regulations on accelerating repatriation of Afghan nationals' which outlawed employment, administrative services, banking, participation in civil society, and accommodations for Afghans without valid residence permits (Abbasi-Shavasi et al. 2005). In the same year, the government implemented mandatory registration of all Afghans in Iran. While the state had conducted repeated campaigns to repatriate Afghans since the 1990s, the more stringent enforcement of its 2003 initiatives instilled anxiety in the Afghan population.³

Education had formed a large part of the justification for many Afghan families to migrate to Iran. With the gradual withdrawal of Iranian educational services from the Afghan refugee population over the years, informal Afghan-run schools were organised by the Afghan community, often operating out of people's homes before shifting to larger venues⁴. Many of the Afghan youth who were forced out of Iranian institutions felt the downshift in quality of teaching and resources in Afghan-run schooling keenly. Using second-hand Iranian textbooks, Afghan-run schools had neither the facilities nor staff to provide the level of education of mainstream Iranian schools. 2003 was a pivotal period for the youth, as the Iranian government made clear its intention of, and gradually implemented, the forced closure of many informal Afghan-run schools. For many youth, Afghan schools represented their final link with educational prospects in the country. The closure of most if not all informal Afghan schools (although some reopened after a few months' closure), along with highly curtailed economic viability became a juncture for decision-making regarding return for many families after years of socially invisible discrimination in Iranian society⁵.

Facing ‘voluntary’ repatriation in 2003

I met the four Afghan youth who are the subjects of this study in 2003 at an informal Afghan school in Tehran. I grew to know them quite well through 9 months of intensive collaborative work developing a youth club at their school and organizing the collection of indepth interviews of them and their peers⁶. Nasir (17-year old, male), Amin (18-year old, male), Maryam (14-year old, female), and Zekya (17-year-old, female)⁷ were highly active both in their studies and in their peer groups, with only Zekya having some pre-forced migrations memories of Afghanistan. The other three had either been infants or not born when their family first crossed into Iran. All were the most educated members in their families. The interviewees were not, nor were they meant to be, a representative sample of Afghan refugee youth in Iran. Instead, commonality of refugee context and relatively uniform age and education allowed for a somewhat less complicated analysis of the influence of return on their lives.

The circumstances in which they were living at the time were not conducive to a bright outlook for a future in Iran. Their school, Afghan-run and Afghan-funded, was located in a small, fairly poor southern Tehran suburb sometimes called ‘little Kabul’ due to its high Afghan population. Life for most Afghans in the Tehran suburb was highly transitory, with many families moving once or twice every year due to steep rent increases by landlords against whom they had no legal protection. Afghan schools were even more vulnerable as recognizable centres of Afghan activity. The school’s lack of money, fear of vandalism, its more or less yearly displacement, and legally unrecognised status led it to maintain an anonymous exterior and low profile. Indeed, students were instructed to not cluster in obvious groups when entering the dank, dark, noisy, and overheated basement housing the school’s five classrooms.

The Afghan youth felt the insecurity of their schooling and living quarters keenly, and negative encounters with Iranians also added stress to their lives. As a researcher and participant observer I occasionally experienced⁸ the routine discrimination facing Afghans travelling around Tehran, including calls of ‘Afghani Afghani!’ in the streets, rudeness and dismissive behaviour in markets, and muttered propositions by men walking beside or behind me. Four months into my fieldwork, I’d become conditioned to so much negative attention from strangers that if people treated me poorly, I often assumed it was because they thought I was Afghan. Amin and Nasir, meanwhile, reported that male Afghans faced possible harassment and beatings by bands of Iranian youth.

At the start of our collaboration, the four youth and their peers in the school knew very little about Afghanistan: their curricula and media environment were immersed in the Iranian perspective. Footage of ruins and devastation on the television vied with their parents’ nostalgic memories of stunning natural beauty

and fertile land. The possibility of remaining in familiar but unfriendly Iran evoked ambivalence, with the youth saying they would enjoy a greater standard of living and benefit from a ‘higher’ culture at the expense of continued discrimination and feelings of not belonging or being second class citizens. Also often present in their discourse was a strong justification for not repatriating in the near future: ‘we would go, but...our lives would be at risk because the country is insecure/my family would not survive economically/my studies would be disrupted.’

As time progressed and the youth grew more comfortable navigating and vocalising their often contradictory feelings, pride, defiance, and concern over Iranian discrimination emerged more frequently in their discourse. Nasir and Zekya became heavily involved in the establishment of a student-run school newsletter. The youth decided to include pictures and investigative articles on the Iranian government’s 2003 mandatory registration for all Afghan refugees, including ‘person on the street’ interviews with newly registered Afghans highlighting the injustices and mistreatment of the process.

In another activity, a photography competition, some of their peers at the school chose to highlight the menial, poorly paid jobs that were often the only employment opportunities available to Afghans in Iran. The youth’s feelings about their status relative to Iranians were often tinged with battered self-esteem mixed with defiant pride. Most working Afghans were relegated to the low-income, informal economy as labourers or unskilled workers – difficult, low-paying jobs that few Iranians would accept. Their hard-earned self-sufficiency, however, as well as the contribution they believed they made to the Iranian economy, were sources of dignity. Likewise, while often ashamed of their poverty and the poor conditions of their school, the youth circulated stories of Afghan students scoring higher than Iranians in Iranian schools and competitions and being denied their rightful place. In general, the youth seemed vulnerable and defensive about their refugee status and the backwardness of their country, but also characterized themselves as more morally upright, resourceful, academically gifted, and hardworking than the ‘soft’ Iranians accustomed to the many privileges Afghans lacked.

Nasir and Zekya in particular, given their strong inclinations towards journalistic writing and social justice, often felt overwhelmed by the way their existence seemed to be submerged – their voices muted (Olszewska, this volume) – in mainstream Iranian discourse. Nasir recounted how a youth journalism club in Tehran which had opened its doors to him later unceremoniously rejected him after discovering he was Afghan. He described his feelings of humiliation and bitterness, feeling that he would be forced to remain a faceless manual labourer regardless of his intellectual and creative abilities.

The seemingly inescapable pressure being put on Afghan families – both through curtailment of economic activity and forced closure of Afghan schools by the Iranian state fed anger over what they felt were unfair violations of their Islamic right to education. Amin was one of numerous students at his school who were convinced that remaining in Iran would be futile. His father had begun careful preparations for traveling to Afghanistan fairly early. Maryam and Zekya meanwhile reacted to the rejection from Iran by declaring that they preferred to be in Afghanistan anyway, where they could contribute to the reconstruction of their society. When their school was reopened after two months of closure, their school newsletter was revitalized with a change in name from ‘the Voice of Today’s Generation’ to ‘The Heart of Asia,’ to reflect both an emotional response towards Afghanistan and claim to its value and importance regionally. Meanwhile, a quieter stream of opinion within the upsurge in nationalism in the school admitted (privately, often requesting anonymity) that they wished they could move to a third country.

While often aware of what the more ‘correct’ patriotic responses were to direct questions regarding repatriation, anxiety and uncertainty often dominated the everyday conversations at the school, particularly given the likely difficulty of re-entering Iran after crossing the border into Afghanistan. Where Zetter (1999) suggests that Greek-Cypriot refugees had ‘retained the conviction – to varying degrees and despite all the objective evidence – that their exile is temporary and that they will eventually return home’ (:4), a significant number of Afghan refugee youth appeared more reluctant to admit any eventuality to repatriation, with some declaring definitively that they would not return despite some peer pressure to show preference for repatriation. Peer pressure was such that Nasir refused to comment on his preferences – his friends explained that he did not want to move to Afghanistan despite his vocal criticisms of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The youth’s anxieties over repatriation included concern over Afghanistan’s ‘lower’ culture, lack of infrastructure, Westernisation/degraded Islam, and insecurity, as well as their own job prospect fears, perceived mismatched skill set for daily life in the country, and distress that they would lose their friends. Girls especially feared that the more traditional, conservative culture in Afghanistan would make life unbearable, prohibiting them from engaging in the cultural activities, work, study, and physical mobility they enjoyed in Iran. Having grown up with Islamic codes prevalent in Iran, Maryam was concerned that she would have to wear Afghanistan-style Islamic coverings, which she believed would be less morally correct than the Iranian *magna’eh* (head-dress similar in style to a nun’s habit). Zekya on the other hand felt that she would feel more free in a majority Sunni Afghanistan given the bruising encounters she had had with the predominantly Shi’a Afghan (and Iranian) population in Iran.

In general, positive aspects of life in Afghanistan were less diverse and often expressed more poetically. The youth cited lack of discrimination, feeling empowered, having the opportunity to help rebuild the country, and, quite simply, being in one's own country as advantages of repatriation. Some youth suggested that in Afghanistan they would not be able to reach their potential, whereas others felt they had to repatriate in order to be able to achieve. Educational quality was viewed as higher in Iran, but more freely accessible - where facilities existed - in Afghanistan. The majority believed they would repatriate, some more out of a seeming sense of fatalism ('we have to go back at some point' – Amin) than choice, with several pointing out that they would need to spend several years adjusting to the conditions in Afghanistan. The general understanding was that the Iranian government's policies would make re-entry into Iran difficult if not impossible, and thus the perceived permanence of repatriation was a significant source of anxiety.

Perspectives on repatriation in 2006

Amin, Nasir, Maryam, and Zekya's school reported that 80% of their students repatriated by 2005. I remained in contact with Nasir and Amin, who both moved to Afghanistan in late 2004. We worked together on research projects for 6 months in Kabul in 2005. Nasir subsequently migrated back to Tehran, Iran, while Amin chose to remain in Afghanistan. In late 2006 I contacted them both again with an indepth questionnaire that focused on significant life events, national affiliation, migration, home, and aspirations for the future. Amin contacted Maryam and Zekya in Kabul, and all four gave me lengthy accounts of their lives since leaving (and in Nasir's case, leaving and re-entering) Iran.

Life in Afghanistan was difficult in 2006. Given the resurgence of Taliban activity, weak economy, and devastated infrastructure in Afghanistan relative to Iran, I expected to hear dissatisfaction from the youth who had chosen to repatriate. I presumed Nasir would be thankful that he had returned to the relative stability of Iran, where informal Afghan schools were still maintaining a precarious but steady existence despite official government prohibitions. In fact the reverse was true: the repatriated youth expressed happiness over their decision to move and were certain they did not want to return to Iran while Nasir continued to be frustrated and concerned that he had very limited future prospects in Iran.

Amin, Maryam, and Zekya

One of the first questions in my interview asked for stories about 'travel with family,' which the youth took to mean the moment of crossing the Iran-Afghanistan border and travelling through different provinces of Afghanistan towards Kabul. The interviews with Amin, Maryam, and Zekya at that point took on the air of an often repeated story – a lodestone of returnee experience – and

were remarkably uniform. For all three, the passage across the border was a pivotal and highly emotional moment, where the disparity between Iran's more developed infrastructure and Afghanistan's devastation caused the youth distress, pain, anxiety, and made them think they had made a terrible mistake. In the words of Maryam:

We were very shocked, it was unbelievable that Afghanistan was so...[interrupts herself] Nobody wanted to come to Afghanistan except me. Day and night I would say: let's go to Afghanistan let's go to Afghanistan, we've got to build Afghanistan, and I'd had all these plans for what I would do and all of those dissolved at once. I didn't know what to do, to laugh or to cry. I was like that an entire week, neither crying nor laughing.

The adjustment process was difficult and involved much economic hardship for all the youth and their families. The two females struggled in particular. Zekya described how she fought on her first day in Afghanistan with a stranger who informed her she was not allowed, as a woman, to approach a heritage site. Maryam recounted how she almost fell into a well because she did not know how to pump water – domestic chores were much more physically taxing in Afghanistan. The youth also had to adjust their behaviour and clothing to integrate with Afghan society. Shifting out of the Iranian accent⁹ was particularly important, as was evident in the (in two cases, rather unsuccessful) ways in which the youth tried to adopt Dari phrases and a Kabul accent in their 2006 interviews. Maryam described a painful episode in her integration process as follows:

When I first came here it was very difficult for me, my accent was very bad, I couldn't speak Dari at all. People would all call me *Iranigak* (little Iranian), and in the streets, or in schools they called me *Iranigak*. In school the teachers seemed to have a particular grudge against us. I went to grade 12 and my algebra teacher – and I'll never forget this, this is the worst memory of my life – I was new at the school and I was wearing a black *magna'eh* and suddenly he pulled it, and he pulled it so hard that it ripped a bit, and he said 'this isn't Iran that you're wearing this, a black headscarf, you've made yourself like a crow, this is Afghanistan.' I took my bag and went home and I felt really bad, and the next day my dad went with me to school and said 'what is going on here that you treat my daughter so badly' - just think, there I was a grade 12 student, taking my dad to school! - and so the teacher did apologise, but it was the worst experience of my life.

After their initial shock and the period of adjustment, their lives improved and, more acclimatised, the youth began to feel that they had made the right choice in repatriating. In general, they reported that their families were also reasonably content. Zekya and Maryam recounted how they believed their families had moved to Afghanistan on their insistence, and how both had struggled with

depression and guilt during the re-acculturation period, but how also, in time, they came to see that everyone appreciated having moved. According to Zekya, increased opportunities and access to schooling (even if the educational system in Afghanistan was not as strong) had made her family happy and thankful about the move. In Maryam's family, her older brother who was studying in Kabul University was particularly happy about having moved. The rest of her family was less enthusiastic, with her parents maintaining they were only in Afghanistan for their children's education. Despite their complaints, however, she said that reading between the lines, one could see that they preferred repatriation as their plans for the future were always about Afghanistan. Amin, meanwhile, said that his family had moved on his father's instigation. Apart from Amin's mother and sister, who had not wanted to move originally and continued to be unhappy with repatriation, his family had passed through the sharp downturn of the adjustment period to a sense of preference for life in Afghanistan over life in Iran.

By 2006, Amin was studying his preferred subject in university; Maryam was working for an international organisation and hoped to be accepted to a midwifery program in university; and Zekya was a host for Radio Arman, the most popular radio station in Kabul, and planned to apply for university in the coming year. In general, the three demonstrated an acceptance of their situations: although their lives were not perfect, they had clear goals that they believed could be achieved. The youth admitted freely their difficulties in adjusting to life in Afghanistan and earlier unhappiness ('I cursed the fact that I am Afghan' - Maryam) but believed the adjustment was something that they - and indeed, all Afghans in Iran - would have had to pass through sooner or later. They expressed contentment with their decision to return and were hopeful about and had concrete plans for the future.

Nasir

Having returned to Tehran in 2006, Nasir interpreted 'travel with family' to mean movement and displacement within Iran. He offered in his interview a detailed history of his family's migration from Esfahan, a city in the south of Iran, to Tehran in the north, and subsequent displacement from suburb to suburb in greater Tehran. He identified this movement as the source of much of his later suffering: he was expelled from an Iranian school he loved in the 1990s due to a new government policy regarding Afghan education which required that Afghans only study in the city in which they had been registered – Esfahan, in his case. He was too young to move from Tehran to Esfahan on his own to continue studying in an Iranian school, and thus was forced to enrol in a resource-poor informal Afghan school. While he had travelled across the Iranian border to Afghanistan in 2004, he did not offer a 'border crossing' story, but instead said briefly that he had felt good in Afghanistan since, as a man, he was not vulnerable to the kinds of harassment and beatings Afghan men can face in Iran.

By favouring an ‘internal displacement’ interpretation of ‘travel with family’ over others, Nasir seemed to be attempting to highlight his own and others’ loss and unhappiness through movement, and their lack of stability within Iran. Nasir’s interview demonstrated clearly his frustrations with feeling Iranian but not being accepted, and his helplessness in the face of rejection:

I had never seen Afghanistan, I’d grown up with Iranian culture and I am like a completely Iranian individual, and I can even speak Farsi much better than many Iranians that are in the provinces, but I’d never seen Afghanistan...I grew up in Iran, my memories are Iran’s, the good, bad, ugly are all Iran’s. I’m 20, and only one of those years, last year, belongs to Afghanistan. The rest belong to Iran. But honestly, I don’t feel calm or secure in Iran. I feel like I’m in a cage.

Nasir, as the only youth who had repatriated but then decided to return to refugee life in Iran, maintained that his return to Iran was not of his own choice:

Why did I come back? Because I was forced to, I couldn’t not come, because I believe a person who wants to reach some things has to give something up, I fired my final bullet to go to university in Iran, with [Amin] I wandered around a lot and tried to find other countries to go to but since we weren’t young we weren’t able to. I never wanted to return again to Iran but I was forced to in order to continue my studies.

The remark that he was ‘forced’ to return to Iran is somewhat disingenuous as Nasir did have the option of remaining in Afghanistan to study in Kabul like his friend Amin. Unfortunately, after re-entering Iran to try to enter a university in Tehran, Nasir found that his admissions application had been blocked, and despite much effort on his part for five months, was eventually rejected. He lost most of his savings in the process and the stress of the period showed itself clearly in his weight loss and shattered demeanour. He became an illegal worker, living and working at a tailor’s shop despite not really knowing the trade, with dreams of finding the means to enter a university in India. A few months after our meeting, Nasir returned to Afghanistan to join his family and again work to find good employment or entry to an educational institution.

Impressions of repatriation in 2007

In 2007, the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated further, with the intensification of attacks shifting casualties from being predominantly in the military or law enforcement to formerly ‘secure’ civilian areas. In May, August, and October, I held a series of meetings and interviews with the four youth. The shift in the youth’s attitudes towards their situations was quite clear: Amin described feeling ‘weird’ when crossing through (now frequently targeted) downtown Kabul; and Maryam, meanwhile, asked to borrow my videocamera for

what I later found out would be footage to convince Afghans still in Iran not to repatriate. Any ‘honeymoon period’ there may have been in the youth’s relationship with Afghanistan seemed to be over.

The crux of the youth’s frustration appeared to centre around feelings of alienation. Amin was continuing his studies at Kabul University and had a job teaching computer skills on the side. While reasonably successful, he was also aware that his opportunities for employment continued to be linked with his identity. Whereas acceptance in Iran was often determined by Afghan-ness versus Iranian-ness, with some Afghan ethnicities such as Tajiks better able to pass as Iranian and hence avoid discrimination, in Afghanistan access to opportunity traversed a complex maze based on factors that could include family, ethnicity, political affiliation, languages spoken, tribe/region of origin, and country of refuge (with Pakistani returnees enjoying much better acceptance than those from Iran).

Nasir and Amin had both resisted shifting their clothing, grooming, and accents at first – in their eyes, urban Afghans sounded like Iranian villagers and looked unkempt. But as time passed they became aware of the disdain their ‘fancy’ ways earned them, marking them as not having suffered like those who had stayed in Afghanistan, de-Afghanizing them for preferring the cultural modes of a powerful neighbour whose interventions many viewed with resentment. By 2007, both had resorted, in writing as well as in their speech, to the Afghan turns of phrase that to Iranian ears sound like poor grammar. Nasir at one point participated in a university riot protesting the unIslamic influence of Westerners, believing he had found a brief solidarity and acceptance in collective Afghan outrage (‘they have insulted our religion’) which dissipated shortly thereafter when he was turned down from a TV hosting job due to, ironically, being too Iranian. His main focus for much of the remainder of the year was to enter a university in Malaysia.

By 2007, the restrictions of gender began to feel ever more confining for the women. Maryam, as the oldest child in a family with only one son (who was in primary school), had set aside her dreams for attending university to take on three jobs for the sake of her family. Despite taking on what would generally be construed as a male role, however, she was still bound by societal conventions requiring her to be chaperoned rather than travel on her own. Maryam, meanwhile, who had spoken in Iran of wanting to stay single forever and enter politics, found that in Afghanistan respectability was much more tied to marriage. She became engaged to a young engineer and worked as a beauty technician. Her strong idealistic desire to work for the reconstruction of her country had been doused by the many hardships and injustices of life in Afghanistan – her father had invested their savings from Iran into building a home in Kabul, but his brother, a military commander, subsequently forced her family out into the streets at gunpoint.

Implications of repatriation for Afghan youth

The perspectives I have included above indicate that refugee youth are far from a monolithic category, and more research would be necessary to understand the experiences of Afghan returnee youth. I do suggest, however, three ways in which the long term refugee youth in my study may have experienced moving to Afghanistan:

Repatriation as self-reconciliation

Bash and Zezlina-Phillips (2006) suggest that transition, for refugee adolescents, is multi-faceted. Refugee youth must position themselves psychologically relative to childhood and adulthood as well as national affiliation in a way that would account for their past, present, and future aspirations. They suggest that the transitions of adolescence mixed with the blurred boundaries of exile and hybrid identity constitute a significant but not insurmountable challenge for youth in finding-defining their identities. Muggeridge and Doná (2006), meanwhile, propose that the first visit home for refugees constitutes an important milestone, causing a shift in inner equilibrium and releasing refugees from the limbo of exile, 'closing one chapter and unlocking a process of engagement with subsequent events' (:424). Brought together, these propositions might suggest that for long term refugee youth, the first visit to the unfamiliar 'home' of their family's origin enables them to shift into a different plane of engagement with life. Having gained insight into what had been the 'otherness' of their origins, returnee youth are better able to reconcile their inner conflict, anchor their sense of self, and proceed with greater confidence and direction out of adolescence.

Zekya offers her thoughts on how repatriation enabled her to achieve greater coherence and self-knowledge about her place in the world:

In Iran, it could be said that identity was something that was obscure, not only for me but for all Afghan youth who lived there. We lived there like other individuals and youth, but there was always something unknown that we always lacked, and that was our identity, if we said we didn't have Iranian residency and were Afghan our identity was something that was trodden on and wasn't given any value, which happily in Afghanistan this issue doesn't emerge much. I can say that there's one thing I'm proud of, and that is that I am Afghan. Maybe Afghanistan isn't a place that people think much of, but I am proud to be from here.

Not only had repatriation solidified her identity as definitively Afghan, but also put into perspective her relationship with Iran. She and her peers recognised the positive contributions of their time in Iran (awareness of a larger world, greater

gender sensitivity, a strong education) while separating themselves from Iranian society. Nasir, on the other hand, who had achieved his first visit home but declined to stay, remained conflicted over his identity. In his case, his internalisation of what Hoodfar (forthcoming) terms the ‘cultural chauvinism’ of Iran may have factored in his decision to reject educational opportunities in Afghanistan and attempt, in vain, to return to the ‘superior’ culture and better established educational system of Iran.

Repatriation as mystical-moral destination

While in Iran in 2003, the youth at the informal Afghan school spoke of Afghanistan in poetic terms, as a space of purity and healing. Placing ‘the spirit’ in Afghanistan appeared to allow the youth to preserve their sense of worth and dignity in the face of Iranian rebuffs, even when – as in the case of Nasir– they were reluctant to repatriate¹⁰. It also allowed the youth to take a moral high ground: whatever harassment the youth may have faced from Iranians, they were adamant that they would not reciprocate in treating Iranians poorly in Afghanistan. Through morality discourse the youth were able to claim one important area in which Afghanistan was more developed relative to Iran, and challenge or break the hold of the Iranian nationalism in which they had been immersed most of their lives.

Given their lack of political and economic clout, the youth made Islamic obligation and morality a central platform in their analysis of Iran’s coercive repatriation program. They appropriated human rights discourse and notions of ‘borderless Islam’ to assert their right to access refugee education in Iran (Hoodfar, forthcoming). Their analysis sat uneasily, however, alongside their sense of obligation towards their country, for whose soil they ostensibly held great esteem. As dutiful and devoted Afghans, how could they justify overstaying their welcome in Iran now that the conflict in Afghanistan was officially over and the collective task of reconstruction had begun?

Thus, contrary to my expectations, the youth had a strong voice in the repatriation decision-making processes in their family, in some cases reportedly convincing their reluctant family members to repatriate against their economic best interests. Their hope for access to education in Afghanistan held great weight in the decision-making process of the family, but the youth’s idealism and less trammelled sense of possibility were also highly potent forces. Repatriation was a moral imperative for the youth, at a personal rather than political level, as well as an idealized solution to their discomfort in Iran.

Repatriation as rite of passage

Monsutti (2007) suggests that economic migration by young Afghan men is a

masculine rite of passage – young males migrating to Iran reached adulthood in proving their ability to be economic providers for their families in Afghanistan. Perhaps for Afghan refugee youth born in exile, enduring the suffering of return is a rite of passage as well, initiating the youth into Afghan society. Their initiation includes economic distress, facing derision at being *Iranigak*, and adjusting to the customs and lack of infrastructure of Afghanistan. For all the youth, crossing the border into Afghanistan was a painful and pivotal event even as its repeated story was a well-worn badge of honour. Nasir, as the one reluctant returnee in the study, declined to share his own border-crossing story, perhaps demonstrating his rejection of the symbolism and transformative power of the border-crossing.

Acculturation stress was a commonality among the returnees and a marker differentiating their coming of age from those still in exile: ‘When I was in Iran, I thought Afghanistan was a place where all my dreams would come true... When I came here, I put all those dreams aside, they seemed really plastic to me. This place needs dreams that are somehow stony’ (Maryam). Asked what they thought of the youth who had remained in Tehran, the returnees said that they were unsure what their former classmates were trying to gain - were they cowards? - by remaining in Iran, as quite simply it was hard to live in a country that wasn’t your own. Surviving the pain of repatriation gave the youth a basis for reclaiming the stoicism of Afghan identity, expressing solidarity with those who had remained in the country, and earning the right to join the larger community in Afghanistan as insiders.

Repatriation as loss of a generation

While the youth may have felt they deserved to be accepted as fully Afghan after repatriating, however, that designation was not always accorded them by their external world. Their painful tension and limbo between Iranian-ness and Afghan-ness continued, as manifested in discrimination by Afghans towards ‘Iranianized’ Afghans. Such lack of community acceptance and the curtailed economic and social opportunities it portends led Maryam to characterize herself and her peers as a ‘burnt generation’: just as her parents had relinquished their life goals in the narrowed choices of forced migration, so would she have to set aside her hopes for greater achievements in the face of battles over land claims, livelihoods, educational placement, and the right to belong in her purported home country.

Concluding thoughts: constructions and reconstructions

This study presents the stories of 4 Afghan youth that had lived in a very specific refugee context in Tehran. By the very nature of the participatory research style, which emphasized self-expression and dialogue among the youth and a fair amount of contact with me, the sample I have studied is ‘contaminated’ and

unlikely to represent most Afghan refugee youth in Iran. I would suggest, however, based on longterm research I have conducted with dozens of youth and their families in a number of neighbourhoods in Tehran and Mashad, that the youth's reactions and concerns during the crises of repatriation decision-making and acculturation evoke the experiences of many Afghan youth.

Their stories also raise a number of questions. First, the differing positions presented by Olszewska and Monsutti in this volume over the 'naturalness' – whether rupture or nomadism – of migration, offer a possible mirror to the naturalness of repatriation. It may indeed be helpful to think of repatriation in light of the nature of the original movement. Is the original movement predicated on trauma, does it include significant ties back to the origin (via remaining family, protected assets, regular remittances, return visits), what perceived or real degree of choice was there in the migration and its destination, etc? In turn, how natural might be the perception and experience of the repatriation?

Second, it is also possible to look at the 'naturalness' dichotomy from the standpoint of the construction of the self, as reflected in international policies. There is a strong critique of the concept of a 'natural' identity being anchored in an 'original' place or community (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Malkki 1997, Black 2002). By this argument, the (wrongful) assumption that identity is 'rooted' in place designates dis-location as unnatural, and as a consequence, (wrongfully) promotes repatriation as optimal relative to any other outcome in a refugee crisis. In contrast, they would argue, on decoupling identity and place and presuming that physical origin allows for a 'construction, rather than merely a discovery, of difference' (Ferguson and Gupta 1997:13), displacement would indicate mobility rather than rupture. Emphasis on the right of return could well be set aside in favour of the right to stay and belong, regardless of original identity.

Finally, 'naturalness' reflects both the individual and their external world. For the youth in this study, one of the most painful aspects of their exile was its continuation in the promised land, post-repatriation. The optimal durable solution of repatriation assumes a natural fit for refugees in their country of origin, offering (often limited) support for returnees, but rarely investing adequately in preparing the society to which they return. Such investments would need to include infrastructural support for the influx, as well as address attitudes and identity constructions of the society towards the returnees.

These concerns are important for de-homogenizing any 'durable solution' to particularized contexts and populations. They are also important for addressing, at the local level, the ruptures and tensions that occur in repatriation. Repatriation is presumed to fit based on the construction of a 'natural' self, when in fact in many cases it may cause the *destruction* of an imagined self as the frameworks of international agencies and policies, those of their families' land of origin, and

those within themselves collide painfully. And when, as was the case for long-term forced migrant Afghan youth in Iran, the ‘liberation’ of the ‘homeland’ presents opportunity/obligation/coercion to return, repatriation can engender a highly conflicted outlook and many suboptimal solutions.