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Afghan refugee youth in Iran and the morality of repatriation

The Children and Adolescents in Sahrawi and Afghani Refugee Households: Living with the Effects of Prolonged Armed Conflict and Forced Migration (SARC) research project studied coping strategies and issues of identity among long term Afghan and Sahrawi refugee youth in 2003. Our participatory research in Iran worked to encourage the Afghan youth in our study to engage with and learn from the research, develop their skills and knowledge base, and build trust with the research team at a time of relatively high instability. In Tehran, over 100 Afghan youth became involved in SARC activities such as generating video footage, producing a youth newsletter, interviewing each other, and organising and participating in essay and photography competitions.

In one participatory research exercise, an eighteen-year-old Afghan refugee trained a video camera, slightly tilted, on the face of his fifteen-year-old male schoolmate for an off-the-cuff interview in the middle of the bustle and noise of an informal Afghan school. The two youth, Afghan refugees who had spent most if not all of their lives in Iran, were acutely aware of their uncertain futures in the face of the Iranian government's increasing pressure on Afghan families to repatriate to Afghanistan. As classmates crowded around and made faces for the camera, their exchange proceeded as follows:

Youth 1: You were born here [in Iran]?

Youth 2: Yes.

Youth 1: Which province are you from?

Youth 2: From Mazar-e-Sharif [in Afghanistan].

Youth 1: In your opinion, is it better here or in Afghanistan?

Youth 2: It's better here.

Youth 1: Why?

Youth 2: Because Afghanistan is in a terrible state.

Youth 1: From the standpoint of...?

Youth 2: From the standpoint of safety.

Youth 1: So from the standpoint of comfort-

Youth 2: [interrupts] For comfort, Afghanistan is better.

Youth 1: Afghanistan is better?!

Youth 2: For comfort, yes.

Youth 1: But you just said it was at war, so how is it better??

Youth 2: Well, um, from the...[looks away, stutters] uh, you know, from a different kind of comfort.

Youth 1: You mean like...spiritually?

Youth 2: Yes.

Youth 1: Ah...

The video clip captures how one long term refugee youth framed and conceptualised his conflicting loyalties, stumbling somewhat as he impulsively vocalised an unsettled,

untested opinion fraught with emotional resonance. With the aid of his older researcher-peer, the young man chose to place ‘the spirit’ firmly in Afghanistan, a place he had never known personally – perhaps speaking to the hope of finding wholeness upon reuniting with his family’s land of origin, or indicating his muted protest over what many youth saw as the Islamic Republic of Iran’s unIslamic tactics for divesting itself of its Afghan refugee population.

The SARC project was primarily interested in issues of identity and belonging for refugee youth, and youth perspectives on religion, work, education, gender, and their larger social world. The timing of the project, however, coincided with a concerted effort by the Iranian government and the UNHCR to press for Afghan repatriation.

Consequently, one of the most immediate sources of anxiety and hope for the youth, as well as their reflexive interrogations of themselves as moral beings, centred about repatriation decision-making and prospects for a future in Iran or Afghanistan.

Many of the youth and their families left for Afghanistan after the end of the project’s data collection period, in many cases as a response to the growing inhospitality of their environment in Iran. In this chapter I will discuss notions of morality in repatriation, especially as seen from the perspectives of refugees, then describe some ways in which youth experience refugee life and repatriation. I will present the context and repatriation decision-making concerns of 50 longterm Afghan refugee youth during the 2003 SARC project. I will then offer a 2006 follow-up study on the decisions and outcomes of eight youth, half of whom repatriated and half of whom remained as refugees. In doing so, I

hope to present a comparative, longterm account of ‘return’ (a problematic term that I use with caution since the majority of the youth were born in exile) from the youth’s perspectives as embedded in their household and social contexts. I will focus particularly on the youth’s evaluations of repatriation and coalescing constructions of self and moral adulthood as seen across the three year time span following a coercive repatriation program.

Morality in repatriation

With voluntary repatriation framed as the optimal, durable solution in international political and legal frameworks since the early 1980s, much refugee research has been directed towards legal, political, and logistical issues for facilitating refugee repatriation. Social and economic concerns have also gained ground as research literature on return has increased, leading to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of repatriation as more than an unproblematic end to the refugee cycle (Cornish et al. 1999, Koser and Black 1999). Lack of clarity on the implications of repatriation programs on the lives of refugees has brought about calls for more longitudinal investigations of refugee perspectives on repatriation (Bradley 2006, Eisenbruch 1997, Chimni 2002, Zetter 1994) especially among refugee youth with little or no experience of their family’s country of origin (Cornish et al. 1999).

The plight of the refugee and their right of return is often debated and framed in moral terms, and this has been seen as problematic in a number of ways. Nader (2006) argues

that the assumption that human rights paradigms are universal is “moral imperialism” and dangerous for instilling “normative blindness” (:6). Chimni (2002) criticises legal analysts’ and academics’ use of human rights discourse as promoting premature repatriation and legitimising coerced return. Support for repatriation programs has waned with growing awareness of their less than exemplary methods, with some programs being seen as harassing their refugee population into returning (Blitz et al. 2005, Stitger 2006). Indeed, the coercive nature of some state-sponsored ‘voluntary’ repatriation programs and unstable ‘post-conflict’ conditions awaiting returnees has prompted ambivalence on the ethics of assisted return (Bakewell 2000, Bradley 2006, Chimni 2002, Stein 1997).

Debates on the morality of return have also extended into connections between identity and place. Drawing inspiration from critiques of anthropological localism, academics have focused attention on the commonsense notion that a ‘natural’ identity is anchored in an ‘original’ place or community (Ferguson and Gupta 1997, Malkki 1997, Black 2002). The assumption that identity is ‘rooted’ in place, they argue, makes dis-location unnatural – in the case of refugee flight, a violent and deeply painful wrenching. As a consequence, the ethical valence of return would outweigh that of any other outcome in a refugee crisis, with healing understood as only beginning with the ‘popping’ back into place of repatriation. In contrast, 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), the moral weight of repatriation becomes less intrinsic, displacement indicating mobility rather than rupture. The importance of original soil

could be understood to be less fundamental than the botanical metaphors and essentialism it often inspires (Malkki 1997).

Nevertheless, from the standpoint of refugees themselves, the notion of return can carry a moral weight and is often considered a central objective, albeit at times symbolically, in their lives. Roger Zetter (1994) conducted a long term study of Greek-Cypriot refugees in protracted exile, presenting ambiguous identity as a major aspect of their two decades of forced transience. Zetter argues that displaced Greek-Cypriots maintained separateness from their host community via the “myth of the return” (citing Cruise O’Brien 1972), maintaining hopes of one day reconstituting their often idealised and fictionalised past homes even as they constructed lives for themselves in a new setting. As their exile extended into the future indefinitely and their prospects of return turned increasingly remote, the Greek-Cypriots faced some ambivalence over whether they saw themselves as “returnees or settlers, migrants rather than refugees?” (Zetter 1994: 314). Their ‘profound conviction’ in the need to repatriate, driven by the desire to recapture the past through returning to sites of nostalgic longing, was mediated by concern over changes to the physical locales to which they might be returning, and the realisation that they themselves had changed in diaspora and would be unlikely to return to their prior existences.

In another study, Bisharat (1997), writing about Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, describes the shifting of longing for return for longterm forced migrants from the specificity of villages and houses to an idealised, romanticised homeland. Loyalty to

particular communities transformed into strong nationalism, especially as long term displacement saw the physical locales to which the refugees had strong ties changed and removed by occupying forces. As with the case of Greek-Cypriot refugees and the myth of the return, the Palestinian refugees' quest for return had political implications that imbued repatriation with a moral force – the righting of a violent wrong, and the restoration of natural order.

Black (2002) suggests that the moral case for return was particularly emphasised in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina. He argues that in Bosnia repatriation was understood as offering a means for reconciliation and redress for ethnic cleansing. Such claims regarding ethnic 'homelands' were problematic, however, for having been the basis for ethnic division and cause of forced migration in the first place.

Refugee youth and repatriation

Assertions regarding an ethnic 'homeland' and connections between identity and place can be challenging in the case of longterm refugee youth. Youth born in the middle of the refugee 'cycle' often inherit some aspects of the confluence of nostalgic longing, political claims, social rights and moral obligations of enforced exile from their elders. They can also, however, have some basis for claiming naturalisation in their host nation. How might youth born as refugees weigh the morality of return against their right to belong in the only land they have known? How might youth contribute to household decision-making regarding repatriation, if at all?

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. The study authors suggest that the returnee youth's unfavourable comparisons of Malawi against their former host country indicate that the refugee experience continues to be difficult after repatriation.

Refugee youth, then, can experience repatriation with greater confusion than and in a different way from their parents. Adolescent notions of the morality of repatriation may likewise differ significantly from those of adults. As suggested by the 15-year-old Afghan interviewee's quote regarding spiritual comfort, despite the generally accepted belief among many Afghan households in our study that the Islamic Republic of Iran represented a more "pure" form of Islam, Afghanistan became a mystical-moral destination for a number of youth in our study. I will provide some context of Afghan refugee life in Iran and describe our study of repatriation in detail before returning to a discussion of the logic behind and implications of this point of view.

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 (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.

Access to education was a central factor in the decision of many Afghan families to migrate to Iran. Over the years, the Iranian government gradually withdrew free Iranian educational services from the Afghan refugee population. Informal Afghan-run schools were organised by the Afghan community, often operating out of people’s homes before shifting to larger venues (see Hoodfar, this volume, for a detailed historical account of Afghan refugee education in Iran). 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 quality of education available in 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 prospects became a juncture for decision-making regarding return for many families.

The SARC Project in 2003

I spent nine months in 2003 at an informal Afghan school in Tehran, working to set up and collect data for the SARC project¹. The school we had chosen as our main data collection site in Tehran was Afghan-run and Afghan-funded, and located in a small, fairly poor southern Tehran suburb sometimes called "little Kabul" due to its high Afghan population. The air was hot, dusty, and polluted from the smog of Tehran and oil refineries a few miles away. Children in slippers were often seen kicking stiff pink and white striped plastic balls in the streets. Unlike the fashionably dressed women in north Tehran, women in the suburb were almost invariably dressed in the more conservative black *chador* (large, all-enveloping Iranian Islamic covering for women) and men often seen fingering prayer beads. The area had a utilitarian, industrial feel to it with little investment in greenery or architectural beauty.

Life for most Afghans in the suburb was highly transitory, with many Afghan households 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.



"Little Kabul" in the south of Tehran

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 in the SARC project I occasionally experienced² 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.

Political instability in Iran was another pervasive source of tension. In June 2003, university students protesting the privatisation of universities spearheaded nightly

demonstrations in the streets of Tehran that were also an outlet for more generalised discontent with the Iranian regime. While the majority of Afghans had little to do with the protests, many felt vulnerable in the face of angry mobs wandering the streets, as easy targets for harassment and beatings by bands of frustrated Iranian youth.

At the start of the SARC data collection period, the youth knew very little about Afghanistan. Its flag, map, the location of Kabul, and the sound of the Kabuli accent were unknown to almost all our interviewees. For many, footage of ruins and devastation on the television vied with their parents' nostalgic memories of stunning natural beauty and fertile land. In involving the youth in data collection processes and asking them questions about their identities and lives as forced migrants, the project catalyzed some soul-searching and collective inquiry into Afghanistan, the meaning of migration, and repatriation.

The SARC project's participatory research captured some of the youth's early attempts at conceptualising and voicing their conflicting views on Iran and Afghanistan. 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 to us, pride, defiance, and concern over Iranian discrimination emerged more frequently in their discourse. The SARC project supported enrichment activities for the youth which included 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, the youth chose to highlight the menial, poorly paid jobs which were often the only employment opportunities available to Afghans in Iran. I was particularly struck by an encounter I had with a pair of boys who walked into the research office and asked me to accept two photographs they had taken as entries to the competition. I downloaded the digital photos they had taken onto the computer, and saw that the photos showed two young men collecting garbage. In all the photos, the faces of the garbage collectors were not visible – either because their faces were turned away or blocked strategically. I thought the photos were good, and said so, then teasingly added, hey, I know that guy! Because I could tell that one of the faceless garbage workers was the youth submitting the photo. The boy in question said: awww!! but took my teasing gracefully as the other boy laughed and punched his shoulder. I then asked the boys if they could explain why they had chosen to take the picture they had. They asked for some time to think about it, and I nodded. They came back later. I said,

"well?" The boy who was not in the photo deferred to the one who was, and he looked me straight in the eye, a thin, dark-haired handsome boy with deep lines on his face that I associate with old age, and said, "we took this picture because we want people to know what Afghan youth have to do." There was an honesty and dignity in his straightforward gaze. "This is what I do when I'm not in school. I'm a garbage collector."

I smiled and thanked him sincerely for an excellent entry. And later as I thought about it, I knew what it was that had made this moment so striking to me: I cherish the memory of that other boy, the one who was not in the picture, smiling as his garbage collector friend spoke to me, quietly leaning an arm on his friend's shoulder and seeming as though his chest might burst with pride.



Two youth's submission to the "Afghans at work" photography competition

The youth's feelings about their status relative to Iranians were often tinged with battered self-esteem mixed with the defiant pride I've illustrated above. 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.

The youth, described by their long time teacher as being generally apathetic and pessimistic in classes, embraced the SARC project’s enrichment activities enthusiastically, perhaps in part because they finally felt their school’s activities rivalled those of better-equipped Iranian institutions. The students gradually began feeling like they had some control over their environment, and their teachers noticed the change in their confidence level in classes. One committee of youth became responsible for looking into ways of improving the school’s conditions. They installed ceiling fans that made the heat in the school more bearable, painted and repaired rusty school benches, and provided ice-cold potable water to the school.

Students at a nearby informal Afghan school likewise set up an extra-curricular youth club. With very limited adult supervision, they replaced broken panes of glass, cleaned out a well that had been filled with litter, painted and cleaned out a storage room (which

they later turned into a student-run library), and even repaired a broken, uneven step and floor with cement. Shortly thereafter, however, the municipal government sent notice that that school's premises were to be demolished to make way for a park.

Approximately two months after their youth club activities began, the local authorities sent bulldozers to tear down the walls around the school. The teachers were forced to evacuate their students in the middle of class.

For many SARC youth, the bulldozing incident at their neighbouring school and subsequent forced closure of Afghan schools by the Iranian state fed anger over what they felt were unfair violations of their Islamic right to education (Hoodfar, this volume). The youth also felt despair and fear over the unforgiving nature of their environment. Some of the youth became convinced that remaining in Iran would be futile – that they were powerless against systematic blocks to their advancement. When their school was reopened after two months of closure, the youth revitalised their school newsletter called “the Voice of Today's Generation” under a new name, “The Heart of Asia,” to reflect both their emotional response towards Afghanistan and claim to its value and importance regionally. Meanwhile, a quieter stream of opinion within the upsurge in nationalism among the youth 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 youth's everyday conversations, 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.

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, some girls were concerned that they would have to wear Afghanistan-style Islamic coverings, which they believed would be less morally correct than the Iranian *magna’eh* (head-dress similar in style to a nun’s habit).



Afghan girls wearing the Iranian magna'eh in Tehran



Afghan women wearing the Afghan chādor in Kabul

In comparison, 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") 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.

(para on parents)

2006 follow-up study methodology

The SARC data collection period ended in December 2003. When we next heard from teachers at the school a year later, we were told that 80% of the youth we had interviewed had moved to Afghanistan. I was able to contact two of the youth in particular. Nasir³ (20-year old, male) and Amin (21-year old, male) were close friends who had lived all their lives in Iran as refugees before moving to Afghanistan in late 2004. I remembered them both as well-liked and respected young men in the final year of their studies – Nasir a charismatic idealistic extrovert and Amin quieter, studious, and pragmatic – seemingly an inseparable pair. I was able to arrange a meeting with them in 2005, and we worked together on research projects for 6 months in Kabul. Nasir subsequently migrated back to Tehran while Amin chose to remain in Afghanistan.

I contacted them both again in late 2006 for the purposes of this follow-up study. I requested that they each, as participant-researchers, interview themselves (1 male) and three of their former SARC project peers (1 male and 2 female), and send me electronic audio recordings of their interviews. Nasir was in Tehran at the time, and Amin in Kabul, so I was able to acquire four interviews of SARC youth who had remained refugees, conducted by a continuing refugee, and four of those who had repatriated, conducted by a youth who had repatriated himself.

I sent Nasir and Amin identical interview questionnaires that focused on significant life events, national affiliation, migration, home, and aspirations for the future. I offered very

limited instruction and training on the questionnaire, asking instead that Nasir and Amin interpret and paraphrase the questions as they saw fit and add other questions or prompts of interest to them regarding repatriation and life as forced migrants. I was interested in tracking changes in what I hoped was fairly neutral terminology in the interview schedule, asking for example about ‘going’ to Afghanistan rather than ‘return’ to see what terms the youth used in referring to repatriation. Some of my questions were rather vague and unclear; for instance, one question asked if the interviewee had travelled with his/her family, and how they had felt about any such travels. A question asking about ‘travel with family’, I reasoned, could mean the original migration to Iran, displacement within Iran, leisure travel, or repatriation – interviewer prompts would possibly reflect the direction of Nasir and Amin’s interests in highlighting differing concerns in the refugee and returnee contexts.

My aim was thus to analyze their interviews on three levels: first, contrasting the discourses of male and female youth returnees in Kabul against those of their male and female peers left behind (or, in one case, re-migrated) in Tehran; second, evaluating all the youth’s current perspectives against their SARC interviews 3 years earlier; and third, juxtaposing the assumptions, modifications in interview wording, and research framings of the two interviewers against one another. My own prior relationships with the youth, especially the interviewees, offered a contextualisation of and check on the data collection process.

Nasir and Amin conducted their interviews in December 2006. The interviews averaged 26 minutes in length and were conducted in Farsi, and I transcribed and translated them. Nasir, who was conducting interviews in Tehran, was unable to find 2 females who had previously participated in the SARC project. He substituted two other female long term forced migrants studying at the informal school where we had based the SARC research. Otherwise I recalled the faces, personalities, and interests of the other six interviewees from 2003.

The interviewees ages ranged from 15 to 21 (average 18.9) and their ethnicities were Tajik (1), Hazara (1), Qezelbash (1), Seyyed (3), and undisclosed (2). All were Farsi-speaking and their religious backgrounds were Shi'a (5), Sunni (1), and undisclosed (2). All of the youth had received their high school diplomas, with one youth being enrolled in university. All but two had no pre-forced migration memories of Afghanistan, having either been only a toddler 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.

Attitudes towards repatriation choices

Life in Afghanistan was difficult in 2006. Given the resurgence of Taliban activity, weak economy, and much lower level of development in Afghanistan relative to Iran⁴, I

expected to hear dissatisfaction from the youth who had chosen to repatriate. I presumed the youth in Tehran, meanwhile, would be thankful they had remained in 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 the refugee youth were frustrated and concerned that they had very limited future prospects in Iran. I will now present the stories of the returnee youth, as captured by participant-researcher Amin.

The returnees

The youth had been very close in Tehran, perhaps forced by dint of the many pressures on them to build a strong community with each other in their overcrowded school. By all the accounts I have heard, most of the youth then lost touch with each other in the struggle and confusion of repatriating. Amin was able to find three of his former classmates for the purposes of this study relatively quickly, however: Maryam (female, 17 years old), Zekya (female, 20 years old), and Mohammad (male, 20 years old). Maryam I remembered as a highly idealistic chatterbox – precocious, academically successful, and earnest. Zekya on the other hand was strong-willed and forthright, with flashing green eyes and a strong gravitation towards symbolism and the aesthetic. Mohammad, meanwhile, had been an energetic athlete, his mischievous smile holding the easy confidence of a popular young man.

During the SARC interviews in 2003, Maryam and Zekya said that they wanted to repatriate for ideological reasons (it's my country/I must help rebuild). Amin was fairly clear that he and his family's future lay in Afghanistan, as his father had already travelled several times to Kabul in search of housing and livelihoods prospects. Mohammad expressed no preference for repatriation in 2003 directly, instead suggesting that he had never considered himself Iranian despite living in Iran for 15 years, and that he felt it was a good time to return to Afghanistan to help rebuild even as he was concerned that external influences were corrupting Afghan society.

In 2006, Amin interviewed himself and Maryam, Zekya, and Amin in Kabul regarding their repatriation experiences. He began by directing my question about "travel with family" towards the moment of crossing the Iran-Afghanistan border and travelling through different provinces of Afghanistan towards Kabul. All four interviews at that point took on the air of an often repeated story – a lodestone of returnee experience – and were remarkably uniform. For all the returnees, 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 female returnees 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 accent⁵ 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, the lives of three out of the four youth 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 were 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 and Mohammad said that their families had both moved on their father’s instigation. Apart from Amin’s mother and sister, who had not wanted to move

originally and continued to be unhappy with repatriation, the two families had passed through the sharp downturn of the adjustment period to a sense of preference for life in Afghanistan over life in Iran.

Of the four returnee youth, Amin (the interviewer) is now studying his preferred subject in university; Maryam is working for an international organisation and hopes to be accepted to a midwifery program in university; Zekya is a host for Radio Arman, the most popular radio station in Kabul, and plans to apply for university in the coming year; and Mohammad, whose life continues to be difficult, is working and attempting to further his education through self-learning at home. In general, the returnees demonstrate an acceptance of their situations: although their lives are not perfect, the youth have clear goals which they believe can be achieved. Despite Mohammad's family's unsatisfactory situation of having "the power of making decisions...more or less not with [them]," Mohammad finds comfort in having weathered the worst of his repatriation. The youth admit freely their difficulties in adjusting to life in Afghanistan and earlier unhappiness ("I cursed the fact that I am Afghan" - Maryam) but believe the adjustment was something that they - and indeed, all Afghans in Iran - would have had to pass through sooner or later. They now express contentment with their decision to return and are hopeful about and have concrete plans for the future.

The continuing refugees

In Tehran, Nasir was able to track down former SARC participant Hamed (male, 20 years old), a tall, generous, warm-hearted young man who enjoyed joking about and playing the perpetual long-suffering victim at the hands of his friends. However, the schoolteacher who had helped the SARC project identify and interact with our 50 interviewees in 2003 was unable to find any female former SARC youth in Tehran. As a result Nasir substituted Hanifa (15 years old) and Leila (18 years old), both young women who had studied at the same informal Afghan school.

In his 2003 SARC interview, Nasir did not disclose whether he wanted to repatriate to Afghanistan. I heard from his peers that he was embarrassed to admit that he did not want to return. Hamed, meanwhile, said directly that he did not like Afghanistan and felt it to be culturally inferior relative to Iran. There is no SARC data on the two female refugee youth, although by their self-reporting in 2006, Hanifa and Leila had both wanted to return in 2003.

While interviewing himself and his three peers in Tehran in 2006, Nasir interpreted ‘travel with family’ to mean movement and displacement within Iran. He offered in his self-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.

Hamed described how his family had also travelled within Iran. They were forced to move from Tehran to the countryside in Kashan (central Iran) for 7 months for undisclosed reasons. The move was difficult for Hamed as he lost his friends and found rural living unpleasant. He was relieved when his family returned to Tehran. Leila, meanwhile, moved to Mashad (eastern Iran, close to the Iranian-Afghan border) for two years before returning to Tehran where rent increases forced her family to move almost yearly. She saw Afghanistan as a place where her displacements and the transitory nature of her relationships could come to an end. Hanifa had not travelled while in Iran, and felt that “travel is good” even if it meant a period of adjusting to new people and environments.

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 self-interview demonstrated clearly his frustrations with feeling Iranian but not being accepted, and his helplessness in the face of rejection. He described his unhappiness over several incidents

where his Afghan nationality resulted in expulsion from educational or cultural activities in Iran. At the same time, however, he seemed to feel trapped in an 'Iranianised' identity:

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 added numerous questions and probes to his interviews that attempted to investigate his interviewees' feelings about their identity "beyond slogans," in his words.

His questions included:

- Do you think if you went to Afghanistan you would feel good or bad?
- Do you think you could reach your wishes in Iran?
- Sitting by yourself one day, have you ever thought to yourself: I wish I were Iranian instead of Afghan?
- If they gave you Iranian citizenship, would you stay here and become Iranian or return?
- Do you wish Iran and Afghanistan would become one country?

In two cases, the interviews ended with his interviewees admitting, to his evident

satisfaction, a greater preference for Iran than Afghanistan. A rather striking undercurrent of anxiety and incoherence permeated the interviews of Hamed and Hanifa, who contradicted themselves, vacillating between stating that they wanted to go to Afghanistan and preferred to remain in Iran. They were often unable to define their national affiliations and loyalty, torn between a sense of filial duty towards Afghanistan and a desire to be accepted into Iranian society, no longer outsiders by birth. Hamed was particularly inconsistent – he at first stated:

Well, until 2 or 3 months ago, I really wanted to go to Afghanistan, but now it's changed and I don't want to go at all.

But then in the following exchange, he expressed a different sentiment:

With all the problems I've seen in Iran, personally I'd really like to go to Afghanistan. Go there and stay, not return. Because honestly in Iran we as Afghans are held back a lot. If in our own country we are able to get a small, suitable job with a low wage, I've been told that life can pass really well there.

Interviewer (Nasir): *I don't understand, on the one hand you say you want to go, on the other you say you don't want to go. Help me out here!*

First in our state, we can't make decisions for ourselves; our parents make decisions for us. Second, now it's winter in Afghanistan and it's also winter in

Iran. For now, I don't at all want to go, but if more of our countrymen were going, that is if there was a lot of hustle and bustle and most people were going back, I would 100% go back, for example in the spring, I've sworn with members of my family that in the spring we would go check it out.

I found these inconsistencies interesting, as they had not been evident in the SARC interviews from 2003. The 2006 refugee interviews point towards some frustration over lack of agency, with decision-making being contingent on external circumstances rather than personal choice. For instance, in the excerpt from Hamed's interview, three statements appear to indicate Hamed's powerlessness: "*personally*, I'd really like to go," "we can't make decisions for ourselves; our parents make decisions for us," and "if...most people were going, I would 100% go back." Lack of agency might also have been some form of justification for the dissonance of stubbornly remaining in a country which had strongly and repeatedly made Afghan refugees unwelcome and removed much of their prospects for work and education.

Nasir had a tendency to ask somewhat leading questions, and had a beginning researcher expectation (shared by his counterpart Amin) that he would find uniformity and "one" convergent answer to his questions. Despite his often cajoling or persistent courtroom barrister approach to questioning, not all the interviewees expressed conflict, however: as one of two youth who had memories of Afghanistan (her family migrated to Iran when she was 8 years old), Leila was very stable in her Afghan nationality: "I remember the wars with Najib and the coming of the Taliban⁶, however long I live I wouldn't ever

forget my main and fundamental identity as an Afghan.” In fact, certain of the temporary nature of her stay in Iran, Leila described the conscious effort she made to maintain commitment to her activities in Iran:

Given that we would like to go to Afghanistan but can't, it's been good to realise that for now we are staying here so that we could work on all the little dreams without continually thinking that we will return today or tomorrow. We haven't been thinking: no, this goal can't be reached because we're returning to Afghanistan.

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, clearly, Nasir did have the option of remaining in Afghanistan to study in Kabul like his friend Amin. Unfortunately, after leaving Afghanistan to try and enter a university in Iran,

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 is now living and working at a tailor's shop despite not really knowing the trade. He wants to continue his studies and is attempting to find the means to enter a university in India.

Hamed likewise wants to work and study but is struggling. He had set up a computer and language teaching institution in Tehran with three of his brothers, but the authorities shut down their institution two months before his interview. Left with no income and no prospects for entering university, and only allowed menial unskilled labour by Iranian law, he is finding life increasingly difficult. Both he and Nasir have the feeling that they are running on air - going through all the right motions, but not getting anywhere. Hanifa and Leila, being younger and still engaged in studies and teaching, are less concerned about the future. They are also aware that they will only be able to study and work in Iran as a temporary arrangement, but appear to assume and be reconciled with the prospect that they will return to Afghanistan in the future.

Implications of repatriation

Afghan refugee youth, often under-investigated in large-scale surveys of male or female heads of refugee households, warrant much more particularized attention than I have been able to present in this study. The diverse perspectives I have included above indicate that refugee youth are far from a monolithic category, and more research would

be necessary to understand how adolescents influence and are affected by repatriation choices, especially in exploring the experiences of longterm returnees. I do suggest, however, three ways in which different long term refugee youth in Iran may have experienced return to Afghanistan:

Repatriation as self-reconciliation

Bash and Zezlina-Phillips (2006) suggest that transition, for refugee adolescents, is multifaceted. 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.

The returnee interviews offer some evidence that repatriation enabled the youth to achieve greater coherence and self-knowledge about their 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 tread upon 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 (Zekya, female returnee, 20 years old).

Not only had the returnees solidified their identities as definitively Afghan, but they had also put into perspective their relationship with Iran. They recognised the positive contributions of their time in Iran to their lives (awareness of a larger world, greater gender sensitivity, a strong education) while separating themselves from Iranian society. The continuing refugees (aside from Leila, who had spent close to half her life in Afghanistan) meanwhile were ambivalent about their identity, desiring acceptance in Iranian society even as the government mounted pressure on Afghans to repatriate. Nasir, who had achieved his 'first visit' home but declined to stay, remained conflicted over his identity. In his case, his internalisation of what Hoodfar (this volume) terms the "cultural chauvinism" of Iran may have factored in his inability to reconcile with his

Afghanness and lead to his decision to reject educational opportunities in Afghanistan and return to the 'superior' culture and educational system of Iran.

Repatriation as rite of passage

An alternative explanation for the greater success of returnee youth in finding a sense of self and direction is self-selection: in general the youth found their original position on repatriation validated through time. The data could support a suggestion that the conviction and desire to repatriate of the returnees gave them strength to overcome adversity and work towards their goals. The returnees believed there was a difference between themselves as they were in Afghanistan and as they had been in Iran, that they had had to change in order to cope with conditions in Kabul: "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, female returnee, 17 years old).

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 returnees, 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 failed 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. 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 moral destination

For the returnee youth, staying in Iran had been untenable: "In Iran we were upset about being Afghan" (Amin, male returnee, 21 years old); "it was absolutely required to be 100% controlled and careful in what we did. We were forced, we had no options" (Mohammad, male returnee, 20 years old). Contrary to our 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.

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 (see Hoodfar, this volume). 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?

Repatriation, then, was a moral imperative for the youth, at a personal rather than political level. Placing "the spirit" in Afghanistan allowed the youth to preserve their sense of worth and dignity in the face of Iranian rebuffs, even when – as in the case of Nasir and Hamed – they chose to remain in Iran. In the final accounting, 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.

Concluding thoughts: from rights to right and wrong

This study, based as it has been on the stories of 8 Afghan youth in a very specific refugee context in Tehran, is too limited to provide any definitive findings. Further, by the very nature of our participatory research, 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. The youth’s reactions and concerns during the crisis of repatriation decision-making do suggest some areas for further study, however.

Studies of Afghan migration suggest that remaining in exile can be a strategy for maximising economic opportunities and dispersing risk (Stigter 2006) and that ‘encouraging messages’ on trusted radio and television programs regarding reconstruction and livelihoods prospects in Afghanistan were likely a major factor influencing many Afghans to repatriate (Turton and Marsden 2002). Economic concerns may be pivotal for migrant workers or those on subsistence lifestyles, and certainly an important element in migration decision-making, but theories with an overly strong emphasis on the rational and self-determining secular individual can neglect other important forces, especially in highly community-driven societies. This study suggests that ethics was an important frame through which youth viewed themselves and their actions, influencing repatriation decision-making and re-acculturation. Civic obligation was particularly important among the young women interviewed, who insisted on

returning to Afghanistan despite their awareness that their lives as women in Afghanistan would be more uncomfortable and restricted.

Complex and less direct, even counter-intuitive reasoning in repatriation decision-making such as social or familial obligation and ideology are not always easy to understand or research in studies of forced migration. This lack may need to be addressed, as there are many households – whether religious or secular – in which leading an upright life may factor into and even counter economic considerations. I am not espousing greater dependence on international human rights treaties, which are legal constructs often developed in and for contexts that are far removed from the realities of many refugees – and their hosting countries. Rather, it may be beneficial to engage more deeply with the morality of repatriation as seen in local cultural values.

The refugee youth in this study were in a defining and transitional period in their lives, and questions of right and wrong were pivotal. The notions of morality that consistently seemed important to them were linked with Middle Eastern ideals of hospitality and their personal, religious, and civic standards of ethics. The youth's discourse emphasized obligation – the responsibilities of the Islamic state, their duties as loyal nationalists – rather than the fulfilment of their rights as individuals. Indeed, the youth tended to regard actions within larger social constructs with more reciprocal bonds of obligation, including their own responsibility, morality, and agency in their multiple relationships with each other, their home country, with the hosting state.

Derrida (2002, cited in Silverstone 2006) presents unconditional hospitality - welcoming the uninvited without any expectation of reciprocity – as culture itself, as equal to ethics. Roger Silverstone concurs, calling hospitality “a primary moment of morality” (2006: 139). Given the everyday realities of massive displacement due to catastrophe and war, the ethical responsibility to provide asylum is clear and adequately delineated in international human rights discourse. What is often less prominent is the idea that, as suggested by Derrida and Silverstone and firmly maintained by the youth in my study, the basis of hospitality (or asylum) is *relationship*. Whether in policy or theory, it may be fruitful to enlarge discussions of ethics in repatriation from what is ‘provided for’ forced migrants to how value systems relate to each other. In other words, in addition to incorporating local traditions into analyses of asylum and repatriation programs, it may be helpful to look at the system of values that institutions, states, and individuals bring to the asylum space, looking for points where they meet, conflict, are upheld or flouted. Such a framing may support alternative understandings of the effectiveness and implications of migration policy, suggest different solutions to refugee dilemmas, as well as foreground defining influences on vulnerable populations that could in some cases (such as those of refugee youth) be taken away in the longer term into the future.

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Notes:

1. Please see Hoodfar in this volume for a more detailed explanation of the methodology and sample population for the SARC project in Tehran.
2. My features are sometimes mistaken as being Hazara (one of the ethnicities in Afghanistan) due to my mixed Chinese-Iranian heritage.
3. The names of all the refugee youth in this article have been changed to protect their identities.
4. For instance, the 2006 UN Human Development Report (HDR) estimates life expectancy at birth in Afghanistan to be 46.4 years compared with 70.7 for Iran. The adult literacy rate, as a percentage of the population over 15 years of age, is 28.1 for Afghanistan, and 77.0 for Iran. See <http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics/countries>.
5. The Farsi spoken in Iran and Dari spoken in Afghanistan are very similar, differing in some points of grammar, vocabulary, and accent.
6. President Najibullah headed the Afghan government from 1986 until 1992, when the Northern Alliance, a coalition of mujahideen armies, overturned his regime and formed a coalition government.

This article is dedicated, with love, to my late PhD supervisor, Roger Silverstone.