

## **Afghan Refugees and Iran's Open Door Policy in the 1980s**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Iran is one of the top refugee-hosting countries in the world. After the beginning of war in Afghanistan in the late 1970s and 1980s, Iran opened its borders to Afghan refugees. Unlike Pakistan, Iran allowed Afghans to enter the country and reside in the mainland, in cities, and villages, instead of accommodating them in border camps. That was an unusual decision that was not effectuated by Iran's government during the 1990s ongoing wave of immigrations. This paper explores the main causes for the open door policy adopted by Iran in the mentioned period and investigates the consequences that resulted from this policy. Unlike many scholars who claim the immigration policy of the time to be the result of either ideological or calculated decisions, this paper argues that there was no other alternative for the new government in the peculiar circumstances of a post-revolutionary country.

*Keywords:* Afghan refugees, border camps, economic competition, immigration policy, Islamic revolution, refugee accommodation, split market, UNHCR

### **INTRODUCTION**

A report, published by UNHCR Refugees Magazine in 1997, introduced Afghan refuge in Iran as an "Iranian surprise." The author stated that although Iran is an

"isolated and less known" country, "it is one of the most generous countries worldwide in hosting refugees because, unlike many other countries, Afghans are allowed in to settle throughout the country instead of being settled in border camps" (Wilkinson, 1997). In fact, the source of this refugee crisis in the region was the political turmoil in Afghanistan. After the 1978 coup, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) came to power which resulted in a set of drastic changes known as the Thor Revolution.

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The temporary and seasonal migration of Afghans to Iran was prevalent prior to 1979, mainly due to poverty and drought at home and economic opportunities abroad. Most of these immigrants were from the western and central parts of Afghanistan, and it is estimated that nearly 600,000 Afghans were in Iran before the 1979 coup (Rubin, 1996, p. 3). As a result, Afghan workers were familiar faces especially in eastern parts of Iran. However, after the communist surge in Afghanistan and USSR military intervention, an unprecedented migration of Afghans in terms of nature and magnitude took place.

As PDPA took power, the new government put socialist reforms on agenda: the national flag of Afghanistan changed from the traditional green to something resembling the flag of Soviet Union, land reforms began, women were granted the right to vote, and similar reforms began to take hold nationwide. Reforms were not welcomed by traditional religious factions of the Afghan community, giving way to a mass exodus of angry Afghans to two neighbouring Islamic countries: Iran and Pakistan. Many traditional families considered reforms to be contradictory to Islamic teachings and preferred to leave Afghanistan. As Hoodfar (2004) points out, most of those who migrated to Iran were illiterate villagers irritated by the government mandatory education programs that forced families to enrol their daughters in public schools. Another reason for the anxiety was marriage laws, which required the bride's consent and set the consent age

for marriage at 16. For many, these were signs of the Soviet agenda to eliminate Islam.

With the establishment of the communist government, internal conflicts between PDPA and Islamic groups rivalling to overthrow the government began. In 1979, with the intensification of war between the *Mujahedeen* and the central government, the Soviet Union, fearful of the anticipated loss of a major ally in the South, started a military intervention in Afghanistan. One of the outcomes of the invasion was the flow of Afghan refugees toward the borders to evade war, because of which about 600,000 Afghans arrived in Iran and Pakistan within a week. As Kakar (1995) puts it, targeting *Mujahedeen* and ordinary people through rocket attacks on civilians, the destruction of the infrastructure under the shared control of the *Mujahedeen* and people, retaliatory attacks of Soviet forces, targeting farmers at the harvest time, confiscation of farmers' crops and livestock, and forced evacuation of villages, made life so insecure that many Afghans decided to leave.

The rate of refugee departure from Afghanistan in 1980-81 was about 180,000 migrants per month; in 1982-85, the rate decreased to 15,000-20,000, and in 1987 it was further reduced to five to six thousand (Goodson, 2001, p. 149). As the population arrived at Iranian borders, they were transferred to Iran's cities and villages after simple and short administrative procedures.

Unlike Pakistan, Iran permitted the refugees to reside in different cities and villages without any restrictions. Refugees

had access to the labour market and allowed to stay in Iran until the end of war in Afghanistan. Most of the refugees with a rural background entered the market as low-skilled workers in urban and rural areas, occupying the location at the lowest layer of Iran's working class.

In November 1981, an Iranian Interior Ministry official told media that the number of Afghan refugees was about 1.5 million; most of whom were settling in two main provinces in eastern Iran (Sorouroddin, 1981). With the arrival of new Afghan refugees, the figure increased annually, reaching an unprecedented number of four million people in 1991. Not all these refugees were Afghan, however, since by that time, Iran had hosted around 2.2 million Iraqi refugees from western borders (Hosseini, 1993, p. 277). Although most Iraqis returned to their country, Afghans remained in Iran and, today, there are nearly three million Afghan refugees and immigrants living across the country.

After the flow of Afghan displaced population toward its borders, Iran welcomed them with an open door policy; a policy that provided Afghans with access to its labour market while the government had to provide the immigrant population with basic education, medical services and subsidized food like Iranian nationals. The open door policy had many short-term and long-term consequences. The sudden settlement of millions of refugees in the eastern provinces of Iran led to some domestic problems at the time and sparked dissatisfaction among

local communities (British Refugee Council, 1987; Pahlavan, 1988). In the long term, the presence of refugees in various regions of Iran and the following non-integration policies aimed at persuading the refugees to return to Afghanistan caused Afghan refugees to lose hope for access to Iranian citizenship rights. The open door policy and settlement of refugees in cities and villages had such severe implications for the Iranian government that in 1990s under similar situations, Iran refused to let Iraqi and Azeri refugees to cross its borders.

The main question here is why such an uncommon refugee policy was implemented by Iran in the 1980s. Several answers have been given to the question. Some believe that it was a calculated decision by Iran to replace labour force shortage agriculture and the construction industry in a time when many young Iranians were sent to the war front in western borders beside using afghans as political tools to influence the situation in Afghanistan (Milani, 2006). Others emphasise on the ideological character of the new revolutionary government in Iran and attribute the reason behind the policy to the Islamic principles of the new government (Yarbakhsh, 2018). This paper argues that Iran's generous policy toward Afghan refugees should be understood, considering the specific features of a post-revolutionary era after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the newly established government. Locating the policy at the social and political context, this article shows that the decision to open borders was the result of the impossibility

of other practical alternatives rather than a rational calculation of the perceived benefits or any other revolutionary agenda.

Moreover, the consequences of this policy at that time are investigated to show why the government did not implement same policy in similar situations a decade later. A close look at Iran's conditions in the early years after the Islamic Revolution, including the engagement in an imposed war with Iraq, and the internal political power struggles, shows what factors shaped the open door policy and what implications it had for the Iranian government, native population of Iran, and Afghan refugees in next decades.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article uses a qualitative approach in the study of its subject matter. So far, any study of Afghan refugee presence in Iran has been made possible only by second-hand sources. This study, however, takes advantage of the access to the recently declassified official documents, tries to clarify the new dimensions of the situation at the time under discussion. The main source of information in this research are the official documents and letters related to Afghan refugees during 1980s. A total of 2,175 documents, official letters, and reports issued to Zanjan, Qazvin, and Markazi Provincial Governments during the 1980s were accessed at the Documentation Centre of Iran's National Library. The documents were declassified as limited access since 2014 and the authors gained authorization to view them following an official agreement between Tehran

University and Iran's National Library. Each document that seemed to be relevant for the purpose of the study were photographed by authors and coded following the procedures of the National Library (documents in this paper are cited with their document number in the National Library). Moreover, all the official comments and interviews published in newspapers about Afghan refugees and immigration policies at the time, were gathered and analysed as supplementary sources of information; the newspapers kept in the National Library of Iran Archive, and *Etelaat* Newspaper Archive, have been the main sources of this data. In addition, reports released by international organisations (including UNHRC, the Refugee and Immigrant Committee of the United States, and British Refugee Council) on the status of Afghan refugees and immigrants or the policies of the Iranian government have also been gathered through their official websites. All the Data gathered from different sources, were analysed by qualitative content analysis approach. First, all data were categorized in a chronological order. For each year, all data were classified under six main categories: 1) number of refugees (legal and illegal) and official statistics, 2) refugee's access to healthcare, education, and so on, 3) refugee's accommodation and travel, 4) refugee entrance policy and deportation, 5) job market policies and regulation, and 6) tensions with local Iranians. Some documents were simultaneously located in two or more categories based on their contents. Every piece of information was

labelled with a code showing the date (year and month) and the main theme. Second, based on the available data for each year, a narrative was formed covering the important aspects of the refugee presence focusing on 1) official policies, and 2) the condition of refugees. The final report was written by combining different segments into an integrated text. The first part of the report explores the causes of open door policy and the second on the consequences of this policy for Iran. Three main themes were extracted from the data for the second part, including identification of refugees and security issues, refugees and Iran labour market, and the problem of repatriation which is discussed in the following section.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Settlement of refugees in Iran**

As stated before, during late 1970s and 1980s, Iran opened its borders to Afghan refugees and permitted them to reside in the mainland country instead of border camps. The reasons for accepting millions of Afghan refugees should be analysed according to the circumstances of the newly established government and social atmosphere of a post-revolutionary country. As explained further in this section, unconditional admission of refugees was the only option that could be implemented at that time, due to the complicated situation of the country and the newly established revolutionary government. All in all, it can be argued that three major factors resulted in the adoption of an open door policy by the Iran government of the time.

First is the collapse of bureaucratic structures and decision-making procedures after the Islamic Revolution. Following the Revolution, the government structure underwent a fundamental change and the entire system of decision-making and administration was radically transformed. At that time, it was not possible to address all national issues with structured and calculated decision-making processes. The newly established administration, which was involved in internal political conflicts and, a year later, imposed war with Iraq, all of a sudden faced the flood of Afghan refugees into the country. In such circumstances, the new government chose the easiest solution: to admit and settle Afghans in cities and villages without any restriction. In fact, the new and somehow inexperienced young bureaucrats wasn't prepared to decide on the matter based on the rational calculation of predictable outcomes of the open door policy.

Second, the new government was busy with more serious problems than Afghan refugee arrival; the main focus was on consolidating power and fighting the imposed war with Iraq. In a situation where the country was involved in internal conflicts during the period of power construction after the 1979 Revolution, the onset of the war and its consequences did not actually leave room for attention to the issue of Afghan refugees. The war resulted in the displacement of a large part of the Iranian population residing in western areas (near the border with Iraq). In this context, the management and settlement of internally

displaced people became the top priority of the government. As a result, the country was so involved with internal and external problems that there was no opportunity to consider the issue of the arrival of foreign war refugees. The Minister of Interior, during his visit to *Sistan and Baluchistan* province in April 1981, explicitly stated to reporters “Unfortunately, due to government engagement with the imposed war, we have not yet been able to decide on the issue of refugee settlement”<sup>1</sup>. He assured local residents that the issue of Afghan refugees in eastern provinces would be properly addressed soon by the central government. Therefore, at that time, the situation was such that, on one hand, the state’s energy was spent on the war with its costs and consequences, and on the other hand, after each Soviet bombardment, thousands of Afghans fled to the Iran border.

Third, the lack of sufficient funds to build border camps in the absence of international assistance was a major factor in implementing open door policy. In contrast, Pakistan’s success in settling refugees in the camps was largely due to the Western aids, considering Pakistan’s role in equipping *Mujahideen* in the fight against the Soviets. Unlike Pakistan, Iran did not have the necessary facilities for building refugee camps; therefore, allowing them in the country was inevitable. The country faced with enormous costs of the

war with Iraq, and there was practically no possibility for building and equipping camps and accommodating more than one million refugee population in a brief period. Relations between Iran and Western countries became hostile after the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979, exactly a month before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Political tensions with the West denied Iran international assistance in the problem of refugee settlement. Iran’s reluctance to trust international institutions due to the fear of intelligence operations under the cover of assistance (Halliday, 2001, p. 5) was another obstacle to receiving assistance from the UNHCR. Between 1979 and 1990, Pakistan received about \$850 million in international assistance, while Iran’s share of international aids was slightly over \$100 million (Eisenberg, 2013, p. 15). Moreover, UNHCR donations were handed based on the population residing in the camps, not those active in the labour market.

In addition to these three main causal factors, there are two facilitators that made open door policy work and created a favourable social and political climate for refugees in the country. First is the ideological approach of the newly established revolutionary state in Iran at the time: a revolution that defined itself as an advocate of the oppressed people in all parts of the world with the announcement of its mission defying the Eastern and Western imperialism. The Islamic Republic, right from its establishment, considered its duty to protect the oppressed and back all

<sup>1</sup>Afghan refugees will be accommodated in Iran, said interior minister (1981, April 10), *Keyhan* newspaper.

liberation movements in the world. Based on this attitude, the phrase "Islam does not have borders" quoted from Ayatollah Khomeini was the legitimating basis for the open door policy. It was for this reason that for many years the term "Afghan brothers" were used in Iran to address Afghan refugees.

In fact, for the government, sheltering Afghan refugees was more of a religious duty and an emphasis on the commitment of the Islamic Republic to play a leading Islamic revolutionary role in the region and worldwide. Recently, a former Afghan government official in Iran claimed that at the beginning of the arrival of Afghans in Iran, the incumbent Prime Minister was in favour of settling refugees in border camps; the idea was rejected by the "scholars of the Islamic Republic and especially Ayatollah Khomeini" (Afzali, 2014). He quoted Mohammad Montazeri, a high-rank revolutionary cleric, to have said, "There is no difference between Iranians and Afghans. Here in Iran, Islam rules. Let them come, work, and learn. Why stopping them?" It is not easy to verify the quotation, since there is no evidence to confirm; but based on the revolutionary rhetoric of the time, however, it could be said that the "revolutionary" section of the government had a welcoming approach toward Afghan refugees. Meanwhile, it should be noted that even if the pragmatic section of the government had a different view on the issue, practical options to do otherwise were feeble.

The second facilitator was the revolutionary atmosphere of the Iranian

society in the early years after the revolution, which provided the social context for the acceptance of Afghans. After the revolution, the social mood created a sense of fraternity and solidarity in the society, which facilitated the acceptance of foreign refugees in Iran. The importance of the revolutionary social atmosphere of the early 1980s on the Afghan refugee's situation in Iran is undeniable since in the following decade, distancing from the early revolutionary atmosphere, the living conditions of Afghans worsened as the public acceptance of refugees declined.

In addition to the factors discussed above, some researchers pointed out two other issues in explaining the open door policy and accommodation of refugees inside the country. One claim is that the beginning of the war with Iraq, and Iran's desperate need for human workforce, means that Iran's refugee policy was a pragmatic decision rather than an ideological approach. To be more precise, the cheap labour force of Afghans workers would compensate the workforce shortage in a time when part of Iran's manpower was deployed on the battlefields. According to the claim, the presence of Afghans in Iran when the country was involved in the heavy war had great benefits for the country.

The second claim is that the presence of Afghans in Iran has enabled the government to form multiple organisations of Afghan fighters who could later be used in the political and domestic power struggles of Afghanistan. Milani (2006) believes that Iran used the "Afghan Card" as a means to put pressure on the Soviet Union and

halt the transfer of Soviet weapons to Iraq during the eight-year war. In his opinion, Iran supported marginalised Shi'a groups, like the *Hazaras* and *Qizilbash*, to create a sphere of influence in Afghanistan and tried to organise them in the form of unified forces (p. 237). During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Iran was a base for armed resistance in Afghanistan, but still different from Pakistan in some respects. In Pakistan, the government openly supported resistance to the Soviet axis and worked closely with local and international groups to provide political and military support to the Islamic fighters (Bhatia and Sedra, 2008, p. 45). However, Iran could not take an apparent position toward Afghanistan because it was fighting at home and its relationship with the Soviet Union was strategically important.

However, many Afghan resistance groups were operating in Iran who enjoyed less freedom of action and received less support compared to their peers in Pakistan (Wannell, 1991). The presence of Afghan refugees in Iran made it possible for Iran to train militias for a right moment to deploy in Afghanistan (Milani, 2006, p. 237). According to Harpviken (2009), the role of these organisations became particularly apparent after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, when Iran tried to influence the *Mujahedeen* government and later used them in the war against the Taliban (p. 84).

To what extent have the two above-mentioned arguments been a decisive factor in the adoption of Iran's Open Door Policy? The importance of these arguments cannot be ignored but what matters here

is whether these factors can be considered explanatory factors behind Iran's open door policy; the two arguments seem to be rather a function of open door policy rather than the reason behind it. As argued before, the open door policy was not adopted based on the precise calculation of economic and political benefits of Afghan refugees' presence in Iran, but was largely due to unique social, political, and bureaucratic situations in a revolutionary condition. In fact, basic requirements for a rational and calculated approach toward the issue of Afghans entering the country were absent. In the context of the socio-political contexts of post-revolutionary Iran, it is evident that at the time, there was no other way for decision-makers but to adopt refugees without restrictions.

Rajaei (2000), in examining Iranian refugee policies, shows that after the stabilisation period, Iran managed to create a balance between its constraints and the urgent need for a response to the refugee crisis; for example, during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 1991, the war between the Azerbaijan and Armenia, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, causing the Azeri refugees to rush to the Iranian border in 1993. However, Iran's policy towards this group of refugees was not opening the country's doors but creating camps inside Azerbaijan that worked under the supervision of the Red Crescent. For this purpose, several camps were constructed by the collaboration of two sides. In 1995, one of the interior ministry officials explicitly stated that Iran did not

allow Azeri refugees to enter Iran because of what the government learned from the experience of Afghan refugees. He explicitly stated that if they could enter, their return to their country would be difficult (pp. 52-55).

Once again, in 1994, during the clashes between the two Kurdish Iraqi parties, KDP and PUK, many leaders and supporters of PUK fled to Iran. The result was the flooding of more than 200 thousand people to Iranian borders. Iran, whose new policy was to deny refugees entrance, declared that it was ready to accept refugees, with the condition of receiving international help. Eventually, Iran allowed 75,000 people to enter the country but settled them in border camps. This time, Iran asked for major international institutions aid and, as a result, was able to receive a great deal of assistance (ibid, pp. 53-55).

Consequently, Iran's policy of accepting refugees in later decades was different from the 1980s. In fact, all the factors that previously led to the open door policy were either absent or had diminished drastically. The bureaucratic apparatus was stabilised, and the policy environment and decision-making procedures were different from the period of the revolutionary excitement of the early years. The social environment also did not support refugee admission due to economic issues, especially at a tough economic setting of the late 1980s.

### **Predictors of Change from Open Door to Closed Door Policy**

The open door policy was the easiest solution for a newly formed revolutionary

government dealing with domestic issues and a war with a neighbouring country. Acceptance of millions of refugees helped many Afghans survive fatal violence and gave them the opportunity to escape poverty and drought in their country. But for government in Iran, enormous issues started to appear over time as the proportion of refugees in local communities grew. The cheap Afghan labour force helped the Iranian economy in different sectors of agriculture, construction and manufacturing in a hard economic period. But these economic benefits costed dearly for the government and led to dramatic policy changes in later decades. The main negative consequences of open door policy for the Iranian government were as follows:

#### *1-Identification of refugees and security issues*

The identification of refugees in Iran was one of the issues faced by the government from the beginning of the crisis. Afghan refugees crossed the borders into Iran without passing any special legal procedures. They were only registered at the border and were deployed to any area they wanted to reside. As a result, there were no definite figures and information about the individuals entering or how they scattered in the country. According to official documents reviewed, in August 1979, a letter (Interior Ministry, 1980) was sent from the Ministry of the Interior to the governorates of all provinces, in which the need to identify Afghans was indicated and the issuance of identity cards was emphasised. The directive calls for the

establishment of a “Coordinating Council for Afghan Refugees Affairs” in each province to identify Afghan refugees and encourage them to register and receive ID cards. These ID cards were supposed to be issued to every household and the names of other household members were to be mentioned in the profile of the family head.

According to one official letter (Mazandaran Provincial Government, 1980), in October 1980, the Ministry of Interior ordered that the issued ID cards be printed with the phrase “no specific rights for the cardholder” at the bottom. This action shows that the government considered refugees’ temporary guests and made it clear to Afghans that the ID card did not indicate a permanent residence permit. The first identification attempts by the government having failed, the issuance of the first identification documents began the following year; in 1981, ID documents were issued for each head of household in the form of large white folders containing information of all household members.

These documents were prepared by the Interior Ministry and were filled by officials at mosques in different cities. This plan was the first government action to identify and regulate the Afghan refugee population in Iran, which distinguished legal refugees from unauthorised Afghans entering the country. These documents were not issued for every individual, and its size made it difficult for refugees to carry, made it difficult for Iranian security forces to control IDs. Moreover, given the fact that these documents were completed only

at the request of the applicant, and there was no database to control all the recorded information, it was possible for refugees to obtain several identity documents for each household in various parts of the country. This attempt to identify Afghan nationals somewhat reduced the problems of identification and improved public services for refugees but was not much of a success due to poor documentation.

The complexities of identity issues added to the government’s problems in meeting the basic needs of refugee population. During the Iran-Iraq war, because of financial constraints and the difficulties in importing goods caused by the siege of *Khorramshahr* and insecurity of other ports, the government monopolised the distribution of primary goods. For this reason, an organisation called *Basij-e Eghtesadi* (Economic Mobilisation) was established with many headquarters throughout the country. The duty of this organisation was to ration and distribute basic goods through the coupon mechanism. With the increase in the number of Afghan refugees, the general needs of this population were also placed on the agenda of the headquarters and the legal refugees were registered. The major problem in providing Afghan refugee supplies was a poor identification system and a lack of reliable statistics.

With problems that gradually became evident in governing a large population of refugees, the first national refugee identification plan was implemented in 1984. Under this plan, an ID card, known as the White Card, was issued to each person.

Contrary to the previous plan, this time, by filling out a special questionnaire by each person, a file was issued for every individual that was archived in the governorate of the area. To enjoy public services, including receiving coupons, enrolling in schools, using healthcare services, and obtaining work permits, one ought to have an ID card. Cards would expire in one year, but it took almost two years to replace it with the new Blue Card. In 1988, a program was implemented entitled the "Electronic Identification of Afghan Refugees" (Interior Ministry, 1988), which failed in the development of electronic database due to the shortage of funds, but the registered data in this plan remained the main source of information of Afghan refugees until 2000.

One of the consequences of the lack of precise identification of Afghan nationals was a security problem in the country. It is not surprising for the security forces to face a variety of social disorders, security threats, and high levels of crime in a society where over two million people have no identity documents. In official documents and media reports, there have been many reports of security problems in the eastern parts of the country. Limited control over the borders would increase the possibility of smuggling guns and narcotics to the country which caused social discontent among the local population. In fact, it was the failure of the government to identify and regulate the refugee population that resulted in some social disorders. However, for many local people, Afghans were responsible for the crimes and wrong-doings which most

of the time were exaggerated by media. Abdi (1988) has shown that during 1980s, the homicide rate among Afghans was higher than the national average. But the point he made was that firstly, killers and victims were usually both Afghans, and secondly, failure of judicial courts in Iran to resolve disputes among Afghan refugees resulted in higher homicide rates among them. Therefore, the negative stereotyping of Afghan refugees in Iran, still prevalent today, is mostly the remnant of the chaotic situation in the 1980s where the power of government to control the situation was very limited.

## *2- Refugees and Iran labour market*

The settlement of refugees in cities and villages, rather than border camps, gave Afghan refugees access to Iran's labour market right from the beginning. The issue that gradually grew from the presence of many Afghan workers in Iran was the economic competition between Afghan workers and local labourers, leading to dissatisfaction among the local population. From the beginning, there was competition between immigrants and locals for primary goods and housing, especially in the two eastern provinces where most immigrants resided, but the labour market competition was the main source of local tensions.

A sizable portion of the Afghan immigrants who generally were low skilled was employed as simple workers in various rural and urban sectors and was welcomed by employers due to their hard work and low wages. The preferences by Iranian

employers for Afghan workers enabled them to gradually gain a greater share of the local labour market and made the competition intense. With the intensification of this conflict, the government was forced to intervene and in 1984, a directive was issued by Iran's Ministry of Labour titled the "Implementation Procedures for Temporary Employment of Afghan Refugees" (Labour and Welfare Ministry, 1985). The directive only allowed for specific occupations to be delivered to Afghan workers, including twelve job categories like brick laying, urban construction, loading cargos in ports, tannery, agriculture, mining, glazing, poultry, small industries and plastic melting, road construction and canalisation, and leather manufacturing. Later, in 1986, four other job categories were added to this list, including work in stone cutting, mosaics, discharging and loading in silos, and concrete masonry unit manufacturing. In addition, the new directive banned the employment of Afghan workers in bakeries, referring to the "importance of public health" and the "poor health" of refugee workers (Zanjan Office of Labour and Welfare, 1985). According to the directive, the employers should receive a work permit from the government by filling out specific questionnaires along with showing identity documents issued for the Afghan workers to officials.

After the government's efforts to identify Afghan nationals and providing identity cards for refugees, efforts to draft laws and regulations on the employment of Afghan citizens became a top priority in

regulating the presence of Afghan refugees in Iran. The "Implementation Procedures for Temporary Employment of Afghan Refugees" enlisted Afghan workers in most simple and generally hard jobs and emphasised the need for a work permit from the Ministry of Labour. These occupations were generally labour-intensive and low-paid jobs that replaced Afghan labourers for Iranian workers from the start of their arrival. In many cases, the entry of this workforce has led to the withdrawal of Iranian labour from these professions, and vacancies in many areas have become a monopoly of Afghan workers. In fact, the directive officially recognised the split labour market (Bonacich, 1972) that had been developed over time. According to the split labour market theory, immigrants enter labour market at a cheaper rate since "they have fewer economic and political resources and less information and because they are willing to put up with worse working conditions and they avoid labour disputes in the short term" (Kunovich, 2017, 1965). A large differential in price creates racial/ethnic "antagonism" between local workers and immigrants which in some cases results into "caste" system.

According to the directive, for each region, a maximum threshold of 40 percent of the labour force was allocated to Afghan workers, and it was only possible to issue a work permit for local governments if it follows the limit. But in practice, many employers did not limit themselves to this quota, causing the increasing share of Afghan labour force and therefore

the intensification of job competition among locals and refugees. The directive aimed at regulating the employment of Afghan workers in the labour market and supporting domestic labour; but in practice, the employers did not accord the law. In fact, a significant part of the temptation of the refugee workforce was the fact that it was outside of the formal labour regulations, which greatly reduced the direct and indirect cost of manpower for employers.

During the 1980s, the Ministry of Labour and local authorities spent much of their efforts regulating Afghan workers and preventing them from engaging in unauthorised or unlicensed jobs. There are numerous documents of the time that indicate the correspondence between the administrative departments and the units of production employing Afghan workers. Manufacturing units were seeking permission to use more Afghan workers, while the government agencies pushed manufacture units to keep the Afghan labour force below the 40 percent.

### 3- *The problem of Repatriation*

Iran and Pakistan refused to recognise the status of "refugees" accorded in the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol for Afghans. Although Iran signed both documents, it only agreed to recognise the Afghans as "immigrants", because refugee admission required the granting of rights and access to services and, more importantly, the requirement for the government not to return refugees to their country of origin without a legitimate legal basis. Therefore, Iran

preferred to declare its assistance to Afghan refugees as humanitarian and Islamic action, instead of a legal obligation (Safri, 2011, p. 591). Moreover, Afghan refugees in Iran did not enjoy the rights of the refugees obligated by the Convention, and the principle of "return" from the outset was complementary to the open door policy.

As mentioned in the previous sections, Iran opened the country's doors to refugees in the 1980s, but from the outset considered it an emergent, temporary residence. This insistence on the necessity of a return of refugees to Afghanistan was clear both from public comments made by the Iranian authorities and the rules and regulations set for Afghan population in Iran.

For example, in the early years after the arrival of refugees, the government insistently blocked the purchase of land by Afghans. According to Iran's civil code, trading by foreign nationals is subject to strict rules, and the legal possibility of land ownership is very limited. In a media interview with *Etela'at* Newspaper an official in the Interior Ministry announced that "Iranian people will be soon be warned to refrain from selling homes, farms, workshops, etc. to the refugees" (Bashir, 1983). This warning suggests that from the very beginning, concern about the return of Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan was very serious.

In fact, the difference in welfare condition in Iran and Afghanistan led many refugees to be reluctant to return home. For this reason, the government tried to control the privileges of this population in Iran to

a degree that it would not eradicate their motivation to return. But the dispersion of this population in every part of the country and its powerful links with the labour market had undermined the government's chances of deporting them. The issue of return was not the main problem of the Iranian government during the 1980s, since the internal situation in Afghanistan did not allow the refugees to return. But, a decade later in 1990s, the issue became the top priority in Iran's immigration policy. From the beginning, however, it was clear that the permission to live in the urban and rural areas would make it almost impossible to get the refugees back to their country.

As mentioned before, there is a well-known statement from Ayatollah Khomeini that emphasises on the idea of Islam without borders. This sentence has been the main idea legitimising the presence of refugees in Iran so far. According to that, the national geographical and national boundaries do not matter in the unification and solidarity of Muslims. The basic question is how this religious approach has been aligned with official policies and insistence on the return of refugees to their country. An official in the Interior Ministry explained this apparently paradoxical situation in a newspaper interview way:

Our general policy is ... while in Islam, the borders do not have the conventional meaning, and all Muslims are considered a unitary nation, but this does not mean that when Muslims were invaded in one part of the planet they have to leave

the front and flee to other Islamic countries. Although we accept that Afghans are now in the house of their brothers, but you acknowledge that brother's house is not one's own house, so they should not forget that they must return to their homes one day and they should constantly try to clear their homeland of unwanted enemies. We hope that one day all Afghans return to their country (Sorouroddin, 1981).

In many official comments in that period, the phrase "the house of one's brother is not one's own home" is repeatedly mentioned and the necessity of eliminating "material attractiveness" of Iran for refugees was emphasised. All of that indicates the two-sided approach of the Iranian government exercising the principle of brotherhood and the necessity of returning simultaneously.

What matters most here is the interpretation of the phrase "Islam doesn't have borders", which was presented by Iranian officials in the quotation above. If the foundation of the immigration policy had been based solely on this fundamental religious principle, then speaking of Iranians and Afghans as different nationals or insisting on the return of Afghans would have been meaningless. It is clear that at the executive level, this slogan could not be the only criterion for deciding on the future of refugees in Iran. What made this principle moderated and, of course, largely ineffective, was the importance of "not leaving the Muslim front" mentioned in the

quotation above. In fact, with the argument that whenever Muslims were attacked and forced to leave their land, they should return and retrieve the lost land, there will be a complementary principle to the principle of "Islam has no borders". The practical result of this combination was that Afghan refugees are temporary guests at their brother's home. Therefore, it can be concluded that the introduction of the principle of Islam with no borders was to provide legitimacy for a policy for which there wasn't any alternative at the time.

## CONCLUSIONS

During the 1980s, Iran witnessed a unique experience of hosting millions of refugees from the neighbouring country. The specific policies and actions of government within this period could only happen in a revolutionary society that defines itself as the representative of all oppressed people in the world. This article tried to answer two main questions: 1) why did Iran's government in the early 1980s apply the open-door policy in the Afghan refugee crisis and settle them in cities and villages instead of border camps? and 2) what were the consequences of this policy for Iran that led to closed door policy in later decades? These two questions are important because Iran did not repeat this policy in the following years, but the results of this policy are still evident in the country.

Three possible explanations have been offered by scholars for the implementation of open door policy. Some authors emphasized on the importance of Afghan labour force

for Iran during 1980s when many young Iranians were fighting in western borders with Iraq (UNHCR, 2004). Others argue that Afghan refugees gave Iran the opportunity to train and mobilize Afghan fighters to influence power balance in Afghanistan (Milani, 2006). The third explanation focuses on Iran's revolutionary attitudes of the time and its openly stated support for all oppressed people (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2005; Yarbakhsh, 2018). Although all these parameters worth noting but this paper argues that with close examination of the situation it is evident that the open door policy was not the result of any calculated decision or a solely ideological one.

It is emphasized that open door policy should be analysed in the light of socio-political contexts of the post-revolutionary Iran. The fundamental transformation of the bureaucratic system after the Islamic Revolution and the dismantling of the previous regime's decision-making apparatus left the revolutionary government few options in evaluating its immigration policy. Moreover, being engaged in domestic political affairs and the imposed war with Iraq, it was not possible to decide other than to open the borders to Afghan refugees and let them settle throughout the country. Funds were limited for the construction of camps and the international institutions did not contribute much due to hostile relations between Iran and the West. The revolutionary atmosphere of the Iranian society at that time, and the importance of defending the oppressed population of the world as a universal strategy of the

revolutionary government, was also two facilitating factors in opening the borders and legitimising the acceptance of the Afghan population. In the years to come, all these conditions changed, and as a result, the open door policy gave it's place to a closed door policy in similar circumstances in 1990s.

The consequences of this refugee policy should also be analysed considering the economic conditions of the Iranian society in the 1980s. Economic pressure resulting from engaging in war with Iraq and hostile relationships with Western powers made it difficult for the government to provide the primary needs of its population. In this situation, hosting millions of refugees was a generous action by the government. In a situation where the country was suffering from a shortage of goods and acute economic problems, local dissatisfaction with the presence of Afghan citizens and their use of the country's resources and services was a common phenomenon, especially in the eastern provinces. Competition over limited resources, goods, and job opportunities had resulted in a hostile confrontation between locals and refugees on some occasions. Wide public dissatisfaction with Afghan immigrant's presence in local communities especially in eastern Iran is supposed to be a main force in restrictive immigration policies in later decades.

As ethnic competition theory suggests, antagonism toward immigrants among ethnic majority members intensifies as the competition over scarce resources such as jobs, housing and welfare grows

(Scheepers et al., 2002; Schneider, 2008). Phizacklea and Miles (1980) showed that the working class can play a central role in the problematisation of immigrants through projecting their misfortunes to the migrant's presence. Limited evidences available from 1980s and presented in this paper indicate social pressure on the authorities to handle the refugee situation and control the size of afghan population in local communities. Toward the end of this decade, despite the ongoing insistence of political leaders on their support for the earlier refugee policy, opposition grew stronger especially in the parliament.

Later in the 1990s, the official immigration policy changed dramatically, and constraints on Afghan refugees intensified. Refugees became problematized by the government to the extent that repatriation policy led to violent actions at some points (Monsutti, 2005). Up to this time, Afghan refugees have remained a socially excluded population in Iran; with the failure of the repatriation policy, their living conditions requires much more attention from scholars and policymakers.

The lack of available data on Iran's refugee policy during 1980s was the main limitation of this study. There are thousands of official documents related to afghan refugees in Iran's National Library which are still classified under limited access documents. Access to these documents can reveal more about the situation and clarifies the reason for policies and regulations of the time.

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