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Formation of hatred emotions toward Afghan refugees in Iran: A grounded theory study

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Abstract

Most studies on refugee-host relations focus on attitudes toward refugees based on ethnic and religious differences. In the current research, we focus on how negative attitudes toward refugees are formed in a non-WEIRD context between followers of the same faith.

Specifically, we explore the social processes in work to build negative emotions against Afghan refugees in a societal context, Iran, that bears considerable cultural and historical similarities to Afghan society in comparison to the other nations as the host. Adopting the grounded theory approach, twenty-two in-depth interviews were carried out with Iranians who expressed highly negative emotions toward Afghans in a city, Shiraz, which is home to a large Afghan community. Beyond identifying the process underlying negative emotions, i.e., hate; our findings show Afghanophobia as the core reversible social process. Accordingly, despite the counter-processes, Afghanophobia resists positive changes, particularly during antagonistic intergroup encounters.

Keywords: Afghan Refugees, hatred emotions, migration studies, Iran, Intergroup Relations

As of December 2021, Iran hosts around 3.6 million Afghan refugees, the highest number of Afghan refugees in the world, and at least 2.5 million of them are undocumented individuals living in urban centers. Similar to refugee-host society relations in other parts of the world (e.g., Artiles & Molina, 2011; Borneman & Ghassem-Fachandi, 2017; Davidov & Semyonov, 2017; Wirtz, van der Pligt, & Doosje, 2016; Yakushko, 2009), interactions between Afghan refugees and Iranians have been mainly conflictual. Preliminary evidence suggests that many Iranians consider Afghans as a threat to their employment and to the country while Afghans express discontent against Iranians and Iranian society in general (Ruhani & Anbarlou, 2019). This hostile intergroup context has been dotted with collective violent encounters (e.g., Alef, 2014). Given the cultural and religious similarities, this is surprising.

Despite a large number of Afghan refugees in Iran and the negative intergroup context between Afghan refugees and Iranians, there is no research, known to us, that investigates the social and psychological roots of the conflictual intergroup relations between the refugees and Iranians. Here, we focus on the emotional experiences of Iranians as an antecedent of Afghanophobia and the ensuing intergroup conflict between the Afghan refugees and the Iranians. Using Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), we elaborate on the possible mechanisms, i.e., social and psychological processes that fuel hatred and negative emotions against Afghans in Iran. Moreover, we also describe the social processes which perpetuate Afghanophobia despite positive experiences. Below, we first discuss research on emotions in the context of refugee-host society relations elsewhere. We then outline the research context briefly elaborating on the background of Afghan existence in Iran. Next, we report our findings on how negative perceptions of Afghans in Iran and perceptions of them as sources of threat feed into negative emotional experiences creating a self-sustaining cycle of negative evaluations, threat perceptions, and negative emotions which includes but is not limited to

hatred toward Afghan refugees. In doing so, we document how negative refugee-host relations are formed and sustained despite at least some shared characteristics, i.e., religion and language, in a non-WEIRD society and one of the least accessible contexts worldwide, Iran.

Iranian refugees and Afghan refugees share many similarities, yet there are also significant cultural, religious, and linguistic differences between them. In Iran, Shia Muslims outnumber Sunnis by a large margin, in contrast, Sunnis make up the majority of the population in Afghanistan. However, both groups have a deep respect for Islam as a religion and share many common religious practices. Meanwhile, both members gain from knowing at least some basic information about the other branch of Islam (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022). Regarding the spoken language, in addition to Dari which is nearly the same as Farsi (the official language of Iranians), Afghanistan has several other languages spoken by different ethnic groups e.g., Pashto, Uzbeki, Turkmeni, etc (Translators without Borders, 2020).

Afghans migrated to Iran in three waves. The first was during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during 1978-1985. The second occurred during 1989-1995 following the civil war in Afghanistan and the third wave was triggered after the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan during 1995-2001 (Modrzejewska-Leśniewska, 2020). Iranian governments have upheld different policies, ranging from open to closed doors, toward Afghans. They were warmly and particularly welcomed in 1979 during the period following the Iranian revolution, such that more than 95% of them were accommodated in cities rather than camps, and Afghan children were provided with extensive educational opportunities despite limitations of the national education system (Sadeghi, 2007).

These amicable relations later soured when the financial repercussions of the Iran-Iraq war hit Iranian society. Afghans were mistreated systematically and deported extensively

from Iran (e.g., Alef, 2014; Ashrafi & Moghissi, 2002; Chatty, 2010; Omidver et al., 2013). Despite the adverse conditions for Afghans, many of them opted to stay due to the civil war of the 1990s in Afghanistan. However, the situation got worse simultaneously with the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. and the downfall of the Taliban. The Iranian government then devised a repatriation plan for the Afghans living in Iran. Afghans were widely introduced as the main cause of unemployment by formal and informal media, and many other problems were attributed to their presence (Kazemi, 2007). The open-door policy was replaced with a closed-door policy which deprived many Afghans from their rights, benefits, and facilities e.g., prevention from registering marriages, having autonomous schools, and even leading to expulsion from the country along with extreme violence and even with casualties (Siavoshi, 2022). Even the term “economic migrants” was used instead of the term refugee to justify the ethical and social dimension of the expulsion of refugees (Sadeghi, 2007).

In addition to the governmental policies, Iranian society also treated Afghans with contempt. Hatred towards the Afghan refugees and attribution of the social, cultural, and economic ravages to them, a lack of awareness about Afghan culture, and resentment of their presence, all strongly featured the Iranian society in their treatment of Afghans. Taken together, these social dynamics lead to the current antagonistic guest/host encounters (Siavoshi, 2022). However, so far, there has been no study that investigates the reasons behind such hostile intergroup relations in Iran. In the following, we review the established theoretical frames on host–migrant relations mainly in the western context. Given the relative absence of research on host migrant relations in contexts with no religious differences, we use this basis to interpret our findings (Charmaz, 2003), whereas we intentionally do not let these concepts draw our attention away from themes emerging naturally from our data (Holton, 2010).

Scholars emphasized on symbolic threats that challenge the morals, values, and social cohesion of the host community (Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993; Murray & Marx, 2013). Negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety have also been highlighted as factors incorporate to create perceptions of threat (Stephan, Renfro, Esses, Stephan, & Martin, 2005). The former refers to the creation of negative expectations about the immigrants' future behaviors whereas the latter refers to the feeling of uneasiness in presence of the out-group member, particularly in the case of groups with a history of conflicts (Wirtz, van der Pligt, & Doosje, 2015). Other studies evaluated the role of each category of threats (e.g., Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999; Stephan, Renfro, Esses, Stephan, & Martin, 2005).

On the other hand, if hosts consider the newcomers economically beneficial, they are less likely to posit negative emotions against them (Bansak, Hainmueller, & Hangartner, 2016; Ford et al., 2012). Studies on Western societies demonstrate that emotions that hosts experience vary regarding the guests' countries of origin, ethnicity, and religion (Goodwin, Raines & Cutts, 2017; Heath & Richards, 2016). These negative emotional experiences toward the migrants also vary as a function of host society members' level of education, political orientation, and age (Heath & Richards, 2016; Winkler, 2015).

Most of this research however has exclusively focused on western social settings where contextual factors such as media discourse and tough laws against newcomers, accompanied by intensifying right-wing ideologies are in work to escalate the intentions to overlook the migrants' rights who are widely perceived as a threat (da Silva Rebelo et al., 2021). The generalizability of such findings to the different social and political settings where the above-mentioned factors do not exist, however, seems problematic and demands further examination. Here, we focus on how these processes toward Afghan migrants unfold in the Iranian context.

Afghan immigrants in Iran experience adverse living conditions from various aspects (e.g., Divkolaye & Burkle Jr, 2011; Takbiri et al., 2020). According to the review conducted by Roozbeh et al (2018), they suffer from considerable economic burdens and healthcare issues which are mainly rooted in their low socioeconomic status. These include but not limited to adverse health conditions, limitations in accessing food, and insufficient access to vaccination, and physical and mental disorders. Meanwhile, Afghan women particularly experience more health challenges compared to men due to the traditional subordinating roles of females (Amiri et al., 2019). Limited research on hostile Afghani-Iranian intergroup relations has documented Afghan refugees' experiences related to mistreatment and hostility. Focusing exclusively on Afghan women's experiences in the host society, Ross-Sheriff (2006) provided a social actor image of Afghan women in the host society rather than generally perceived as *helpless victims*. Accordingly, Afghan women take an active role in protecting their family members during the exile period notwithstanding perceived discrimination. Other lines of research has investigated the emotions of the host society towards newcomers, but not specifically targeted Afghan community. Among them, one line of research focused on realistic threats to the welfare of hosts (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Pereira, Vala, & Costa-Lopes, 2010). In a similar vein, Iranians are also potentially susceptible to widely perceive Afghan guests as a threat to their tangible resources, e.g., public facilities, educational and health infrastructures, particularly because of long-time economic crises and financial sanctions imposed by the West (Karimi Moughari, 2008).

We believe that understanding the formation of hatred towards Afghans in Iran is important for several reasons. First, this provides us with the opportunity to examine the extent to which the current western-focused literature can be successfully applied to explain the hostility toward immigrants in different contexts. Second, due to similar cultural and religious backgrounds, one could assume that Iranians and their Afghan guests are likely to

experience positive intergroup interactions. The findings from the present could contribute toward establishing whether this is the case or not. Although migration and refugee experiences have received much attention over the last two decades (e.g., Castles, 2010; De Haas, 2010; O'Reilly, 2013). The great majority of literature has concentrated on one or two sources of anti-immigrant attitudes at a time such as contact or marginalization theories - yielding in an incomplete image (Rustenbach, 2010). This study, however, aims to provide a more comprehensive account of the social processes fueling the negative feelings against newcomers in a least accessible and researched context. What is more, the existing research has been predominantly conducted in WEIRD (e.g., Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Cavaille, C., & Marshall, 2019; Heinrich, 2020) contexts. As the global shifts showed us, countries that are known to be sending countries are rapidly transforming into host countries. (e.g., Turkey and Iran). Although there is a burgeoning line of research on refugee/immigrant–host society relations in Turkey (for a review, see Özkan et al., 2021; Ünver et al., 2022), Iran has not received similar scientific attention.

In earlier work, using exploratory-survey research (ANON, 2015), we investigated the emotions of Shirazi citizens towards Afghans. Findings showed that approximately 70% of the citizens reported highly negative emotions towards Afghans. Whereas only about 2% reported a low negative social emotion towards Afghans. The same source reveals that not only overwhelming majority of Shirazi citizens express a large social distance towards Afghans (as 80% of people interviewed reported that their direct contact with Afghans was low), but also, they were merely aware of the customs and culture of Afghans (nearly 70% of them reported a low awareness about Afghans). Additionally, systematic encounters, referring to various camps in Shiraz or other places, interviews with Afghans and the Bureau of Immigration, show the extent of this situation, and the encounters with Afghans are mostly

tense leading to negative emotional experiences. To sum up, the research mentioned above showed that the emotions of Iranians toward Afghans have been more negative than positive.

Iran has been one of the first destinations of Afghan refugees in recent decades, but studies that systematically address the associated challenges of entering the newcomers to the host society do not exist till now. The current study, therefore, is designed to provide a detailed account of the processes underlying the formation of negative feelings toward Afghans in a less studied social setting, Iran.

Method

Participants and Data Collection

The research was carried out by 22 adult participants in Shiraz which is the capital of the Fars province of Iran and one of the metropolitan cities in Iran that is widely home to Afghan immigrants. Table 1 depicts brief information about our participants such as educational level, gender, self-reported social class, and age. As shown in Table 1, most of our interviewees were female (15 females, 7 males). Our participants' ages ranged from 19 to 30 years old ($M = 25.31$, $SD = 3.38$). The selection criteria of interviewees was to acknowledgement of harbouring negative attitudes against Afghans. In this vein, the participants were selected by asking people on social networks (online/offline) to introduce those with negative emotions toward Afghans. The interviews were organized in Shiraz, the capital of Fars province, in 2018. It is worth noting that Fars was among the five-first Iran provinces with the highest number of Afghan populations according to the latest nationwide census (Alef, 2020).

It is estimated that the city has tens of thousands of authorized and unauthorized Afghans, most of whom work and live inside the city. Due to the large size of the Shiraz population (nearly 1,900,000 at the 2016 census), we have gone through various steps for the refinement and selection of participants in the study. In this regard, we have used a purposive

and theoretical sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The selection criteria of interviewees were negative attitudes against Afghans. In this vein, the participants were selected by asking people on social networks (online/offline) to introduce those with negative emotions toward Afghans. In the meantime, participants were first selected in neighborhoods and areas where Afghans have a strong presence. After conducting a couple of initial interviews, we relied on theoretical sampling to conduct the new interviews. In other words, diversity drove recruitment. Our sampling strategy gradually changed from homogeneity to heterogeneity of participants in terms of their attributions. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face and took place in both private, participants' own homes, and public places. Participants were invited to sign a consent form demonstrating that they recognized the nature of the research and that their contribution was entirely voluntary.

We tried to extend the dispersion of the sample to the refinement of the theory and collection of more useful information and richer categories. Therefore, our interviews ended in the 20th case when theoretical saturation was achieved (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is worth noting that the sample comprised 22 cases, two of which were added after conducting the study to assess the trustworthiness and validity of the research findings. To ensure the dependability of the collected data and analysis procedure, we presented the research to four of our colleagues who were experts in the qualitative approach. Also, the results were presented to four people (two non-participants and two participants who held negative emotions and were not interviewed), including two men and two women. This procedure helped us to establish the validity of our findings and have more confidence in them.

Data Analysis

The current research employed the Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to gather and analyze the data. The method is particularly useful for gaining detailed insights into social phenomena, even with small sample sizes (Patton, 2005). This study

followed Flick's (2018) suggestions to improve the ethics of the research. In this regard, initially, we tried to provide the participants with comfort and convenience. All the interviews were face-to-face and conducted in both private and public places. Moreover, before starting the interviews, each individual was invited to sign a consent form demonstrating that he or she recognized the nature of the research and that his or her contribution was entirely voluntary. Upon consent, we audio-recorded the interviews. The initial interviews were unstructured.

First, we tried to encourage the participants to talk via ice-breakers mainly around two main themes: whether and how much they have been in contact with the Afghans. The second theme was about the quality of their contacts. After each interview, audio recordings were transcribed allowing us to review the data before the next interview. We shifted gradually to semi-structured interviews around emergent themes. The total length of interviews was 910 minutes ranging from 18 to 93, resulting in overall 60,000 words when transcribed. The following steps were taken in the process of data analysis: (1) Creating and organizing data files; (2) consulting the background literature, and preparing marginal notes for initial coding; (3) Describing the categories resulting from coding; (4) Selecting a category resulted from open coding, as the central phenomenon in the axial coding process; (5) Selective coding and relating the categories to each other to develop the storyline and (6) Providing a visual model (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

Our research aimed to explore the social processes behind the formation of negative emotions against Afghan refugees in Iran. The five extracted categories are briefly defined here: (1) *Emotional dissonance due to tense atmosphere* illustrates the emotional experience of participants from the presence of Afghans in Iran (2) *Unhygienic lifestyle* elaborates how our participants evaluate the health conditions of Afghans (3) *Costly losses and benefits*

demonstrates the participants' understanding from the objective consequences of Afghans' immigration to Iran (4) *Shirazi identity breakdown* shows the participants' concerns about the effects of Afghans on their identity (5) *Phobia of sexual violence* describes the fear that our participants experience in the presence of Afghans. The core category entitled *Afghanophobia; the social construction of negative emotion* depicts how negative feelings against Afghans formed among our interviewees. In the following sections, we have elaborated on the explored categories.

Emotional Dissonance Due to Tense Atmosphere

Participants voiced various reasons based on their knowledge of Afghans – noting that most were rooted in the information provided by Iranian public mass media, especially IRIB¹. They believed that Afghans who entered Iran were escaping bearing from adverse living conditions in their own country. In addition to these inhibiting factors that forced Afghans away from their country, our participants frequently stated lax border control and poor immigration laws made Iran an attractive destination for Afghans. Our participants also referred to the tolerance of the Iranian administration as an antecedent for Afghan refugees to come to Iran. What Omid stated, clarifies this perception:

“If our country set strict rules for their [Afghans’] entry, the genius ones would come to our country, this would be much wiser than now! But when we see now.... it is a war-torn country, there are many poor people with cultural poverty there, poverty is in their lives, their materials and they have spiritual issues... their attitude, their behavior, well, these kinds of people are entering now”

¹ . The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation

According to our participants, Afghans after traveling to Iran were able to engage in economic activities and stay away from the war and other hazards that existed in their home country. Leila described the situation as follows:

“Well, because of their country's problems like [low] the value of their money, they haven't been able to find a job for a long time in their own country, and the work they do here is much more profitable than what they do in their own country”

Participants also reported that many of them have had occasional encounters with Afghan refugees. Notwithstanding, we realized that our participants' encounters with Afghan refugees were superficial. In such process, the participants' understanding became oriented and their mental worlds were growing distant, and their social judgments were intensified based on superficial affairs. Accordingly, they started to make value judgments which lead to the *othering* of Afghans. For instance, the participants believed that the presence of Afghans is associated with cultural hazards, for instance, inappropriate clothing of Afghans in public spaces like transportation tools, public organizations, and hospitals.

The participants asserted that Afghan newcomers, living in Shiraz, have changed their strategy from defensive to aggressive over time. This means that Afghan refugees have transformed to being bullies who continuously violate the rules- do not show commitment to the civic duties. In this regard, the participants believed that the presence of Afghans was associated with objective hazards like the seizure of facilities. Masume stated in this regard:

“Their illiteracy is a problem, and that their use of the educational facility of our schools is another, that's because, as it seems to me, the facilities are too limited that our children are also deprived.”

Some of our participants were exposed to a tense social atmosphere perceived to be triggered by negative media coverage of Afghans. Almost all the participants have experienced conflicting emotions in these areas; meaning that they not only experienced

negative emotions e.g., fear, anger, and hatred but compassion too. That is because they continuously reconsidered their previous cognitive evaluations- constantly questioning their evaluations and trying to replace them with new and more positive ones. However, they failed to handle their dissimilar emotions through re-expanding Afghanophobia discourses. For example, Banafshe stated in this regard:

“I was a kid, and scared of them, that's why my attitude changed about them and I don't like them. But at the same time, I pity them so much, I believe their children are guiltless, but they do not observe many rules in Shiraz, many things.”

Unhygienic Lifestyle

Participants believed that the presence of Afghans was a source of threat to their health - understanding them as people with unhygienic lifestyles. Our interviewees frequently stated that Afghans had a very poor hygiene even in their own country and this led to an unhealthy lifestyle. Participants stated that Afghans lacked hygiene even in Afghanistan, because they thought that Afghanistan was an “underdeveloped” country in social and economic terms, thus, their hygiene level was also low. Zeinab stated in this regard:

“The things I saw, many of them have health problems. If I have seen ten Afghans, seven or eight of them have such issues, maybe two or three ones are an exception but most are such!”

According to interviewees, some reasons e.g., living in small and old houses without appropriate health facilities and mainly located in the suburbs with poor health systems have led to the unhygienic lifestyle of Afghan refugees. They also had a particular emphasis on Afghans’ body odor, which they attributed to high fat consumption and drug abuse (taking Naswār- a type of drug). Participants stated that this foul smell could be smelt even from far distances which are described as intensively annoying. As Kurosh asserted:

“Afghan health is a genetic and cultural issue; I mean we must change the whole Afghans. We can't change the Afghans, their culture, and their genetics, nothing can be done for them because their culture is so. For example, you can send an Iranian, like, to the bathroom because of bad hygiene condition, because, for example, his culture and genetics is alright, but it's not true for an Afghani! The reason is his genetics and culture!”

Some of our participants believed that hygiene is not an important element to be internalized during Afghans' socialization and that this “unhygienic lifestyle” even is rooted in their genetics. In other words, they labeled Afghans naturally unhygienic, disordered, indecent, and dirty people. In their belief, the Afghans continue their unhygienic social ethics in the public and urban spaces and have no respect for public health. The participants hold that the unsanitary life of Afghans has led to the outbreak of pollution and diseases from Afghanistan to Iran and they even spread the diseases that had already been eradicated in Iran. As Omid stated:

“Speaking about cleanliness they are at level zero! You can't look at them. At times, their clothes, even their appearance, their long beard, without shaving, even a tiny bit, they are toe to head pollution, living pollution that moves”

According to participants, Shirazi citizens generally resist contact with Afghan refugees. For instance, many students are even reluctant to sit next to their Afghan peers, as described by Masoud: *“If I was free, I would have thrown them out. If I could, I would have thrown them out, I would have thrown them out, but I couldn't!”* However, participants got upset after reflecting on their negative emotions or behaviors e.g., objecting to them, changing their seats in public transportation, they have displayed in their encounters with “unsanitary Afghans”. When they bracketed the situation of facing unsanitary life conditions of Afghans (Epoché/Bracketing) and consequently thought about their actions and feelings,

they got upset about their negative emotions. Despite this could be a sign of a change from negative feelings to positive ones, such positive reflections were not durable. The negative emotions came up again when facing Afghans in public spaces. Actually, in the time of perceived unsanitary conditions in Afghan lives, the participants thought that their appearance has become untidy, the likelihood of becoming ill increased and they smell like Afghans. They also transferred their negative emotions to other friends, relatives, acquaintances, and family. As Banafshe says:

“I always bring an argument with me about them, in 148², (referring to the bus line No. 148). Always 148 is discussing Afghans! Afghan Stories! They were saying that once there was a child in the bus, they just pulled over the bus, the child went out and pissed in the street and they moved again”

Costly losses and benefits

Furthermore, educated participants had considerable concerns about the Iranian job market. These participants emphasized the adverse effects of this on the Iranian youth especially those who work in manual jobs e.g., building construction, gardening, and sewing. All in all, they stated that Afghans are taking all the jobs in these sectors. Our participants frequently asserted that Afghans have made Iranians unemployed due to their high working hours and low wages. Mina described the situation: *“They are the occupying workforce; they are ruining the labor market because they work at lower rates.”*

However, according to the participants, both in institutional and non-institutional terms, their work and employment are supported in Iran; because private and governmental contractors are greatly inclined to employ Afghans due to illegal benefits e.g., tax evasion, and not paying insurance premiums. Samira stated the situation as follows:

² Referring to the bus line No. 148 which usually witnesses a large number of Afghans

“They are sinking the capital out of the country, we generate money, and they invest it in their own country. They buy a house, land, and their families, for example, many of them are here but their family is over there. Well, this doesn't have a positive effect on the economic cycle, we can pass the money in our hands and produce ourselves.”

In addition to these perceived losses attributed to Afghans, our interviewees also expressed concerns on Afghans not paying taxes due to their illegal presence in Iran, or they benefit from various free amenities, services, and facilities. According to the participants, Afghans did not spend the income they earn in Iran and sent most of it to Afghanistan to support their families who are still in Afghanistan. In other words, they believed that there is an unequal trade exchange between Iran and Afghanistan and this has incurred a dramatic impact on Iran's economy. This process seems to be ever-accelerating because the presence of Afghans in Iran is growing. The participants showed various reactions but in the not same direction, when encountering such a situation. They tried to bargain for Iranian workers in work opportunities and simultaneously represented the Afghans as “others” who dominated the Iranian job market. As stated by Setareh:

“We recommend, for example, to our family, like, when they employ workers for their home, for example, they mostly employ Iranians, rather than foreigners in our home, so we will have more security, if they don't come to work, we don't employ them also.”

The participants felt upset and irritated when they saw the booming market of Afghans and incurred heavy emotional pressures. But in the meantime, as they rethought, they concluded that the Iranians themselves must be blamed in this regard. Accordingly, Iranians, and particularly Iranian workers were not able to compete with Afghans to take the given vacancies. They attributed some old characteristics such as laziness to Iranian workers

to explain the differentiation between Iranians and Afghan workers concerning their job competencies.

Shirazi Identity Breakdown

One particular theme that emerged during the interviews relates to symbolic threats. The participants attributed the dissolution of Shirazi identity to the existence of a large population of Afghans, their unhygienic lifestyle, as well as their dominance in the business market of Shiraz. These participants put particular emphasis on their interests in the history of Shiraz and more broadly Iran. They hold the idea that the presence of Afghans in the city is one of the main factors for blemishing the genuine historical/cultural identity of Shiraz. As Kimia stated:

“If they don't ban it, they'd grow more in number, because you know that their number is not low. Isfahan Gate [a famous neighborhood of Shiraz] is known as the Afghan neighborhood. The crossroad is near here. The traditional texture is now under their control, that is, it has caused Shirazi people to abandon here, and the culture of the city is under question.”

According to what our participants declared, Shirazi citizens were scared of losing their well-known historical fame due to the presence of Afghans. They maintained that not only “Shirazi identity” has been damaged by their presence, but also the Iranian collective identity, as a whole, was threatened. In other words, Afghans have questioned Iran’s collective “Us” and violated the Iranian identity. On the other hand, according to the participants, Afghan women due to marrying at early ages and a high fertility rate caused to the booming Afghan population. This has intensified the domination of the main traditional area of the city.

All in all, the participant’s main views were that the damages were incurred by the ethnocentrism of Afghans, interfaith and interethnic marriages, the spread of Sunnism,

aesthetic issues (distorting the tourists' viewpoints about the city), and inappropriate socialization of children caused by Afghan refugees. In addition to the thought of "negative" cultural transformation due to the Afghan presence, the old areas of the city would be compromised in terms of security, according to our participants. In this sense, the old and traditional texture of the city has turned unprecedentedly insecure. Furthermore, the participants thought that by living in Iran, Afghans became familiar with Iran's geopolitical information which might they might use in inappropriate ways. They also hold that this issue is placed alongside the two facts: On the one hand, Afghans might hold Takfiri and Talibanistic ideologies and on the other hand, Afghans were known for their involvement in numerous terroristic activities in the past. All these factors in the view of participants threatened the identity of the city, drawing it closer to its destruction. What Mehdi expressed, shows that Iranians have a significant concern that Afghan refugees abused their gained information for terrorism-related purposes:

"You know what the main problem is? Some time ago, a minibus was stranded by ISIS, in Iraq, and I heard the story from arrested people. They described that ISIS talked to us one by one, now quoting on behalf of the man caught by ISIS: they took us out of the minibus, leaving us in a corner of a room, they pulled out one of us, we went out one by one, I went out, suddenly a man came and began speaking, with an almost Iranian dialect 'hi, where are you from?' I figured it out from his face that he was an Afghan from the ISIS group. 'What do you do?' he asked, I said I live in that place, and he said 'where do you live?' I said Fars province, 'where in Fars province?' I said to Jahrom, 'where in Jahrom?' I mean he precisely knew area inch by inch! He said 'what are you doing in Jahrom' I said, manufacturing tiles, and he said 'where do you tile? There are only three tile manufacturers in Jahrom, do you work with [a name]?' He said that his information was so accurate about our country, that I really dropped my

teeth thinking that they could easily domain our country, why? Because they are familiar with our culture, geography, people.”

The participants believed that Afghans do not obey the citizenship ethics and obligations even after a long time living in Iran. Accordingly, Afghans have been extremely reluctant to integrate into Iranian society. This situation, according to the participants, not only caused losses of opportunities related to the city but prevent investment efforts due to the inappropriate living appearance of Afghans in the traditional places of Shiraz. The participants argued that this was mainly due to the ineffectiveness of regulatory bodies, and decision-making institutions. Accordingly, neither the regulatory bodies have been concerned about the security of the historical area of the city, nor have the cultural institutions of the city tried to protect the historical and cultural heritage. The described situation not only made our participants worry but also increased their sense of powerlessness among them. Therefore, they were looking for people and policy-makers who as a savior could expel Afghans from Iran and establish expulsion policies.

Furthermore, according to the participants, the presence of Afghans in traditional places has been associated with a bunch of dysfunctions in Iranian society. In their view, the national and historical culture, as well as Shirazi identity, would be destructed because Afghans' lifestyle has increasingly been diffused into the Iranian society. According to what our interviewees expressed, the elements of Afghans' lifestyles include having a weird accent, scrambling Farsi words, illiteracy, and unhygienic life.

Phobia of Sexual Violence

The participants' perceptions related to Afghans' existence have been associated with a tense atmosphere and cultural, economic, and health damages. Additionally, participants frequently quoted their childhood memories when their parents described Afghans as savage

and dangerous people. Actually, not only their parents, relatives, and peers scared them Afghans. As shared by Masume:

“I always remember from my childhood that when I became naughty, my mom always said, do not leave my hand, Afghans will kidnap you! I mean since childhood they dictated to us with such thoughts ... they always told us not to go there much [Shahcheragh neighborhood, a traditional place in Shiraz], don't go there by yourself, that is, all Shirazi people have such fear.”

The Afghanophobia partly is rooted in the collective memory of Iranians from the historical Afghans' invasion of Iran which resulted in regime change in Iran³, according to our participants, Hence, some of our participants considered Afghan refugees as violent, belligerent, and patriarchal people with historical hatred towards Iranians. As Omid stated,

“It's even written in the history that they attacked Iran and raped many Iranians, this is certain and there are documents, it's also in the history.”

The constructed feeling of Afghanophobia led our participants to intentionally avoid contact with Afghan refugees as much as possible. What is more, for those participants with academic educations and then more access to the internet, the media intensified the feeling of fear from Afghan guests.

Our participants experienced a growing fear of continually reading news about Afghans It was widely believed among Iranians that the majorities of Afghans in Iran are single or lead a single life. According to them, such a situation has left Afghans sexually unsatisfied. For this reason, some of our participants perceived that Afghan refugees were the

³ Shāh Mahmūd Hotak, also known as Shāh Mahmūd Ghiljī (lived 1697 – April 22, 1725), was an Afghan ruler who overthrew the heavily declined Safavid dynasty to briefly become the king of Persia from 1722 until his death in 1725 (Leandro, 2021)

potential to commit rape to satisfy their sexual needs. They believed that the Afghans not only commit brutal rapes in secret but also commit verbal and nonverbal harassment. As stated by Kosar:

“You know what is bad? That they say something to us! It's a very bad feeling! For example, they pass by us, then say something! I, for example, passed by them, and they say something to us, then looked at us and laughed! We say yikes, he told something and left! [With great surprise].”

Participants reported that they frequently watched videos of Afghans exerting sexual violence on Iranians. These videos usually show that a group of Afghans is sexually abusing Iranian women. The most famous clip was the one in which a group of Afghans collectively abused an Iranian girl who was first dancing for them and appeared to be on friendly terms with them. These images appear to evoke strong feelings whenever they have encounters with Afghans, and their mentality was generally shaped by these images. Afghan phobic society is susceptible to spreading lots of narratives in this respect and continually retells the rapes and activities of Afghans. These narrations also reinforced the media's reconstruction of rape and Afghanophobia. Shaghayegh described the situation as follows:

“I saw their crime in a movie where an Afghan kills a girl who is dancing for them in Iran. It occurs to my mind, by seeing that movie, I love dancing, my mentality was changed about dancing, but that movie made me have a bad mentality when I dance.”

One of the underlying reasons behind it was the cycle of crime and rape. They believed that the Afghans with illegal entry and presence, no trace and identification document, and thus, they were difficult to surveil. Their supposed rape culture and criminal lifestyle have been strengthened and intensified with illegal entry and presence, because after committing the crime, they were not only inaccessible, they could simply escape to their own

country or other neighboring countries. Participants argued that even those who were legally married to Iranians showed little commitment and considered Iranian women as *sexual commodities*.

In this respect, the participants generally believed that the regulatory and governing institutions did not provide Iranians with adequate supervision and protection from Afghan refugees. In their opinion, besides the country's deficient rules, the current protecting rules were not properly implemented against the Afghan offenders and criminals, and defined actions against them were minimal. However, when the participants realized that the regulatory and the governance institutions did not proceed with a serious and fundamental act against the criminal Afghans, they put their efforts to confront Afghans in their intragroup networks. In this regard, they opened up Afghan phobic and anti-Afghan conversations and discussions and frequently shared the hazards and risks of the presence of Afghans in Iran with their friends, relatives, and acquaintances. In this regard, they believed that *too much emphasis on human rights* would be troublesome and believed that this would lead to the expansion of Afghans' criminal acts. As described by Kurosh:

“Like, these people have no future for us, no profit for us, then, say, they do crimes also, then, we because of humanity and for human rights, like! Give them jobs! Give facilities! Then it's like biting the hand that feeds you!”

Although participants' feelings toward Afghans were heavily affected by the media's rape construction, they, in particular women, reconsidered their presumptions as they had not witnessed the criminal or rape activities of Afghans. Therefore, they came to the idea that their negative emotions had been inappropriately unfair and inaccurate. Consequently, they attempted to change their constructed negative attitude towards Afghans. However, in their first close in-person encounter with Afghans, the negative emotions were provoked again. they suffered from emotional stress including hatred feeling accompanied fear; because they

always consider the probability of being affected by perceived Afghans' criminal activities. Therefore, a group of participants, in particular men, displayed a strong tendency to stand up against Afghans in any possible way, that is, cleaning Iran from Afghans without considering any compassion and mercy.

The Core Category: Afghanophobia; the social construction of negative emotions

According to our analysis, Afghanophobia was extracted as the core category of our study. This concept as an abstract concept represents the central theme of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that interconnects all extracted categories and preserves the coherence of the extracted theory. Indeed, Afghanophobia, as a core category, reveals the central phenomenon of current research, uniting the whole process of study by connecting emerging themes. Accordingly, the fear feeling was mainly rooted in the social construction of negative emotions. In this vein, the term *the social construction of negative emotions* shows how Afghanophobia is formed while representing the direction, type, structure, and content of Afghanophobia. As stated in the preceding storyline, Afghanophobia was socially constructed. This means that social mechanisms e.g., the tense atmosphere, occupying the job market, perceived unhygienic lifestyles, fear of Shirazi identity breakdown, fear of rape, and fear of encountering Afghans, all were engaged in constructing the negative emotions in our under-studied context.

The negative collective memory of the Afghans dates back to the Afghans' invasion of Iran (October 1722). Historical books and historical narratives of the Afghans' invasion help the formation of such negative feelings among Iranians. In the meantime, the socialization of Afghanophobia was an obvious process among our participants. From childhood, Iranians grow up with horror stories that trigger Afghanophobia. Such negative images were intensified then with stereotypes formed through their lived experiences. The

poor living conditions of Afghans in Iran reflected them as *others* who were not suitable to be approached in person.

The Substantive Theory

The Substantive theory is depicted in the shape of the spiral model (see Figure 1). Spiral represents Afghanophobia, as the mainstream process that governs the whole study and is theorized as a “Constructed Construction” since it comprises how the five processes (that is, five extracted categories) based on negative emotions constructed Afghanophobia.

Figure 1. Here please

This demonstrates that, despite the fact that Afghanophobia was the primary active process driving this research, there was also a resistive stream attempting to prevent the development of Afghanophobia. This stream constantly displays the dynamicity of emotions in our context (shown as the dashed line in Figure 1). This uncompleted and small spiral, shown in Figure 1, demonstrates shows the reflections which people take against Afghanophobia. This indicates that a new and resisting process would rise, which would be set against the established construction of Afghanophobia. It would be motivated by factors such as universal emotional variables (passion for children, women, the elderly, and the poor), a lack of personal observation (absence of in-person observation of crimes, etc., in which Afghans participate), critical reflection on the negative emotions, capital ownership (in particular cultural capital), and gender allyship (being female). This means that despite the fact that Afghanophobia is an ever-developing process, an alternative process, which takes the form of reflexive emotions, works to combat it and offers fresh perspectives in favour of Afghan refugees.

The created construction and the resistive process start at the same place, as shown in the figure, but after that, they diverge. The dotted line in the following diagram joins the divergent stream to the main line. This divergent stream suggests that other processes that

fight against the development of Afghanophobia are being activated. But if an ever-growing Afghanophobia formation were there, the resistance process would fail. This failure happens as a result of running into a tough situation: the presence of Afghans. In other words, because of the negatively triggering societal processes, Afghanophobia, as a created structure, is continually "becoming" and being regenerated. The dynamics of resistant constructs fight the rise of Afghanophobia, but they ultimately fall short when faced with the anxiety-inducing encounter with Afghan refugees.

Limitations and Future Studies

The novelty of our findings notwithstanding, we do acknowledge the overall research and the findings might be subject to limitations. One particular limitation might be our sampling strategy. We recruited our participants from only one city in Iran, which may not be representative of the whole country. People in other cities with differing sizes of Afghan communities might have more positive or more negative experiences with and representations of the Afghan refugees. In addition, the majority of participants were women. Previous research shows that women might display higher levels of racial prejudice (Ekehammar et al., 2003). Future research should aim to address these limitations by including a more diverse sample and utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a more nuanced understanding of Afghanophobia in Iran.

Another possible limitation might be the use of "Afghan refugees" as the common denominator. Although there are significant racial, cultural, and social variations among Afghans living in Iran, our observations showed that Iranians typically ignore these distinctions. However, we believe that future studies might benefit from a particular focus on these distinctions.

Conclusion

Most research conducted on refugee/migrant-host society relations aims to provide a snapshot account of the underlying processes at a specific point in time mainly in WEIRD contexts in countries that are traditionally immigrant or refugee receiving countries. Accordingly, little is known about how existing animosity and negative attitudes towards refugees or immigrants are created and upheld, especially in countries that have recently been transformed from being immigrant or refugee sending countries into host countries. Emerging research elsewhere (e.g., Özkan et al., 2021; Smith-Castro, 2021; Ünver et al., 2022) highlights the complexity of refugee/immigrant-host society relations in emerging host countries where incoming communities and members of the host society share linguistic, ethnic, and religious features, particularly in non-WEIRD contexts. Our findings extend this line of research to perhaps one of the most under-researched societies in the world, Iran, and one of its target populations, Afghan refugees. We show how hatred and subsequent cognitive and emotional processes are the combined consequence of historical and present-day factors. By understanding these processes, we hope to contribute to a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the experiences of both refugees and host communities in Iran and beyond.

Based on the results of our research, we advise policymakers to support intercultural understanding between Iranians and Afghan refugees. This can be accomplished through community events that unite the two groups as well as intercultural programmes such as art classes. In addition, it is critical to give Afghan refugees access to necessities like clean water, sanitary facilities, and medical care. This will assist in enhancing their living circumstances and lessening unfavourable perceptions of their hygiene. The government should encourage a sense of national unity among all Iranians, regardless of their origin or immigrant status, in order to address worries about identity breakdown. By implementing

these policy recommendations, we may expect that the negative emotions towards Afghan refugees in Iran will be reduced.

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Table 1 Brief profile of participants

Raw	Name (aliases)	Education level	Gender	Social Class	Age
1	Samira	M.A	Female	upper middle	26
2	Masoud	PhD	Male	middle	28
3	Fatemeh	BA	Female	upper middle	23
4	Zahra	PhD	Female	upper	28
5	Shaghayegh	BA	Female	upper	19
6	Banafsheh	BA	Female	upper middle	19
7	Afsaneh	BA	Female	middle	20
8	Kosar	BA	Female	upper middle	20
9	Korush	M.A	Male	lower	27
10	Omid	M.A	Male	lower	26
11	Javad	PhD	Male	lower middle	28
12	Leila	BA	Female	middle	27
13	Kimia	M.A	Female	upper middle	30
14	Mohammad	M.A	Male	middle	26
15	Sara	M.A	Female	upper middle	26
16	Maryam	M.A	Female	middle	26
17	Zeinab	M.A	Female	upper middle	28
18	Masoumeh	M.A	Female	middle	26
19	Setareh	BA	Female	middle	21
20	Mehdi	PhD	Male	lower middle	28
21	Ali	PhD	Male	middle	29

22	Maryam	M.A	Female	middle	26
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Noting that all participants were Iranian and belonged to the Shiite (a branch of Islam - formal religion of Iranians)