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AFGHAN FORCED MIGRANTS IN LONDON

A Participatory Action Research and Autoethnography Approach

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Thesis in Sociology

presented to the Department of Sociology and Criminology

in the School of Policy & Global Affairs, City St Georges, University of London

31/05/2025

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I, Reza Hussaini, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis initially set out to use Participatory Action Research (PAR) to explore internal displacement in Afghanistan, following a bottom-up approach to knowledge production that challenges the dominant research approach in forced migration studies. However, the Taliban's takeover of Kabul and my subsequent evacuation disrupted the research. As a result, the project shifted into an ethnographic and autoethnographic study.

Attempts to apply PAR both in Afghanistan and later among Afghan evacuees in the UK faced considerable challenges. Although I am Afghan, my identity as a Hazara often positioned me as an outsider. In addition to that, the temporary and fragmented conditions of life in bridging hotels meant that stable communities—essential for participatory research—had not yet formed. These obstacles highlight the limitations of PAR in crisis settings, particularly when institutional and community support is absent.

Given these constraints, the research moved towards an ethnographic and autoethnographic approach to examine the lived experiences of Afghan forced migrants (evacuees) resettled in London, focusing on their unmet and failed expectations as it emerged from data.

A key influence on these expectations were the concepts of *Kharij* (abroad) and *Khariji* (foreigners), which shaped how Afghans imagined the Global North. *Kharij* was often seen as a place of order, fairness, and opportunity, in contrast to the instability and injustice of Afghanistan. This perception was reinforced through years of interaction with *Khariji*—including development workers, military personnel, NGO staff, and consultants—who were seen as symbols of powerful and benevolent systems that promised progress and inclusion. Many Afghan professionals internalised these ideals through their work with international organisations.

These expectations did not emerge in isolation. They were formed over time through prior experiences of exile and prolonged engagement with foreign missions. This shaped a belief among many that their loyalty, service, and risks would be recognised and rewarded with protection, respect, and opportunity in the Global North.

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Finally, heartfelt thanks to my family for their endless patience and understanding. I often feel that I placed my PhD above their lives and carry a sense of guilt for it. I am deeply grateful for their support and patience throughout this long and difficult journey.

Chapter 1: Introduction and research background

Introduction

In September 2020, I began my doctoral studies, focusing on internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan. There is an obvious and significant gap in the academic literature and in knowledge regarding internal forced displacement, particularly in Afghanistan. What research exists is usually applied and carried out for NGOs (Majidi et al, 2012; Schmeidel et al, 2010). With the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, forced displacement entered my own life, transforming me into a subject of my own study.

This is a thesis within a thesis: it is an insider analysis of a particular incidence of forced migration, but also an examination of a 'failed' attempt at using a particular methodology. Chapters two and three focus on methods literature and describe my attempts and the barriers to use Participatory Action Research (PAR), and the lessons learnt from the attempt. Chapter four reviews the empirical literature on forced migration, while chapters five to eight narrate my story, my family's, and that of those who, following the Taliban's retaking of Afghanistan, were evacuated to the UK as we attempted to settle and integrate into British society. When I eventually accepted that my preferred methodology was not feasible, and switched to an ethnography, an unexpected research question emerged from the data in grounded theory fashion: the core theme was the concept of expectations - the unrealised expectations of those evacuated in the autumn of 2021, expectations that those working with the evacuees believed to be unrealistic, so the question became: What shaped these expectations? Were they that unrealistic?

This thesis argues that expectations must be re-centred as an important analytical concept viewed through the lived perspectives of forced migrants themselves, ie not as passive hopes or aspirations but deeply informed moral, social, and political claims shaped by long-standing engagement with the Global north.

A key concept in relation to these expectations, is that of *kharij* (literally abroad). In what follows, I articulate this Dari/Persian concept to capture the layered expectations, experiences and knowledges that migrants bring with them into exile. This is the key conceptual contribution of this thesis. In this way, the work broadens the field's conceptual vocabulary and intervenes critically in Eurocentric modes of knowledge production within migration studies.

More methodological questions were: what conditions are necessary for PAR to work, and what conditions militate against the successful implementation of this methodology. The responses to these questions constitute this thesis' contribution to knowledge more broadly, and to knowledge production, epistemology and methodology more specifically. Throughout the thesis, I describe as honestly as I can my research practice, including the challenges and, in some case insurmountable, obstacles faced.

Finally, the thesis is a contribution to a small, but emerging body of scholarship on Afghanistan and Afghans by Afghan scholars, most of whom are now located outside Afghanistan, and, though this was not my original intention, specifically on the situation of Hazaras as they attempt to claim a place among those scholars.

Leaving Kabul

On the afternoon of 19 August, a small military aircraft accommodated around 40 people (men, women, and children from Afghanistan), mostly seated on the floor. I cast my last glance at the mountains of Kabul before the large door of the aircraft closed; it was the final image of Kabul that would imprint itself in my mind. After the plane took off, the loud and terrifying noise caused my ears to ache. Ehsan, my ten-year-old son, was holding his ears, tears streaming down his face. Time seemed to slip away from me; I think it was about two hours later, around dusk, that we landed at a deserted airport in Uzbekistan. Apart from a few Uzbek and Polish staff, no one else was there to welcome us. Upon disembarking, we walked a short distance to a Polish passenger aircraft and stood in line near the plane. A Polish soldier began counting us, perhaps

for the tenth time that day. We were all tested for COVID-19. After two days and one night of continuous gunfire amidst a crowd, wiped out by sleeplessness, fatigue, and hunger, I lay down on the ground. At that moment, a Polish photographer started taking pictures without asking our permission, which felt intrusive. We did not want anyone taking photos of us in that condition. My wife was distressed and muttered under her breath. A few steps ahead of me, a woman holding a child in her arms tried to hide her face with her scarf when the photographer approached her. She clearly felt uncomfortable, but the combination of a woman, a child, and their plight was too compelling for the photographer. Eventually, the journalist tried to justify his actions by saying in English that he had a child of similar age and wanted to take more pictures, adding that if the photos were published, our faces would be blurred. This was the extent of the engagement with us by the journalist after our silent protests. Later, speaking with the woman, I learned she did not understand English and it remained unclear who the photographer was and what would happen with the photos.

Now, I occasionally reflect on that incident, questioning why I didn't object to the photographer. I could have asked him not to take our photos or pointed out that his actions were inappropriate, but like everyone else there, I remained silent. Various scenarios now replay in my mind. For instance, if someone had taken my photo in Afghanistan under similar circumstances, I might have protested, though perhaps not thought much of it since personal consent for photography is not strictly observed there. However, the context was different now: beyond Afghanistan, in Europe, taking a photograph of someone in such a situation without consent is considered an invasion of privacy and disrespectful, which I knew from my work experience with foreigners in Afghanistan. I felt the photographer's actions were insulting, as if we had been reduced to mere objects (Ramsay, 2020) for his photographic narrative, and this angered me.

Sometimes, I think perhaps I didn't protest due to a fear of being labeled ungrateful, considering that the Polish government had helped us escape from Afghanistan. The foreigners had saved us again. The first time was in 2001 when the Americans and their allies came to 'save Afghan women', and now, as they withdrew, they saved 'us' again. They are 'saviors'. But now, I feel that my silence, and possibly that of others, was largely

due to the new situation we found ourselves in — being forced migrants. This status turned me, my family, and my fellow travellers into hot subjects for photographers, journalists, and later for policy makers and academics as well. This role influenced both our behaviour and reactions, consciously and subconsciously, shaping how we responded in these interactions.

Being a forced migrant extends far beyond legal, and academic definitions; it is a profound life situation embedded within a complex and intersecting political, economic, social, and psychological landscape. We fled in fear of an ideological and terrorist regime with which the American government had reached an agreement. We lost many things—homes, jobs, money. Our networks of friends, family, and our social capital vanished, leaving us to experience profound anxiety and fear. Simultaneously, we awaited entry into a country about which we knew very little except they were allies of the Americans who had invaded Afghanistan and were now leaving with them. What would await us? Where would we live? How would they (our hosts) receive us? How would we connect in this new society? How could we find work? What could we do? In those early moments, we did not know what to expect.

We found ourselves in a liminal, border-like, unstable position, separated from a clearly defined context in our society and not yet members of the new society. This influenced the behaviour and reactions of myself, my family, and my fellow travellers in every aspect. Similarly, this new situation may have also influenced the seemingly thoughtless behaviour of the photographer, who had interacted with us based on his own preconceptions. This highlights the complex dynamics at play where perceptions, expectations and realities intersect, affecting both the photographed and the photographer.

When I spoke with my fellow evacuees during this study about their life as forced migrants, we understood that our situation differed from that of other refugees who had entered using dangerous and risky paths. We were apparently 'selected' and 'saved' and brought to safety directly by the host, thus bypassing the need to navigate the complex and lengthy asylum system about which we had heard sad and harsh stories. This distinct path seemed not only to set us apart from other asylum seekers and refugees but also

highlighted the varied experiences and expectations within the broader context of forced migration. The UK government didn't consider us refugees but labelled us 'evacuees' who were 'saved' and treated us differently legally.

However, my experience was also particular: although evacuated to Poland because I had studied there some years previously, I had a student visa issued before the collapse of the Afghan Republic that enable me to bring my family to the UK shortly after evacuation to Poland, and so was not considered an evacuee or a forced migrant in the UK, but a student. Every country had their own validation system and logic to differentiate among people who escaped the same political situation. Despite the distinctions and categories constructed by host governments, all Afghans see ourselves as *Mohajer*, which literally means migrants or forced migrants and the host community as *Khariji*, foreigners. In this study, I explore the experiences and expectations of Afghan evacuees, a subset of forced migrants, in the UK using Participatory Action Research and Autoethnography.

Individuals who are part of racialized groups such as forced migrants, often find themselves in subordinate positions within society, excluded from knowledge production, objects rather than subjects of research, but this very positioning grants them unique and valuable insights. Being in the position of a forced migrant not only provides an ethical justification for writing about forced migration (see chapter 2) but also holds profound epistemological significance. These perspectives are vital for developing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complexities of forced migration. Moreover, these lived experiences should contribute significantly to the discourse on forced migration studies, challenging and enriching the existing theories and narratives that are often shaped by those scholars who have not endured similar hardships and experiences but who, based on a dominant knowledge production system, have the legitimacy to study 'others'.

Most scholars who have contributed to the body of knowledge on forced migration have done so from positions of relative privilege and safety, typically from the Global North using a top-down research approach (Holmes, 2013; Khosravi, 2018, Neang et al 2022). Additionally, dominant knowledge production in refugee and forced migration studies has

often been shaped by methodological nationalism and the priorities of donors and policymakers in a specific national context (Anderson, 2019, Bakewell 2008). This approach frequently neglects critical issues such as colonial legacies (Mayblin & Turner, 2021)

Contributions from researchers with personal experiences of forced migration are rare (Behar, 1996; Naficy, 2001; Khosravi 2009). This study adds to that small body of work, employing Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Autoethnography. In using PAR, I tried to involve Afghan evacuees as co-researchers, not merely participants, democratizing knowledge production and ensuring findings reflect our true experiences. This bottom-up approach enriches the academic discourse and aims to influence policy in ways that genuinely reflect the migrant community's needs and challenges. Furthermore autoethnography allows for a deep, personal exploration of the cultural, social, and emotional aspects of migration, as seen for example in the work of Khosravi (2009). As a researcher who has personally experienced forced displacement, utilizing autoethnography enables me to explore complex dimensions of this life-changing event. This research approach is an attempt to challenge impersonal and detached perspectives, offering a more intimate and impactful insight into the lives of those affected by forced migration.

Knowledge production in and about Afghanistan

From 2001, when the United States and its allies launched their invasion of Afghanistan as a war against terrorism and framed it as a moral duty to 'save Afghan women' (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Hanifi, 2018; Manchanda, 2020), little was known about Afghanistan. The Taliban had come to prominence in 1994 and took over Kabul in 1996 without the US or its allies paying much attention. That changed when the Taliban refused to surrender Bin Laden and Bush decided to invade. Subsequently, an influx of "advisors", "specialists", "experts" and scholars from the Global North poured into Afghanistan. Their mission was

to develop policies, construct governmental systems, and guide the nation towards what they considered liberal democracy and development.

Foreign forces in Afghanistan urgently needed to develop a body of knowledge that would lend justification and legitimacy to their intervention (Hanifi, 2009). This demand significantly increased the presence of foreign researchers in the country. Notably, the United States launched the Human Terrain System (HTS) project, which recruited anthropologists to generate social knowledge aimed at enhancing military effectiveness in counterinsurgency efforts. This project starkly contradicted the social sciences' foundational 'do no harm' principle, leading to serious ethical concerns and sparking dissent among some anthropologists (Monsutti, 2013). This initiative underscores the complex interplay between military operations and academic research within conflict zones.

Historically, the production of knowledge about Afghanistan in the West, especially in Britain, has been influenced by orientalist and colonial perspectives (Hanifi, 2018; Hanifi & Dalrymple, 2019; Jeremy, 2023). Notably, the very existence of Afghanistan as a country was shaped by British colonial efforts in the region. Hanifi (2011, 2018) critically examines how historically, producing, disseminating, and utilizing knowledge about Afghanistan has been steeped in colonialism. This process has influenced global perceptions of Afghanistan, often aligning with the interests of colonial powers and failing to accurately reflect the complex realities of Afghanistan itself.

Hanifi (2011, 2016, 2018) notes that colonial powers, including British, Soviet, and American forces, undertook the mapping and documenting of Afghanistan primarily to facilitate geopolitical control and assert dominance, rather than for academic purposes. This approach led to the creation of knowledge that often depicted Afghanistan as a primitive, tribal territory in need of civilization or modernization, aligning with a broader colonial narrative (Hanifi, 2011, 2016, 2018; Manchanda, 2020; Monsutti, 2013). Such portrayals not only marginalized local perspectives but also simplified Afghanistan's rich cultural and social complexities into persistent stereotypes and clichés within academic and policy-making circles. Hanifi (2018) emphasizes how these colonial legacies continue to shape modern academic, media, and policy discourses, perpetuating outdated

stereotypes and misconceptions about Afghan society, culture, and politics. This ongoing influence reflects the persistence of colonial frameworks in contemporary understandings of Afghanistan, often rehashing and reinforcing simplistic and outdated views.

The depiction of Afghanistan as a tribal society—overemphasizing Pashtuns, the largest ethnic minority (in Afghanistan, there is no ethnic majority) while ignoring the country's ethnic and religious diversity—and narratives of it being an unconquerable land, the "graveyard of empires," a failed state threatening international stability, and portraying its women as needing rescue, have been persistent themes in historical and contemporary descriptions. These portrayals, found consistently across various periods, have been used to justify foreign interventions and perpetuate the view of Afghans as the "other" and as "backward" (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Fluri & Lehr, 2017; Hanifi, 2018; Manchanda, 2020). This uniform and unchanging body of knowledge reinforces a narrative that frames Afghanistan within a context of deficiency, thereby rationalizing the need for external governance and aid.

These perceptions of Afghanistan have significant impacts on how the country is approached in international relations, aid, and development strategies, where policies and interventions are often based on these flawed notions rather than an accurate understanding of the country's needs and realities (Fluri & Lehr, 2017; Hanifi, 2009; Schuster & Hussaini, 2022; Simpson, 2023). Since 2001, prevailing colonial perceptions of Afghanistan have profoundly shaped the mechanisms of knowledge production and research methodologies within the country, an issue that remains underexplored. During this period, the viewpoints and research questions of donors and policymakers became central to how knowledge about Afghanistan was generated (Ibrahimi et al 2025). This centrality of external influences was reinforced by the administrative, financial, and technical support that donors provided to foreign researchers, enhancing their influence (Ibrahimi et al 2025). Concurrently, Afghan locals and researchers found themselves increasingly marginalized, with limited opportunities to contribute to or shape the knowledge production process (as described below). This dynamic has entrenched a system where external narratives dominate at the expense of local involvement and insight.

During my twelve years working with local and international NGOs in Afghanistan (2009-2021), I observed a consistent pattern in the production of knowledge, predominantly led by foreign researchers. This pattern established a clear division of labor: foreign research teams were responsible for designing the study (whether applied or academic), analyzing data, and writing up the research, while the task of data collection and translation, particularly in high-risk areas, was assigned to Afghan staff. Little or no attention was paid to research ethics.

For example, for one research project my Afghan colleagues, Ahmad and Zahra¹, both proficient in English, frequently travelled to various provinces to gather data. In stark contrast, our foreign colleague, the lead researcher, primarily remained in the office. She never conducted an interview herself; instead, she was an employee at a European research institution that had managed to secure a significant research budget for Afghanistan. Although she had basic Farsi skills, she was not capable of engaging directly with research participants. After the data collection phase, Ahmad and Zahra would translate the findings and pass them to the foreign researcher, who would then analyze and write the research reports based solely on these second-hand data. This model, which relies on Afghan staff for primary data collection without their direct involvement in the design, analytical or report-writing stages, highlights a broader issue of power and representation in research practices. It also underscores an exploitative and colonial relationship within the framework of knowledge production in Afghanistan.

In 2017, a foreign scholar with several years of experience in Afghanistan, working at a prestigious European research institution, reached out to me via email. At the time, I served as the research manager at a research institute at Kabul University. The scholar sought collaboration on a project that had already been fully designed and funded. They required our help to facilitate a two-week data collection period and to hire several Afghan staff members for the task. In return, a specified sum of money was offered to our institute. In essence, our role was often reduced to that of facilitators or legitimizers for foreign research projects that necessitated a local partner, a recent common stipulation set by

¹ All names in this thesis are pseudonyms.

some donors for funding allocation. Throughout my tenure in Afghanistan, I encountered only one foreign researcher who earnestly engaged Afghan researchers in all phases of the research process, including design, data collection, analysis, writing up and publication.

In such scenarios, Afghan capabilities were routinely underestimated, leading to a common practice where substantial budgets were allocated for capacity building in both research and non-research projects (Scalettari, 2020). This was the one area where donors readily approved funding, influenced by the prevailing belief in the necessity of enhancing Afghan capacities. I participated in these capacity-building programs more out of organizational obligation than enthusiasm or need, as these sessions had become ritualistic exercises imposed by donors. Over time, they grew increasingly repetitive and ineffective. Eventually, the security situation meant that organizers began holding these events outside Afghanistan for the protection of the foreign participants and to incentivise Afghan participants, who saw these overseas workshops not just as educational opportunities but also as potential avenues for seeking asylum.

The perception of Afghan incapacity provided fertile ground for colonial-style interventions in state-building efforts and knowledge production in Afghanistan. For example, Scalettari (2020) refers to the capacity-building program within the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations of Afghanistan (MoRR) as a manifestation of postcolonial hegemony, representing a modern form of colonization. She argues that these efforts perpetuate Afghanistan's subordination in the global order by reinforcing a narrative that portrays Afghan ministries and officials as fundamentally inept and in need of Western intervention and guidance. This narrative, rooted in ethnocentric assumptions about global universality and the superiority of Western governance models, disregards the unique socio-political landscapes and complexities of Afghanistan. It is important to recognize that many of Afghanistan's most skilled individuals were employed by foreign institutions, corporations, NGOs, and development agencies, which provided significantly better compensation compared to the government. During the time I was assisting with capacity building in MoRR (2016-18), there were frequent and bitter discussions about the different pay awarded to those paid by the government, those Afghan nationals whose positions were

'sponsored' by foreign governments or international NGOs, and foreign staff or consultants.

In addition to the perceived incapacity of Afghans and a colonial division of labour in the realm of research, dominant research methodologies have also demonstrated colonial biases when interacting with "the Other" (Hall & Tandon, 2017a; Simpson, 2023; Smith, 2012). In such research settings, the researcher is often positioned as the "expert", relegating local participants to the status of "the field." This not only perpetuates unequal power dynamics within the knowledge production process but also often overlooks critical ethical considerations essential for local communities. Furthermore, the programs and initiatives led by foreign consultants in Afghanistan, who lacked a profound understanding of the local cultural and historical context, instead of empowering local communities, increased dependency, ultimately contributing to the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Fluri & Lehr, 2017; Simpson, 2023).

Working in an environment dominated by top-down approaches underscored for me the critical need for research methodologies that adopt a bottom-up perspective. These methodologies allow forced migrants to conduct their own research and articulate their stories firsthand, offering a significant advantage over external observers who may lack the necessary language skills, cultural understanding, and lived experience to fully grasp the complexities of their lives. In Afghanistan, the strategic necessity for these bottom-up approaches to serve as a resistance against the prevalent colonial model of knowledge production led by foreign researchers and consultants became apparent.

Research Area: Coming to Participatory Action Research and Auto-ethnography

Participatory Action Research (PAR) provides a compelling alternative method of knowledge production, shifting from an extractive to a collaborative and empowering model. By engaging local Afghan communities as co-researchers, PAR seemed to offer a way to dismantle the unequal power dynamics in research, centering Afghan narratives

within the investigative process. I hoped this method would ensure that research processes and outcomes would be directly shaped by Afghan experiences and insights, offering a more authentic representation of local realities and needs.

My initial inclination towards Participatory Action Research (PAR) and autoethnography stemmed from my experience of working alongside foreign researchers as described above. Participatory Action Research (PAR) emerged in the 1970s as a critique of the dominant methodologies within the social sciences and the top-down development approaches prevalent in the Global South. Developed in the context of newly independent, postcolonial countries and influenced by Marxist theories, PAR aligns with efforts to decolonize social science methodologies.

Proponents of PAR argue that the social and human sciences taught in academic institutions during the 1970s primarily reflected the experiences and perspectives of the Global North, embodying colonial characteristics that were ill-suited to address the complexities of the Global South (Fals-Borda, 1987; Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003; Fals-Borda et al 2003; Hall, 1975, 1977; Hall & Tandon, 2017a; Rahman, 2008, 1991). They assert that these conventional methodologies do not adequately represent the conditions of the marginalized and oppressed, often neglecting the voices and agency of these groups. Furthermore, such methods are criticized for their limited capacity to understand and address the challenges faced by vulnerable communities, highlighting a fundamental gap in traditional research practices (Hall & Tandon, 2017a; Cahill, 2007).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has not been widely used in migration studies. In exploring the use of PAR in forced migration studies, my goal was to identify the specific challenges this method faces within this context: When and where is it most effective? What are the key lessons from its application in forced migration? How can these insights contribute to the broader discourse on PAR methodologies? Additionally, I examined what prerequisites are necessary for the successful implementation of PAR and considered the feasibility of this method in very challenging circumstances. Chapter two critically reviews the existing literature on PAR and discusses findings related to the application of PAR and autoethnography in forced migration, focusing on these challenges and contributions. Together, these methodologies not only address ethical concerns

associated with research but also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex processes of evacuation and reception from a bottom-up perspective. In the following sections I describe some of the challenges they raise precisely in the context of forced migration.

PAR with IDPs and forced migrants

In working on this thesis, I attempted to use Participatory Action Research (PAR) in two quite different contexts, though there were shared challenges: first, in the context of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan, and second, among evacuees and forced migrants in London residing in bridging hotels. I consider both attempts to have been ultimately unsuccessful but nonetheless very instructive learning experiences that revealed the challenges of using PAR in the context of forced migration (see chapter three). The first attempt was disrupted by the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, and the second by a lack of sustained interest among Afghan evacuees for reasons that I will discuss in the following chapters.

At the beginning of my PhD in September 2020, my thesis was set to explore internal displacement within Afghanistan, specifically focusing on a displacement camp in East Kabul. I had already established connections with some of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2019 through a small project and I had maintained these relationships by occasionally visiting the camp and having phone conversations with some IDPs, which shaped the idea of doing my PhD using PAR with them.

The inclusive nature of PAR involves engaging the community from the outset, which led me to initiate preliminary discussions with the camp's residents in late October, November, and December 2020. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, I was unable to travel to London for the first year of my PhD as originally planned. This unexpected situation worked in my favour, as it allowed me to start working directly with the displaced community (as is the nature of PAR) instead of initially reviewing literature and formulating research questions in isolation as required by dominant research approaches, especially for doctoral candidates in Sociology. However, due to the political and security instability

in Afghanistan, culminating in the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, I had to abandon my initial research plans.

Facing security threats, I was compelled to leave Afghanistan, first evacuated to Poland and then to the UK. After my own forced migration, it was clear I would have to choose a different research topic, but I wanted to continue with the PAR methodology. I decided to apply this methodology among the Afghan evacuees in London. However, these individuals were overwhelmed by the bureaucratic procedures involved in receiving services and by being confined to hotels. It was difficult to convince participants of the study's value, particularly as they felt the research offered them no tangible benefits. Additionally, my positionality as a Hazara among other Afghan ethnic groups presented challenges (both in Afghanistan and the UK). The third chapter of this thesis discusses my choice of PAR methodology and my experiences of employing PAR and the challenges it presents in the study of forced migration, while the section below explains the shift to autoethnography.

Autoethnography – turning the lens back on myself

Defined by Ellis et al. (2011), "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." Autoethnography, like Participatory Action Research (PAR), challenges traditional research methodologies. Both approaches are designed to empower marginalized and vulnerable groups and individuals by providing them with a platform to voice their experiences, but it has been controversial from the start.

During a historical debate at one of Malinowski's seminars at the LSE in London in November 1935 a heated argument broke out between Kenyan students Jomo Kenyatta and Louis Leakey about who has the right to produce knowledge about African societies and how it should be done, with Leakey defending traditional anthropology (which he put at the service of British colonialists) and Kenyatta arguing for a more autobiographic, grounded approach (Wax, 1976, Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 4), which foregrounded

the interests of *his* people. Kenyatta [1938] (2015) wrote about the culture of the Gikuyu people as a Gikuyu, and later his works were cited as the first auto-ethnographic work (Hayano, 1979).²

The work of Kenyatta as an 'insider' ethnographer wasn't easy since he (as a Black African) was frequently considered as a subject/experience/field of study rather than a researcher/anthropologist, a complaint voiced many years later by Khosravi, an Iranian-Swedish anthropologist in Sweden who experienced similar silencing, identified as a migrant rather than an anthropologist by Swedish society (2010, 2016). As Malinowski explained in the introduction to Kenyatta's book (2015), hearing the voice of a 'local' ethnographer was a challenge to the dominant colonial research culture. As noted by Hayano (1979), Kenyatta's approach has been a persistent critique of dominant research methodologies among anthropologists up to the present day.

In my research, I utilize both PAR and autoethnography to examine my own personal experiences of forced migration from Afghanistan, as well as those of my fellow evacuees. The evacuation had erased completely the border between me and my research subjects: how then could I not make myself the object of my research? I shared similar experiences, emotions and perspectives. Turning the research lens on myself, exploring the trauma of forced migration, was painful but necessary. How else could I understand or empathise with those who spoke to me? How else to understand their reluctance to revisit and articulate the anguish experienced in 2021?

Research Area: Evacuation, Reception and Resettlement in London

This thesis essentially presents a study within a study. It explores the experiences of Afghan forced migrants, including my family and myself, in relation to evacuation, reception, and settlement in London from August 2021 to March 2023. Utilizing

² In a footnote to his book on the Gikuyu or Gekoyo people (2015) Kenyatta makes the point that Western anthropologists had misspelled the tribe's name. In fact, the correct name of the tribe is GEKOYO, which had been misspelled KIKUYU by outsider anthropologists.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) within the context of IDPs and forced migration, this research aims to explore the potential benefits and inherent challenges of this research methodology, while also, revealing the deeply personal narratives of Afghan forced migrants of evacuation as they navigate their new realities in the UK, often characterized by unmet or failed expectations of what life would be like in the UK, in *Kharji* (this word, meaning abroad, and its significance, is discussed at length below). These expectations create tensions with other stakeholders such as charity staff and former Afghans who view these expectations as unrealistic. These diverse perspectives and detailed accounts will be further elaborated in Chapters six and seven. This approach not only enriches our understanding of the forced migrants' lived experiences but also highlights the complexities of their integration into a new society.

In examining the expectations of those evacuated, several themes emerged. The first revolved around the evacuation itself. Traditionally understood in the context of emergency lifesaving during natural disasters, evacuation typically involves the expectation of returning home after the disaster. However, there is little discussion of evacuation in the context of forced migration (see chapter four). Evacuation was a new experience for Afghan forced migrants, who had normally left the country autonomously. While this phenomenon has historical precedents in the UK's history of forced migration, there are few insider analyses. Historical instances such as the evacuations of Ugandan Asians, Vietnamese, Bosnians (very few), Kosovans, and more recently, Afghans and Sudanese, underscore the recurrent nature of such events and the need for a fuller understanding of what works and what doesn't, and how best to assist those evacuated.

Furthermore, there is a media and public tendency to portray evacuation as a humanitarian act and a point of national pride, highlighting the nation's role as a saviour of those whose lives are in danger. However, this public perspective often overlooks the broader historical and political context involving the countries engaged politically and militarily in places like Afghanistan. Furthermore, the evacuations of Afghans occurred against the backdrop of the British government's stringent refugee admission policies (Goodfellow 2019; Ryan et al, 2024). Evacuation appears to be a response by the British

government to balance both the humanitarian imperative to provide refuge and the political need to control migration.

However, there was little preparation for the evacuation, which was chaotic, creating pressure on those evacuated and on the authorities and populations expected to receive them. It seemed that the lessons of past evacuations had not been learned, although the subsequent reception of Ukrainian refugees (Walsh & Jorgenson 2024) and the arrival of Hong Kong citizens (Rolf and Benson 2023) saw those groups treated very differently. For example, Ukrainian nationals and their immediate family members were allowed to come to the UK if they had a named sponsor. This research offers a detailed examination from both my personal experience and the experiences of other Afghans who have first-hand knowledge of evacuation and reception, providing a more nuanced understanding of our experiences and perspectives. However, to better understand these experiences and perspectives, and the expectations that emerge from the data, it is important to provide some historical context to recent forced migration from Afghanistan.

Background and context of Afghan migration:

The recent mass migration of Afghans began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and it continues to this day. It is estimated that more than half (Harpviken, 2009, p.7) to three-quarters (Majidi 2017) of Afghanistan's population have experienced migration at some point in their lives. Migration has become a part of everyday life and a survival strategy for many Afghans (Monsutti, 2005).

The total population of Afghanistan is 41,454,761 according to Data Commons (2023), though since there has not been an attempt at a national census since 1979, there has been high casualties and births, and significant in- and out-migration, and none of these caveats were mentioned, it is difficult to trust this data. Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021, approximately 1.6 million people left Afghanistan, bringing the total number of Afghan migrants and refugees to over 8.2 million, making it one of the largest displaced populations in the world (UNHCR, 2024). Additionally, as of December 2023,

there are about 3.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2024).

Afghanistan is a country marked by significant ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity, which has played a crucial role in shaping migration patterns to neighbouring countries like Iran and Pakistan. According to UNHCR statistics from March 2024, there are approximately 4.5 million Afghan refugees and migrants, both documented and undocumented, in Iran and 3.1 million in Pakistan (UNHCR, 2024). The population of Afghan refugees and migrants in these countries has fluctuated over nearly five decades due to political developments in Afghanistan and continues to fluctuate as the Iranian and Pakistan governments deport thousands of Afghans at irregular intervals (VOA 2025).

The major ethnic groups in Afghanistan include Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, each with distinct cultural, linguistic identities, and geographical distributions, and there are many other smaller ethnic groups. Pashtuns, predominantly Sunni Muslims and Pashto speakers, form the larger ethnic group, and mostly reside in the south and east of Afghanistan. Tajiks, who speak Farsi (Dari)³, are also primarily Sunni Muslims, and live in the west and northeast of the country. Hazaras, who speak Farsi (Dari) and practice mostly Shia Islam, form another significant group, residing mainly in central Afghanistan. Uzbeks, who are Sunni Muslims and speak Uzbek, a Turkic language, primarily live in the northeast of Afghanistan. Although Afghanistan's major cities like Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Herat are home to diverse populations where various ethnic groups live together, these cities still maintain some distinct communities based on ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities.

These ethnic and religious affiliations have influenced migration trends. For instance, the Durand Line, drawn by the British colonialists and forming the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, divided Pashtuns, turning them into a cross border community. For many years, this border was open, allowing Afghan Pashtuns to move easily between the two countries, attracted by shared linguistic and religious and ethnic ties (Alimia, 2022).

³ Farsi, or Persian as it is called in English, is widely spoken in the region though there are differences. That spoken in Afghanistan has officially been called Dari since 1967, but in this study we use Farsi.

In contrast, Hazaras mostly migrated to Iran due to shared cultural connections, language and faith (Glazebrook & Abbasi-Shavazi, 2007). Similarly, the Tajiks, who are Farsi-speaking and mostly Sunni, migrated to both Pakistan and Iran depending on their geographic location and few to Tajikistan, another neighbouring country. For example, many Tajik Farsi speakers from Herat, Farah, and Ghor migrated to Iran due to their proximity to the Iranian border (Adelkhah & Olszewska, 2007). However, it is important to remember, these are not absolute rules, and each neighbour hosts Afghans from all ethnic communities.

The population of Afghans in Iran and Pakistan is not constant and is highly mobile, responding to policies and political changes in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and recently in Europe. For instance, between 2002 and 2022, 6.2 million Afghans returned to Afghanistan, mainly from Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, 2024). Additionally, during the brief opening of EU borders in 2015, around 190,000 Afghans (EAOS, 2015), including some from Iran, migrated to the EU as living conditions in Iran became unbearable for many Afghans, including those born in Iran (Crawley & Kaytaz, 2022).

On the other hand, both Pakistan and Iran, especially since 2001, have prioritised the deportation of Afghan migrants in their immigration policies and have emphasised increased military control over their shared borders with Afghanistan to prevent Afghan migration. Pakistan has recently completed a 10-year program to build a border fence along its 2,641-kilometre border with Afghanistan (Samim 2024). Meanwhile, Iran is continuing its efforts to construct a 4-metre-high wall with barbed wire along its 921-kilometre border with Afghanistan (ATN News 2024).

In Afghanistan, political changes and escalating wars have led to waves of migration, beginning with the Soviet invasion in 1979. This invasion aimed to support the Soviet-backed communist government, resulting in violent conflicts that forced millions of Afghans to seek refuge primarily in Iran and Pakistan. From 1979 until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the number of Afghan refugees grew dramatically. By 1981, approximately 1.5 million Afghans had become refugees, and by 1986, this number had nearly reached six million (Khan 2017). Most Afghan refugees in Pakistan were ethnic Pashtuns, residing in UNHCR-established camps in the North-West Frontier Province and

Baluchistan. In contrast, most Afghan refugees in Iran settled on the outskirts of major cities, with only a few living in camps (Esfahani, 2018).

During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States and other Western countries, in the context of the Cold War, supported the opposition forces known as the Mujahideen, or holy warriors, by providing them with substantial weapons and financial resources, mainly through Pakistan (Abbasi et al 2025; Barfield 2023; Safri 2011). Some Mujahideen families lived in refugee camps in Pakistan, with the men returning to Afghanistan in summer to fight the Soviets in what they called jihad, while the women remained in the camps with their children (Khattak 2007; Daud 2022). The United States, through its aid and humanitarian organisations, focused heavily on promoting '*jihad*' against the Soviet Union, a strategy that later became a significant issue for Afghanistan. According to Manchanda (2020), in the 1980s USAID printed millions of school textbooks in Farsi and Pashto, distributed in Afghan refugee schools in Pakistan and within Afghanistan. These textbooks used examples such as Kalashnikovs to teach the alphabet and bullets and guns to teach numbers and counting. This educational content, costing \$51 million, was developed by specialists at The Afghanistan Center at the University of Nebraska Omaha, with the glorification of *jihad* and martyrdom being the main themes of the propaganda (Manchanda, 2020).

At the same time, Iran experienced the Islamic Revolution in 1979, with its key policy of "Neither East nor West". Afghans were seen as Mujahideen fighting against atheistic communism (Safri, 2011), aligning with the goals of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran. However, Nasr Esafahani (2018) argues that this policy was not only a result of ideological decisions by Iran but also due to its inability to manage and control its borders, especially as Iran became embroiled in the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, which left it without sufficient resources to manage the refugee situation, but happy to add Afghans to its forces.

The anti-Western policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran meant that international organisations faced restrictions. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began its operations in Iran in 1983, but there were few others due to the

prevailing political atmosphere. During this period, refugees in Iran generally lacked international attention and aid (Adelkhah & Olszewska, 2007).

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan descended into a devastating civil war. Following the Soviet troop withdrawal, the Mujahideen continued to fight against the Najibullah government, which was considered a Soviet puppet, until its fall in 1992. Meanwhile, Pakistan and Iran pressured refugees to return home. However, the subsequent civil war in Afghanistan between various Mujahideen factions, divided along ethnic lines, prevented large-scale returns and led to a new wave of migration (Abbasi et al 2025; Safri 2011).

The Mujahideen's victory in 1992 marked the beginning of a civil war over the distribution of power in Afghanistan, which continued until 1996, when the Taliban gained control over most of the country (Barfield 2023). In 1996, the Taliban captured Kabul and established a regime that controlled most of the country, enforcing a strict interpretation of Sharia law. This period also prompted a significant wave of migration, particularly among minorities. The Hazaras especially faced widespread massacres (e.g., the massacres in Mazar Sharif (1998) and Bamiyan (2001)) and continued persecution, leading many to flee (). This period saw the conflicts between factions become ethnically charged, activating ethnic divides (Barfield 2023). This intense internal conflict further devastated Afghanistan, leading to widespread internal and external displacement, forcing many to flee the country again.

Following the US and NATO invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, despite initial military successes, the conflict persisted, leading to a prolonged and complex war. After the establishment of the interim government in Afghanistan, there was a significant wave of refugee returns, particularly from Iran and Pakistan. However, this return was accompanied by political instability and economic challenges. Many returnees did not go back to their villages due to insecurity, economic constraints, and drought, and instead settled on the outskirts of major Afghan cities like Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, and Jalalabad with some forming camps (Hussaini 2020). Additionally, returnees, especially Hazaras, who still faced structural discrimination, had a high inclination to migrate again.

In contrast, Pashtuns showed less interest in re-migrating during this period (Sadeghi et al., 2019).

In 2014, with the announcement of the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, we witnessed the resurgence of Taliban influence and a corresponding increase in violence, sparking another wave of Afghan migration (Abbasi et al 2025). Many Afghans continued to seek refuge abroad, while others were displaced within the country, but faced with the hostility of European and other governments of the Global North, these departures required planning and resources. The rapid withdrawal of US forces in 2021 led to the swift takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, including Kabul. This sudden change resulted in a chaotic and desperate evacuation of foreign nationals and Afghan allies, and it is this experience that is the focus of this thesis.

Thesis structure

This thesis is structured around nine chapters.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This introductory chapter explained the genesis of this research project and the significant changes imposed by circumstances beyond my control. It described the continuities and changes in my research project, in terms of focus and methods, as well as in the history of forced migration from Afghanistan.

Chapter 2 - Participatory Action Research Review of Literature

This chapter reviews literature on PAR as a methodological approach, outlining its emergence, principles, and practices. It evaluates the strengths and limitations of dominant research methodologies, highlighting ethical dilemmas, biases, power dynamics between researchers and participants, issues of representation, and the impact on studied communities.

Chapter 3 - PAR in context of forced displacement

This chapter details my attempts to use PAR and methodological findings that emerged in the contexts of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan and forced migrants in London. I begin by describing how I accessed these communities, established relationships, and invited people to participate in PAR. Additionally, I discuss my positionality in both fields of research in Afghanistan and London. This chapter is also an examination of the challenges and limitations associated with using PAR and constitutes an important contribution to the literature on this methodology.

Chapter 4 - Review of the empirical literature

The review of empirical and theoretical literature examines:

- Evacuation and Expectations
- Refugee Reception in the Global South (Iran and Pakistan): This section explores the experiences of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, examining literature on the policies and practices of these host countries. Many evacuees and forced migrants in London, including myself and my family, have previous experiences as forced migrants in these countries, and this previous experience may be said to have shaped expectations of arrival in the West to some degree.
- Reception of Forced Migrants in the European Union and the United Kingdom: This section focuses on the reception of forced migrants in the EU and the UK, and the development of a hostile environment intended to deter migrants, including forced migrants. It discusses the concepts and theories surrounding reception and analyzes the reception conditions in these regions. This provides the foundation for a better understanding of the context for the reception of Afghan evacuees in London.

Chapter 5 - Methods

Chapter 5 discusses the methods that I eventually adopted for the research, and key issues including positionality, reflexivity, ethics and analysis. In this chapter, I provide practical methodological information such as the number of interviews and participants, time-duration of the interviews and fieldwork.

Chapter 6 - The evacuation: Shock and Chaos

This chapter delves deeply into the discrepancies between the expectations of Afghan forced migrants and the realities they encountered during evacuation. A recurring theme that emerged from the data was the notion of failed expectations, expectations that *Khariji* would rapidly and efficiently organise the evacuation based on a rational evaluation of risk and need.

Chapter 7 - Arrival: Unmet Expectations

Even though the UK officials and NGOs could have designed reception and resettlement programs informed by historical precedents from the East African Asians, Vietnamese boat people, and refugees from the former Yugoslavia, a substantial gap persists between what Afghan forced migrants anticipated and what they experienced during their initial reception and resettlement. This chapter is structured around the key themes of housing, employment and education.

Chapter 8 - Afghan Refugee Expectations and Realities

In this discussion chapter, I concentrate on what shaped the expectations of reception and resettlement among Afghan forced migrants in the UK. This segment builds on the analysis of failed expectations and their origins, illuminating the impact of historical interactions between Afghans and the international community. The chapter investigates how these expectations were formed, with a particular emphasis on the historical presence of UK military and civilians in Afghanistan, but also the (mis)translation of Afghan cultural expectations around hospitality to the British context.

Chapter 9 - Conclusion

Chapter 9 reflects on lessons that can be learnt from the Afghan evacuation to the UK and the mistakes that were repeated from previous evacuations. Although not the focus of this thesis, given the proximity of the Ukrainian crisis, it would be remiss not to reflect very briefly on Afghan perceptions of the different treatment afforded Ukrainian refugees

who arrived in the UK six months after the Afghan evacuation. This chapter summarizes the main findings and reflects on the limitations of the study.

Chapter 2: Participatory Action Research Review of Literature

Introduction:

In the spring of 2020, during a discussion in Kabul with a consultant from an international research institution specializing in displacement and migration in Afghanistan, I proposed translating their research articles into the local Afghan languages (Farsi and Pashto) in order to make the research accessible to Afghan audiences, particularly the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation of Afghanistan, so they could use it for policy-making and improving the conditions of Afghan migrants and returnees. The consultant politely apologized, saying, "Unfortunately, there is no allocated budget for this task, and we cannot carry it out."

This conversation stayed with me for a long time. It reminded me of a broader trend in knowledge production in Afghanistan since 2001, largely driven by foreign entities. The knowledge produced was primarily published in academic journals in the West or shared with think tanks and policy-making institutions in the West. The target audience for produced knowledge about Afghan migration was mainly outside Afghanistan, in Western countries that often view Afghan migration as a crisis and use various tools such as the externalisation of borders and deportation to control it (Hussaini & Schuster, 2022). From my experience and that of my colleagues, Afghan researchers in the knowledge production process were considered merely as tools for data collection, to whom no commitment or responsibility was owed. This issue went beyond ethical concerns, revealing deep methodological and epistemological problems that highlighted deficiencies in the production of knowledge in the field of displacement and forced migration, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

From 2009 to 2021, I worked as a researcher in Afghanistan. My research experience in Afghanistan and conversations with foreign researchers prompted me to think more critically about these issues and explore how the dominant process of knowledge production relates to the Global North and South. During this time, the design of most studies was conducted by foreign researchers, while Afghan staff were primarily

responsible for translation (of questionnaires and data) and data collection. The data analysis was carried out by foreign researchers, predominantly in English. This process followed an established old division of labour: the Global South provided the data, and the Global North developed the theories (Hall, 1975; Hall and Tandon 2017; Khosravi 2016). This imbalance reflects deeper issues in global knowledge production, research methodologies and the implications for understanding and addressing forced migration and displacement.

This unequal power dynamic, including the allocation of funding, impacts research methodologies in forced migration and refugee studies beyond Afghanistan. These methodologies often struggle with issues of Eurocentrism, methodological nationalism, and significant power imbalances between researchers and participants (Chimni, 1998; Anderson, 2019; Dahinden & Anderson, 2021). Such issues undermine the validity and ethical integrity of the research.

In this chapter, my primary aim is to explore the deficiencies, challenges, and shortcomings in knowledge production and research methodologies, both generally and specifically in the field of migration studies. Initially, I will discuss the overall state of knowledge production in the social sciences and the common critiques of it, which will set the stage for a literature review on knowledge production in migration studies. Following this, I will examine the existing literature on research methodologies in forced migration studies and focus on Participatory Action Research (PAR) and autoethnography as potential research approaches that present fewer ethical issues.

This thesis, which examines the experiences of Afghan individuals forced to migrate from August 2021, argues that most research and knowledge produced about forced migration and its methodologies are embedded within a framework that privileges western epistemology, values, and perspectives, while neglecting the perspectives and knowledge of others. It seeks to explore how alternative research methodologies, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) and autoethnography, can be utilised in studying such populations to bring forced migrants to the centre of knowledge production process. The use of PAR and autoethnography is at the heart of the decolonisation movement in research methodology, so this review of the literature on these methods played a crucial

role in informing this research. These methodologies emphasise a reflective and participatory approach, valuing the lived experiences and perspectives of research participants (forced migrants and refugees). Additionally, the decolonisation of knowledge insists on recognising various ways of knowing and understanding (Hall & Tandon, 2017b; Nhemachena et al., 2016; Santos, 2016; Smith, 2012) and challenges the dominant paradigms, theories and concepts produced.

On a broader level in the social sciences, the core idea of decolonisation is to challenge and break away from the colonial legacies embedded in conventional and dominant research methodologies (Smith, 2012; Taha, 2022). The aim of decolonising research methodologies is to highlight and address the power imbalances in both contemporary and historical research processes. This imbalance is especially evident in relation to marginalised groups, such as indigenous peoples and forced migrants. This movement aims to shift from an exploitative and extractive perspective towards research processes that are more inclusive, ethical, and equitable. This thesis fits within that tradition, and seeks to create space for Afghan forced migrants to create knowledge about their own experiences.

Therefore, the impact of colonialism on the formation of social sciences and research methodologies, as well as their decolonisation, forms part of the literature review that can guide this study. The literature review will discuss how social knowledge and its methodologies were shaped in interaction with colonialism and how some signs of it are present in today's dominant research methodologies.

Knowledge Production in Social Sciences: Colonialism and Eurocentrism

Historically, social sciences have been constructed on foundations deeply rooted in colonial and eurocentric paradigms (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). The claim that knowledge can be apolitical or that methodologies can be asocial becomes tarnished when scrutinised against the current backdrop of colonial legacies and the geopolitical dynamics of neo-colonialism (Mignolo, 2009). As Foucault (1980) states, power and

knowledge are inextricably intertwined, thus, a critical confrontation with the methodologies of social sciences should be perceived not only as an intellectual endeavour but also as a moral imperative (Smith, 1999).

The content, research approaches and the political-economy of knowledge produced in social science have been criticized widely by scholars from the Global South, the Global North and sometimes in partnership (Amin, 1989; Bhambra, 2007, 2014, 2020, 2021; Bhambra & Holmwood, 2018, 2021; Hall & Tandon, 2017a; Meghji, 2021; Santos, 2007). These scholars have pointed out that colonialism continues to shape knowledge production as the resources necessary for this work remain concentrated in the Global North. These issues should be seen as profoundly ethical, involving as they do arguments over who defines, produces and disseminates knowledge, the relations of power between those producing knowledge and those about whom knowledge is produced, the challenge of informed consent given those relations of power and the vulnerability of certain populations (such as forced migrants), and the issue of who controls the data produced, how is it to be used and protected given that vulnerability.

Other scholars argue that this coincidence of the growth of the social sciences (anthropology, sociology, history, geography) with the development of colonialism is not accidental (Bhambra, 2007; Hall & Tandon, 2017a; Meghji, 2021). These scholars have shown that the knowledge produced by early social scientists provided intellectual support for colonialism, constructing races and hierarchies that fitted some people to be slaves and others civilizers (Abu-Lughod 2002; Bhambra & Holmwood 2021; Meghji, 2021). Bhambra ([2007](#), [2014](#)) argues that almost all existing research on racialized inequality and colonialism should be rejected because the epistemological and ontological foundations of the social sciences are shaped by colonialism and imperialism and because that work is Eurocentric, reproduces ideas of non-Western people as inferior, and overlooks the exploitation of non-Western resources on which the West's wealth and progress has been built (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021).

Historically, there has been a robust link between anthropology and colonial administration, to the extent that knowledge produced by anthropologists has been used as a tool by colonisers for controlling or expanding the colony. Although anthropologists

came relatively late to Afghanistan (Monsutti 2013), 'anthropological' accounts of Afghanistan's social organization, tribal structures, military alliances, politics and economics, or the Kingdom of Kabul, were provided in particular by Britain's representatives in the colonies. For instance Mountstuart Elphinstone's "An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul," (written in Peshawar, not Kabul) and his subsequent work, laid the foundation for the British colonial administration's engagement with Afghanistan (2013, also Hanifi 2019). His comprehensive descriptions of Afghanistan's geography, tribal systems, and social customs shaped the British approach to governance and established a precedent for skewed Western knowledge about Afghanistan that persists to this day.

In contemporary times, during the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, anthropologists were recruited for counterinsurgency projects through the US Human Terrain System (HTS). HTS reflects a continuation of utilizing anthropological insights for military purposes, echoing Elphinstone's initial 'ethnographic' endeavors (Monsutti, 2013). Furthermore, anthropology has directly participated in objectifying and 'othering' colonized societies (Talal Asad 1973, Said, 1979). This 'other' has been bizarrely depicted as backward and subaltern (Said, 1979). At the core of this discourse about the 'other' the idea of non-Western subalternity is produced and reproduced in social sciences (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021; Bhambra, 2007, 2014; Holmwood, 2014).

Following Bhambra, Meghji (2021) argued that sociology has been colonial from the beginning rather than becoming a colonial social science in the process of its evolution. In his view, the meaning of colonial sociology is that:

sociology both internalized the logic of a colonial episteme, and also (re)-produced and bolstered that very episteme itself. Epistemes are ways of thinking and knowing, they set the limits of what can be known, as well as dictating what counts as legitimate knowledge and how this knowledge can be legitimately produced.
(Meghji, 2021, p. 15)

Meghji (2021) argued that sociology reproduced colonial differences in three ways: through a theory of "civilizational backwardness", by "endorsing democratic imperialism" and through "being an agent of empire". Bhambra and Meghji both engage with Durkheim

and Meghji cites Durkheim's theory of mechanical and organic solidarity and its connection with the image he presents of “primitive” and “advanced” societies as an example of how sociology reproduces this colonial difference. Sociology could not remain indifferent to such historical phenomena as colonialism and imperialism but rather than a critical engagement, the discipline provided an intellectual response by validating colonial differences (Meghji, 2021). Against this, Dawson (2022), while broadly accepting Bhabra and Holmwood’s critique of Durkheim (2021), argued that the legacy of Durkheim is more complicated, and that while there are absences and failures, there is also criticism of colonialism and its ‘bloody foolhardiness’.

Meghji and others (Bhabra 2022b, 2022a) have argued that academia continues to work with colonized knowledge, and that the structures and norms of Global North, but also Global South institutions, ignore the impact of colonization and empire on the institutions and infrastructure of the Global North and South, and continue to exclude knowledge produced by those excluded from the academy.

The term “euro-centric” was coined by the Egyptian economist Amin in 1989 (Amin, 1989). Amin noted that the focus of euro-centric social knowledge was the first world (Global North) and its issues, and the third world (Global South) and its issues were discussed as “others”. Like Bhabra, Connell (2020) has shown how knowledge in the European metropolises (Paris, London) was formed based on their views of themselves as superior, and this knowledge was then given a global character to the exclusion of ‘other’ knowledges. Hall & Tandon (2017a) have argued that what today is called knowledge in Western academic institutions is only a small part of bigger human treasury of knowledge. As Smith (2012) and Swantz (2016) argued, the knowledge and experience of indigenous peoples are ignored by dominant research approaches, and only knowledge produced by experts and researchers and published in reputable journals which are located in Europe and US is validated as knowledge. Knowledge from the Global South is invisible or treated as incorrect, ‘mere’ opinion or at the best a raw material for research, or as a “field”. In this scenario of knowledge production, the position of the Global South is only a place to collect data or test social theories (Connell, 2007; Hall & Tandon, 2017a, 2017b) while the Global North is the center for analyzing these data and developing theories.

These scholars note that Eurocentrism in research funding sustains itself through the structure of funding for research: what is produced and introduced as global social knowledge is based on research questions originating in the Global North, as funders often prioritize research that does not necessarily align with the priorities of the people of the Global South (Bradley, 2017). Dominant research frameworks and business models make it difficult for Global South scholars to secure funding for their projects (Chimni, 1998; McGrath et al., 2019). Complex bureaucratic and structural barriers exacerbate the issue. For example, the stringent administrative requirements for grant applications, such as the need for matching funds, are often unattainable for Global South institutions. Language barriers further complicate the process, as many applications must be submitted in English (Landau, 2012; McGrath et al., 2019). These factors collectively lead to inequitable collaborations where institutions in the Global North dominate, limiting the agency and leadership of Global South researchers.

Efforts have been made to reduce this inequality of power in knowledge production, especially by some funders (McGrath et al., 2019), e.g. the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund, who have made some funding conditional on cooperation between Global South and North scholars in research projects that are implemented in the South (Bradley, 2017; Landau, 2012; McGrath et al., 2019). Of course, such an approach has always faced many challenges due to the imbalance of power between the two research partners from Global North and south (Bradley, 2017; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Landau, 2012; Shivakoti & Milner, 2021), which still mean that it is often the Northern partners who control the research funds. Research design and analysis continue to be the responsibility of Global North researchers, and in fact, the presence of Global South researchers in research project is sometimes used to legitimize the research funding, and their work remains unrecognized and unacknowledged (Landau, 2019; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2019).

Knowledge Production in Forced Migration Studies

The inequality of power at the core of knowledge production globally that was noted above is especially evident in forced migration studies (Chimni, 2009). Most forced migrants are

from the Global South and most of them have settled in the Global South, but most of the knowledge about forced migrants is produced by outsiders from the Global North and distributed there (Bradley, 2017; Chimni, 2009; Pittaway et al., 2010; Shivakoti & Milner, 2021). Chimni (2009) has pointed out the invisibility of Global South scholarship, noting that knowledge produced by Global South scholars has less chance to be published or referenced in reputable academic journals of migration studies in Global North. Between 2010 and 2019, 5% of the total articles published in the *Journal of Refugee Studies* were produced by researchers from Global South, 9% were produced jointly (scholars from the Global South and north) and 86% were produced by scholars who were in institutions in Global North (Neang et al., 2022).

Aside from the structural power that means the decision on what knowledge will be produced is almost inevitably in the Global North because it is the institutions of the Global North that set the research agenda and provide the funds for research, it is also important to consider the power that comes from a migration researcher's positionality.

Power is a key concept to be explored in research on vulnerable populations. Two aspects of power were discussed in the literature. The first is power that comes from the dominant research approach itself, which puts researchers in a position of “expert”, the one who asks questions, and the “researched”, the one who answers the questions without understanding the context. In other words, there is the position of observer and observed, researcher and researched (Ellis et al., 2007), with the expert analysing the data provided and interpreting its meaning. The ‘researched’ has no power to shape the knowledge at any stage: they do not choose the research questions, decide the objectives or methodological approach or how to use the knowledge that is produced (Smith, 2012), and for the most part don’t have access to the knowledge that is produced. Exceptions such as autoethnography and Participatory Action Research (Halilovich, 2013; Rodgers, 2004) are discussed below and in chapter four. A second aspect is the power that comes from a researcher's positionality as an outsider, protected by their economic, legal, social position that allows them to enter, and importantly, leave the ‘field’ unconstrained by the structural forces that constrain the lives of the researched.

Scholars have noted (Bilotta, 2018; Lammers, 2007a) that researchers from Europe, the US, Canada or Australia are protected by their governments and their organizations allowing them the freedom to study forced migrants who are confined to camps or at edge of cities, undocumented, (un)welcomed by host societies on whom they are dependent. Researchers have, among other privileges, the freedom to come and to go, a salary and a degree of certainty (at least in the short-term). Some scholars (Lammers, 2007b; Nencel, 2001) have challenged the binary of powerful researcher and powerless research subject, arguing that it is very simplistic. Lammers (2007b) argues that refugees and migrants are not passive, because it is refugees/forced migrants/informants who decide over what information to share or not, or how to share information to protect themselves, or more fundamentally, have the right to not participate in the research process from the very beginning, or to participate completely on an informed and voluntary based.

Against this view, Clark-Kazak (2019) and others have pointed out that “legal precarity, the criminalization and politicization of migrants” puts forced migrants in a vulnerable position in the research process compared to the researcher who is most often an outsider from Global North. The hope or expectation that by participating, a relationship will be forged with someone who might be able to offer help, has in my experience pushed people to agree to participate even when reluctant. Nonetheless, there is ambiguity over the concept of vulnerability in research ethics (Coleman, 2009; Hurst, 2008; McDowell, 2013; Milner, 2015). McDowell (2013) has shown how the concept of “vulnerability” in forced migration studies is associated in particular with refugees and forced migrants living in camps, and then this “vulnerability” is generalized and extended to other migrant groups which is an unsound generalization. He argued that vulnerability varies among displaced people especially due to the cause of displacement and migration – conflict, natural disasters, environmental and legal status of displaced person and the locations in which we conduct our research. Nonetheless, it’s essential to note that ultimately, it is the researcher who decides which part of the data to omit and which to present, how to interpret it or even how to publish it post-study, how long to retain raw data, or determine how it should be utilized.

The inequality in the production and distribution of knowledge within migration and asylum studies has significantly impacted the field's content. Bakewell (2008) argues that the emphasis on policy relevance in forced migration research has led researchers to adopt the categories and priorities of policymakers as their primary frame of reference. This approach limits the types of questions researchers ask, the subjects they study, and the methodologies they employ, thereby marginalising large groups of forced migrants in both research and policy.

The policy-relevant research agenda rigidly adheres to recognised categories of displaced people, such as refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), as defined by policymakers. This categorisation excludes those who do not fit these definitions and prioritises the concerns and interests of states in the Global North over those of forced migrants themselves (Bakewell, 2008). The policy relevant agendas mean that social scientists and policymakers are generally looking for durable solutions and addressing integration challenges, while other issues such as colonization are ignored (Mayblin & Turner, 2020; Ramsay, 2020). Consequently, local knowledge and the experiences of forced migrants are often overlooked, rendering them invisible in both research and policy discussions. Bakewell contends that this focus on policy relevance inadvertently skews research towards areas where policies are already in place, often to the detriment of understanding the broader social processes affecting forced migrants.

Moreover, knowledge production in the field of migration has been heavily influenced by methodological nationalism in the Global North. Many scholars (Anderson, 2019; Cabot, 2019; Dahinden, 2016; Khosravi, 2016; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) have noted how methodological nationalism generally influenced the social sciences both as a research framework and the premise of many research questions. Research is designed in a way that assumes the nation-state is a natural and inevitable form of governance. Such an approach has significant implications for the study of forced migration: it creates dualities such as migrant/citizen, forced/voluntary migrants, legal/illegal migrants, documented/undocumented migrants. These concepts frame most research and migration is generally presented as a problem, a crisis and an exception.

Anderson (2019) explains how a particular concept of migrant is constructed as “out of place” in contradiction with the concept of “native” or citizenship. Such an understanding and presupposition is at the heart of many forced migration concerns about human mobility as well. She shows how migration research is influenced by this particular image of the migrants based on citizenship (2019). This image has an ideological impact on migration research, which basically influences what questions are to be asked and how they are to be asked, as a result shaping the knowledge that is produced.

In the 21st century, the limitations of ‘methodological nationalism’ were apparent and transnational studies developed as an alternative, decentralizing the nation-state (Khagram & Levitt, 2008) and providing a point of view in which phenomena are examined beyond borders and nations. Anderson (2019) calls for methodological denationalism through ‘migrantizing’ the citizen, while Ramsay (2020) says we should de-exeptionalise migrants by destabilizing the concept of citizen. Taking this approach reveals how dominant binary categories (migrant/citizen) affect the lives of people and groups and make those forcibly mobile invisible.

This may sound like wordplay, but for Afghans born and raised in Iran, who have no chance of becoming Iranian citizens, who are forced to put their parents’ or grandparents’ Afghan birthplace as their own, and for whom ‘return’ to Afghanistan is not possible, such ideas have resonance. Monsutti’s multisite examination of war and migration in Afghanistan is an excellent example of denationalizing research, exploring as it does the transnational networks of Hazaras, constantly moving across national borders between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran (Monsutti, 2005).

In addition to the content produced in studies on forced migration and refugees, which is influenced by epistemological and political approaches from the Global North, research methodologies and knowledge production have also been shaped by these dominant interests and policies. These methodologies often reflect a top-down perspective, reinforcing a hierarchical view of forced migrants. This research process reduced forced migrants to an object. Pittaway and colleagues (2010) have objected to a research process in which migrants and refugees are only used as tools, and their presence is reduced to research projects, without any positive change occurring in their situation

(Bilotta, 2018). In what follows, I examine the existing methodologies in forced migration studies and the criticisms directed towards them.

Research Methodologies in Forced Migration Studies:

We are faced with extensive growth of research in the field of forced migration. As Anderson (2019) has pointed out, we are in the age of migration research rather than “age of migration”, and most of that research is qualitative, especially in Europe (Yalaz & Zapata-Barrero, 2018). Yalaz and Zapata-Barrero (2018), reviewing papers published between 2000 to 2016 at two important migration academic journals (*Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies*), have pointed out that the main data collection tools are interviews (mostly structured, semi-structured and in a few cases focus group discussions) and then participatory observation and document analysis.

Quantitative methods, such as surveys, are most likely to be used by economists (Bauer & Zimmermann, 1998; de la Brière et al., 2002) or international organisations. Rodgers (2004) has argued that the use of quantitative methodologies is based on assumptions that researchers already know the appropriate questions. Khosravi (2018) and Rodgers (2004), among others, have argued that quantitative methodologies are not able to capture the complex realities of forced migrants' lives. As Rodgers (2004) argues, they might be appropriate if forced migrants were living in laboratory situations, but like all humans, the lives of forced migrants are shaped by the interaction of complex economic, political and social contexts and are beyond the capacity of surveys to measure. Quantitative research instruments can measure but don't have the capacity to explain such a life. Qualitative researchers (Khosravi, 2018; Rodgers, 2004) have stressed the importance of research methods that encourage the participation of forced migrants in the research process in order to produce more accurate and nuanced knowledge with fewer ethical problems.

Recently, this emphasis on the lived experience of forced migrants and of researchers has become more important (Clark-Kazak, 2019; Eastmond, 2007; Khosravi, 2016, 2018;

Oda et al., 2022; Shivakoti & Milner, 2021; Taha, 2022) in knowledge production. The main concern is how research can be designed in a way that the forced migrants have a greater role shaping and conducting the research in order to produce knowledge that more accurately reflects reality and the lived experiences of forced migrants. Can a researcher research the migration experience of others without having themselves experienced forced migration (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004, Clark-Kazak, 2019; Khosravi, 2016, 2018)?

This is an important epistemological question, originally raised by feminist scholars (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Harding, 2004). The question of the researcher's lived experience is a core concept in Feminist standpoint theory (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004). Feminists have argued that the dominant research practice has generally marginalized women and that dominant male values shape research (Harding, 2004). The experience and concerns of women as researchers and researched were ignored, and research projects were designed by men asked questions using methods that could not accurately capture the concerns and lived experience of women.

Crenshaw (1989), introducing the concept of intersectionality, pointed out that feminist research, conducted by white women, was blind to the experiences of Black women, and women from migrant communities. More recently, research has acknowledged the importance of gender, ethnicity and class in shaping the production of knowledge, and the important contribution that researchers who are not white, middle class, straight men make to knowledge (Bilotta, 2021; Taha, 2022).

These critics of the dominant research culture argue that the marginalized have a major epistemic advantage that allows them to see things differently, or to see things from a perspective that members of the dominant group do not (Harding, 2004). This does not necessarily mean that a researcher who does not have the relevant life experience or is not member of a marginalized groups has no contribution to make or is unable to understand the perspective of marginalized groups (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Harding, 2004), but it does suggest that the knowledge about such groups should not be produced only by outsiders, and that such groups themselves have a right to produce their own

knowledge and critique that produced by others (feasible only when the research is available in an accessible language).

As a result of these critical voices, the complex lived experience of forced migrants is receiving more attention and influencing research methodologies. In the last two decades, research based on auto-ethnography and narration has emerged (Clark-Kazak, 2019; Iosifides & Sporton, 2009; Khosravi, 2010, 2018). In these research approaches, rather than the researcher asking questions that they choose, researchers try to be active listeners (especially in narration and storytelling) allowing forced migrants to narrate their stories in their own way, choosing what to emphasize (Powles, 2004). Increasingly researchers try to give more agency and space to forced migrants or research participants to direct the research. The ultimate goal in these types of research approaches is to minimize the intervention of researchers (Clark-Kazak, 2019; Khosravi, 2016, 2018).

Eastmond (2007) notes, however, that we have to be aware that the narratives and stories of refugees are based on their experience within a larger socio-cultural context that also needs to be understood, and outsider researchers may understand that context better. For example, Afghans, such as myself, who arrived into the UK in 2021 would not be familiar with the history of refugee reception in the UK, or the place of refugees in British culture or wider social challenges and tensions relating to e.g. education, housing, welfare, and may assume that particular obstacles do not exist for other groups. This is not the only concern with research that focuses narrowly on the voices of forced migrants. Narratives are one interpretation of a migrant's life, which may be experienced and expressed in different ways by other forced migrants.

Clark-Kazak (2019) argues that narrative-based research approaches raise ethical challenges in terms of data ownership and confidentiality. In the case of asylum seekers and refugees confidentiality is essential. Their legal status may be jeopardized by telling the story of their migration, since the current system forces people to present their cases in very particular ways. It might not be possible for some people to recount certain experiences due to trauma or limited knowledge because of different constraints (e.g. the unaccompanied minor who relies on the friend or uncle or smuggler to get him from A to B without knowing the countries through which he has passed).

Finally, the focus on self-narration does not overcome the issue of interpretation and presentation. Once the stories have been told, it is still the researcher who decides which parts of the story make it into the article or report, and in publications it is the interpretation of the researcher that is heard. PAR and autoethnography in migration studies are attempts to address these issues. Both methodologies strive to disrupt hierarchical structures in knowledge production toward more ethical and democratic way of knowledge production. In the next section, I elaborate on PAR and autoethnography as alternative methodologies for producing more ethical and democratic science.

PAR as an Alternative Knowledge Production Approach

PAR is an attempt to democratically produce knowledge in partnership with those about whom such knowledge is produced. PAR scholars (Fals-Borda, 1989; Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003; Hall, 1975; Hall & Tandon, 2017a, 2017b; Rahman, 2008, 1991; Robles Lomeli & Rappaport, 2018; Swantz, 2008; Swantz, 2016) argue that the dominant structures of knowledge production maintain existing unequal power structures, which excludes those without power, denying the validity of their knowledge.

Fals-Borda (2003), like Bhambra (2007) and Meghji (2021) above, calls into question the validity of the knowledge produced in the North, explaining how he (Fals-Borda, 2003) and his colleagues felt a deep gap between what they learnt in Global North academic institutions and the reality that existed in their society. They re-read a wide range of sociological texts, hoping to find a way to solve the social problems confronting their societies and to find a connection between what they had learned in the Global North institutions and the realities of Colombian society, but they did not succeed. Fals-Borda contended that dominant social science paradigms are not applicable to the Global South, which faces profound injustice and inequality (Fals-Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003). He (1987; 2003; 2006) argued that social knowledge is contextual and is influenced by the environment where it is produced. It is shaped by the motivation, values and concerns of its producers, in spite of claims to objectivity and universality.

PAR scholars argued that deprived societies should produce their own knowledge using an approach which puts people at the centre and validates their experience, rather than leaving it to outsiders armed with theories developed elsewhere and unrelated to lived experiences. Describing people-led research essentially describes how dominant power structures in the research process are disrupted. PAR as a qualitative, inductive approach is “research by and with people” instead of “research on or about people”, in which people help to define the problem/question and provide a solution according to the situation and existing resources (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Hall, 1975; Nyemba & Mayer, 2018; RIB, 2004; Swantz, 2008).

PAR emerged as an approach in the second half of the 20th century in the context of decolonization and post-colonialism in the Global South and in particular in Latin America and South Asia and was most often associated with a Marxist (and sometimes revolutionary) perspective. The PAR approach sought to improve the life of poor, rightless, vulnerable communities whose agency was ignored by government/policy makers (Fals-Borda et al., 2006; Swantz, 2008). Swantz was one of the earliest proponents of PAR, employing this approach in several projects, including improving the situation of village women through education in Tanzania (McIntyre, 2008) at a development project (1975-1979) where villagers were asked to identify their problems and find a solution based on whatever resources they have (Nyemba & Mayer, 2018).

Fals-Borda coined the term Participatory Action Research (Hall, 2005) and was/is famous for his outstanding work with peasant communities in Colombia. “Knowledge and People's Power: Lessons with Peasants in Nicaragua, Mexico and Colombia” (1985) marked an important milestone in the development of PAR, describing the development of techniques for organizing and systematizing people’s knowledge, especially techniques such as “collective research”, “critical recovery of history”, “valuing and applying folk culture”, and the “production and diffusion of new knowledge”. In collective research, Fals-Borda points out that knowledge is cultural and its goals, values, and assumptions benefit those who produce and control it. Therefore, more than knowledge itself, forms and relationships of knowledge production are important. Collective research deals with the real problems of the people and uses dialogue and social drama and is

produced collectively. It is validated by *its* public. To produce such knowledge, it is important to pay attention to the value of local rituals and customs such as storytelling, art, and music. In fact, those tools express the knowledge, situation, feelings and issues that are important to the community that uses them. In the “critical recovery of history”, the emphasis is on understanding hegemonic and colonial relations of the past based on the narratives and experiences of the older generation in order to somehow correct past knowledge that may have been produced elsewhere. The final important point is to “share the knowledge” that has been produced, that is, whatever knowledge is produced should be presented to the community and not only in written form, which is often only accessible to the elite or dominant group (Fals-Borda, 1987).

The concept of participation is fundamental to the PAR methodology. This characteristic moves the research away from a monopoly condition and democratises it. In other words, PAR views the source of knowledge as something diverse, which can be produced in various places (IDPs camp in Kabul) and institutions (City, University of London) ; knowledge is also a product of public participation, which has always been eliminated from decision-making processes, and popular wisdom and insight have consistently been overlooked in favour of expert knowledge (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 10).

The concept of participation aims to disrupt the hierarchical process of knowledge production and shift towards a democratic process in knowledge production, where individuals have an equitable stake. Participation essentially implies establishing a balance in power and redistributing it in the research process, enhancing the validity of the research.

The primary difference of participation in PAR compared to other participatory methods is that participation in PAR is not linear but cyclical and iterative (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Lenette, 2022; Rahman, 1991). This means that participation is not something that happens once and ends; instead, it includes continuous and repeated research, action, and reflection.

In practice, this idea faces numerous challenges, which may lead to merely symbolic or superficial participation, and it has faced considerable criticism (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Lenette, 2022). Some studies, while purporting to use the PAR approach, enter the field

with the research topic already defined, which deviates from PAR guidelines. This naturally brings up questions regarding the degrees of involvement in PAR research. The central concern becomes: How deeply must participation run for it to be genuinely termed PAR? Where do we draw the line delineating participation levels in PAR methodology?

Working in Bangladesh, Rahman (2008) explained that while objectivity in research methods is designed to remove personal influences or bias in the research process, so that the subject can be studied impartially, due to the collective nature of research in PAR and the equal role of the researcher with other research colleagues (research participants), objectivity has its highest degree, since collective agreement is central to PAR, and so consequently it has a high degree of validity. Hall & Tandon (2017b) argue that lack of education or academic expertise does not mean ignorance or an inability to produce knowledge. People have a greater understanding of the situation in which they live than an outside researcher who enters the community, usually relatively briefly, with a pre-formulated question. This does not mean ignoring the knowledge produced in academic institutions, but PAR is resistant to the erasure of people's local experiences and knowledge, especially about living conditions and ways out of it, and insistent that this knowledge, experience and insight should be considered in the research process.

So far, I have just discussed the participatory element of research in the PAR approach, but Action is as important. With a PAR approach, action is an essential part of research that should in some way lead to an improvement in the living conditions of the community (Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Hall, 1975; Swantz, 2008), and not in some far distant future. The action is the result of the participation of the people in the research process and is implemented and monitored by the participants. Ideally, participation leads to plans of action, which are implemented, critiqued in real time and this feedback leads to adjustments, and further research leading to better actions in an iterative cycle, leading to improved life conditions.

Initially, the PAR approach had quite a lot of influence on development theories and International Development agencies (Baum et al., 2006). The concept of participation by stakeholders was welcomed by many development institutions such as the World Bank and UN (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). The United Nations (at least in theory) has taken a

"whole society" approach to involving vulnerable groups in the decision-making process for development projects which coincides with the concept of participation in PAR. However, in spite of its robust ethical approach and the potential for making a difference in the lives of a range of populations, PAR wasn't welcomed by academic institutions except in development, education and health. Bergold and Thomas (2012) argued that the main reason for this reluctance was that PAR was incompatible with the existing standards of research at western universities and the demands of academic research funding bodies, which demand from the outset a clearly articulated research question, at least some theory and or a hypothesis, a timeline, a budget and the promise of a research monograph (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

However, I hypothesise that the decline may also have been due to the rise of neoliberalism and managerialism, which demanded clearly articulated performance indicators, inputs, outputs, Gantt charts and risk assessments (instruments with which those of us who have worked with international organisations in Afghanistan are familiar). PAR, with its emphasis on collaboration at all stages of the research project, on allowing time and resources for multiple cycles of planning, implementation, theorizing and consultation, and with no guarantee of success, and no hierarchy of project management, was an anathema to the dominant paradigm for research. It even lost ground in the development field, as from the 1990s onwards grants became conditional on having partners who could fulfil due diligence criteria, and had 'acceptable' banks accounts, etc.

Today there is renewed interest in using the PAR approach (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Halilovich, 2013; Nyemba & Mayer, 2018) especially in forced migration studies (Hugman et al., 2011), but it remains the exception. This is no doubt due to the funding issue, but my own experience with researchers from the Global North indicates that the colonial mindset is still dominant in this field.

In this research, I was interested to know how PAR researchers could collaborate with people to plan the research? How would they collect data? How would they analyse the data together? How would they distribute the research? And most importantly, how could the research meaningfully contribute to improving the lives of forced migrants? In chapter four, I describe step by step the actions taken to (try and) implement PAR, and the

challenges that meant my attempt did not fulfil my expectations and led me to embrace autoethnography more fully.

Auto-ethnography

Autoethnography has become a significant methodological approach in qualitative research since the 1970s. It has evolved to address the limitations of positivist research methods and is now seen as a way to decolonise knowledge production, particularly for marginalised groups like refugees (Khosravi, 2010, 2016; Williams, 2021).

The term "autoethnography" first appeared in academic literature in the mid-1970s, introduced by Karl Heider (1975) and later developed by David Hayano (1979). Hayano's initial concept was limited, focusing on insiders researching their own cultural groups. He did not see it as a critical or transformative practice but as an extension of traditional ethnography with closer researcher involvement (Hayano, 1979). Traditional positivist methods emphasised objectivity and generalisability, often neglecting the subjective and emotional aspects of human experience. Researchers realised these methods were inadequate for addressing social complexities, leading to more reflective approaches in qualitative research (Adams et al., 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011; Khosravi, 2016).

Autoethnography evolved as a response to the limitations of positivist research paradigms that dominated social sciences (Adams et al., 2015), and that often focus on understanding the 'other' from a neutral, impersonal, and objective standpoint, maintaining a distance between researcher and subject (Smith, 2012). Autoethnography eliminates this boundary, making the researcher a part of the research community and shifting the focus from the 'other' to the self within a social context (Khosravi, 2016). It aims to connect personal stories with social contexts, intertwining theoretical concepts with personal experiences and placing lived experiences within social, cultural, political, and artistic frameworks (Khosravi, 2016).

In traditional ethnography, researchers often remained in the background, presenting findings as objective truths without acknowledging their influence on the research (Adams et al., 2015). Autoethnography, in contrast, places the researcher's experiences and positionality at the forefront, offering a transparent and reflexive account of the research process. This approach aligns with postmodernism, which questions absolute objectivity and highlights the constructed nature of knowledge (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

The political dimensions of autoethnography are significant, as it challenges dominant narratives and highlights marginalised voices. By foregrounding personal and communal experiences, autoethnography serves as a tool for social justice, advocating for greater recognition and understanding of diverse identities and experiences. This approach aligns with decolonising methodologies, addressing power imbalances and biases in traditional research (Smith, 2012).

Autoethnography challenges colonial legacies by allowing researchers from marginalised backgrounds to represent their own cultures and experiences (Chawla & Atay, 2018). By using autoethnography, researchers can critique power dynamics and biases in ethnographic research. This approach emphasises narrative sovereignty, where individuals from marginalised communities tell their own stories and represent their realities. Autoethnography thus fosters a more equitable and inclusive approach to knowledge production (Ortiz-Vilarelle, 2017).

Both autoethnography and PAR serve as challenges to conventional research methodologies and are more ethical and democratic ways of producing knowledge.

Ethics in Forced Migration Research

The vulnerability of forced migrants, especially those who fled war and conflict and who live in camps (including detention or reception centres), challenges ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality and do no harm (Bilotta, 2018; Clark-Kazak, 2017;

Mackenzie et al., 2007; Pittaway et al., 2010). The concept of informed consent is based on the assumption of individual autonomy and awareness of the consequences of participation (Barrett & Parker, 2003; Leaning, 2001; Molyneux et al., 2005). In many societies, the decision to participate in research may be a collective one, or it would be family or community that make decisions on whether individuals should take part or not (Mackenzie et al., 2007). For people who have not experienced formal education, the explanations offered by researchers may have no meaning, and consent may be 'given' because of a reluctance to offend or the assumption that the more educated researcher knows better or will bring some benefit, something that our fieldworkers encountered in a previous project (2016-18) on which I was research manager, something we only became aware of when participants began asking them for advice on issues unrelated to the project.

There is sometimes an assumption that, if it does not benefit the individual, the research will at least improve the situation of future forced migrants, a promise that is often made in negotiating consent, though the evidence for this is thin. As noted above in the discussion on PAR, there is not equal power between the researched and the researcher, especially in the case of forced migrants, and even more so for those in camps and detention centres (Leaning, 2001; Mackenzie et al., 2007). In many cases, migrants in camps are asked by camp representatives or authorities to participate in research projects, and they may fear that if they refused, this would have negative consequences for them which is related to risk-based vulnerability (Ellis et al., 2007). Also living in difficult camp conditions, migrants may consider participation in a research project as an opportunity to find a way out of the situation they live in, so may feel obliged by their circumstances to participate, which calls into question whether their 'consent' is fully informed or voluntary (Pittaway et al., 2010). Some forced migrants agree to be research participants in the hope of developing relationships with researchers or organizations who might be able to help them migrate to Global North countries (Ayub Khan, personal communication, October 30, 2020).

Another ethical principle that has been seriously questioned is that of privacy and confidentiality (Clark-Kazak, 2021; Leaning, 2001; Pittaway et al., 2010; Zwi et al., 2006).

The concept of privacy is based on preserving the identity of the participant to protect him / her, but in fact after publishing articles (even if the information is anonymous) it is not difficult to identify people because the protected space of the camp is such that people are often identifiable especially when people participate in research with a foreign researcher in a controlled environment (Zwi et al., 2006).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the unequal benefit that the parties - researcher and researched - derive from the research process. In fact, this unequal relationship of power in the research process has also made the benefit unequal. Forced migrants are used to researchers entering camps or detention centres and asking them to 'tell their stories' (Pittaway et al., 2010) but leaving nothing behind for the vulnerable community. Such relationships are, according to the respondent in one study, completely parasitic (Bilotta, 2019) and such knowledge is exploitative:

That kind of parasitic relationship is that researchers are—I feel that researchers, they come get our data, then waste our time. There is no mutual benefit, the benefit is on one side. Those guys collect the data, and for us at the end of it we don't see any change. We expect to at least get some benefit back, but there is no benefit. You get your data, you go — maybe use it for your own benefit and you leave us hanging. So, I feel only one party is benefitting and the other one is not benefitting. So that's why I say it's kind of a parasitic relationship (RYP2) (Bilotta, 2019, p. 134)

Many scholars (Bilotta, 2018; Milner, 2015; Pittaway et al., 2010) have noticed a “research fatigue” among forced migrants as they contribute to many research projects but don't see any change or benefit for the forced migrant community. While ethically we should only conduct research among vulnerable groups if it is to reduce their suffering (Turton, 1996, p. 96).

Procedural ethics at academic and research institutions often fail to address the on-the-ground challenges encountered when working with vulnerable populations, such as those involved in forced migration studies (Bilotta, 2019). Researchers in this field face ethical dilemmas that may conflict with guidelines set by ethics committees; for example, assisting asylum seekers beyond the research scope might be viewed as compromising the study's integrity (Bilotta, 2018; Lammers, 2007a). Sole reliance on procedural ethics

is inadequate for systematically marginalized communities. Therefore, it is crucial for researchers to develop 'relational ethics', which emphasize mutual respect, dignity, recognition of value and connectedness between researchers and participants. While procedural ethics provide essential guidelines, relational ethics offer a more context-sensitive approach that recognises the humanity and agency of research participants (Bilotta, 2018).

Addressing the ethical concerns inherent in the research process, PAR presents fewer dilemmas. Through the active involvement of participants at every research stage, PAR mitigates ethical challenges stemming from power disparities. In this approach, community members are viewed as collaborative partners rather than mere subjects of study, inherently addressing issues such as informed consent (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). PAR thus fosters an equitable environment for knowledge and experience exchange. It prioritises articulating the concerns and viewpoints of participants and seeks indigenous solutions. Crucially, by guiding action, PAR ensures the primary beneficiaries of the research are the participants themselves (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991).

Consequently, employing both autoethnography and Participatory Action Research offers a potent remedy to ethical challenges prevalent in traditional research. These methodologies promote a profound and equitable comprehension of the studied communities while amplifying community participation and resource utilisation.

Conclusion

Emerging from this review of the literature is a series of relationships: between social science and colonialism and empire; between the welfare state and empire; the decline of PAR and the rise of neoliberalism. These relationships are important because they have all shaped existing knowledge about forced migration and the reception of asylum seekers in the UK, and potentially elsewhere in the Global North.

Moreover, the relationship between the researcher and the researched recalls or replicates colonial power dynamics. Researchers from the Global North, who have access to funding and resources, significantly influence what and how subjects are studied, how data are interpreted and analysed, and how findings are published and disseminated. This is particularly evident when researchers come from a privileged background while the study subjects, such as refugees, might be in an utterly disempowered and vulnerable situation. Such a scenario might result in a one-sided understanding of the issue, where the voices of forced migrants and refugees are not heard.

This review justifies my choice of methodology but also makes clear that I approached this study convinced that PAR and autoethnography provided the most ethical approach to the study of forced migration, but unsure whether it would be feasible given the challenges identified in the literature.

In this research, I try to utilise PAR and autoethnography to explore my own forced migration experience from Afghanistan, as well as the experiences of my fellow Afghan forced migrants. These two methodologies were intended to provide forced migrants with the space and authority to manage their own research projects and speak for themselves instead of being spoken for by Others. Before turning to a review of the more empirical literature that formed the basis of the final focus of this thesis, the next chapter describes my attempts to apply PAR, the challenges I faced and the lessons I learned.

Chapter 3: PAR in context of forced displacement

Introduction

The importance of participatory methods, particularly for vulnerable groups such as forced migrants, lies in their potential to place people at the centre of both research and action. It aims to improve the conditions of forced migrants by involving them directly in the research process. This approach stems from the Participatory Action Research (PAR) standpoint that no research is ethical unless it leads to an improvement in people's lives (Fals-Borda, 1989; Hall, 1975; Rahman, 1991). My use of PAR aimed to create a bottom-up research approach, informed by both the research literature in forced migration studies and my field experiences in Afghanistan and in London with Afghan forced migrants. Despite being underutilized in the context of forced migration, PAR seems to present a unique opportunity for this research. Although its application in this context is still emerging, there is a growing emphasis on its use, and this study explores its potential and effectiveness (Ellis et al., 2007).

I present my experience of PAR application in Kabul-Afghanistan as the first case study in the context of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). However, this case study remained unfinished due to political circumstances and the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, but it is still useful to include reflections on this attempt in this part of the thesis as there are lessons to be learnt for using PAR in a conflict setting. Following the introduction to the first case study, in which I justify including a discussion of this aborted case study, I provide some background to the issue of internal displacement in Afghanistan. I then discuss my own positionality with regard to my potential co-researchers before explaining the challenges I faced in greater detail.

In the second case study, I describe how I tried and failed to use PAR in the context of forced migration in London where Afghan evacuees/forced migrants were stuck in a bridging hotel for almost two years (August 2021 - August 2023). Once again, I explore the methodological challenges I faced, and the solutions I found. I conclude with a comparison of the two attempts at PAR and reflections on their failure.

By exploring these experiences and methodological transitions, this chapter aims to provide a better understanding of the application and limitations of PAR in the study of forced migration, offering valuable lessons for future research in this field.

Case study 1: PAR in the context of IDPs in Afghanistan

The initial research plan for this PhD focused on internal displacement in Afghanistan using PAR methodology. However, eight months into the research, political changes in Afghanistan, notably the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, meant I had to stop my fieldwork and shift my research focus and field. Initially, I did not intend to discuss this semi-completed research in my thesis. Upon reflection, however, detailing my first real attempt to use PAR in Afghanistan allowed me to reflect on why I wished to continue with a very challenging methodology in very different circumstances, the lessons I learnt, and to examine why it was ultimately not feasible to continue with it in either case.

The IDP case study permits lessons to be drawn from the comparison with the attempt to work with people in a similarly temporary but protracted situation of intense stress, but very different surroundings. I came to see that problems I thought unique to an IDP camp outside Kabul were not so unique, and that PAR may not be feasible in all settings, that certain conditions are necessary to be able to use this method. This comparison yields valuable methodological insights and offers a deeper understanding of how context is crucial in PAR.

Second, the use of PAR within the context of internal forced migration in Afghanistan provided interesting insights into attitudes to forced displacement among Afghans inside Afghanistan. These insights lay the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of Afghan evacuees in the UK. Ultimately, narratives of displacement both within and outside Afghanistan are interconnected, offering a fuller picture of Afghan forced migration. This comprehensive approach enriches our understanding of the complex experiences of Afghan forced migrants, addressing the gap in dominant

research which often lacks information about the original countries of forced migrants, leading to an incomplete picture.

In the following section, I will provide an overview of the situation concerning IDPs in Afghanistan. I will also explain my reasons for choosing Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the research methodology within this particular context beyond the more general appeal of the method. Additionally, I will detail exactly how I tried to use PAR and the reasons I failed. This includes discussions on the research field, target group selection, and the establishment of relationships with the IDP community. I will also address the process of inviting participants to engage in PAR, ensuring their active participation, and reflecting on my positionality throughout the study.

Internal Displacement in Afghanistan:

Following the US and its allies' invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the UNHCR celebrated the largest return of migrants in its history, as 5.7 million Afghans returned from neighbouring countries, especially Iran and Pakistan (UNHCR 2012). However, due to ongoing conflicts, drought, and unemployment, they could not return to their original homes and therefore settled in informal camps around the larger cities like Kabul, Mazar, Herat, and Jalalabad, hoping to find safety and work. Some also returned to their places of exile (Iran and Pakistan) because of ongoing insecurity and or an inability to survive economically in Afghanistan (UNHCR 2012). The population of IDPs was increasing daily. According to the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), the number of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan reached 4,350,900 in 2019 (IOM 2019), primarily due to the intensity of the war, though some also migrated due to natural disasters such as drought, floods, and landslides.

In urban areas, IDPs faced numerous challenges. Some established self-settled camps on the outskirts of cities. For instance, Kabul had about 53 informal IDP camps (World Bank/UNHCR 2011). Inhabitants of these camps lacked access to clean water, electricity, and education, and there were no sanitation facilities. Men often had to travel long distances to find work, earning minimal income. Begging and child labour were common

issues, along with an increasing problem of drug use among disillusioned young people who had no hopeful prospects for the future. The World Bank/UNHCR report in 2011 (the last to mention this issue) had already noted these problems, and put the % of households with drug addicted members at 4.6% (World Bank/UNHCR 2011, 23), but by 2020, the numbers seemed to me to be considerably higher.

In the winter of 2012, following reports of children dying in IDP camps due to extreme cold, Hamid Karzai, the then-President of Afghanistan, ordered the development of a policy to tackle the complex issues faced by IDPs (Wiseberg 2014). UNHCR was entrusted with the task of drafting this policy, and Laurie S. Wiseberg, a senior officer at UNHCR, was responsible for its creation. Wiseberg (2014) detailed the challenges of formulating the IDP policy, including the demanding effort of seeking contributions from relevant ministries. She argued that the participation of pertinent Afghan ministries and civil society in the decision-making was not effective or successful. Most importantly, there was a lack of significant engagement from the IDPs themselves, and discussions often didn't go beyond addressing their immediate needs. Wiseberg acknowledged that these factors made it difficult to create a policy that fully addressed the complexities of displacement in Afghanistan (Wiseberg 2014).

The efforts of both international and national bodies to address the challenges faced by IDPs in Afghanistan have largely been unsuccessful (Majidi 2013). Despite two decades since the occupation of Afghanistan by the United States and its allies and billions of dollars spent in aid, the living conditions and status of IDPs have shown little improvement (Majidi, 2013). One significant issue has been the persistent focus of these organisations on short-term emergency responses, neglecting long-term development initiatives. Moreover, there has been a lack of meaningful engagement with IDPs and other relevant stakeholders (Majidi, 2013). This top-down approach not only overlooked the insights and needs of the IDPs but also failed to recognise them as valuable contributors to the solution. As a result, such policies often exacerbated issues for IDPs and even negatively impacted the host communities (Hussaini, 2020).

Examples of the failed efforts of the Afghan government and the international community to respond appropriately to the needs of IDPs can be seen in the AliceGhan Township

project. The construction of AliceGhan Township was initially a programme for the voluntary and forced return from Australia to facilitate their reintegration into Afghan society. This project was executed through a memorandum of understanding between the governments of Australia and Afghanistan, and in collaboration with UNDP (Sydney Morning Herald 2012). Upon the completion of the construction of AliceGhan Township in the suburbs of Kabul, by 2011, only 250 families resided there, whilst it was meant to accommodate 1,400 families. The township faced failure due to a scarcity of drinking water, lack of access to employment opportunities, property disputes with the host community, and disregard for some of Afghanistan's cultural standards (such as the need for boundary walls) (Majidi, 2013) and was described by UNDP itself as a resounding failure (2014). UNDP (2014) and Majidi (2013) agree that the primary reason for the failure of this project for returning Afghans was the lack of consultation with returnees and the host community. Despite attempts to address some of the reasons for the project's failure, it still proposed activities that were not meaningful for most residents, resulting in AliceGhan Township remaining half-empty in spite of a chronic need for homes and settlement possibilities for IDPs.

The recurring theme of inadequate consultation with affected communities, as exemplified by the AliceGhan Township project, underscores the critical necessity of involving individuals in programs directly impacting their lives. This observation significantly influenced the methodological direction of my dissertation. Using the PAR methodology was an attempt to initiate a bottom-up analysis of the problems facing IDPs in Kabul and to support them in defining and identifying appropriate solutions over which they would have a sense of ownership.

Positionality in PAR

Positionality, as understood in academic research, significantly influences the trajectory and outcomes of any study. Rooted in an understanding that the researcher's characteristics such as age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, religious beliefs, language, and even past experiences like migration, can shape every facet of the

research process from the questions that are answered to how research participants respond to the researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Consequently, it is important to clarify that positionality for co-researchers and for future readers. Engaging co-researchers in discussions about relative positionality is vital to uphold research transparency and underscore the democratic essence of PAR. In many research instances, researchers do not feel obligated to provide participants with much information beyond their name, as maintaining distance is a key principle, and there is a strong belief that too much greater closeness can potentially undermine the credibility of the research (Landau & Jacobsen, 2005).

The experience of researchers in navigating between 'insider' and 'outsider' roles is linked to those characteristics. While being an 'insider' can ostensibly ease access, trust, and lead to richer data collection due to shared cultural or socio-economic backgrounds (Ryan et al., 2011), it's also essential to recognize the fluidity of these labels. As Hayano (1979) posits, one can share certain attributes with the researched group, like language or ethnicity, and yet still be perceived as an outsider. This became clear during the previous project referred to above (p.53), when we saw that some of the families participating viewed Afghan colleagues as outsider researchers because they were educated Hazara women, born in Iran and working for a foreign funded project (Schuster et al., 2021).

PAR, while advocating for a more inclusive, collective approach (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007), needs time to overcome the boundaries between insider and outsider. In PAR efforts are made to blur and lift the boundary between the researcher and the researched, the outsider and insider, by highlighting the collective nature of research. The goal is 'unity in research' where research is not conducted "on" people but "with" people against the duality of researched and researcher or insider/outsider critiqued in PAR literature (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Hall, 1975; Nyemba & Mayer, 2018; RIB, 2004; Swantz, 2008).

In spite of this goal, researcher positionality still plays an important role in PAR research. First, the discourse on researcher positionality in PAR methodology becomes particularly vital during the initial phases when the researcher endeavours to invite the community to PAR. At this juncture, the researcher's positionality - how well they are known and trusted

by the community - might influence the modality and level of participation (Lenette, 2022). Second, it's entirely possible that the ideal scenario of collective knowledge production with optimal participation may not be achieved, or the level of participation in the research process may not be satisfactory as proved to be the case for this project, especially if the participants feel that the researcher's goals do not align with theirs, if for example the researcher is seen to be closely allied to outsider interests (Lenette, 2022). Because the researcher's positionality will shape the research process to a greater or lesser extent, so it was important to clarify that positionality for the reader and for co-researchers. In my case, although I emphasised my desire to support the community in reaching their goals, I was also clear that the research would lead to the completion of a PhD - something inconceivable for my potential participants. However, I had hoped that at least initiating a discussion on positionality would ensure transparency and illuminate the potential impacts of my position (and my relationship with potential co-researchers within the community) on knowledge creation.

I began by getting to know individuals, and trying to understand the camp and its residents as a community, and as a community of IDPs - what exactly did that mean? Recognising the dynamics of power that would shape people's participation, and who would be willing and able to participate in this project would be crucial, but it took me a long time to understand who would be unable or unwilling to participate, who would be excluded, by whom or what. It took time to fully appreciate the limitations I would encounter in accessing people in order to extend the invitation to PAR.

At each meeting I introduced myself to my potential co-researchers and answered their questions about my background and my family. There was no other way to promote collaboration in knowledge production without offering reciprocal detailed answers to their questions. There were many conversations about my life experience with the community, and our shared experience of exile and return, and the experience of discrimination was important for establishing trust. Presenting information about myself did not adhere to a pre-determined plan but evolved gradually through numerous informal conversations with the camp residents and Ayub Khan. During our discussions, I shared with them numerous memories from Iran and Afghanistan and Poland (where I had just completed a Masters

degree). I had done similar work to these IDPs growing up in Iran: in a brick factory, carpet weaving, tailoring, construction, and canal digging (for the installation of gas and waterpipes) - the only jobs open to Afghans in Iran. Tired of the discrimination we had all faced, I had returned to Afghanistan in 2009.

However, unlike the people in the IDP camp, I had found work with national and international organisations. Unlike them, I lived in the west of Kabul, inhabited primarily by the Hazara ethnic group, in a township named Omid-e Sabz, where middle-class Hazaras, generally educated with migration experience in Iran or Pakistan, resided. I did not realise at the start of the project, the extent to which these differences of ethnicity, education and employment would outweigh our commonalities.

Research Field and Target Group

From 2019, a year before starting my doctoral programme, I took advantage of every opportunity to converse with anyone in any way related to the camp. Civil and governmental institutions, the host community, teachers who had briefly come to the camp for instruction. I had spoken with them all through the process of writing my research proposal for a PhD at the university. Different groups had varied perceptions about the IDPs. The host community, civil and governmental institutions each had their understanding/assumptions about the IDPs residing in the camp. One day, as I was heading towards the camp to talk with my contacts, I boarded a taxi from a point in downtown Kabul. It was approximately a 45-minute ride, if one could survive the Kabul traffic:

Today (1st November), as I was heading towards the camp in a shared taxi with 4 other passengers, I asked the driver to drop me off at Nassaji Camp. This led to a conversation with another passenger, a young man named Asad Khan, who was 18 years old and from Jalalabad. Interestingly, he had previously lived in this camp and was familiar with many of its representatives. He believed that most of them weren't that badly off financially and the primary reason they remained in the camp

was their hope to receive land from the government. The government had khan promised land to the displaced people but had not yet fulfilled this promise. Asad Khan said that many hoped to claim the lands they currently reside in as their own. According to Asad Khan, they've also grown accustomed to waiting for institutions to assist them and therefore are not seeking employment. Many of them have become addicted to drugs, according to him.

Interestingly, Asad Khan's description of the camp was not an isolated perspective; similar descriptions were provided by civil and governmental bodies.

From the government's standpoint, the IDPs were those who illegally occupied the land of the textile factory. I spoke to a guard from the textile factory, situated across the street from the camp. He took his duty of preventing the expansion of IDPs' homes seriously, since the lands were government property and belonged to the state-owned textile factory. The government had tried several times to evacuate the IDPs from the camp using military force, but faced resistance, even encountering fatalities in these clashes. Every day, the government issued notices demanding the IDPs leave the camp. The camp was perceived by these officials as a temporary locale, and their insistence on the temporariness of this IDP camp that had already existed for 16 years instilled a perpetual instability or enduring uncertainty in the residents. I worried this would negatively impact their participation in the research.

In the eyes of the host community, the IDPs were also seen as outsiders who would have to leave the area sooner or later, but as Omar, a camp resident, stated, *'We have been living here temporarily for almost 16 years.'* I was surprised when I realised that many of 'host community' around the camp were more recent arrivals to the area than some of IDPs.

Living under such circumstances forced the camp residents to look hopefully towards any external entity that could potentially offer a way out, but most interventions in the camps were primarily for providing financial and material aid that was limited in terms of quantity and time. Aid shaped the expectations of the residents and led to the formation of various groups and a competitive, conflict-driven environment over possible resources. This

environment could adversely impact participation and a collaborative spirit, as well as making agreement on a research question very difficult as I discuss in the next section.

In 2020, I began my doctoral journey. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 prevented me from spending my first year in London as required by the doctoral programme. As a result, I decided to prepare for my field research as best as I could under the circumstances. This preparation was crucial, and it aligned with the requirements of the PAR methodology, which necessitates that researchers immerse themselves in the field from the outset. This I did, aiming to establish a strong connection with the IDPs in the camp. This meant that my first steps involved encouraging the participation of these individuals in both the design and implementation of the research. This approach to fieldwork differs from the conventional research process in academic institutions. Typically, the standard research trajectory involves the researcher entering the field after completing a literature review, which helps identify gaps and clarify research questions. Instead of following this traditional route, I aimed to initially establish and strengthen my connections with the IDPs and then involve them in discussions about the research question.

My intention was to employ PAR in a camp situated east of Kabul. In 2019, I had successfully established contact with the residents of this camp when, along with a group of academics from City, University of London, and civil institutions active in the displacement and development sectors in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, we formed a network named the South Asia Network for Displacement and Development (SANDD). SANDD emphasised adopting a bottom-up policy, community participation, and interdisciplinary studies in the realm of displacement and development. To this end, as a volunteer member of this entity in Afghanistan, I sought to present this concept to the IDPs and other institutions related to displacement, seeking their perspectives to thus pave the way for future activities.

In 2019, through one of the institutions working with IDPs, I had requested an introduction to an IDP camp. Although I could have visited the camp directly and spoken with its inhabitants, an introduction through a mutual acquaintance would help establish greater trust. From this person, I then obtained the mobile numbers of one of the camp's representatives. This camp was known as the 'Nassaji' Camp. After making initial contact,

I visited the Nassaji Camp, located east of Kabul to meet this representative hoping that he would help me to recruit the co-researchers without which my project would be impossible. They would help me to organise the public meetings at which I hoped to discuss the situation of the IDPs with the IDPs and identify their priorities. It would be important to find enough co-researchers to ensure access to the most diverse participants in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and access to power within the camp.

Mud houses and narrow, winding alleys distinguished the Nassaji Camp from the surrounding concrete and brick houses of the host community. The houses within the camp were built without any discernible order, and no distinct boundary existed between the camp and the surrounding houses; instead, the camp sprawled right up to the city. The establishment of the camp dates back to the year 2000, when several IDP families initially erected tents and gradually built their mud houses. By 2020, according to the camp's representatives, approximately 900 families resided in the camp. The camp was divided into three smaller sections: Helmandi's Camp, Kodakestan's Camp, and Takabi's Camp. A 12-meter street separates Helmandis Camp from Takabis Camp. My focus was mainly on the Takabis, who spoke Farsi comfortably, as it is also my language, while the native language of the other camp residents was Pashto, with which I was unfamiliar as I had grown up in Iran.

The land on which the camp was situated belonged to the government. In reality, these lands were part of an old governmental textile factory (not functioning), and now a big street had been created between the camp and the textile factory. A few textile employees (guards) were still responsible for preventing the displaced people from continuing construction and developing the camp. Therefore, they inhibited any developmental work. For instance, an NGO had agreed to drill a well for the IDPs for whom access to water was a problem. Although a well existed in the Takabis Camp, it contained water with a bitter taste, unsuitable for drinking, and was mostly utilised for washing. The displaced people obtained their drinking water from the so-called host community, which itself, had settled in that area due to the population increase in Kabul over the last two decades. A large drilling machine was brought to the camp and placed in front of a small mosque in the centre of the Takabis Camp, but the textile factory employees intervened and refused

to allow the drilling to go ahead. They had been ordered by the government to oppose any action that might lead to the permanency of the camp or create claims to ownership over these lands by the displaced.

While the neighbouring houses had access to electricity, albeit for only a few hours a day, the camps were not connected to the city's electricity grid. Some camp residents had a small amount of lighting in their homes through solar power. For cooking and winter heating, they frequently resorted to burning rubbish collected by small children. Around the camp, it was common to see girls and boys aged 6 to 10 carrying bags over their shoulders, searching for waste paper, wood, or plastic. These materials were often toxic, and caused illness and sometimes death (Arete Gazette 23/09/2021).

In subsequent conversations I had with the camp residents, they complained about neglect by the government and both international and national organisations. International organizations occasionally provided cash and in-kind aid for the camp residents, but this was insufficient for survival. The protraction of the war and the inevitable grinding poverty had ensured this aid was necessary but not sufficient. On the other hand, this aid also created a conflict between the camp residents and the host community. The host community accused the IDPS of freeloading and crime. The aid provided caused resentment towards the IDPS among the host community who were not benefiting from the aid in spite of their poverty, and who considered themselves equally deserving of aid (Hussaini, 2020). This then was to be the site of my fieldwork, the setting for a participatory action PhD research project.

2020 was not a propitious year in which to start my PhD research. First, the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan raised doubts about the possibility of completing the research at all. In February 2020, while the Taliban had formally agreed to a peace deal (the Doha Agreement, 2020) with the Americans, their military aggression amplified. Daily incidents of suicide bombings and blasts were common, and conflicts intensified across several provinces ([New York Times 04/03/2020](#)). The peace agreement with the US empowered the Taliban while disheartening the Afghan army, which was bereft of international support ([Afghanistan International 29/02/2024](#)). Furthermore, the Taliban

consistently resisted negotiations with the Afghan government, dismissing it as a mere extension of the US ([Guardian](#) 28/03/2020).

Second, I faced challenges due to the nature of PAR methodology. Unlike dominant research methodologies, PAR's approach meant that I wasn't in full control of the research direction and process. This chaos, uncertainty, and messiness are part of the PAR research process, and demands skills that the researcher must learn to develop throughout the study (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). The scholar is not the sole director of the research, does not choose the question or even the specific methods (Pain et al 2022, 3). Instead, co-researchers are the experts in their own lives and play a crucial role in shaping every aspect of the research. PAR is driven by the assumption that these co-researchers possess knowledge about their own specific situation and are best placed to prioritize problems and identify the most effective solutions. The researcher places their skills and knowledge at the service of the community (Swantz 2008). Therefore, the research is under their control.

Not having a clear research plan in advance was nerve-wracking. Most PhD students I believe worry about completing their PhD but can at least control their topic and research question. With PAR, I had only the vaguest notion of the end goal of the research and no clear path to that destination. I was full of questions: Where could I begin? How could I introduce the concept of PAR to the other camp residents? How could I persuade them to participate? Given the pervasive poverty in the camp, what value or significance might they find in participating in a research study? If they chose to participate, how would we collaborate throughout? What roles would they play compared to mine? How would we jointly decide on research priorities, design, data collection, and analysis? And crucially, how could this research contribute to improving their living conditions? These uncertainties weighed heavily on me from the outset.

In an attempt to alleviate some of these doubts and worries, I got in touch with some of the contacts I had made through the SANDD network. Conversations with PAR practitioners, particularly those affiliated with Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), one of the SANDD members, confirmed that my worries weren't unique. However, there was a clear difference in our approaches. While RIB's primary focus was on community

empowerment, I had to balance between empowerment and maintaining academic standards, especially since my end goal was to complete a doctoral thesis. In addition, RIB practitioners had established relationships with communities going back years. They had existing relationships of trust and participants were familiar with the functioning of PAR, and their respective roles.

Adding to these challenges was a mismatch between my understanding of research as shaped by the PAR methodology, and the camp residents' perception of what research entailed. This difference meant spending extra time explaining the PAR approach. A conversation with a camp resident highlighted a common misconception: they equated 'research' with the regular surveys conducted by various aid agencies. Such surveys were often just data collection exercises preceding aid distribution, so there was an incentive for people to exaggerate the size of their families, sometimes borrowing members from other families. For many camp residents, being part of such 'survey' was a frantic attempt to ensure their names made it to the aid lists. A colleague from one of these agencies shared how challenging it was to get accurate data to distribute aid. Sometimes, they would resort to midnight visits to the camp to conduct surveys in the hope of finding only the actual household members present. Most interventions from outside were usually about aid distribution. I realised it would take a long time and much discussion to clearly communicate my research intentions to the camp residents.

Access

In October 2020, armed with the experience of several discussions from the previous year, I re-entered the field. This time, I had arranged a meeting with Ayub Khan, who was one of the representatives of IDPs at Takabi's camp who hadn't had a chance to talk last year. When we had met previously, Ayub Khan had been engrossed in repairing his mud house, and he had given me his phone number to establish contact for the future.

20th October 2020 - while I was waiting for Ayub Khan at about 9 in the morning at the head of the alley to the IDPs camp, I went to buy a cigarette from two children, who seemed to be 8 or 9 years old, but both seemed much older when

they spoke - intelligent and agile, it was as if I was speaking with a mature young man! Both lived in the camp and were selling cigarettes on a small cart at the main street. Neither were able to go to school because they did not have ID cards. Both seemed happy to be able to work and help their families, and a kind of pride sparkled in their eyes. I bought an ESSE cigarette for 40 Afghanis and a lighter for 10 Afghanis [less than a dollar: around 75 cents]. Further down, a young man, about 20 years old, was sitting with a bucket and two pieces of cloth on his shoulder, saying that he sat waiting here to wash cars. "On weekends, some people let me wash their cars". Ayub Khan arrived, and we moved towards his house in the camp.

Ayub Khan, a 45-year-old father of two with no formal education, had spent 18 years in Pakistan before returning to Afghanistan in 2007. He felt it would be unsafe to stay in his village in Kapisa permanently due to the presence and influence of the Taliban, which he viewed as a threat. Here in Kabul, he didn't have a steady job. Sometimes he collects walnuts from his village in Kapisa and sells them in the city. I had initially proposed to Ayub Khan that we meet at a local restaurant for a chat, but he suggested his home instead. I welcomed this idea, seeing it as a chance to get a clearer glimpse into his living conditions.

On our way to his home, a picturesque hill beside the camp caught my eye, prompting me to comment on its beauty. Ayub Khan responded, pointing out its darker side: it had become a refuge for addicts: a consequence, he believed, of unemployment. Reaching his home, identifiable by its small, red-painted iron gate, we walked into a modest courtyard leading to two rooms. He ushered me into one. The occasional sound of a child crying broke the otherwise silent atmosphere. The women in Ayub Khan's family, adhering to tradition, kept themselves hidden from male guest like me (a complete stranger to the family). I was reminded that my research interactions would predominantly involve male voices due to cultural norms.

Once settled, I asked a very common Afghan question: how are things? Ayub Khan quickly started an endless discussion of hardship in the IDP camp life. He discussed the rampant unemployment affecting everyone in the camp, forcing some younger members

to seek work in Iran and Pakistan. This migration had become a necessary means of survival for many Afghans. The ongoing peace talks and the gradual withdrawal of international organisations had, paradoxically, escalated conflicts and deepened poverty. He expressed scepticism about these peace negotiations involving the Taliban, the Americans, and the Afghan government, and was apprehensive about what the future held. When I tried to give some foolish hope about peace and challenged his pessimism regarding peace prospects, he replied, highlighting the stark contradictions: "How can there be peace? On one side they talk of peace, while on the other, there's violence. In the city, you risk being robbed or even killed just for using a mobile phone."

I tried to clarify the purpose of our meeting to Ayub Khan. I mentioned that I am a doctoral student from the University of London, supervised by Dr Liza Schuster. My aim is to conduct research in partnership with the residents of the Nasaji camp. The project would adopt a PAR approach, shaped by the voluntary involvement of community members. Through discussions, they would identify and address their community's issues, and my role would be to facilitate these conversations. I stressed that I was not there to instruct them but to work collaboratively (to be honest, I didn't know at that stage what I mean by being collaborative, despite my reading and discussions with colleagues in Bangladesh, I had no clear idea what that would look like since I had never experienced it).

Ayub Khan's attentive, albeit puzzled, expression told me he had many questions. It was evident he wondered about the practical benefits of such an initiative, especially if I wasn't offering financial assistance. Why had I even chosen this particular camp when others existed? I reminded him of my previous visit as justification for returning for this project, and then asked about his tenure at the camp. He mentioned having been there for 13 years, from 2007 to 2020, which made him a useful contact. When I enquired about any organisations active in the camp, he replied that while many had come and gone over the years, none had stayed, and the conditions of the camp residents remained unchanged. His frank response as to whether they'd contributed to any tangible improvements was a simple 'no'. He explained, "The aid they provide is negligible. Annually, they offer 7,000 Afghanis (approximately 100 USD) for fuel, which can't even buy a '*kharwar*' of wood (280

Kg), priced at 9,000 Afghanis. So, where should this money go? Wood? Food? Medical needs? It barely covers anything."

I explained that while international organisations often initiated projects and then departed, the idea behind this PAR initiative was different. The goal of PAR was to bring us Afghans together to deliberate on what we could do collectively to address ongoing challenges. I clarified that I am not promising financial aid, as I am not representing any organisation, that I was a returning migrant like him, and tired of having foreigners do things for us that were not appropriate or helpful. The goal of the project was to encourage greater autonomy in the camp.

Drawing upon my past experiences with SANDD and RIB, I explained the process, which involves group discussions to identify problems and potential solutions. Despite our extensive two-hour conversation, I was left wondering if I had effectively communicated my intentions. My previous decade of research in Afghanistan didn't provide much guidance for this particular conversation. Both of us sensed we were venturing into new territory, and uncertainties persisted.

I told Ayub Khan, "You are a voice for the people. Gather them to discuss my proposal as a group. I'll be there to join the discussion and answer any questions." At our conversation's conclusion, Ayub Khan pointed out a critical challenge: "When you invite people for such an initiative, their first question will be about compensation, either daily or monthly. If you say there's no monetary benefit, they'll argue they have hungry children at home and can't afford to spare time without pay." Ayub Khan's point resonated with me. Providing some small compensation and or refreshments was common practice for foreign funded researchers. While I understood his perspective, I insisted on the need for us to work together to solve our problems instead of relying on outsiders, "Look, Ayub Khan, this initiative is purely voluntary. It's about you addressing the issues you face in the camp. It's your initiative, a group effort requiring maybe an hour or two weekly or biweekly, based on your availability. Wouldn't you be willing to spare a couple of hours to discuss and potentially resolve pressing camp issues?"

Ayub Khan responded, "I get your point. But you might have noticed the young man washing cars. He'll think, 'Why would I spend two hours here without payment when I

could earn a hundred Afghanis (\$1.30) washing a car, is it worth it?' People are struggling, especially in these COVID-19 times. I'm unemployed myself, sometimes feeling mentally drained. If job opportunities arise, improving people's situations, that'd be great. The core issue here is unemployment". For Ayub Khan the problem and solution were clear - what was the point of discussions?

The sense of beating a pestle in water enveloped me. Ayub Khan was right; unemployment and poverty were substantial issues that had worsened with the outbreak of Covid-19. The people were not afraid of the virus, rather it was the deteriorating, fragile economic situation of Afghanistan that was terrifying. Five decades of wars with the Soviet Union and America had eradicated the economic infrastructures. As Ayub Khan explained, this situation led some camp residents to migrate to Iran and Pakistan in search of work. Ironically, Afghanistan had become an attractive employment opportunity with comparatively higher salaries for some (foreigners: consultants, security company owners, NGO employees, international organisations, and international construction companies; and returning highly skilled Afghans)! Working on different projects for international NGOs I had access to the different salaries scales.

Ayub Khan had clearly outlined the challenge, and posed the question - what could I (or we collectively) do to resolve structural problems of poverty and unemployment? How was this research supposed to assist in mitigating their problem? Isn't it the responsibility of governments to address such issues? And if we weren't going to make any improvement in these areas, how would this research differ from the other studies? I needed to convince him to gather a few individuals to discuss this problem collectively because Ayub Khan was focused narrowly on these problems, and I hoped that others might take a broader view and identify problems that we could address. Furthermore, the principles of PAR methodology necessitated that such topics be discussed among the camp residents (Swantz 2008), and that everyone's opinions be heard.

Ayub Khan considered himself a representative of the camp residents, someone whose length of residence in the camp gave him an authoritative understanding of its issues. He saw no need for a group discussion. I argued that it would be better to discuss the unemployment issue collectively and I worked hard to convince him that a collective

discussion could be beneficial. In the end, Ayub Khan agreed to notify people for the next meeting to have a discussion. But it was clear he had little faith in my capacity as a mere Afghan individual without resources to organise anything that would improve the situation in the camp.

But then he had a bright idea: Ayub Khan inquired about my supervisor: "By the way, why doesn't the lady in England help? Couldn't she set up a charity, raise funds, and support us? I might be uneducated, but I have experience. It's true that money has flowed into Afghanistan for years. However, the needy and the vulnerable are often overlooked. The funds typically end up in the hands of the powerful and the mafia, bypassing people like us." Over the 16 years since the establishment of the camp, its residents' lives had become intensely dependent on external aid. In such circumstances, the first expectation of anyone visiting the camp is that they will provide financial or in-kind aid. Such expectations were going to make conducting my research difficult.

I sought insights from colleagues at RIB, due to their experience with similar challenges. The feedback from RIB yielded several guiding suggestions:

1. I needed to acknowledge the entrenched poverty of the camp's inhabitants as an existing reality. Given their economic context, it's unsurprising they continuously seek financial means for sustenance. Transforming this state in the immediate future is unlikely.
2. It would be essential to shift the residents' focus to elements of life not contingent on aid, emphasizing how they sustained themselves pre-aid. Engaging with female residents was highlighted, as discussions with them might reveal concerns beyond access to aid and employment.
3. It would be imperative to raise their awareness of the range of problems they grapple with, fostering dialogue about these challenges. For example, delving into the root causes exacerbating the prevailing poverty.
4. Should an issue be identified, the community might collectively brainstorm a solution. In these dialogues, my role aligns more with a facilitator than a problem-

solver. This approach in PAR deviated from my typical research engagements, a distinction I'll elaborate on later.

Considering the events during my meeting with Ayub Khan, I could see how my positionality (my education, my foreign contacts, my time in Europe) could impact on the expectations and participation of IDPs in the research. In the next section, I reflect on participation challenges.

Participation

In the following, I will try to explain some of the challenges/difficulties I faced trying to ensure participation through describing and answering the following questions: How did the participation process happen? What meaningful contexts for participation were created? How did the displaced individuals get involved in determining the topic? Who could not participate? How did the existing cultural, social, and economic structures in the camp increase or decrease the participation of individuals/groups? The essence of the PAR approach lies in thorough engagement with the target community, necessitating clear discussions and agreements with its members. In fact, these initial consultations serve as vital introductions to PAR, aiding in understanding community perspectives about the research's implementation, but I found little discussion in the existing PAR literature of the challenges involved in persuading some communities of the value of participation, and so no advice on how to respond. For this reason, I believe it essential to detail the problems I faced.

During my conversation with Ayub Khan, aid emerged as a dominant theme. However, I could not allow one person to set the research agenda: the topic would have to be subject to wider community discussion. He agreed to host a subsequent meeting and I hoped the discussion could be broadened out, that other voices would be heard.

On this visit, I noticed that Ayub Khan had created a small, but stable home in the camp: the yard was concreted, and a two-meter solar panel in one corner supplied their electricity. The interior was painted a beautiful creamy colour. Like most Afghan homes,

there was a carpet in the guest room where they typically receive visitors. Mattresses lined all four sides of the room for guests to sit on, and a pleasant scent filled the air. Ayub Khan explained that it was oud, an incense used to freshen the house, which I saw burning in a corner of the room.

To my disappointment we were joined by only one other person: Amin — a father of seven whose eldest son had migrated to Iran due to the local unemployment and security issues. At the insistence of Ayub Khan, we were also joined remotely by my supervisor, Liza. To summarise the dialogue of our second orientation meeting: Ayub Khan explained that he represented the views of the camp residents and emphasised the community's impoverished state and their inability to alter their fate. He felt external intervention was crucial. He was hopeful that Liza, as a foreigner, could rally support and channel aid to Afghanistan. Ayub expressed concerns over the long-standing reliance on foreign aid, believing it had fostered a culture of dependency that wouldn't dissipate easily, but emphasising the continued need for support. Liza had first-hand experience, having visited IDPs camps near East Kabul, and she was aware of the living conditions of the displaced. Often, as a foreigner, Liza was seen as a figure of authority and power although she had very limited access to resources. She had been very reluctant to participate, and only agreed when I explained it was necessary for the project. Our communication with Liza, facilitated via WhatsApp, was hindered by poor connectivity and frequent disconnections, symptomatic of the camp's weak internet reception.

Liza and I emphasised that while we recognise the hardships faced by IDPs, we were academics, the project was mine alone, and my role was to facilitate IDPs defining and implementing their own solutions to problems they could solve. We explained that we don't have the means to provide financial aid. One camp resident remarked, "In our country, the real power is not with Ghani, our president, but with foreigners." This perception presented both challenges and opportunities for PAR research. My association with a foreigner and my education in London stirred interest in our research but also created certain expectations. Underlining my failure to explain the purpose and focus of my project, the meeting ended with Ayub Khan suggesting that I start looking for aid projects involving foreigners. He offered to provide pictures and videos of the camp

residents' lives to motivate potential donors. I insisted that we needed to work differently, feeling increasingly frustrated and angry at how single-minded and opportunistic Ayub Khan seemed. At the same time, I understood that of course he was right to look for aid, as life in the camp was really difficult, and he had to seize every opportunity that presented itself.

I proposed discussing our project at yet another meeting with a broader audience to gather ideas about what could be achieved. Ayub Khan took the initiative to organise and invite attendees for the next meeting. Our third meeting took place shortly after the attack at Kabul University on 4th November 2020. 22 young people had been killed and 40 injured during a six-hour siege of the University. I was nearby when the attack occurred, and the echoes of gunfire followed by the sirens of ambulances filled the air. Attempts to reach my friends at the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University were futile. As we awaited other participants at Ayub Khan's home, the conversation gravitated towards those events. We were all in shock at the loss of life.

More attendees joined: Amin, Fazlullah, Mehrullah, Rahman, and Khalid. The conversation continued to be dominated by tales of war and displacement. Fazlullah recalled the traumatic Kunduz conflict where an artillery strike claimed eight members of a single family, leaving just one survivor. Mehrullah, a law student, spoke of a targeted attack at his university which resulted in casualties. The atmosphere was sombre.

Ayub Khan introduced me to the group, saying, *"Hussaini, a student at London, wishes to explore why, despite 13 years of support, our lives remain unchanged. I mentioned to him that sporadic aid is not a long-term solution. What we truly need are stable employment opportunities."* I tried to explain the methods I hoped to use further. It was clear that this could only work if people understood how PAR worked, I would have to invest a lot of time in this crucial step before any work could begin. I explained the subject to the six people as follows:

I am a student, sometimes a teacher, and I want to try to apply participatory action research in a study of displacement. I'm asking you to be my colleagues in this research, to work with me. If you're interested, let's talk for example to see where the problems of the camp residents lie and which problems we can solve ourselves

without outsiders? What the solutions can we find ourselves? How can we together do something to improve the situation? When we gather and discuss, with mutual brainstorming, we can better find solutions than those proposed by outsiders. I do not know how long these sessions will last, but I invite anyone interested to come and talk once a week at a time that you agree upon. As an example of a problem that we can fix ourselves without outside help, today I encountered dirty water and sewage outdoors, which are sources of numerous diseases. We could see what solutions exist and what we can do ourselves to remedy this problem? I welcome your thoughts, and anyone else who might want to participate.

Everyone began to speak. I became an observer in this process, and it was as if a dialogue had developed amongst the group. To afford more space to my potential co-researchers, I will quote some key statements here to illustrate how the discussions took shape.

Fazlollah: *Initially, in 2007, there was a lot of rice and oil distributed at camp, but it ended. It's essential that people have jobs and can earn an income. These aids don't induce change.*

Rahman: *Our main problem is land. We must have a place so that even if we plant a tree, we can hope to sit under its shade tomorrow. But here, they don't allow us to do anything. They come and ruin wherever we fix up (referring to governmental forces that do not allow any work to be done in the camps because they consider the lands state-owned and the displaced people as usurpers). I say we need to request a piece of land. One that belongs to us, is permanent, and we can gradually settle and populate.*

Ayub Khan: *We need unity. We have been here for 13 years. We are not united people. Why don't we demand our rights from the government? We, the people, deserve to have a house. We have the right to have water, electricity, right? We do not have unity to all stand together, grab a government official, and demand our rights. We have the right to have our sewage fixed and have access to water. We should have a well.*

Khalid: *The government says, 'Brother, go. We still have our problems. We can't take care of you.' They are right; the government is at war and has internal conflicts. How will*

they find time for us? We have a proverb in Pashto that says, 'A lamp that is needed in the house, shouldn't be given to the mosque.' Now the government says, 'Let me sort myself out, then I'll take care of you.' Do you think we will be taken care of in this system?

Ayub Khan: *So what is the solution? We can't demand our rights, but foreigners can because they have power. Do you think Ashraf Ghani is the President of Afghanistan? No, he is not. Foreigners are in charge; he takes orders from them. Look at when Trump came to Bagram; Ghani went to meet him like a soldier and stood behind him. Otherwise, if Ghani was the president and Trump was the guest, Trump should have gone to him.*

Khalid: *Foreigners have always humiliated us in Afghanistan. I witnessed foreign soldiers standing by their tanks, throwing chocolates in one direction, and all the small children chasing after them, like someone feeding a flock of dogs. I thought to myself, look these infidels, they are demeaning us Muslims of Afghanistan. But we don't understand. With due respect, I would spit on these chocolates you give us, chasing us like dogs. The foreigners coming here are pursuing their own interests; they don't care about you or me. They are not here to wipe away our tears. If you listen to a foreigner and become their servant, everything gets sorted out.*

Nemat: *I have been in the camp for two years. The core issue is this disagreement; we are not united at all. We disagree among ourselves. Most conflict is also due to these aids. First, these two representatives (Ayub Khan and Anzar Gul) are arguing between them and have no understanding of each other. Each is just chasing after aids. If there are 50 households, they claim to be 100 households. If there are 100 households, they claim to be 200 households. When aid arrive, they quickly call; relatives and family come, and you realize the camp population increases.*

Nemat: *First, all 50 households should be called, and everyone should be informed to see how many people gather. I think we should talk together for at least two months, and then see who comes and decide. The main issue is trust and cooperation, which is very low among us.*

After a two-hour discussion, without any specific conclusions, we planned to meet the following week. Key issues identified included the lack of stable housing, unemployment,

internal disunity among camp residents, pervasive insecurity, and poverty. These challenges are not unique to the camp but are structural problems affecting many in Afghanistan. The dialogue was heavily centred on problems. It would take time to agree how to approach these problems, and even longer to decide on potential solutions. I realised that most of the attendees were closely related to Ayub Khan, who showed limited interest in broadening the scope of the meetings. I did not know whether this was because he saw me and my project as a potential resource that he did not wish to share, or because his network was entirely kinship based.

In the subsequent meeting, attendance remained limited to seven participants. Some of the attendees from the last meeting excused themselves due to prior commitments. A prevailing sense of disengagement was evident amongst the majority, with the exception of two younger individuals who actively engaged in the discourse. The discussions largely echoed those from the previous session. By the fifth meeting, it was conveyed to me that there was a general lack of interest in further dialogue and a noticeable absence of commitment from the community. Conversations with the two engaged young individuals over the phone confirmed this sentiment, revealing interest only in aid acquisition rather than active participation in the discussions or research.

Exclusion

Notably absent from these discussions were the women of the camp. This absence can be attributed to the entrenched cultural norms within the camp. I had considered, should the dialogues continue successfully, enlisting a female colleague to facilitate the involvement of women in the research, though I couldn't see how to do that within the framework of a PhD. However, there were several challenges: I had no budget for hiring a female colleague, and it would be difficult for a female researcher to work in the field without institutional support in Afghanistan, especially in case of any risks. Additionally, there was uncertainty about the project's early stages.

However, the discussions did not persist. Additionally, a particular group that held disagreements with Ayub Khan was conspicuously missing from the sessions. The root of these disputes centred on the distribution of aid within the camp. The allocation of resources was heavily influenced by power dynamics and the relationship dynamics with the camp's representative. With no clear and transparent distribution mechanism in place, the environment was ripe for the spread of rumours and ensuing disputes. The camp was segmented into different factions, each with its own designated representative to lobby for aid. Those in opposition to Ayub Khan were denied the chance to participate in the sessions he oversaw.

The absence of young people was pronounced. For them, engaging in decision-making sessions seemed redundant, as the dominant figures with established authority dictated most decisions within the community. While the principle of inclusive participation is commendable, its effectiveness is invariably shaped by the societal backdrop in which it operates. One factor constraining broader participation was the venue of the sessions, which took place in Ayub Khan's residence. Ayub Khan had proposed his house as the meeting place, assuring me there would be no issues. However, this arrangement inadvertently reinforced his influence over participant selection. The decision on inclusion or exclusion largely rested with Ayub Khan, sidelining my involvement. It seemed he primarily invited individuals within his close circle.

Reflections on Case Study 1:

Ultimately, I was unable to successfully persuade IDPs to take part in this research, a point had been reached where collaboration with the camp residents had ceased. They were not willing to participate, as they could not see any way to improve their situation except by securing aid. I lacked the capacity and the necessary resources to offer such assistance. However, a number of important lessons emerged during the writing up period, too late to have prevented me from trying a PAR approach again in London.

PAR requires a huge investment of time, but while time is necessary, it is not sufficient. Trying to start a PAR project from scratch means being able to invest significant amounts of time at the outset to explain the concept and build relationships, because PAR requires active participation and real engagement. It is essential to be able to explain the concept in language that is meaningful to the community so that they have a sense of ownership of the project (Swantz 2008). Which brings me to the next point:

The benefit to the community must be clear (Swantz 2008). I did not have clear examples of PAR projects that had benefited people in situations similar to those of the camp residents. The approach I wanted to take was alien to this population so there was no reason for people to trust me. They needed to be able to see that there would be a benefit if they were to invest their time. This need is magnified when dealing with vulnerable groups like the displaced.

Established contacts and networks are key. What was evident to me was that undertaking such a task alone is not feasible. For there to be engagement and participation, I needed a team of partners who were already known to and trusted by the community. At a minimum, I needed a female colleague to ensure the inclusion of women's perspectives in the research. I also needed younger collaborators. However, the academic requirements for a Phd seemed to militate against working collaboratively.

Finally, comprehending the power dynamics within the target community is vital. Coming into a new situation, it is vital to identify multiple gatekeepers and potential collaborators so as to access the widest possible range of participants. Here too, time is important in order to identify influential and competing groups, and to understand their different agendas, perspectives and priorities. It is important to spend a lot of time in the community in order to see and understand who is excluded from discussions, who is shy, who is not allowed to speak and to create opportunities for them to get involved. Collective discussions might deter those who feel less confident speaking in groups from voicing their opinions.

Beyond these challenges, I came to realise there were structural barriers to PAR. The experience of the camp residents had taught them that the only way to survive was via foreign aid. The government had no interest in helping them and civil society did not exist.

No one had invited them to participate in any decisions about their present or future, so what I was proposing was unintelligible. When a community has been made dependent in the way the IDPs of Afghanistan had been made dependent, a solitary person arriving with nothing more than words cannot undo decades of conditioning. At the very least I needed to be able to show them evidence that what I was proposing could work. But even then, in a situation of intense competition for extremely scarce resources, striving for the cooperation required for a PAR project would be like searching for a unicorn.

Case study 2: Afghan Forced Migrants in London

With the political shifts in Afghanistan and the evacuation of my family and I to Poland and then to the UK, my research was interrupted. It could not be completed, compelling me to define a new research direction. I occasionally made notes of my observations during this unsettled period. These daily writings provoked thoughts of incorporating my own displacement story into this thesis. I was part of the evacuation story in a way I hadn't been part of the IDP story. On the other hand, initiating life in a new country also presented new challenges. Autoethnography seemed a fitting methodology for articulating this internalised experience, necessitating an attempt to listen to the experiences of my fellow travellers and their stories of this journey and the commencement of life in a new land. Very soon (too soon) after my own arrival in the UK, I endeavoured to connect with Afghans residing in bridging hotels in the UK – specifically London, initiating dialogues with them.

I realised that my new research terrain was very different. I had never been to London, everything was new and unfamiliar, as it was for the majority of those evacuated in August. This unfamiliarity demanded extra energy from me. I had been adopted by CARA, and was expected to reframe and continue my PhD, but the geography was new: how would I go about locating people and addresses; how, when, where could I organise dialogues or find a space for conversations. Everything was more time-consuming and accompanied by added stress in this new and unfamiliar environment. Moreover, like me, most Afghans who had arrived in the UK were struggling with life in a new setting.

Language, daily shopping, using transportation, education, and work – everything was new, including for me.

While trying to reorient my PhD topic, I was looking for more suitable accommodation. CARA had found somewhere for my family for a month, but it was much smaller than the houses we had lived in in Afghanistan, too small for a family of five and did not meet UK space standards. Within that first month, I was expected to find somewhere for us to live, register my children for school, find English courses for my wife, and register with a doctor. None of my family members could speak English, so I had to accompany them everywhere as we learnt how to shop in the UK in a new language, use public transport, buy a SIM card, and set up gas and electricity accounts. At the same time, the recent past, our departure from Kabul and the family we left behind, weighed on all of us, weighed down our tongues so much we could hardly bear to speak of it.

But London was now to become home and the site of my fieldwork. Compared to the IDP camps in Kabul, where access to individuals was relatively easy, accessing Afghans residing in bridging hotels in London was much more challenging. Entry to bridging hotels was controlled by a private security company hired by the Home Office. I could occasionally meet Afghan friends living there, but there was no opportunity for regular access or holding group meetings. Personal visits with Afghans residing in the bridging hotel usually took place in a café near their residence because there was no suitable space inside some of the hotels, or we were not permitted to use some of those spaces (meeting rooms). Additionally, Afghans residing in the hotel appeared to be busier than the camp residents in Kabul. But still, I was able to connect to more people.

Initial Conversations: Invitation to PAR

On 21st October 2021, I visited one of the city-centre bridging hotels (Hotel B), hoping to establish contacts, and find a site for my fieldwork. A mutual friend had put me in touch with Nasrin (34 year old woman, Hazara, former NGO employee, educated, divorced, one child left behind in Afghanistan, moderate English proficiency) who had been evacuated

to Britain by British forces and was being housed in the hotel. I sent a message to Nasrin's Afghan WhatsApp number. She replied on the same day. I explained my own situation—that I had recently arrived as well and told her about my research topic. She happily agreed to talk with me. Using Google Maps, I went to the address she had given me. From the crowd at the hotel entrance, I realized that this was the right place. I called her on WhatsApp and asked her to come outside.

This four-star hotel was temporary home to approximately 200 Afghan families. In the hotel's lobby and exterior, numerous small Afghan children were occupied with their play, and Afghan men engaged in conversation in groups of two to several individuals. Among them, women were visible, some of whom had covered their faces, passing through. Very few women were without a headscarf. Nasrin, not wearing a headscarf, was obvious from a distance. I noticed the disapproving glances of the Afghan men towards her and, following her suggestion, we went to a nearby park to converse.

Nasrin spoke of the hotel's tense and busy atmosphere, the continuous echo of children's voices in the corridors and lobby. Afghan families, generally large, were struggling to control and confine their children within the hotel rooms. The majority of the evacuees were of the Pashtun ethnic group, and all notices pinned up in the corridors were in Pashto and English. These notices usually concerned mealtimes or some organizations' working hours to assist the Afghan evacuees. It seemed that those who spoke Farsi were in the minority. That presented problems for me since I don't speak Pashto. I worried about finding enough participants for my research. Nasrin, from the start, when asked about the hotel's condition said:

I have been transferred to this hotel for over a month, and the situation is entirely uncertain. There is no accurate information; we do not know what is planned for us or how long we are to stay in the hotel. Some people were sent to Manchester or Liverpool, and some were brought from there to London. There is a kind of confusion. There are no guides. Living in a hotel is tiring; we are not accustomed to this lifestyle. In addition, our food situation is not good, it is not suitable for our taste and culture.

The instability of the situation did not bode well for my fieldwork - how could I establish a network of trust if people were unsure where they would be? Choosing bridging hotels as my field of work, I was uncertain how long the endeavour might last, as I continuously speculated that the Afghans would move to a more permanent location, thereby leaving me without access to the research site. This uncertainty permeated the research as well. I hoped to establish contacts with people while they were gathered in the hotels, and then to maintain contact when they were re-housed. Neither I nor they understood how long that would take.

When saying goodbye to Nasrin, I asked her to introduce me to others she knew, so I could speak to them later. Just then, I saw one of my friends who was also living in the same hotel. Haroon (50, Married, Pashtun, educated, good english, NGOs worker) had been evacuated on 19 August 2021. He too lamented the chaotic condition of the hotels, stating,

I have been in the hotel for one and a half months. No one is willing to help people buy transport tickets or teach them how to use the transport. Anyone who comes brings second-hand clothes. My 16-year-old son hasn't been enrolled in school yet. We went somewhere, and they said bring him next year to study for A-levels. We are lost. The main issue is that there is no organization that can provide specific information for us. They are also confused.

These visits and the words of Nasrin and Haroon reminded me of the situation in the IDP's camps in Afghanistan: there was a significant gap between the needs of the Afghan arrivals and the services provided. The fundamental needs had not been accurately identified. Organisations approached Afghans with specific programmes that they assumed would be helpful and necessary, but these primarily focused on clothing and food requirements. In other words, there was the same top-down approach in the plans of governmental and NGO entities, a failure to consult with the people being assisted. I discussed my research plans with Nasrin and Haroon; explaining that if I was to shift my focus to the bridging hotels, I would need co-researchers who would be in, and facilitate my access to, the field. Both agreed to participate, and I began to think that I would be able to employ the PAR methodology with evacuees residing in London hotels.

Nasrin was my first co-researcher. In her words, she was currently unemployed and had no plans - essentially, no plans could be made while staying in the hotel. She had the time to dedicate to discussions with other residents and to organise the meetings. I asked Nasrin to identify some individuals who might be interested in joining our initial meetings. After some attempts, Nasrin and I spoke with two other residents of Hotel E (two sisters, Maryam and Zainab). Both were Hazaras and educated. Maryam was a Chevening scholar and married, while Zainab was single. My ethnicity was facilitating contact with others of my ethnic group, but seemed to be a barrier reaching others, in particular, Pashtuns

Relatively quickly, it became clear that the newly arrived Afghans in bridging hotels had no interest in participating in regular meetings because their everyday challenges in this new environment were overwhelming. Everyone was busy pursuing tasks like registering for a GP, enrolling children in schools, pursuing legal status, learning the language, and acquiring skills to live in Britain. The bureaucratic workload was beyond their expectations and was further complicated by English language barriers. In this chaotic and bustling world, they did not see a priority or benefit in ongoing participation for PAR meetings from which there would be no immediate or tangible benefit. Some of the hotel residents had already organised their own meetings and gatherings to propose and follow up on issues and requests, which they presented to the relevant authorities. They did not see how participation in a PAR would improve their situation.

After two months I had made little progress. Ata Khan (35, Married, Pashtun, educated, good English, NGO worker in Afghanistan) who was introduced by Haroon, and located at Hotel F in central London, told me: *'We [Afghans in the hotel] currently have WhatsApp groups where we discuss our issues, and NGOs in the hotel are trying to help us.'* He informed me that Afghan evacuees in the hotel had prepared a list of issues and suggestions that were to be negotiated with the relevant authority in the council. It was not clear to him what benefit participation in my project would bring to the hotel residents beyond what they were achieving for themselves. It was also not very clear to me at that point.

Ata Khan told me that NGOs, active in the realm of refugees and migrants, were visiting the hotels and organising various programmes such as walking events for women, painting for children, and arts. However, Afghans typically exhibited little interest in participating in these programmes. I saw a parallel with the NGOs in the Kabul IDP camps. If Afghans were already organising, perhaps adopting PAR could help them to refine their demands and exert pressure on NGOs and local and national authorities to put their resources to better use, reducing waste and allowing the new arrivals to put their knowledge and skills to good use.

Access:

I contacted two NGO that worked with Afghan refugees and discussed potential collaboration regarding access. The first NGO, MO, did not work directly within the hotel but maintained contact with a number of Afghans inside and outside of the hotels, offering them different assistance like legal advice and ESOL courses etc. The second organisation, Paiwand, was actively involved in two bridging hotels. I decided to volunteer with Paiwand for two days a week, mostly as a translator and a kind of cultural mediator. I worked as a volunteer for 5 months from April 2022 to August 2022. Volunteering allowed me to have direct contact with Afghans within the hotels, a significant improvement on the situation in the IDP camps. Paiwand was present in two hotels (A and B) in central London, providing services seven days a week from 9 am to 5 pm. Services provided by Paiwand included scheduling doctor appointments, school registrations, coordinating meetings with Home Office staff, and answering any questions the Afghan residents of the hotel had, guiding them, or referring them to relevant organisations. I volunteered on Thursdays and on Sundays, so that I would be able to meet with those who were working during the week.

Hotel A accommodated around 600 people and was the largest of the hotels I visited. Hotel B, housing around 150 people, was quieter and smaller compared to Hotel A, but more of the residents had British papers (they had been on return visits to Afghanistan when the government fell). However, both hotels provided identical services. When I first

went to the hotels, the guards approached me to ask about my identity and my intentions. The entrance gates of the hotels were monitored and protected by four guards at Hotel A and two guards at Hotel B. Non-residents entering the hotels were stringently questioned to ensure that no one entered without prior coordination. Once I informed them that I was working with Paiwand, they directed me to the hotel reception to register my name.

I also volunteered with Migrant Organise (MO) as a translator. This afforded me the opportunity to interact with more Afghan asylum seekers and evacuees, but on an individual basis. There was much less opportunity for group meetings, although at Hotel C, situated in central London, where MO had contacts, I was able to organise a group meeting, and I was invited three more times to confer with the residents about housing issues. There were approximately 200 Afghans living in that hotel, and I was regularly in touch with some of them via WhatsApp.

Through this voluntary work, I also met Afghan asylum seekers and refugees who had arrived in the UK before August 2021. It was very informative to see how they experienced the reception in the UK's bridging hotels. One day, my spouse returned from a language class organised by an NGO and spoke of meeting an Afghan family living in Hotel D, who had themselves come to Britain by sea. Hotel D housed mostly asylum seekers who had entered the UK independently and accommodated residents from various countries. Hotel D, being relatively far from the city centre, was not as stringently supervised as hotels located in central London. I could easily enter with minimal coordination and use the public space to converse with new friends.

After visiting the hotel D, I realised that two individuals whom I had previously known in Kabul were also accommodated in the same hotel, which led to more frequent visits and facilitated access. In this hotel, two Afghan families and four single individuals were residing. The hotel's population was not constant but typically housed between 80 and 100 people. My communication with Afghan asylum seekers at hotel D began in April 2022, and I aimed to visit this hotel at least once a month to assist them (scheduling meetings, registration for courses), as their English was weak, and no organisation was currently assisting them consistently. After a while, this relationship evolved into a deeper friendship.

Afghan evacuees residing in bridging hotels consisted of various groups, such as employees of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, staff of international organisations and NGOs, Afghan military and security forces, journalists, and a few labourers. Most individuals had managed to secure a spot on the evacuation list due to connections with British organisations and individuals, but some had done so by luck. Upon arrival in Britain, all Afghan evacuees initially spent 15 to 20 days in quarantine, followed by a transfer to bridging hotels. The stay in bridging hotels could span several months to two years. During this period, I spoke with individuals who experienced residence in 2 to 4 different hotels. The transfer from one hotel to another occurred sometimes upon the request of the individuals and sometimes due to the termination of the hotel contract.

Most residents viewed their hotel stay as temporary, always anticipating a move to new, more permanent accommodation. The transient nature of life in these hotels also rendered collective research precarious, diminishing the possibility of participation and interest in the study.

Change of Research Methodology

My new role as a volunteer meant that I was now conducting Participatory Observation as well as the PAR and autoethnography. Over three weeks, I managed to establish friendly connections with a few individuals at Hotel A and B, all of whom were informed about the purpose of my work and research. I had explained what PAR was, its applications, and expressed my interest in implementing it with the cooperation of the hotel residents of A and B.

Nevertheless, the first challenge encountered after the initial meetings was the residents' perceptions of research and the PAR methodology. They inquired about research questionnaires or anticipated short interviews but did not expect regular sessions and activities. When I detailed the PAR methodology, a common reaction emerged: adopting such a method would not be successful since it demands time, commitment, patience, and active participation, which were not feasible under current circumstances. It was

highlighted that people were *"not in the right state; they were stuck in temporary hotels and worried about their families in Afghanistan. They are not interested in participating; this is not an apt time for such sessions."* This was accurate, as it was genuinely a tense period for everyone: families were separated, the new environment harboured tensions (ethnic, linguistic, gender-based), and the situation in Afghanistan and the left-behind families were causing stress, anxiety, and depression. Some evacuees had begun working during the day, others were seeking employment, and many were trying to learn the language and participate in English language courses. Additionally, a substantial amount of administrative work existed, and the lack of proficient English communication skills made it even more challenging.

As I became more acquainted with the hotel (A and B) residents, deeper layers of ethnic, linguistic, gender, and familial tensions within the hotel became apparent. The hotel's environment had become a miniature Afghanistan, carrying with it the existing tensions from Afghanistan. Years of war and conflict in Afghanistan had engendered significant darkness in ethnic relations. In Afghanistan, ethnic groups had been less mixed, especially ethnic minority groups like the Hazaras, who lived in ghettoised conditions. However, evacuation had caused all ethnic groups to live together in one hotel. Most evacuees in the bridging hotels (A and B) were Pashtuns, with smaller groups of Tajiks and a handful of Hazaras also residing there. The tension between the ethnic groups was palpable. In private conversations, Hazaras and Tajiks generally expressed that Participatory Action Research would be challenging, as discussing their true concerns in the presence of other ethnic groups was not possible. They felt that discrimination by the Pashtuns was one of their biggest issues and discussing it in PAR sessions would exacerbate conflicts and tensions.

On one hand, a minimum level of solidarity is needed among research participants for PAR, which currently doesn't exist among Afghan residents in the bridging hotels. On the other hand, some evacuees believed they should be grateful to be living in the hotels, as many people in Afghanistan are in very poor conditions, questioning why they should participate in PAR. Ultimately, some single men were content staying in the hotels (A and B) and felt that they were not currently facing any particular problems that would warrant

their participation in the research. Furthermore, there didn't seem to be any particular benefit to conducting PAR, as numerous institutions, including Paiwand, existed to address evacuees' problems. Therefore, what added value could PAR potentially offer?

Reflections on Case Study 2

I spoke with Zahra, (a 30-year-old woman, single, educated, Hazara, good english, government employee) living with her two sisters (28 and 25 years old) in the hotel, and explained my research story. In the end, Zahra looked at me and said, *'These days, nobody really reads research, how many will read your thesis?'* I chuckled bitterly and said, *'I don't know, but at least the examiners and the supervisor have to read it.'* Zahra said, *'So why waste your time? I instead want to become a filmmaker. I will tell the stories of our people through film; it's a better tool!'*

It was an important question, and I had no clear answer, especially considering my research claim – generating knowledge to improve the condition of Afghan forced migrants. My answer was not convincing at all. This question and answer remained in my mind as the most significant unanswered ethical question. My research benefited me more than anyone else, as it was set to facilitate my obtaining a doctorate and smoothing my future path. But what did it offer to the evacuees residing in the hotel? I had no satisfying answer.

Ultimately, I had concluded that with such challenges, the likelihood of successfully executing a PAR project was low, and the environment for implementing PAR here was non-existent. As a result of these issues, I decided to take a step back and initially focus on documenting my observations within the hotels. The hotel (A and B) had become my main research field - a domain where I witnessed Afghans interacting amongst themselves and with charitable and governmental institutions, as well as their efforts to commence life in a new setting. Consequently, my research approach shifted towards ethnography.

Simultaneously, I was conducting unstructured and informal interviews with numerous Afghan evacuees, seizing every opportunity to converse with them. These interviews did not pursue any specific questions; the discussions would typically commence with the start of their journey and their exit method, naturally progressing to talk about their experiences living in London. These conversations had no central theme but merely opened a dialogue to allow them to discuss life in the hotel.

Conclusion

Looking back at these two false starts to my thesis, and comparing the work I did to what became the focus of the ethnographic study, it seems clear that I had unrealistic expectations of my doctoral research: it was unrealistic of me (and my supervisor, who did not have prior experience of PAR) to believe that it would be possible to carry out a PAR project for the first time in a community in which I did not have already established networks. Comparing the two cases, it is clear that the barriers to successfully doing PAR were my positionality and the two research fields, which together made access and recruitment of co-researchers incredibly difficult.

The social, economic and political context of the IDP camps and the bridging hotels meant that I was mistaken in assuming that being an Afghan, who had experienced life in exile, return to a homeland that had no place for me, and in which my fate, like theirs was to be decided by foreigners would outweigh deeply ingrained differences. I was an outsider for many reasons: not just because I was of a different ethnicity to the people in the camps and most people in bridging hotels, but because I belonged to an ethnic group that was regarded as fit for nothing but manual work. No matter how polite our interactions, no matter my status as a PhD candidate, being Hazara created a gulf, and made it impossible for the IDPs or camp residents to believe that they could work with me successfully to improve their situation (even though I could and did assist them in my role as NGO volunteer). However, that same social, economic and political context meant that in Afghanistan there were no Hazara IDP camps close to Kabul where I could have based my research. Hazaras would head to Dashti-Barchi in the west of Kabul and find shelter

there in their community, or they would return to their provinces, no matter how insecure or poor.

It was also unrealistic of me to expect to have been able to conduct a PAR study in the bridging hotels. Here too, in spite of existing contacts, ethnicity still meant that for most of my research population, I was ethnically an outsider. There were Hazaras in the hotels, but relatively few, and those who agreed to work with me faced the same barriers I did in trying to access the other ethnic groups who made up the majority of the residents. Part of this difficulty relates to the general political conditions of a war-torn country, where ethnic conflict is intensifying, making even simple interactions with people from other ethnic groups difficult, especially when confined to a bridging hotel. There were real tensions in the hotels. Though I did not experience significant hostility directed towards me personally, and though I was eventually able to develop relationships across ethnic boundaries, this was not to the extent where people would have been willing to work with me.

In addition to being an ethnic outsider, in each case I was also separated from the research population. I was not living their life. Although my family and I had lived and worked as manual labourers, I was of a generation that had accessed higher education, had moved into white collar jobs, found positions in international organisations. In Kabul, when I left the camp, I went back to a comfortable, warm middle-class home. I owned a car and my children went to good schools. In London, although our apartment was small, the children had access to a garden, we had a kitchen and a living room, we could have guests to stay. I had a scholarship and an office to work in.

In both cases, there were important structural factors creating a reluctance to participate. In Kabul, with the exception of a small number of people, most IDPs were barely surviving. Participation involved an opportunity cost - if there was not a clear, obvious and tangible benefit, men saw little or no reason to give up their time to a project that seemed nebulous and promised no extra resources.

There were differences between the two field sites. In the IDP camps, it would have been impossible to access women - though limited, I was able to speak with women in the bridging hotels. In the IDP camps, there was no way for me as a man to ensure balanced

community engagement, and so essential voices from a significant segment of the IDP community were completely absent, which would have seriously compromised the research. For Afghan forced migrants in London, pronounced ethnic tensions, especially among those staying in bridging hotels, exacerbated by anxiety and some gender-related issues, posed significant barriers. Such dynamics stymied open dialogue and curtailed the holistic engagement indispensable for PAR.

In London, working with an NGO did facilitate access to a more representative sample of people in bridging hotels. However, ultimately, I was unable to use PAR as I had hoped. This was bitterly disappointing. Nonetheless, I believe that important findings about the PAR methodology emerged from these failed attempts.

Finally, to a far greater extent than in London, the previous experience of the IDPs with NGOs created a series of expectations around research. As described above, people assumed that research was always focused around identifying and responding to needs, usually through handouts of some kind, such as fuel, or blankets. Attempting to implement PAR in the IDP camps, the - for me - insurmountable difficulties included extreme poverty, heightened community tension from aid dependency, the ever-evolving political context, and my own positionality.

PAR was not the right for me at those times in those places. And yet, lessons emerged. For PAR to succeed, there needs to be a real community. There was no community in the bridging hotels because those groups of people were just flung together. There was no space for community to grow. In the IDP camps, resources were so scarce that there was fierce competition in the face of which, cooperation and collaboration could not develop.

PAR has to develop organically, in really existing communities and with people who are trusted. It seems ideal but faces numerous challenges in implementation. It can be more appropriately described as a research strategy where various research tools are employed to maximize participation while paying the utmost attention to the benefits that may accrue to the participants. Since PAR requires a significant time and practical commitment from participants, it may not be appropriate in certain conditions. In the

bridging hotels, it was evident that due to various tensions and stresses experienced by the migrants, there was practically no space to utilize such methods.

In summary, while PAR represents an aspirational approach for community-led knowledge generation, the tangible and ethical challenges encountered with Afghan forced migrants in London necessitated a thoughtful recalibration. Modifying the research strategy was vital to capture their experiences.

Chapter 4: Review of the Empirical literature

Introduction

In this chapter, I review the empirical literature on forced migration from Afghanistan, and on the reception of forced migrants in the UK, but the first two sections focus on two pivotal concepts in this thesis: evacuation and expectations. These are brief as relevant literature was limited. The following section examines academic works on the reception of forced migrants in the Global South generally, before concentrating on the reception and experience of Afghan forced migrants in neighbouring countries, in particular Iran and Pakistan. Many Afghan evacuees and forced migrants arriving in the UK had experienced living and being received in these countries, which might influence/inform their expectations of reception in the UK. The last section reviews academic literature on the reception and treatment of forced migrants in Europe, with a particular focus on their initial arrival in the United Kingdom. Understanding the reception in the EU is pivotal, especially given the country's past membership in the European Union and its adherence to EU migration and refugee policies.

Evacuations

This review of the evacuation literature is brief as my thesis focuses on the *expectations* of those Afghans evacuated to the UK in 2021, and much of the evacuation literature focused on logistics and was written from the perspective of those evacuating rather than by those who had been evacuated. However, as my fieldwork showed, the evacuation itself shaped the expectations of those evacuated and was assumed to imply, more or less explicitly, certain promises about how they would be treated. The term 'evacuation' covers a wide range of phenomena from the short-lived movement of people out of a small area to the mass movement of millions in response to a natural disaster or conflict. The danger provoking an evacuation may be actual or perceived, natural or man-made,

accidental or deliberate. While the initial assumption is often that the evacuation is temporary and that people will return when the earth has stopped shaking, the fire is put out, the flood recedes or the conflict has been resolved, in some cases, those evacuated may be unable or unwilling to return.

Much of the literature on evacuations focuses on natural disasters (evacuations, floods, hurricanes, wild fires) and examines the preparedness of communities to deal with those disasters. Especially in areas that are prone to earthquakes or flooding such preparedness is considered key to avoiding the loss of life and property. Almost inevitably, many (not all) of the states most likely to experience such disasters do not have the resources or governance structures necessary to make preparations for dealing with the consequences, and as can be seen from the case of Afghanistan, each earthquake or flood provokes high mortality due to poor construction practices and the difficulties of getting aid to those in need.

In reviewing the literature on conflict related evacuations, I was surprised that there appears to be no systematic study of international evacuations in response to conflict, that is, when states and/or international organisations remove large numbers of people from one state to another to ensure their safety, as occurred after the fall of Saigon, or from Kosovo. Most studies that exist are case studies of particular evacuations and most are of European case studies, of diplomats, expatriates, supporters of an international presence, or of children - see for example Kushner and Knox's (1999) comprehensive study of the evacuation of children to the UK in the 20th century, including from the Spanish civil war, Belgium in WWI, and the Kinder transport from Germany when Britain evacuated 10,000 mostly Jewish children from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland in the nine months before the start of WWII. The British government did not allow their parents to accompany them, and they were often the only members of their family to survive. These evacuations were tightly controlled and permitted under restrictive conditions. Kushner and Knox note in each case the generosity of families who hosted these children, as well as the expectation that the children would be grateful, well-behaved and biddable, an expectation that continues to shape responses to those evacuated today. The focus on children was repeated in operation Babylift, which saw

the evacuation of 2,600 Vietnamese ‘orphans’ from Saigon in the weeks before the fall of that city (Haulman 2000).

Nonetheless, one review of literature (Quarelli 1980), though more than 40 years old and concerned primarily with natural disasters, offered some useful ways to think about evacuations in general, and the evacuation from Afghanistan in particular. Quarelli highlighted some important components of evacuations. One was what he called the community context, what I referred to as the ‘context and background’ in the previous chapter - ie Afghans’ experience of conflict and of forced migration, and Afghans’ extremely restricted access to mobility, especially beyond the region. Many of those fleeing had experienced the previous Taliban regime, exile, frustrated and/or successful attempts to leave Afghanistan, separation for long periods from family members and this past experience inevitably shaped people’s decisions to seek evacuation, driven by expectations of what would happen to them if they stayed, and of opportunities if they left. Many of us rushing to the airport were keenly aware that this might be our only chance to leave the country and to take our family with us. But past experience did not lead everyone to the same conclusion. Not everyone tried to leave, and among those of us who did, our expectations of the evacuation varied. Reflecting on how experience shapes responses to crises and the need to evacuate, I can see that my own experience of having to collect documents and meet impossible criteria in order to get a student visa, the challenges I faced obtaining visas for my wife and children to accompany me to the UK, conditioned me to assume I could not bring my siblings and their families with me; an assumption that was challenged during my visits to bridging hotels when I met people who had brought up 20 family members out with them, something that I had not even dreamed of.

Quarelli (1980) also referred to the possible influence of social linkages, and these were clearly key in August 2021, as noted by Ryan et al (2024), whose respondents referred to a policewoman, for example, who had no links to foreigners and could not leave despite the risks she faced. Evacuation was easier, more conceivable, for those who had a network of contacts who could get them inside the airport and onto aircraft. Such a network was the most valuable resource anyone could have - in my case, contacts in Poland and the UK were key to our places on the departing plane. The chaos of those

days meant it was not impossible for those without such networks to join the evacuation, but it was rarer. But Quarelli also noted a common finding in the literature, which is that when faced with uncertainty, families talk to their neighbours, and that families are more likely to leave when neighbours are leaving. In the days before my own departure, I watched from our window as overloaded cars pulled away from our building and sat with neighbours as we discussed when and how to leave.

The evacuation from Kabul has been compared to that from Saigon on 30 April 1975, also precipitated by an American withdrawal, as chaotic and with similar scenes of desperate people dying as they clung to departing aircraft (Haulman 2000). In searching works on that event, I noted that, like the first publications on the Afghan evacuation, many were military and political analyses, and memoirs by foreigners (diplomats, journalists and military personnel). Some of these accounts mirror closely our experience, describing, as the North Vietnamese advanced south, the surprise and the growing terror of the population, in particular civil servants, members of the military and “anyone who had supported or worked with the Americans” (Willbanks 2008, 258). At that time, the evacuation of Americans and South Vietnamese was the largest seen in history - until Kabul 2021.

While it is considered to be part of the duty of states to prepare evacuation plans in the event of, for example, a natural disaster, nuclear or chemical accident, conflict creates a more volatile and uncertain situation, one in which preparing or actually evacuating a population may be seen as destabilising. Mirroring concerns from Saigon (Haulman 2000), Alcala (2023, 15) suggests the US evacuation of noncombatants in August 2021 was delayed until the 14 August at the request of the Ghani administration who warned “that if they withdrew American citizens and SIV [Special Immigrant Visa] applicants at a pace that was too fast, it would cause a collapse of the government”.

Klein, former Deputy Secretary of the Joint Staff of United States Forces Korea, provided an analysis of US failures in Afghanistan (2024) in the hope that lessons might be drawn for a possible future evacuation from South Korea, but this article was largely an argument over territory ie a transfer of responsibility for evacuations from the Department of State, to the Department of Defence. Klein (2024, 69) noted that the US had had quite a lot of

experience of limited and complex NEOs (Noncombatant Evacuation Operations) including Liberia (1990), Somalia (1991), Rwanda (1994), the Central African Republic (1996), Albania (1997), Kuwait (1998), Turkey (2003), Lebanon (2006), and South Sudan (2014), and cites Army Major Charles Hoke who in 2019 predicted a “major evacuation” from Afghanistan. Hoke used a detailed analysis of the Vietnam evacuation and other examples to urge the preparation of an evacuation plan (cited by Klein 2024, 69) but given the chaos experienced in Kabul, it seemed that no practical or logistical lessons had been learned that would have made the evacuation any easier, more efficient or safer for those trying to leave or those trying to organise our departures. Klein lays most of the responsibility for the chaos and failures on the shoulders of the Ambassador and Embassy staff and argues that the State department plan was vague “both on the prioritizing of evacuees and on plans for temporary safe havens” (2024, 73).

I have no way of knowing whether Klein’s argument is correct, but in any case, there was a clear lack of planning and preparedness on the ground - something that astonished those of us who had worked with foreign governments, agencies and organisations. We had had years of being chastised for poor organisation, lack of planning, of being conditioned to believe that efficiency, forward planning and careful preparation were the characteristics of developed countries. It was that conditioning that shaped our expectations of the evacuation and our reception in Europe, the UK and the US.

Expectations

This section is also brief because in searching for literature on how the expectations of forced (or voluntary) migrants are met or not post-migration, it became clear that almost all studies were concerned with how expectations or aspirations shaped the decision to migrate (Carling 2002; Alpes 2014; Carling and Collins 2018). It would seem that scholars and policy-makers are not overly concerned with the realisation/disappointment of expectations post arrival.

Salley (2024) explored the factors shaping the integration of Afghans evacuated to the US. Her interviewees included those who had come to the US before and after 2021. She divided the factors into pre-migration and post-migration, with the former including education and whether the person had come before August 2021, arguing that those who had come before had had time to prepare for their journey, while the evacuation had been chaotic and dangerous, with little or no time for preparation. The post-migration factors included expectations, ethnicity (noting that those who had been discriminated against, such as the Hazara, had less social capital) and gender, with women who had less access to education and employment in Afghanistan finding it harder to access education and employment in the US. Salley noted that Afghans were forced to reevaluate their expectations re: health, education, employment, and housing, all issues that were raised during my fieldwork (2024, 114). These expectations included misconceptions of an easier life with a robust social safety net, others anticipated immediate continuation of higher education or professional careers. Ideals of a perfect U.S. life were contrasted with the reality of safety concerns, particularly in low-income housing areas (2024, 114).

In the US context, the safety concerns related to violent crime, while in the UK people had not expected the homes they were eventually offered to be so small, dirty, or infested. Salley discussed how people adapted their expectations, a theme that surfaced in my fieldwork.

Dimitriades in her study of Afghans in Greece found that Afghans had certain expectations of asylum “These included integration into a system of social protection and assistance through the offer of accommodation, food provisions, language training, employment, and access to education for children” (2017a, 63). Interestingly, she referred to the experience of refuge in Iran, particularly during the Soviet period, when Afghans were easily able to access accommodation, education, employment, medical, as shaping Afghan expectations of asylum in Europe (2017b). She argues that Afghans recognised that they would need assistance to settle but expected that assistance to be framed within the concepts of host/guest, refuge/shelter (see next section for more on Afghans in Iran). Dimitriades (2017b, 50) notes too the influence of stories told by family and friends returning to Afghanistan or Iran to visit, in spite of the fact that those stories may be out

of date or edited by the teller. Other factors shaping Afghan expectations of Europe, according to Dimitriadis, include social media which creates a particular image of Europe and of asylum - that papers will provide access to a new life, social benefits and education, which in turn lead to employment and integration.

Gaps in this literature concern the practice of hiding disappointment when communicating with family and friends back home, the way in which those who make it to the Global North contribute to unrealistic expectations by pretending to have better accommodation and employment than they do; and the extent to which unrealistic expectations are created by the implicit and explicit attitudes of those from the Global North who construct an image of beneficent, clean, efficient, prosperous, protective, rational states where everyone can thrive and realise their full potential.

The reception of forced migrants in the Global South

In speaking of the reception of forced migrants, I refer to the range of practices, policies, and responses implemented by host countries and communities to manage the arrival, accommodation, and initial integration of individuals who have been compelled to flee their home countries due to violence, persecution, natural disasters, or other life-threatening situations. The long history of receiving and protecting those forced to flee their homes has been documented by scholars throughout the twentieth century (Zolberg, Suhrke & Aguayo 1989, Kushner and Knox 1999, Soguk 1999), noting that most of those displaced are hosted in neighbouring provinces and countries in the Global South, although the bulk of the literature focuses on the Global North.

The study of refugees, of the conditions they endured in camps in Africa and South Asia where they were first received, and then of their reception in the countries of resettlement, first emerged in the 1970s, in the work of people like Colson (1971), Lieber (1977), Mamdani (1973) and later Harrell-Bond (1986), among others. During wars or natural disasters, forced migrants typically seek refuge in nearby villages or cities, where often those who receive them are local communities, barely subsisting themselves (Harrell-

Bond 1986). Countries of first reception (many of whom are not signatories of the 1951 Refugee Convention and do not have an 'asylum system') rarely have the necessary infrastructure to receive and integrate forced migrants into their communities, so that first responses are *ad hoc* and may be hostile or hospitable or both.

One of the earliest ethnographic studies of the impact of refugee arrivals of such communities, and their generous response to those arrivals, was *Imposing Aid* (Harrell-Bond 1986). Harrell-Bond abandoned the anthropologists' non-judgemental stance to embrace a critical appraisal of humanitarian agencies and their programs of assistance to refugees, which overlooked the costs to local communities. She never lost sight of the trauma experienced by refugees, nor of their material and non-material resources. The Sudanese refugees of her case study were three dimensional beings, who interacted with their hosts, the receiving government and the international agencies. A central argument of this study was that agencies should rely more on local people and refugees themselves, and less on foreign personnel, and that people should be allowed to settle locally rather than being held separately in camps. She acknowledged local corruption but still argued that there was equal or greater corruption on the part of agencies who use money earmarked for relief to hire expensive expatriate staff rather than competent local people and to buy supplies abroad that can be purchased locally (1986). While lessons have been learnt, many of the mistakes highlighted by Harrell-Bond continue today and in other countries, including those hosting Afghans. Interestingly, Pakistan, a non-signatory of the 1951 Convention, in which UNHCR and the international community is very active, confined many Afghans to camps, while Iran, a signatory, permitted local integration (with restrictions).

However, despite a tradition of welcome and integration (Milner, 2009), since the 1980s, the primary policy of governments in the Global South, particularly on the African continent, has focused on repatriation. Chimni (2004) examined the shift from resettlement, particularly towards the Global North, as the practical durable solution between 1945-85 towards repatriation in three phases post 1985 (voluntary return, 'safe' return and forced return). In spite of this emphasis on returning people to their countries of origin, in reality, given the political instability and poverty in sending countries, return is

very difficult, and countries in the Global South, including Kenya and Uganda, Iran and Pakistan, continue to receive and host the majority of forced migrants, however reluctantly (Norman 2020). According to Norman, to deter arrivals and encourage return, host countries allow refugees to enter and remain within their borders but provide minimal support for their integration or welfare, effectively preventing their integration (2020), a policy also pursued in some European countries. Consequently, most refugees are pushed towards the informal economy and typically live in poor economic and social conditions.

Norman (2020) argues that countries in the Global South manage refugee populations within their political, economic, and social constraints while maximizing international aid. These countries attempt to gain international credit by emphasizing their role in hosting refugees. However, Abdelaaty (2021) argues that governments vary in their reception of refugees. Some groups face reluctant reception, while others are met with hospitality. Abdelaaty further asserts that foreign policy, such as competition with rival states (migrant-sending countries), can influence how refugees are received, potentially using refugee reception as a diplomatic threat or tool of humiliation.

By examining the policies and behaviors of the Turkish and Egyptian governments towards migrants, Abdelaaty (2021) demonstrates that reception is often influenced by foreign policy and ethnic proximity to the refugee community. For example, Turkey welcomed 300,000 Bulgarians between 1989 and 1990, who shared common Turkish ethnic roots and had hostile relations with the Bulgarian government, by lifting visa restrictions and providing state housing. Simultaneously, Turkey persecuted and expelled 10,000 Iraqi Kurds, who lacked ethnic ties with the ruling group in Turkey but had good relations with the Iraqi government.

Abdelaaty (2021) concludes that the differing and discriminatory reception and treatment of refugees by governments is often not fully explained by humanitarian motives, resources, individual characteristics, or security issues. Reception policies in the Global South have evolved due to ongoing wars and the prolonged presence of refugees. Many of Abdelaaty's conclusions could have emerged from the Afghan context to which we now turn.

Reception of Afghans in Iran and Pakistan

In this section I review the literature on the reception of Afghans in Iran (and to a lesser degree Pakistan) and their return to Afghanistan, as many of those evacuated to the UK in 2021 had had previous experience of exile, and one argument advanced in this thesis is that this experience shaped to a degree the expectations of those who were brought to the UK.

In his review of work on Afghan refugees 30 years ago, Centlivres (1994) pointed out the lack of literature on Afghan refugees in Iran compared to that of Pakistan due to the political atmosphere in Iran which made research difficult for foreign academics and NGOs. In the intervening years, a great deal of work has been done on this topic. Rajaei (2000), Turton and Marsden (2002), Monsutti (2004), Glazebrook & Abbasi-Shavazi (2006), Safri (2011) have all described the situation of Afghan refugees in Iran as well as Iranian policies towards Afghans, explaining that the policies vary depending on the domestic and international concerns of the Iranian government. In an atmosphere filled with the pressure to leave Iran after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Glazebrook & Abbasi-Shavazi (2006) examined the case of Afghans living in Iran (both refugee households and single labour migrants), their living conditions and their processes of decision-making on return.

The identity and perception of Afghan refugees shifted significantly from being seen as "muhajir" (refugees) to being perceived as migrants and even terrorists. In the 1980s, Afghan refugees were welcomed in Iran using the Islamic concepts of *Muhajirin* and *Ansar*. *Muhajirin* were to be treated with respect as those who were forced to flee to preserve their religion, while *Ansar* were the residents of Medina who took in and protected the Prophet and his Muhajirin when they were forced to flee. However, by the 1990s and 2000s, Afghans were being described by terms that had more negative

connotations such as *Panahandegan* (impoverished refugees) or *Awaregan* (vagabonds) in Iran (Abbasi 2025) and "terrorists" in Pakistan⁴, particularly post-9/11.

Most research by Iranian scholars portrays Afghan refugees as a burden on the Iranian economy. Scholars such as Rajaei (2000) argue that Afghan refugees compete with Iranian workers for low-skilled jobs, thereby increasing unemployment rates among Iranians. Eisazadeh and Mehranfar (2010) claim that Afghan workers, often unskilled and undocumented, accept lower wages and work under harsh conditions, displacing Iranian workers and exacerbating economic hardships for Iranian low-skilled laborers. This narrative is further supported by Karimi-Moughari (2007), who suggests that the presence of Afghan workers contributes to unemployment among Iranians without addressing broader economic and political factors. The competition for low-skilled jobs between Afghan refugees and Iranian workers is a central theme in Iranian academic and public discourse. This narrative partly explains why Iranian low-skilled labourers feel threatened by and are hostile to Afghan workers.

Contrary to this portrayal, other scholars, mostly non-Iranian (e.g. Monsutti 2005), highlight how the Iranian government has strategically utilized Afghan refugees. Sepehrdoust (2013) argues that despite the high costs incurred by Iran as host to more than one million refugees, the country benefited from the presence of the Afghans. He shows this by using the case of Afghan workers in construction sectors of Iran, showing how the repatriation of Afghans would have a severe impact on this sector. Sepehrdoust argued then that substituting Iranian workers for repatriated Afghans should be limited as Afghans work under conditions that are unattractive to Iranians. Safri (2011) argues that Iran's policies towards Afghans have been shaped by their perceived usefulness. During periods of labour shortages, especially after the Iran-Iraq War (September 1980 to August 1988), which largely coincided with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Iranian government employed Afghans as cheap labour. Afghans retain a memory of that time, when they were welcomed by Khomeini and could access accommodation, education,

⁴ In Pakistan, the term Muhajir was reserved for those Muslims who fled/ were driven out of India towards the new state of Pakistan in 1947, and wasn't used for Afghans. Instead, Afghan men were encouraged to return from Pakistan to fight the Soviet invaders and were known as *Mujahadeen*.

employment, and travel freely inside the country. Salley (2024) suggests that this memory shaped Afghan expectations of reception in the US.

However, when these labour needs diminished, policies shifted towards repatriation, reduced access to services and limitations of travel (Safri 2011). Both Iran and Pakistan went through periods of relative openness to Afghan refugees because it was domestically expedient. However, both countries also turned against the same refugee population when politics demanded it (Safri 2011). Afghans in Iran and Pakistan constitute a convenient scapegoat upon which to build elaborate narratives that mask other serious systemic problems. Afghans have been subject to large scale deportations to Afghanistan as a way of deflecting from their own failures and indicating that governments are dealing the problems faced by their citizens. Similar strategies have been employed in the Global North.

Reception in Global North:

Following the second world war and the mass displacement it caused, scholars turned their attention to the situation of those forced to migrate especially within or from Europe (Arendt 1986), noting that the hostility with which strangers are received has also been leavened by the desire to protect, and that the granting of protection by states has frequently served the interests of those states (Schuster 2004a). In the following section, the literature on the reception of refugees, especially the legal duties of states, their (non)implementation and the public response to the arrivals are reviewed.

Stephen Castles (2017) argues that migration policies in the Global North are predominantly designed to control and restrict the movement of people, prioritizing the interests and security concerns of destination countries rather than addressing the needs and rights of migrants. These policies often perceive migrants as passive subjects to be managed, ignoring their autonomy and capacity for resilience and adaptation. Consequently, migrants frequently circumvent restrictive measures, finding informal ways to enter countries and establish support networks. Castles highlights that control-oriented

policies are ineffective because they fail to consider migrants' perspectives and experiences, leading to unintended consequences such as the growth of smuggling networks and increased migrant precariousness (Castles, 2017; Castles & Delgado Wise, 2008). In the UK, as we will see below, reception infrastructure largely focuses on ensuring the control of arrivals and rendering them available for deportation, while creating an environment that discourages such arrivals.

Reception as a tool of migration control and deterrence:

Empirical research highlights variations in the reception of refugees across EU member states (Eliassi, 2015; Göler, 2020; Kreichauf, 2020; Rosenberger & König, 2011; Semprebon & Pelacani, 2020). Even where universal rights such as education and emergency medical care are guaranteed, a number of studies have highlighted wide variation in access across the EU (Rogers, 2002; van Oort et al., 2018). In terms of conditions within camps and reception centers used to accommodate asylum seekers the difference is notable (Kreichauf, 2020; Slingenberg, 2016; Szczepanikova, 2013).

The EU Council Directive on Reception Conditions (2003) and its subsequent Recast (2016) serve as crucial legal frameworks outlining the reception conditions for asylum seekers in EU countries and were intended to reduce the incentives for applicants to 'shop around' for better conditions by ensuring every asylum seeker would have a similar experience of reception in every EU state. The directives have been subject to sustained criticism in the literature since the draft stage. Rogers (2002) noted that, while these documents established a set of measures to ensure a "minimum standard" that legally guarantees a dignified life and well-being for asylum seekers, they did not explicitly define the concept of reception (see also Rosenberger & König, 2011). Subsequently, Tsourdi (2016) pointed out that although the standard conditions encompass material conditions such as housing, financial assistance, education, medical care, and access to employment, the implementation of those standards is still largely left to the discretion of individual EU states. The consensus among these scholars and others commenting since then (Silverman, 2012; Slingenberg, 2016; van Oort et al., 2018) is that this strategy has

failed as states continue to compete to impose stricter restrictions on asylum seekers as a means to control migration flows and deter future migration and results in the interpretation of 'minimum reception standards' as merely 'minimum reception' (Rosenberger & König, 2011, p. 537).

The flaws in this strategy have been detailed by scholars such as Semprebon & Pelacani, (2020). The directive has not stopped people seeking sanctuary, preferably with family or friends or in a country whose language they speak but has made it more dangerous and difficult for them and created a population in transit excluded from access to necessary reception facilities (Semprebon & Pelacani 2020). This approach explicitly undermines the refugees' agency and desire to settle in a country of their choice, effectively denying them what Hannah Arendt described as the 'right to have rights' (Arendt 1986). Such policies reflect a fundamental disregard for the individual preferences and needs of asylum seekers, treating them as mere subjects of administrative processes rather than as individuals with specific aspirations and rights. Reviewing this literature highlighted a common thread with regard to the attitudes towards forced migrants, which is that forced migrants do not have a right to autonomy, even those brought in through evacuation schemes.

From a state's perspective, asylum seekers should not expect to choose where they go, even within national borders, where or with whom they live, whether or what kind of work they can do (Papadimitriou & Papageorgiou 2005, Schuster 2011). In addition to critical work on the assumption that asylum seekers should expect to be treated as pawns or children on arrival in Europe (Schuster 2011), there has been a significant body of literature on the treatment of asylum seekers in first accommodation centres, whether camps (Campesi 2015;), dedicated hostels (Stratham 2003, Phillimore et al 2025, Zill et al 2021), hotels or motels (Gibson 2003, Grayson 2022), within or excluded from local communities (Schuster 2004b), run by the state (Phillimore et al 2025), private enterprise (Darling 2016a, Fée 2021, Martin & Tazziolo 2023) or civil society (Mayblin & James 2019), a body of literature remarkable for its consensus on the inappropriateness of the treatment of people seeking protection, whether in terms of the damage done to the people 'housed' (Ziersch & Due 2018, Spira et al 2025, Phillimore et al 2025), or achieving

'burden-sharing' among local authorities (Boswell 2003, Thielemann 2004, Mort & Morris 2024). However, evacuated Afghans were treated differently - because of the rapid and chaotic evacuation they were initially housed in hotels, which caused resentment in the population and was not a long term solution. Six months later, a new solution was found for Ukrainians - a scheme whereby UK citizens were encouraged to open their homes (UK government 2022). The difference in the response to Afghans and Ukrainians has been widely noted in the media (Barros 2022, Bayoumi 2022) but much less in academic literature (De Coninck 2022, Lordache & Blanchard 2024).

Reception provision:

While different countries privilege different models of reception provision (state in Germany, private enterprise in the UK, charities in Italy), in many cases, local authorities and central government have come to rely on a mixture of all three. Some scholars argue that the shift towards the privatization of the management of reception centers in the UK has increasingly shifted towards privatization, a change driven largely by economic austerity measures (Darling, 2016a, 2016b). Darling argues that privatizing these facilities was seen as a straightforward budget-cutting measure, made feasible by the fact that asylum seekers lack significant political representation, as they do not possess the right to vote or work and are often negatively portrayed (Darling, 2016a). Furthermore, Darling contends that in this privatized environment, the pursuit of profit overshadows the actual needs of asylum seekers, turning their accommodation into a business governed by principles of neoliberalism such as 'economic efficiency,' 'market competition,' and 'dispersed government responsibility' (Darling, 2016b, p. 230). This shift not only frames asylum seeking as an economic burden rather than a humanitarian or political issue but also depoliticizes it, reducing it to a mere managerial concern. This transition away from state responsibility towards private management, Darling notes, ultimately diminishes the state's role in providing for asylum seekers (Darling, 2016b; Geuijen et al., 2020) and introduces a profit motive. Certainly the accommodation of Afghans in hotels in the UK created a windfall for the private sector and led to large bills for local and national

government (James & Mayblin 2024, Mort & Morice 2024) and leading to attacks on asylum accommodation.

Research indicates that top-down policy implementations have often been ineffective and problematic on the ground, particularly when local stakeholders were excluded from the decision-making process (Glorius et al., 2019). In some EU countries, such as the Netherlands and Austria, there has been a shift toward a community-based approach in the reception of refugees, particularly after 2015 when state systems failed to provide adequate reception facilities. This shift emerged as local communities took an active role in responding to the refugee crisis, offering a grassroots alternative to state-driven efforts (Geuijen et al., 2020; Rast et al., 2020; Rosenberger & Müller, 2020). Engaging local communities in the reception of asylum seekers has demonstrated several advantages, notably in the successful integration of refugees into these communities (Rosenberger & Müller, 2020) as demonstrated by the response to Ukrainians. However, this trend is not without criticism; some argue that it may inappropriately shift the burden of responsibility from governments to local communities and the asylum seekers themselves.

With the increase in asylum seeker numbers in the EU, asylum laws and regulations have become stricter, leading to significant changes in the practices within accommodation and reception centers, often transforming them into camp-like facilities (Göler, 2020; Kreichauf, 2020). These centers are increasingly being relocated outside urban areas to locations of lower quality and camp-like structures, a phenomenon Kreichauf (2018) terms 'Campisation.' She argues that Campisation involves containment, exclusion, and temporality, highlighting the dehumanizing conditions faced by refugees within the EU.

Camp-like accommodations for refugees in Europe have garnered considerable attention, particularly concerning their role as sites of 'exclusion' and 'non-places' (Diken, 2004; Göler, 2020). Using Marc Augé's concept of a 'non-place' (1995), Göler (2020) argues that asylum policies have transformed refugee camps into spaces devoid of history and identity. He explains that asylum seekers find themselves in a perpetual state of temporariness and transition, where meaningful connections to the social environment are systematically obstructed. The strategic choice of remote locations for these camps and the provision of substandard services, such as poor-quality medical care, effectively

isolate refugees from broader community engagement. This practice, known as 'othering,' deliberately distances asylum seekers and refugees from societal integration through their accommodation (Göler, 2020; Kreichauf, 2018; Segarra, 2020)

Moreover, the 'othering' of refugees is exacerbated through bureaucratic processes within reception centers (Eliassi, 2015; Segarra, 2020). Segarra (2020) illustrates how these restrictions can manifest financially, such as limitations on transportation allowances that prevent refugees from accessing city centers, or the issuance of vouchers instead of cash, which restricts their purchasing choices to certain centers. These practices effectively confine refugees to being mere consumers of designated resources, further segregating them from the broader community (Gustafsson, 2015)."

Furthermore, Szczepanikova (2013) argues that accommodation and reception centers serve dual purposes: they control asylum seekers while providing limited assistance. Although staying in these centers is not mandatory, the conditions for leaving—such as demonstrating sufficient financial independence—are often unattainable for refugees who typically lack work permits and therefore the means to support themselves independently (Szczepanikova, 2013). Conversely, residing in these centers fosters dependency on humanitarian aid, as noted by Campesi (2015). Ultimately, the current conditions within reception centers do not foster independence or integration but rather contribute to social disempowerment, inhibiting rather than enhancing the empowerment of refugees.

The primary justification for the control and confinement of asylum seekers is often cited as national security (Khosravi, 2009). Asylum seekers are frequently perceived as threats (Witteborn, 2011), and are even suspected of carrying dangerous diseases (Szczepanikova, 2013), which proponents argue necessitates their segregation and control to protect the nation (Khosravi, 2009; Kreichauf, 2018). In the UK, Silverman (2012) argues that the government's main objective is to deter future migration. However, research such as Edwards (2011) suggests there is no evidence that detention effectively prevents further migration. Despite this, governments often describe the detention of asylum seekers as 'regrettable but necessary' (Silverman, 2012), and efforts are made to normalize this practice as a punitive measure for those who enter illegally (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Düvell, 2014; Khosravi, 2009). Nevertheless, Silverman (2012) contends

that the UK government has not succeeded in normalizing the detention of asylum seekers.

Until August 2021, Afghans were frequently held in such camps, but in response to the evacuation they were accommodated in bridging hotels, which were in practice turned into reception centres. Unsited to the accommodation of families for more than a few days, some families spent almost two years in the hotels. For one of the only studies of the reception of Afghans in 2021, Ryan et al (2024) conducted a study in bridging hotels, noting the confusion and frustration (as well as gratitude) of the recent arrivals.

The literature reviewed underscores a predominant theme: government policies concerning the reception and accommodation of asylum seekers are primarily driven by motives of deterrence, control and the protection of national interests, rather than by considerations of care and humanitarian support. Numerous studies indicate that the policies and practices in reception centers are predominantly designed from the perspectives of the host society and government, rather than addressing the actual needs of asylum seekers or refugees (Darling, 2016a; Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018; Norström & Gustafsson, 2010). Asylum seekers are largely excluded from the development of programs within these centers. They are perceived as a problem to be managed rather than as participants capable of contributing to solutions (Darling, 2016b, Goodfellow 2019). Consequently, they are systematically excluded from the decision-making process, reinforcing their marginalization and disempowerment (Gustafsson, 2015; Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018; Kreichauf, 2020).

Public response to refugee reception:

Public opinion towards the presence of migrants spans a spectrum from hostility to hospitality, with notable differences observed in the Global North between attitudes to white and non-white migrants (Ford, 2011). This disparity in reception extends to refugees and forced migrants and has been the focus of numerous studies, which suggest that economic concerns of the host society and government often lead to stricter policies and increased hostility (Citrin et al., 1997; Scheve & Slaughter, 2001). Despite holding British

passports and legally migrating, Ugandan-Asians fleeing Idi Amin's brutality were perceived as economic threats, taking job opportunities from locals (Bristow, 1976; Cosemans, 2021; Taylor, 2021). In contrast, similar economic concerns did not manifest in hostility towards white European migrants (Ford, 2011).

Ford argues that identity and cultural differences are key to understanding these divergent responses, with British public opinion historically favoring white migrants over non-white migrants, arguments made 40 years later with respect to Afghan and Ukrainian refugees (De Conink, 2023). Ukrainian refugees have received more welcoming and easier pathways for entry and temporary residency through schemes like the UK's Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme. These programs do not have strict limits on numbers and provide quick, temporary residency options for more than 200,000 people (Cuibus et al 2024).

In contrast, the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) aimed at providing relocation and assistance to 20000 people who worked with/for the UK government and/or UK Armed Forces in Afghanistan. This scheme was also open to vulnerable Afghan nationals, such as female politicians, women's rights activists, and judges (Home Office, 2021a). A further separate resettlement initiative, the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), was established to relocate Afghan people most at risk of human rights abuse, such as women and girls, members of ethnic and religious minority groups, and LGBT+ individuals. These programs had strict quotas and were only available to specific vulnerable groups or those with prior connections to the host country.

However, since 2021, the UK has accepted only 21,526 Afghan refugees through these restrictive schemes, while accepting approximately 214,400 Ukrainian refugees since 2022 through more open schemes (Cuibus et al 2024; House of Commons 2024). The more favourable treatment of Ukrainian refugees is influenced by their European background and the current geopolitical situation, showing underlying racial and cultural biases that make it harder for Afghan refugees to enter, settle, and integrate (De Coninck, 2023).

Scholars (Ford, 2011; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Holzberg et al., 2018; Ivarsflaten, 2005; Ludi, 2014) have explored how host societies and public debates evaluate refugees based on ethnicity, religion, and values, asking how similar or different these individuals

are from 'us', how 'socially distant' they are, and hence, how likely to integrate. Ludi (2014) argues that the reception of refugees varies significantly based on how host societies perceive and evaluate the refugees' similarity to or difference from their own identity. She illustrates this by comparing the hostile reception of Jewish refugees, who were deemed undesirable in 1938 to the warm welcome given to Hungarian refugees in 1956 in Switzerland.

This cultural lens shapes not only public sentiment but also policy responses, highlighting a complex layer of refugee reception that intersects with notions of identity and belonging (Ford, 2011; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Holzberg et al., 2018; Ivarsflaten, 2005; Ludi, 2014). Ivarsflaten (2005) and DeConink have argued that perceived cultural threats—stemming from differences in language, religion, and customs—are significant drivers behind the strictness of migration policies and the hostility of host societies in European countries. This research suggests that cultural concerns can outweigh economic ones in influencing migration policies and attitudes toward asylum seekers. Essentially, the closer an asylum seeker's culture aligns with that of the host society, the more likely they are to be welcomed. This finding underscores the profound impact of cultural similarity on the reception processes.

Recent literature highlights how the reception of refugees in the context of Europe—whether hostile or hospitable—is influenced by the concept of (un)deservingness in public debates (Casati, 2018; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Ludi, 2014; Ravn et al., 2020; Sales 2002; Walaardt, 2013). The perception of refugees as deserving or undeserving significantly affects both policy-making and the actual practices within reception centers. Casati (2018) argues that the dynamics inside refugee reception centers are largely reflective of the broader societal and public discourses occurring outside these centers. Furthermore, the socio-economic, political, and historical contexts of the host society shape these perceptions of (un)deservingness, which in turn directly and indirectly impact the treatment of refugees within camps and reception centers (Casati, 2018).

Therefore, it becomes central to understand how public debates and the host society's perceptions shape views on who is considered a (un)deserving or (un)worthy refugee (Shiff, 2020). These perceptions determine who is deemed to deserve protection or a

'worthy reception' (Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018). Reviewing literature on the (un)deservingness of refugees, Ravn et al. (2020) identified three key dimensions of deservingness: legal, moral, and economic (Ravn et al., 2020, p. 136). From a legal perspective, deservingness is defined according to the 1951 Geneva Convention, with governments tasked with identifying who meets these criteria. Central to this discourse is the distinction between 'authentic refugees,' who are seen as deserving, and 'bogus refugees,' often categorized as economic migrants, who are not.

The second dimension of deservingness, as identified in the literature, is moral, largely based on the vulnerability of the asylum seekers. This dimension posits that those who are more vulnerable, such as women and children, are seen as more deserving of refuge (Walaardt, 2013). Refugee advocates often emphasize this portrayal to highlight the plight of such groups, arguing that their heightened vulnerability justifies their need for asylum (Cabot, 2016). Conversely, young men are frequently depicted by critics as less deserving; they are often labeled as cowards for leaving their home countries instead of staying to face adversities (Ravn et al., 2020). This portrayal reflects underlying societal biases that influence who is considered a 'deserving' refugee, where age and gender play critical roles in shaping public and policy perspectives. The economic, discussed above, relates to a refugee's potential contribution to society, as reflected in poster campaigns that showcase refugees to have made significant contributions, such as Einstein, Freddy Mercury, Lord Alf Dubs.

Casati (2018) argues that the reception of refugees hinges not merely on cultural similarities and differences but is intricately linked to the historical, economic, and political contexts of the host society. Casati provides a detailed examination of how these factors collectively influence perceptions of refugees as deserving or undeserving. For instance, in her study of a small Italian city, she identifies gratitude, suffering, and autonomy (demonstrated through hard work) as key elements that define deserving refugees. These attributes reflect the challenging economic circumstances of the local area, which, in turn, shape the reception and treatment of refugees at the local level.

The securitization of refugees also plays a crucial role in shaping their perceived deservingness in public debate. Refugees are often constructed as threats to national

security, with associations of terrorism that predominantly target Muslim refugees (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Holzberg et al., 2018; Su & Hakimi, 2021). This framing influences not only public perception but also policy responses, thereby affecting the overall treatment of refugees based on their perceived cultural and security-related threats. It is crucial to recognize that the concept of deserving refugees is not static; it varies across public debates and changes over time, contingent on the political, socio-economic conditions, and values of host societies. However, discussions about the (un)deservingness of refugees often overlook how these public perceptions translate into actual reception practices, particularly concerning the differential treatment of various refugee groups (Casati, 2018; Geuijen et al., 2020; Hinger et al., 2016; De Conink 2024).

Moreover, a significant gap in the literature is the absence of discussion about the forced migrants' own views on this process of reception. The expectations and preconceived images that forced migrants have about reception in the EU are rarely reflected upon (Ryan et al 2024, Salley 2024). This oversight misses a critical dimension of the reception experience—how forced migrants perceive and subsequently adjust to these reception practices. Furthermore, an aspect that remains largely unexplored is how asylum seekers themselves negotiate labels of (un)deservingness. How do they resist, react to, or attempt to conform to the images projected by the host society? And to what extent does this imposed image of deservingness affect asylum seekers as they strive to either align with or challenge these perceptions?

Reception of forced migrants in the UK

Over the last century, the UK has received a diverse range of refugee groups, including Belgians, Jews, Poles, Ugandan-Asians, Vietnamese, Bosnians, Syrians, and most recently, Afghans. Many academic studies (Bristow, 1976; Hale, 1993; Jones, 1983; Kuepper et al., 1975; Kuepper et al., 1976; Robinson, 1999; Robinson & Coleman, 2000; Somerset, 1983) have assessed the reception and resettlement programs for these groups, contributing to an extensive body of knowledge on the subject.

The issue of forced migrants' reception has consistently generated controversy within both political and public spheres in the UK. Critics of migration often argue for prioritizing national interests and express concerns over uncontrolled migration. In contrast, supporters advocate for the moral obligations towards refugees and highlight the potential benefits of welcoming them (Reinisch & Frank, 2017)

Historically, the initial response of the UK government has often been resistant to accepting group refugees, whether they were Jewish, Ugandan-Asian, Bosnian, or Vietnamese (Bristow, 1976; Cosemans, 2021; London, 2003; Reinisch & Frank, 2017). However, exceptions have occurred when accepting refugees aligns with national pride or specific political agendas. For instance, during the Cold War, refugees fleeing the Soviet Union were often portrayed as heroes and staunch anti-communists, which resonated with British national interests at that time (Steiner, 2017). Research on Britain's response to refugees includes historical analyses by authors such as Bailkin (2018), Kushner (2006), London (2003), and Taylor (2021), along with sociological perspectives from Schuster (2004a) and policy-focused studies by Sales (2007) and Spencer (1997). These studies reveal a consistent theme of controlling migration, which has been a central aspect of UK policies across various eras. Spencer (1997) particularly highlights that this control often targeted non-white individuals, underlining an intent to maintain a 'white Britain'.

Sales (2007) identified four distinct phases of UK migration policies, each targeting different groups but consistently racializing specific demographics. The first phase, from the early 20th century until the end of World War II, primarily targeted "aliens," mainly

Jews. After the war, the policy differentiated between old and new Commonwealth countries, with a particular focus on controlling the entry of black individuals. From the 1980s onwards, policies targeted asylum seekers, predominantly blacks and Asians, with measures including dispersal, detention, and deportation (Bloch & Schuster, 2005). The most recent phase, "migration management," involves selecting migrants for labor and imposing stricter controls.

Spencer (1997) further explained that while economic reconstruction post-war underscored Britain's need for labor, the overriding reason for such stringent policies was cultural fears. He highlighted that despite the economic integration of Asians and Black individuals benefiting the UK economy, the government persistently imposed more restrictive migration measures due to concerns over losing national identity. These insights suggest that the primary motivations behind these policies were not only economic but also deeply rooted in maintaining a homogeneous national identity.

The discussion surrounding the UK's approach to accepting forced migrants, as analyzed in various academic studies, reveals a complex interaction between humanitarian rhetoric and pragmatic, self-interested motives that drive policy decisions. This discourse presents a nuanced and often critical view of Britain's immigration policies, indicating that humanitarian concerns are usually secondary to economic, cultural, and political factors.

Academic studies (Bailkin, 2018; Kushner, 2006; London, 2003; Schuster, 2004; Taylor, 2021) have critically assessed the UK's state responses, arguing that humanitarian motivations to accept forced migrants—either individually or groups—are rare and usually driven by Britain's self-interest. For instance, London (2003) critically examines British immigration policy towards Jewish refugees, emphasizing that British interests have historically taken precedence over humanitarian considerations. She highlights that the acceptance of a large number of Jewish women as workers was primarily a response to labor shortages at the time. Additionally, London (2003) notes that it was not solely economic interests at play, but cultural factors also significantly influenced Britain's migration agenda. Schuster (2004a) explores why Britain accepts asylum seekers, despite its stringent migration control policies characterized by deportation, detention, and dispersal (Bloch & Schuster, 2005). She argues that the limited grants of sanctuary are

not primarily about offering refuge but are aimed at preserving Britain's self-image as a beacon of liberal democracy. This identity, constructed post-imperial and colonial era, is deeply entwined with the values of freedom and human rights, suggesting that the acceptance of asylum seekers serves more to maintain this image than to address humanitarian needs directly.

Taylor (2021) discusses how Britain's acceptance of refugees hasn't been driven by humanitarian goals, instead focusing on the preservation of international prestige and other strategic objectives. He further argues that Britain's portrayal of accepting refugees as a humanitarian act often precedes and justifies the introduction of stricter policies on refugee entry and reception. This suggests that such actions are less about offering sanctuary and more about managing public perception and international relations. These critiques suggest that the UK's humanitarian actions are frequently aligned with broader strategic or self-serving objectives.

Historical cases

The reception of refugees in the UK has historically varied significantly based on factors such as race and the political context of their migration. Significant scholarship (Kushner, 2006; London, 2003; Reinisch & Frank, 2017) has critically analyzed the treatment of Jewish refugees during World War II, revealing a less altruistic approach than has been suggested in Parliamentary speeches to date. This research highlights strict policies such as the imposition of visas and the requirement for sponsors to cover all refugee expenses.

London (2003) described how the acceptance of 10,000 Jewish refugees from Central Europe between 1938 and 1939, along with the evacuation of 3,000 Jewish children via the Kindertransport, is often celebrated as a testament to British generosity. However, she argues that these actions should be viewed within their historical context. The British government issued relatively few visas under stringent conditions, and philanthropic organizations, not the government, organized the rescue efforts, with the government even refusing to allow the children's parents to accompany them.

Further emphasizing the pragmatic aspects of refugee acceptance, London (2003) noted that labor needs often underpinned the UK's willingness to accept refugees. They cite the importation of displaced women from concentration and displaced persons camps after the war as a response to domestic labor shortages, indicating that economic factors rather than humanitarian motives frequently drove the UK's refugee policies. This perspective challenges the narrative of pure humanitarianism and suggests a more utilitarian approach to the acceptance of refugees based on the nation's labor needs.

The treatment of Ugandan-Asians in 1972 in reception camps was deeply influenced by Britain's deteriorating relationship with its colonies (Mamdani, 2011). Mamdani (2011) describes the reception camps as colony run by post-colonial staff, and the management of camp is also reminder of colonial administration which all authority were white (Humphry & Ward, 1974) as well as separation of food queues for Ugandans Asians and British employees according to an observation was reminder of Apartheid regime (Kuepper et al., 1975).

As the British Empire was disintegrating, Britain was grappling with severe economic challenges, including high unemployment, which created a hostile environment for refugees. This period was further marked by escalating racism, xenophobia, and anti-immigration sentiment across the UK (Taylor, 2021). A pivotal moment in shaping public attitude toward immigration occurred in 1968 when Enoch Powell delivered a speech demanding an end to immigration from the Commonwealth and even advocating for the expulsion of Black people living in Britain. His speech received an unprecedented response, with 110,000 letters arriving, eighty-two percent of which backed his views, leading to demonstrations that echoed his sentiments (Bristow, 1976).

Initially rejected, Britain eventually agreed to accept 30,000 Ugandan-Asians who held British passports. Upon their arrival, 16 reception centers across the country were designated for their admission. Out of the arrivals, 6,621 were able to secure their own accommodation immediately and left the centers, but 21,987 remained for longer-term resettlement. The stay in these camps extended beyond initial expectations due to housing shortages, persisting until January 1974 when the Ugandan-Asian Resettlement Board was dissolved. Twenty years later, Britain initially refused to accept Bosnian

refugees, justifying this decision with the argument that accepting them would inadvertently support the Serbs' plan for ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. However, under mounting international and media pressure, the UK reluctantly agreed to accept 4,000 Bosnians at the last minute, later increasing this number by an additional 1,500 due to international demands (Robinson & Coleman, 2000). The situation in 2021 was different, with Britain first promising more places then reducing them.

When refugee groups arrive in the UK, British authorities typically treat each situation as an exception rather than a recurring event (Bailkin, 2018). As Robinson (1993, 1999) explained, there are, however, common practices such as focusing on initial reception rather than long-term integration and community development. These include the dispersal of refugees across the country, relying on charities and NGOs for support, and local authorities providing housing on a voluntary basis. Despite being presented as mainstream, these approaches are often opposed by NGOs and charities because it prioritizes short-term solutions over long-term integration. This approach relies heavily on inconsistent support from local authorities and voluntary housing provisions, often resulting in prolonged timelines and inadequate living conditions. This reliance on charities and voluntary organizations has been criticized, as it suggests the government is shirking its responsibilities—a point underscored by Taylor (2021) when discussing the management of Ugandan-Asian refugees.

Scholars from Kushner and Knox (1999) through Schuster (2004a) to Bailkin (2018) have all noted that the British authorities have consistently treated the arrival and reception of forcibly migrated groups as exceptional, unprecedented, and temporary events to which they respond in an *ad hoc* manner. The frequency of these exceptional events has not led to preparedness for managing these crises (Bailkin, 2018; Kelly, 2001). Bailkin (2018) argues that this is a deliberate policy choice, that it represents a refusal to establish a permanent aid structure because creating such a structure would anticipate further influxes of forced migrants, that it would acknowledge a state's inability to control the arrival of refugees. This insistence on the temporary and unprecedented nature of such arrivals has resulted in a failure to learn from past reception and assessment programs. Robinson & Coleman (2000) and Kelly (2001) point out that there is no systematic

evaluation of these programs, which hinders the ability to improve and learn from past experiences. However, this is not the case with programs of the recent wave of refugees, such as those from Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.

Furthermore, with the reception of refugees, dispersal was one of the core policies. The policy of dispersing refugees, which aims to spread costs among local authorities and prevent the formation of ghettos, has consistently been unsuccessful, frequently followed by the remigration of those dispersed back to urban centres where they are more likely to find community and support (Kelly, 2001; Mamdani, 1973; Robinson, 1999; Taylor, 2021). Dispersal is justified on the grounds of cost ie it is cheaper to house people outside of London, and burden-sharing, ie a concentration of asylum-seekers, or refugees in an area puts unbearable strain on schools, doctors surgeries and other public services. Taylor (2021) argues that in the process of dispersal, the government prioritizes the interests of the British public over the preferences and needs of forced migrants, risking their potential for integration. However, Kelly (2001) points out that reception programs are typically designed without involving forced migrants, considering their ideas or their potential contributions to their new homes, treating refugees more as passive victims and subjects of policy rather than as active participants in shaping the policies that affect their lives.

Reception programs for forced migrants have faced criticism for inadequate training of the staff involved (Kelly, 2001). Often, these staff members lacked sufficient information and experience, and were unaware of the lessons learned from previous reception initiatives. This lack of awareness led them to develop their own practices independently, which varied significantly in effectiveness and sensitivity to the needs of forced migrants (Robinson & Coleman, 2000; cited in Kelly, 2001). Criticism also extends to the early practices in reception centers during the arrival of refugees and evacuees. Bloch (1999) examined the initial arrival of Kosovan forced migrants in UK reception centers, highlighting a significant oversight in staff training and preparation. Many staff members, previously involved with the Bosnian program, were recruited under the assumption that the needs of Kosovan migrants would be similar. However, it soon became evident that the needs differed substantially. Specifically, Bloch pointed out that in 1999, there was a

lack of clear understanding regarding the specific food items and priorities needed by Kosovan evacuees, reflecting a broader disconnect in addressing the unique requirements of different refugee groups, errors replicated in 2021 and the years in between.

The terminology used to describe these facilities has also been a point of contention. British authorities have consistently avoided the term “camp,” preferring “reception centers” instead (Bailkin, 2018). However, displaced individuals themselves, as well as some academic scholars, often refer to these as camps (Bailkin, 2018; Mamdani, 1973), suggesting a disconnect between official language and the lived experiences of the migrants. This discrepancy is significant: while “reception center” implies a temporary and welcoming facility, “camp” may evoke connotations of restriction and control, which Bailkin (2018) argues more accurately reflects the reality of these settings.

Control over daily life has been a significant issue in some reception centers, notably those used for Vietnamese refugees. These centers were often guarded by military personnel and dogs, symbolizing a stark separation from British society and a restriction on the refugees' autonomy. Living under such conditions meant that individuals had limited control over their lives. From 1975 to 1988, 22,577 Vietnamese refugees arrived in England, with the majority admitted between 1979 and 1981. They were distributed across 46 reception centers nationwide. While it was initially expected that people would stay in these centers for 12 to 14 weeks before moving to more permanent accommodations, reality differed significantly. According to a survey of 54 individuals, many stayed in the centers for more than six months, and about 7% remained for over a year.

Camps were scattered from city centers to the most remote areas of Britain, often in locations that were largely invisible and unrecognized (Bailkin, 2018). Initially, these camps were repurposed from former military bases, air force stations, and even prisons. After 1982, many of these sites underwent transformations into parks, markets, new buildings, or reverted to military use. Despite their official closure, these changes often led to the emergence of new types of accommodations, such as detention centers and

bridging hotels, reflecting a continued use of these sites for controlling and housing vulnerable populations (Bailkin, 2018).

The various accounts and studies of refugee reception in the UK reveal a pattern of inadequate preparation and support for displaced populations. From Ugandan-Asians to Vietnamese and Kosovans, the consistent issues of improper staff training, inadequate understanding of refugee needs, and the use of inappropriately secured and isolated locations illustrate systemic failures. The practice of treating each arrival as a unique, temporary emergency has hindered the development of effective, compassionate policies. Furthermore, the terminology and physical settings—often distant and disconnected from society—reflect a broader reluctance to integrate refugees into the community, underscoring a need for significant reform in how reception centers operate and how the UK as a whole approaches its responsibilities towards forced migrants.

The Hostile Environment

Although the announcement in 2012 of the intention to create a ‘hostile environment’ for undocumented migration was an explicit policy of Theresa May’s government (Goodfellow 2012, Maguire 2023), as detailed above numerous scholars have described how successive Labour and Conservative governments have introduced policies that have made it increasingly difficult for migrants, including forced migrants, to enter and survive in the UK (Benwell et al, 2023; Schuster, 2005; Kushner and Knox 1999). Nonetheless, scholars have shown that the introduction of two Immigration Acts in 2014 and 2016 which put in place the “hostile environment” marking a significant hardening of attitudes to asylum seekers: these laws obliged UK citizens to become border guards (Goodfellow 2019; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019), checking the residence papers of prospective employees, tenants, and even patients. The duty imposed on doctors, landlords, teachers and others to create a hostile environment for undocumented migrants legitimised racism and hostility towards all migrants (Guma et al, 2024; Griffiths & Yeo 2024, Reynolds et al 2024). This hostility and racism was exacerbated by the policy of privatising asylum accommodation that was mainstreamed from 2012 onwards and subsequently of housing asylum seekers in hotels (Guma et al, 2024).

Afghans evacuated to the UK in 2021 were not the explicit target of the hostile environment - we were, apparently, recipients of 'Operation Warm Welcome' (Ryan et al 2024). The British government had acknowledged a duty towards us, as they had to those from Hong Kong. We belonged to the category of 'deserving refugees' (it seemed there was political consensus that 'most asylum seekers are not genuine but 'bogus', because they flee for 'opportunistic' economic reasons' (De Jong, cited in Ryan et al 2024)). Ryan et al (2024) in a study conducted in 2022 demonstrated how the hostile environment shaped responses, even to those evacuated. They describe the difficulties faced by this group when trying to access employment and housing (see chapter 7 below). Together with asylum seekers, evacuees too were subject to dispersal policies designed to spread the 'burden' that we represented for local councils (as Vietnamese, Chilean and other refugee groups had been before us) (Robinson 1999; Hirsch 2012), though Ryan et al also note that the emphasis on controlling the border and deterring 'illegal migrants' meant that Afghans who could not be evacuated and made their own way to the UK, especially in small boats, were treated much more harshly.

As I noted at the outset of our discussion, academic work concerning the resettlement programs of forced migrants in the UK predominantly focuses on evaluations. This research, characterized by a reliance on quantitative metrics such as figures and management structures, is shaped largely by the interests and questions posed by donors, institutions, or researchers. Consequently, there is a striking lack of detailed information about the actual living conditions within reception centers, the challenges refugees face upon their arrival, or insights into how they are cared for and resettled. While Ryan et al's study is important and relevant to this thesis, it is also worth noting that the four Afghan peer researchers, including two evacuees, are not named or given authorship credits in the CSP article.

Academic research rarely incorporates the perspectives of the refugees themselves. Few accounts from residents of these camps or reception centers exist that describe the daily life within these confines. One notable exception is Mamdani's (1973) personal narrative detailing his experiences at Kensington Barracks in the heart of London, while other Ugandan-Asians were spread across 16 different camps, some in remote areas like

Wales. His account provides valuable insights into the everyday lives and challenges faced by evacuees during their resettlement in the UK. More recently, Abbasi (2025) has provided a rare insight into the conditions inside Yarl's Wood, a camp for refugee women outside Bedford.

The existing academic studies, including those by Bristow (1976), Hale (1993), Jones (1983), Kuepper et al. (1975, 1976), Robinson (1999), Robinson & Coleman (2000), and Somerset (1983), typically examine the structural and managerial aspects of reception and resettlement programs. These include learning English, housing, and employment, yet rarely address the personal experiences of the forced migrants themselves. While this may be understandable given the difficulties accessing these centres, this dominant research approach prioritizes institutional perspectives over the voices and lived experiences of the migrants, often resulting in a skewed understanding of the effectiveness and human impact of these programs.

This focus reflects a broader trend in migration studies where the evaluation of reception and resettlement programs is conducted primarily through the lens of government policies and institutional frameworks, adopting a top-down rather than a bottom-up approach. Research in the field of reception of refugees is similarly presented within this dominant national perspective and problem-oriented viewpoint, where refugees primarily play the role of interviewees, and their perspectives are analyzed within the same framework. The predominance of such perspectives underscores the need for bottom-up research approach that offering a fuller, more nuanced picture of their experiences in reception centers and during resettlement in the UK.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the main gaps in the literature were identified. Inevitably, the main gaps is the lack of first person accounts and analyses of evacuation, of reception and detention, and of the challenges of trying to find or create a place for oneself in a new country, especially when one arrives with nothing - no resources, no networks and no social capital. The review found little written on the experience of evacuation from conflict zones, and almost nothing on what it meant to leave people behind in danger or how these two factors shape the lives of those evacuated. We also found that most work on expectations concentrated on expectations prior to migration, not on how expectations are met or disappointed on arrival, on how people are forced to adapt their expectations or what happens when they cannot.

Most of the chapter reviewed the literature on the reception of forced migrants, first in the Global South, and then in the Global North. The literature is heavily skewed towards the Global North even though most forced migrants are received in the Global South. The reasons are that most publications are by scholars in the Global North, most research resources are in the Global North, and the Global South seems scarcely to exist for Global North policy-makers and publics.

Chapter 5: Methods

Introduction

As a result of the challenges I faced trying to use PAR, I switched to ethnography, using a combination of participant observation, informal interviews, group meetings (see below) and autoethnography. Working two days a week in the hotels as a volunteer with NGOs supporting the evacuees facilitated regular interactions with the residents. As described in chapter 3, through volunteering with Paiwand and MO, I had already established a presence in four different hotels.

In Hotel A, I was stationed behind one of two tables in the lobby, while in Hotel B, a comparatively large meeting room was utilized during working hours. My responsibilities encompassed scheduling medical appointments, coordinating meetings with Home Office representatives, translating, and acting as a primary contact point for resident issues. In conversation with those people, I would explain that I was a researcher as well as a volunteer, and describe my research topic. Gradually, most visitors became familiar with my ongoing research.

While working as a volunteer with Paiwand at Hotels A and B for five months, I frequently spoke with individuals about their experiences living in these hotels, and about their hopes and expectations for the future. This gave me insight into their perspectives on settling and living in the UK. These conversations were informal and took place without a set structure, as I followed where my interlocutor led. I also regularly visited Hotel D to meet friends and where we engaged in lengthy discussions. During these conversations, we exchanged stories about our lives in the UK and reminisced about Afghanistan, Iran, and our journeys. Many of us had fled Afghanistan/Iran/Pakistan due to perilous

circumstances filled with danger, trauma, and chaos. These dialogues served not only as a way to ease the pain of displacement but also to discuss our futures in the UK.

During these informal interactions, we inadvertently generated and sometimes even analysed data, essentially reflecting on our own life stories. It's essential to note that all participants were aware from the outset that I was not just a fellow migrant but also a researcher. They understood that our discussions would be used as research data. We always maintained an atmosphere of trust, ensuring all conversations took place with transparency regarding confidentiality and anonymity. While informed consent forms were available, some participants preferred to provide verbal consent without the need for a signature.

Data Collection:

The individual interviews were conducted within the hotel with three major ethnic groups from Afghanistan: Pashtuns (23 individuals), Tajiks (15 individuals), and Hazaras (29 individuals), which included both hotel residents and institutional employees. Of these, 25 were women and 42 were men. The relatively higher number of Hazara participants in the sample reflects the role of trust and researcher–participant relationships in access to interviews. As I am Hazara myself, many Hazara residents felt more comfortable speaking with me directly and were more willing to share their experiences. In contrast, some Pashtun participants preferred to communicate through my Pashtun colleague and were more likely to seek support and assistance from him. This highlights how shared ethnic identity and familiarity can influence participation and shape the composition of qualitative interview samples. The Hazaras, in particular, consistently complained about the discriminatory and racist behaviours exhibited by some Pashtuns. In such an environment, when the Hazaras residing in the hotel saw me at the service desk, they felt a sense of closeness and were more inclined to consult with me to resolve their issues rather than the Pashtun or Tajik colleague seated beside me.

Fifty-nine individuals entered Britain through an evacuation programme, while eight entered informally but were then accommodated in the hotels. Although the number of

Hazaras in the hotels was significantly lower than that of other ethnic groups, more conversations were conducted with them, not based on my preference or selection, but influenced by the tense ethnic atmosphere prevailing in the hotel environment and my positionality (see below and chapter 3).

In terms of marital status, forty-seven participants were married, nineteen were single, and one participant was divorced. The predominance of married participants reflects the family-based nature of many evacuation and resettlement experiences.

Participants had diverse educational backgrounds. Nine participants were unable to read or write. Twenty-five participants had completed secondary education or less, while twenty-seven held bachelor's degrees. A smaller number held postgraduate qualifications, including four participants with master's degrees and two with PhDs.

Participants also came from a broad range of occupational backgrounds in Afghanistan. The largest group previously worked with NGOs and humanitarian organisations (13 participants). Other common occupations included housekeeping work (6 participants), construction work (5 participants), and students or scholarship recipients (5 participants). Smaller numbers had worked in the security forces, small businesses, cultural or artistic roles, or in other forms of employment.

The frequency of interviews varied from one to six instances per individual (Nasrin). Over time, I attempted to engage in dialogue with some individuals at least once a month to closely observe any changes in their situations.

Group meetings occurred with the residents of Hotel C, where the majority of the population were Pashtuns, followed by Tajiks, and a few Hazara were present amongst them. Three group sessions were held in hotels in October and November 2022, with 14 participants (4 women and 10 men) in the first session, 16 participants (all men) in the second, and 33 participants (all men) in the third. They took place in hotel lobbies, meeting rooms, and around dining tables in the hotel restaurant. These were not focus groups as they were quite large and did not follow a topic guide, nor did I run them. Instead, I was present as a participant observer, following the discussion and occasionally interjecting.

The process of data collection in my research was influenced by a grounded theory approach. As patterns and themes emerged from my initial analysis, I actively sought additional data to further explore and elaborate on these findings. This dynamic approach meant that the focus of the research could shift based on the data being gathered, with initial research questions evolving in response to new information. In the initial phase of data collection, which extended until August 2022, the focus of most conversations was on the evacuation and experiences of those evacuated. These unstructured interviews did not pursue specific questions but aimed to understand the daily situation and living environment in the hotels where Afghans had temporarily resided. The interviews took an open form, which, while stressful and challenging for me as a researcher, created an open space for participants to express themselves. I was stressed because I was looking for my research topic to emerge from the conversations and was worried about the timing and outcomes. In contrast, for the research participants, the process was more relaxed as there was no structured questionnaire or predefined topics.

Around the time I felt a kind of saturation in the conversations about evacuation and life in bridging hotels, and as my voluntary work at the hotel ended, I ceased data collection and began typing and initially coding the data to uncover the existing themes within them. After identifying the main themes, I shifted my focus in the second phase of interviews to emphasize expectations and their formation while continuing to code my data. This stage, which coincided with data analysis, involved conducting follow up interviews with 20 individuals from diverse groups whom I had met during the first phase of data collection in the bridging hotel.

Positionality:

Although I discussed my positionality in chapter 3 in relation to PAR, my position changed during the second case study as I became a forced migrant myself and part of a research group rather than a researcher. Initially, I was an educated researcher studying Afghan IDPs while not being an IDP myself. I considered myself a middle-class Hazara living in

a comfortable area of Kabul. However, during the second case study in London, as I described above, my position shifted as I became an evacuee and experienced forced migration like the other participants. This change in positionality significantly influenced my interactions and the data collection process, offering a deeper, more empathetic understanding of the participants' experiences. At the same time I was also present in the hotels as a volunteer not a resident, and my immigration status was different - I had a student visa, which ironically seemed less secure than that of the evacuees. Acknowledging this is crucial to provide context for the research findings and to highlight the evolving nature of my role in the study.

My position as a Hazara man, an educated individual, and a forced migrant, significantly impacted with whom I could comfortably converse and what was shared with me along these boundary lines. These positions must be understood within the specific context of Afghanistan. Being a man, a Hazara, and a migrant each carried distinct meanings and implications in relation to various ethnic, linguistic, and gender groups. In other words, to comprehend my situation, one must grasp the background of the intricate ethnic and linguistic relationships in Afghanistan, much like understanding the context for a white foreigner entering Afghanistan, acknowledging their presence in the socio-economic and political context of their time. In the next section, I discuss the impact of my positionality in London.

On one of our April days, I arrived at the hotel at 10 in the morning. It was a Sunday, and the hotel was relatively quiet. I walked around the hotel lobby, hoping to potentially encounter someone and have a conversation. At this moment, I met two non-Hazara youths. After exchanging greetings in Farsi/Dari and enquiring about each other's well being, I introduced myself and awaited their introductions. One of them, without responding to me, asked in Farsi/Dari mockingly, "Which country are you from?" (This while my Hazara accent and appearance clearly indicated to him that I was from Afghanistan). At that moment, I felt a sentiment conveyed to me, implying that "you (a Hazara) are a stranger, and you are not from Afghanistan." His response invoked in my mind the infamous sentence by the Taliban's ethnic leader, which suggested that "Tajiks should return to Tajikistan, Uzbeks to Uzbekistan, and Hazaras to the graveyard." I

responded calmly, stating that I am from Afghanistan, and I am researching the lived experiences of Afghan forced migrants in the hotel. With a smirk, he stated: "Everything here is good, and there are no problems," and then he left. Unbidden, Bahador's words came to mind. Bahador, my Pashtun colleague at hotel A who came to England at the age of 14 and is now approximately 30, and cannot speak Farsi, had said: "I know they will not let you interview them because they are prejudiced against Hazaras."

I had been upset by this reaction, and I found myself pondering why I should experience such treatment from someone I was meeting for the first time. What had prompted their behaviour? Throughout the day, while working, I harboured two conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I wanted to assist my compatriots who needed help and guidance, and on the other, I was irritated by the prevailing atmosphere in the hotel, which was antagonistic towards Hazaras and indeed, was impacting my research progress. My identity caused some hotel residents to refrain from conversing with me. On the other hand, there were Pashtuns who, transcending ethnic and linguistic barriers, were sincerely willing to engage in conversation, shared their experiences with me, and expressed their dismay at the prevailing prejudice and discrimination.

Considering the sensitivity of the ethnic topic in Afghanistan, it can be asserted that ethnicity plays a pivotal role in shaping both insider and outsider perceptions of the researcher. Political events in Afghanistan had a pronounced influence on the interactions between various ethnic groups in the hotel and intensified ethnic interactions. The Taliban, primarily consisting of the Pashtun ethnic group (although some members from other ethnic groups like Tajiks and Uzbeks, and a handful of Hazara, are present in the lower echelons), intensified their attacks on Hazara and Tajik-inhabited regions, causing disputes among the hotel residents in London, which also affected my relations with them. All the Afghans in the hotel were members of a WhatsApp group, serving as an information dissemination medium. When the Taliban attacked Panjshir and Balkhab—Tajik and Hazara residential areas—tensions escalated within this group.

Language was another factor that sometimes overlapped with ethnicity and played a role in whether the researcher was perceived as an insider or outsider. There was a division based on language. Pashtuns, whose language was Pashto, were mostly able to speak

Farsi/Dari as well. While other ethnic groups (Hazara and Tajik) in the bridging hotels spoke Farsi/Dari, the Tajiks somewhat understood and could speak Pashto, whereas the Hazaras generally did not know Pashto. I was only able to speak Farsi. Therefore, for many Pashto speakers, even if they spoke Farsi as a second language, I was considered an outsider as a researcher. However, this was not always the case. For instance, Bahador, my colleague in Paiwand, a young Pashto speaker, was not able to speak Farsi, and I did not know Pashto, so we communicated in English. Yet, his relationship with me and the research was very warm and empathetic.

On the other hand, among those who spoke Farsi as their first language, I was considered an insider, even though there were ethnic differences. Tajiks felt closer to me as a Farsi/Dari speaker compared to those who spoke Pashto. For example, I worked as a volunteer to help newly arrived Afghans, and mainly Hazaras and Tajiks asked me to assist them with translation for the Home Office, job centres, and GP appointments. Hazaras and Tajiks would tell me, "They (the Pashto-speaking colleagues in the NGO) do not translate correctly and are not honest with us." Of course, the staff often complained about such accusations from the residents.

In addition to other factors, gender plays a pivotal role in delineating insiders and outsiders during research processes (Ryan et al., 2011). Throughout my research, as a male, I found it easier to access and talk with men rather than women. Direct interaction with Pashtun and some Tajik women was often challenging or occasionally impossible, especially those who veiled their faces. A group of women who were less conservative in terms of hijab were easier to communicate with directly. However, this was not always the case. I did manage to have long conversations with some Pashtun women who were illiterate and wore hijab but were very open to discussing their lives in Afghanistan and at the bridging hotel. I encountered no significant barriers in communicating with Hazara women regardless of their hijab. It appears that ethnicity played a more important role than gender in this context.

The determination of whether a researcher is perceived as an insider or outsider substantially depends on social, political context and history of society. Sometimes, ethnic boundaries gain prominence; at other times, gender boundaries overshadow all other

factors, and occasionally, language, age, class, shared experiences, and profession intersect and jointly define the researcher's insider or outsider status (Carling, Erdal, & Ezzati, 2014). I shared many experiences with the people in the hotels, having lived in Afghanistan and migrated, and having lived through the evacuation process in August 2021. However, although my situation as a recent arrival in London shared similarities with those who had arrived through the evacuation process and other means, it diverged fundamentally in other respects. My legal status, and consequently, the type and amount of support I received, were entirely different, which may have resulted in disparate resettlement experiences, altering our respective insider and outsider boundaries.

My identity as a forced migrant facilitated the research process (access and trust) with those groups that considered me an insider researcher. My status and situation, during conversations with Afghans inside or outside of hotels, made the dialogue candid and simple. From the outset, I was frequently asked: "What is your current residency status?", a question that shifted power relations. After explaining that my current residency is based on a student visa, everyone, without exception, began advising me to explore stable settlement routes because, in their view, my legal status as a student was unstable, my right to work was limited, and I lacked any kind of UK government support. In these aspects, many Afghans (evacuees) were in a better position than I, having secured permanent residency in the UK, having access to governmental support, employment opportunities, and educational opportunities (such as the Warm Welcome Scholarship). A notable number of Afghans also held British passports, enhancing their situation significantly.

Occasionally, my status was demoted from an Afghan researcher to a failed Afghan forced migrant because I lacked the capacity/ability to use this "window of opportunity" to be included in the UK's Afghan resettlement programme. Some conversations centred on finding a solution for stabilising my future status in the UK and confronting associated challenges. My legal status as a "failed forced migrant" influenced the nature of our conversation. There was no hierarchy (researcher-research subject) but, instead, honest dialogue between forced migrants. I was not regarded as a researcher, or at least, my position in this research project was not considered privileged or alien.

Throughout this process, as a migrant myself my mind was frequently preoccupied with thoughts about what my residential status in the UK would become. Living in Afghanistan had become impossible for me and my family, particularly as the father of a daughter of Sara's age (18). Upon arrival, I contacted friends who had lived in the UK. All advised that I should apply for asylum. However, for various reasons, I resisted applying for asylum, the most prominent of which was a commitment to the organisation that supported academics at risk, and who insisted that we should not claim asylum but maintain our student status. The deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan and the Taliban's brutal encounters with religious and ethnic minority groups and women caused my doubts and indecisions to flare and perpetually occupied a part of my mind. This issue became more inflamed when I talked to Afghans residing in the hotel because they also constantly encouraged me to submit my asylum application. These hesitations stayed with me until the final moments of writing the dissertation, and I wrestled with blaming myself for prioritising my studies over my family's needs.

And yet, my situation was notably different and, in some respects, privileged compared to other Afghans who had not been evacuated, but who had travelled independently too the UK and had claimed asylum. They did not possess the right to work, nor did they have the autonomy to choose their place of residence.

Reflexivity

While writing this thesis, the most important point that constantly occupied my mind was understanding my position as a forced migrant from Afghanistan. I was always aware and confronted with the question of whether what I produce as a dissertation would differ from what a foreign researcher would produce about Afghanistan or Afghans. What other elements in this dissertation could play a role in changing the flavour of the research? Simultaneously with conducting field research, I was studying the literature produced in this field, intentionally focusing on sources produced by southern researchers like Chamani, Khosravi, Fals-Borda, and Rahman, which were few. Indeed, being a researcher from the Global South or North was not the issue per se, but rather the kind

of perspective one might have on the issue that could make a difference, especially as there were times when I might have been exploring some concepts without realizing I was becoming part of the dominant narrative of the research. I have tried to keep in mind that I am a researcher from Global South when reviewing literature and writing this thesis.

The insistence on using the PAR methodology raised the question in my mind of how this knowledge could directly improve the lives of Afghan migrants while also meeting the expectations of academic research that could be evaluated in academic institutions. This was the blind spot I had as a researcher. Although the PAR efforts did not progress smoothly, if I had moved towards PAR, without a doubt, balancing and addressing these two issues would have impacted the work.

Ethical issues of Research:

The structure of ethical review requests in universities conflicts with the objectives of methodologies like PAR and grounded theory approaches. This is because, in contrast to university ethics committees, fieldwork precedes any research design (Bilotta, 2018). In essence, the 'field' should be a collaborator in research design. However, within ethics committees, research design (i.e., the subject, research questions, methodology) takes precedence over any engagement with the research field (Bilotta, 2018). The assumption of this methodology was collaboration with research colleagues in the field, yet entering the research field was contingent upon a clear research proposal in the ethical research application.

However, to answer the questions on the ethics application form (research question, methodology, data collection, analysis), I had to have preliminary discussions with research participants to understand what they were thinking. Another option was to fill out the ethics form without considering them, but I chose a middle path. I answered some of the ethics research form questions based on my initial visits and conversation to the Afghan forced migrants at bridging hotels. Many ideas emerged after observing the research field and conversing with Afghans residing in the hotels. Even though I had

visited the research field before completing the ethical research form, this might have been considered a deviation from the ethical guidelines set by universities (going to the field without ethical approval).

The Research Ethics Committee at City University granted research permission. The most significant concerns based on the application were informed consent, data anonymity, and confidentiality. I had translated information forms for research participants and informed consent documents into Farsi/Dari. For some participants, I sent the forms online via email or WhatsApp. Afghans evacuees were provided with complete information about the research and were asked to sign the consent forms if they agree. In cases where a participant was illiterate or had limited literacy, I would spend more time explaining the subject verbally without any consent forms signed. The individuals who were asylum seekers were not typically keen to sign consent forms, although there was a substantial trust established between us. It was evident they did not feel at ease with signing, and while I didn't insist on their signature, I provided them with comprehensive information about the research, their rights, and data confidentiality. As a result of numerous meetings and deepening friendships, some eventually signed the informed consent forms.

On the other hand, it was crucial for me to anonymise the data as much as possible to prevent identification. All the names mentioned in this thesis are not the real names of the participants. I initially recorded the data on my phone, uploading it to my computer after the conversation ended. Both my computer and my phone were encrypted. Beyond these ethical concerns from a university perspective, I was more preoccupied with how I could compensate them for the time they spent conversing with me. Of course, in the central London hotels, this was not a concern as I tried two days a week to make my presence there compensate them in ways such as making GP's appointments, accompanying, and translating during meetings with the Home Office, translating emails, opening bank account etc. This was, in a way, compensatory.

Analysis:

After the failure to apply the PAR methodology, data analysis methods also changed to align with the new research methods (ethnography and participant observation). Grounded theory seemed a better approach for data collection and analysis because, initially, no specific theory intervened in the research process. Instead, it is the field data itself that guides the theoretical framework. In this regard, it bears significant similarity to the PAR method, as it attempts to give research participants a more substantial role in shaping the research. Therefore, grounded theory is a method that is more focused on developing concepts and theories rather than testing existing ones (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For me, this was the most suitable approach because it allowed me to initially avoid the constraints of literature and theories formed in the Global North and, on the other hand, provided greater openness to the perspectives of Afghan forced migrants. Unlike many traditional methods, Grounded Theory doesn't prescribe a predetermined theoretical lens (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather, it allows the field data to shape the theoretical trajectory, echoing the spirit of PAR, which emphasizes participant-driven research. In essence, Grounded Theory isn't merely a tool for testing pre-existing theories; it's an avenue for crafting new concepts and frameworks (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As in Grounded Theory, the PAR methodology does not conduct a literature review beforehand, as it remains uncertain which themes will emerge from the data (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991).

Of course, this ambiguity also affected data collection, as I, as a researcher, did not have a specific question in mind, which did not align with the dominant academic framework. Therefore, there was no questionnaire, especially in the initial conversations, where only a vague and general idea was present. This strategy allowed for more comprehensive listening and observing from the research field. Consequently, I had to collect everything happening around me as data. All conversations and observations were important. My data included daily notes from my observations in the hotels, recorded conversations and interviews, notes from my conversations with friends staying in the hotel and my family, photos, friendly chats on WhatsApp, experiences from daily life in London, and experiences of administrative tasks. Naturally, such a strategy imposed more stress and pressure on the researcher.

After collecting the data in the first stage, I began typing it up. I devised a system to change the names of the research participants and the names of the hotels to ensure anonymity. Following that, I started open coding using the MAXQDA software. This coding revealed that the main discussions revolved around evacuation, life in the hotel, education, work, and discrimination. Initially, the conversations seemed more positive, but over time, negativity overshadowed them. Many were dissatisfied with their situation, complaining about the lack of information. In fact, a sense of dissatisfaction and hopelessness had developed as their expectations were not met.

In the process of coding the data, comparing and questioning the data played an important role. Comparing data to identify similarities and differences and asking questions helped me gain a deeper understanding of the data. This process ultimately led to axial coding, where the main themes of the research became apparent. I had been waiting to see what themes would emerge from the conversations with Afghan forced migrants so I could search for the relevant literature accordingly. At this stage, expectations and their formation emerged as a key theme in the research. After combining these sub-themes, the next analytical stage was to understand how these expectations were initially formed and how they evolved over time. This is described in Chapter 8.

Conclusion:

My methodological journey has been long and winding, and for me ultimately unsatisfactory as I am still committed to the ideals of PAR research. However, the combination of ethnographic and autoethnographic methods has allowed me to explore the response of that group of Afghans evacuated in 2021 to the evacuation itself and to answer the question: what were the expectations of the evacuees? Where did they come from and how were they shaped.

I did not start out with that as my research question, but in the interviews, group discussions and participant observations, as well as my reflections on my own experiences it was clear that our experiences were profoundly shaped by the

expectations we had formed before the evacuation. In hindsight, I do not know if this would have been my question had I been able to continue with PAR.

Having committed to using my own experiences and those of my family, I now recognise that was not a wise decision. We had not recovered from the trauma of the evacuation, nor had some of my respondents. Our experiences in London did not create the necessary peace and stability required for healing and recovery. I now have doubts about the ethics of collecting data and pursuing a PhD in these circumstances, and yet researchers around the world have conducted and are currently conducting research with vulnerable populations, even more separated from those populations than I was from the people in IDP camps and bridging hotels. The next two chapters describe our experiences and expectations.

Chapter 6: The Evacuation

Introduction

The evacuation itself was not originally a major focus of this research project, but in the days and weeks that followed our arrival in London, and in conversations with others who shared that experience, it kept intruding. No discussion could proceed without first sharing our experiences of those last days in Kabul. With the exception of some family members who had been brought to Kabul from Pakistan for the express purpose of being evacuated, we had all lived through explosions, gunfire, had all lost friends and or family members in the preceding decades. And yet nothing prepared us for the days spent around the airport under the watchful and volatile surveillance of the Taliban and the foreign soldiers, the sound of gunfire, the sight, sound and pain inflicted by the Taliban whips, the humiliation of feeling our humanity dissolving into a mass of terrified, desperate bodies. That experience was completely beyond what any of us could have imagined.

Re-reading the interview transcripts I saw that I could not begin to understand our adaptation to our new lives in London without examining the evacuation itself. What became clear was that assumptions we had about these *khariji* who were organising the evacuation were wrong: the evacuation was chaotic, and that chaos amplified our shock; there was no rational, logical selection - who was evacuated was often a question of luck.

This chapter details a set of findings that revolve around the concept of expectations, around the interplay between hope and desperation; and the sense of shock as some who were at serious risk were left behind.

Evacuation to *Kharij* (abroad):

It was 2 AM when we headed towards the ABBEYGATE, a back entrance to the Kabul airport, hoping to easily pass the Taliban checkpoint. It was summer and during the day it was very hot, but at 2 AM Kabul weather was really good. Three armed Taliban were stationed along the way; they appeared tired and did not seem overly intent on stopping the large crowd eager to get through. Perhaps even if they had wanted to, they couldn't have easily contained the flood of people. My family, friends, and I managed to slip past by the wall and enter a street that led to ABBEYGATE. We found ourselves on a street about 1000 meters long, flanked on one side by Taliban forces and on the other by NATO (British) forces. To our left was the tall airport perimeter wall, and to our right, the high wall of Camp Baron, where foreigners resided, and which was heavily guarded. The crowd was so dense that movement was nearly impossible. We had to make our way towards the British and Polish forces. The situation was dire, filled with humiliation; to progress, one had to push or step over others, enduring insults and curses. There was no dignity. Midway, an exhausted and angry elderly woman with her family was turning back in the opposite direction, yelling, "Where are you going? There's no way through, turn back, damn these "kharijiha" (foreigners) and their evacuation." Her words struck me like a bolt of lightning, and for a moment, I considered turning back. But even retreating through the dense, frustrated crowd proved challenging. Finally, around 7:30 AM, we approached the vicinity of the British soldiers.

I had to move forward to speak with the British soldiers so they could notify the Polish troops of our presence. I suggested to the crowd that they let me through to talk to the British soldiers, offering in return to translate for them. They agreed, and I was allowed to approach and speak with the nearest young British soldier who looked worried, tired and sweaty in the Afghan heat. The first person who asked for my translation help was a middle-aged man who reported that three family members had died in the crowd the night before; their bodies had been moved into

Camp Baron. All three were women, and he asked me to tell the soldier that he had come to retrieve their bodies. For a moment, I reflected on the folly of my actions and felt fear. What would I have done if it had happened to me? How could I live with that for the rest of my life? The British soldier acknowledged that the bodies were there but wondered how he could possibly retrieve them from the midst of the crowd. The man fell silent. There was nothing more to say. He was despondent. With no way to enter the airport and no way back home, he was stuck in the middle of a dense crowd, pressing to get closer to the British soldiers.

Ignoring the grief-stricken man, another person was showing a certificate of participation in a human rights workshop, adorned with various organizational logos. He asked me to request the soldier to let him in. The soldier responded that only those with a British passport or a specific email were allowed entry. However, the crowd remained, unwilling to turn back despite the negative response, including a woman sitting with her three children under the shade of an ambulance (it was used as a barrier), which offered shelter from the summer heat. I wondered how she had managed to get herself and her children to this point though this crowd, and without any documents or knowledge of English, yet she sat resolutely, determined, hoping to gain entry into the airport and go to Kharij. Afghans who had British passports or the requisite emails reproached the others who lacked any documents, cursing and berating them for causing such a crush, believing themselves more deserving of being evacuated.

From the perspective of the Taliban, those leaving Afghanistan were branded as traitors, having assisted the occupiers over the past 20 years to establish control over Afghanistan. Indeed, they were genuinely at risk, as it was uncertain how the Taliban would treat them. However, most of the people gathered at the airport were not those who had worked with foreigners or in the government. Most of the individuals I had seen and spoken with, or tried to interpret for, during the 34 hours around and inside the airfield were ordinary people, and everyone, including British soldiers, Afghan-British passport holders, and those with evacuation emails, thought they were undeserving of evacuation

but just trying their luck. These individuals were taking the opportunity to flee a situation created over years of war by foreigners, the Afghan government, and the Taliban.

Many Afghan people saw the evacuation as a golden opportunity to leave Afghanistan. Departing the country had become a widespread phenomenon; a pervasive and intense desire to leave had formed among all social strata. Those who managed to evacuate were considered 'lucky' and 'successful', while those who couldn't were seen as 'unlucky' and 'unsuccessful', or even 'cowardly'. I was in touch with a group of friends who kept going around the airport with their family from morning to evening after 15 August 2021, trying their luck despite not having passports or receiving evacuation calls or emails. If they managed to get through to Kabul airport, they would be considered 'lucky'.

One of these young 'lucky' people was Mirvais, whom I met one spring day in 2023 at a pizza shop in London in a neighbourhood where I have lived. Mirvais, a good-natured 22-year-old, had finished high school and had run a small business with his father in Kabul. Mirvais had lost hope for an improvement in the situation in Afghanistan and had longed to move "Kharij" for the past couple of years. He had not worked with foreigners, nor had he been employed by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, nor did he have any ties to the Taliban. He was just an ordinary young Afghan man who had been able to use the opportunity presented by the evacuation to come to London by wandering around the Kabul airport for five days and nights after 15 of August 2021. Some of his friends were not as fortunate. Now, 'lucky' Mirvais who had reached 'Kharij' sometimes works up to 80 hours a week in a London pizza shop, trying to save some money to send back to his family in Afghanistan and to build a life for himself in London.

In this section, I explore the narratives surrounding the evacuation process, underscoring the complex interplay between hope and desperation that characterized the departure from Afghanistan. The evacuation process was fraught with risks and challenges: navigating through checkpoints manned by the Taliban, dealing with the dense crowds at the airport, and the bureaucratic complexities of securing a spot on an evacuation flight added layers of danger and uncertainty. I investigate these stories, highlighting how the evacuees navigated these hurdles, often in conditions of extreme distress and chaos and indignity.

Evacuation and Expectations:

In what follows, I outline the details of the evacuation story from Afghanistan based on my own experience and then that of my fellow travellers. I want to show the challenges we faced, how we kept going, and what we hoped for when we arrived. I'll talk about our journey from Afghanistan to the UK and how we felt during the move. These experiences are key for understanding how we experienced our arrival in the UK and what we expected to happen next.

However, writing and recalling the evacuation has been painful for me, constantly refreshing the guilt carried since our departure. The pain does not stem from losing a "home" but rather from confronting a version of myself that was new, different to my self perception up to that moment. In a move that feels selfish, I had concentrated on getting myself, my wife and my children out of Afghanistan, leaving behind many friends and extended family members. Every day, from afar, I have followed the Taliban's threats, the deprivation of education, and the sense of fear and insecurity that pervades the lives of my loved ones in Afghanistan, unable to do anything about it. Life in Britain has been coloured with a sense of guilt and self-reproach for me.

Part of this guilt and self-reproach stemmed from comparing my inability to assist my close ones and friends during the evacuation process with others I met during my fieldwork who had been quick-witted enough to bring out many more family members. My failure was due to the expectation and perception I had formed in my mind about how the evacuation process would work. The image of evacuation in my mind was relatively orderly and stringent, where individuals would leave Afghanistan in a carefully well organised manner. I didn't initially understand why I had come to expect such orderliness and well-managed evacuation in a crisis situation. However, upon reflection, I think my earlier experiences of the complex and lengthy process of obtaining Schengen and UK visas and the rigor that came with it had shaped such an image in my mind. The entire visa process had conveyed to me that only those who could prove they had significant financial, academic, or strong institutional support through a lengthy administrative

process were eligible to enter Europe. I had not conceived of the possibility that simply turning up at the airport would be enough. I reproach myself constantly for not daring, for not taking a chance that could have paid off, that could have meant a lucky escape for my siblings and their families.

Chaos and shock

Contrary to my initial expectations, the evacuation process was disorganized, marked by crisis, violence, and humiliation. While many people lost their lives, others had succeeded in escaping and there seemed little logic to which group one found oneself in. Those who early on understood the nature of this chaos and had good connections were successful in securing a place on the evacuation list, but so too were those who just managed to take advantage of the chaos. The evacuation from Afghanistan had become a desperate competition for survival. For many Afghans, the issue was one of immediate danger, the fear of Taliban reprisals was a compelling motivation for evacuation, as no one knew what awaited them under Taliban rule. But for others, the evacuation presented an irresistible, if unexpected, opportunity to leave Afghanistan.

Nasrin and other people began to send numerous emails to different embassies. A list of contact emails, prepared by some activists, was being sent everywhere. Anyone who got access to this list would send a short message to all the email addresses, asking for help. It was still a matter of luck if anyone received a response indicating they were on the evacuation list.

Some Afghans knew that once the evacuation process started, verifying many documents in a short period was impossible, and the opportunity for evacuation was limited. People from all kinds of backgrounds, whether they had ties to the UK forces or were simply in danger, saw this as their chance to flee Afghanistan. It was with this perception that many gathered around Kabul airport to try their luck because all Afghans had realized that "the time is now." Among them, only a few managed to come to the UK as part of the evacuation plan. At the airport, the atmosphere was a mix of hope and despair as crowds gathered, each hoping to secure a place on a flight out. Despite the strong wish to leave,

the reality hit hard; only a few from the many hopefuls could board the evacuation flights to the UK (or anywhere else).

The evacuation seemed to consist of a series of shocks for all Afghans. It all started with the "shock of the Taliban's rapid takeover of Kabul" following the peace agreements between the U.S. and the Taliban. For some of us, this event led to a "sudden uprooting" from our everyday lives in Afghanistan followed by a "sudden relocation" to a hotel in central London—a series of events unimaginable a week or even a day earlier, yet which had become our new reality. This abrupt uprooting and relocation evoked a range of emotions, beginning with confusion, fear and worry, then fleeting happiness of arriving kharij (abroad), followed by a sense of guilt. For many evacuees, alongside the brief moments of relief and joy, there was a profound sense of guilt for the family and friends they had left behind. For some, there was resentment towards those who did not 'deserve' to be evacuated.

Lucky and unlucky; deserving and undeserving

While the evacuation was a unifying experience, it was also divisive. There was a clear division between those brought directly to the UK, and those who had made their own way. The way different people arrived in the UK is significant because it reflects the diverse experiences Afghans have had with the reception they received from various organisations in the UK, which also seems to have shaped the expectations of Afghan forced migrants. In many conversations, whether in bridging hotels or outside, I see that we (evacuees) were treated differently compared to other Afghan forced migrants who arrived in the UK via the English Channel or on a study visa.

Kazim, who arrived (August 2021) with his family in the UK across the Channel, remarked that the services and financial support received by Afghan evacuees were significantly different from those provided to him. "Afghan evacuees have been granted indefinite leave to remain, while I am still an asylum seeker; I receive £8 per week, whereas Afghan evacuees receive £80 per week. Additionally, their accommodation is in 4 to 5-star hotels, whereas our accommodation is in a much worse condition".

While working in the evacuees' hotels, many of the Afghan NGO workers who had arrived in the UK before the evacuation highlighted the differences between their experiences of reception and Afghan evacuees. They detailed how challenging their journey to the UK had been, highlighting the length of time it took, the risks involved in the journey, and the expense of the journey itself. Upon their arrival in the UK (two decades previously), they had not received accommodation in "five-star hotels", nor did they have immediate support from local councils and charities offering information and services. Additionally, they (Afghan-British charity workers) had faced the challenges of navigating the asylum system and accessing resources, which they described as a bitter experience.

On the other hand, those who were evacuated often shared a common view that "We didn't come here on our own; the British forces brought us, so they are responsible for us". But even among this group, divisions appeared - there were constant discussions about who deserved to be in the UK. In the bridging hotels in London, a common jibe among Afghans evacuees was "You came to the UK with an electricity bill," an ironic comment that became popular on social media. This joke playfully mocked the criteria used for relocation to the West in August 2021, suggesting some may have left Afghanistan with minimal proof of being at risk. This humour, although light-hearted, underscored a kind of competition for legitimacy. For instance, Mirvais and Ahmad, two young entrepreneurs from Kabul aged 22 and 24 respectively, despite lacking any ties to UK institutions or facing immediate threats to their lives, had been able to get to the UK solely thanks to the evacuation, while others had been driven by a fear of arrest, detention or death. As Hakim (Hotel B, security forces) put it "Those whose lives were in danger are still waiting and unable to leave Afghanistan, yet here, some have arrived whose lives were not at risk."

The evacuation from Afghanistan was perceived as an opportunity by some Afghans, and those who could make the most of this chance were considered fortunate. Many Afghan-British colleagues working with Paiwand believed that the evacuated Afghans were lucky. As Saffie, one such colleague, said "The Taliban are a disaster for many, but for some, they were a blessing in disguise, especially for those who wanted to leave Afghanistan but couldn't, for those who had been waiting for years for a response from the immigration

office, but their cases were not accepted." Nazira, a Pakistani student working as a guard at one of the bridging hotels in central London, said resentfully "These Afghans are different; they were brought here, they are very fortunate, and they receive a lot of attention".

The presence of the Taliban was referred to by the proverb, "A calamity that brings good fortune" (a cloud with a silver lining). Afghans knew that during the evacuation process, it would be impossible to check many documents in a short time, and the emerging opportunity was limited. Therefore, they tried to make the most of the evacuation process. With this mindset, many gathered around Kabul airport to try their luck.

Next, I'll dive deeper into the evacuation, highlighting not just the experiences but also the expectations that came with it. I'll look at life before the crisis hit its peak, a time of normalcy and routine, the challenging evacuation period filled with uncertainty and fear. This part will also explore how the evacuees' expectations of safety, stability, and a new life contrasted with the difficulties they faced in the UK, all while dealing with the memories and traumas of their escape. Through these personal accounts, I provide a full picture of the evacuation's impact on individual lives and the collective mindset of the Afghan community, emphasizing the blend of hope and the harsh reality of their expectations.

Before the Evacuation:

"We didn't expect the Taliban to reach Kabul this quickly; we were all taken by surprise."

It was late July 2021 when Bashir (one of my relatives) came from Herat to stay at our house in Kabul. He was a soldier who had fought against the Taliban for years. After being injured for the last time in 2018, he resigned from the army. When the fighting reached the outskirts of Herat in July 2021, fearing Taliban reprisals, Bashir, along with his wife and four children, came to Kabul and stayed at our house. They planned to obtain passports and then go to Iran for a while. That summer, Kabul's population of internally displaced people had exploded. Many people from cities falling to the Taliban had come

to Kabul seeking refuge, and thousands slept in mosques and parks at night. No one expected the Taliban to reach Kabul so quickly.

Through the second week of August, we followed the incredible advance of the Taliban through the country. As they neared Kabul, on Thursday the 12th, my children joined thousands of others on the roofs of West Kabul to shout 'Allah Akbar' in defiance of the Taliban, still not quite believing the government would fall and the Taliban would take over. On August 15th, rumours were spreading on social media that the Taliban had entered the city from Dasht-e Barchi in west Kabul. In our area (Omid-e Sabz township in west Kabul), the streets were nearly empty. From the window of our room overlooking the main street, we watched as military tanks and police cars sped towards the city centre in retreat. We were all caught off guard. The entire city of Kabul had surrendered without any resistance, like other cities, and fear and anxiety had taken over.

My daughter, Sara, who was 16, had created a Telegram group with her classmates to share news. According to her, she hadn't been a member of any news channels before, but during those days, she joined several news channels on Telegram and other social media platforms. These girls were terrified of the Taliban's arrival, well aware that their lives would change drastically with the Taliban's return to power. There were alarming reports from some districts in Bamyán that the Taliban were behaving violently and even forcing young girls into marriage with Taliban fighters. When I saw the worry and fear in Sara's eyes, I told her we would leave Afghanistan no matter what, but deep inside, I was worried because I didn't know how we could possibly manage to get out under such circumstances.

In 2020, I had managed to secure a scholarship for a PhD program in the UK, but due to COVID-19, I had been unable to leave Afghanistan. Initially, I had planned to leave alone and try to set things up before bringing the family to join me. However, with the deterioration of the security situation that winter (especially targeted suicide bombings in Hazara-populated areas), I had decided to apply for a visa and move the family to the UK as soon as possible. My family (Rukhana, Sara, Ehsan, and Latif) and I had been forced to go to Islamabad to apply for the visa as the British Embassy, in common with most European embassies, had closed their consulates. We finally obtained our UK visas at

the end of July 2021. The process had taken a total of five months of stress, anxiety, and effort to gather various documents required for the visa application: proof of financial capability, marriage certificates, birth certificates, national IDs, medical tests, COVID restrictions and regulations, the demeaning questions on visa forms, the family trip to Pakistan for the visa interview, and a month's wait in Pakistan for the visa issuance. I had spent nearly \$20,000 on obtaining the visa, which included insurance costs, UK visa fees, medical test fees, travel expenses to Pakistan, costs for a month's stay in Pakistan, and fees for VFS service companies. I had experienced a similar situation when obtaining a Schengen visa in 2018. It was a complex, lengthy, and expensive process for people coming from Afghanistan, demonstrating the strictness of the global north when dealing with someone from the global south, especially Afghan citizens who are at the lower end of the economic hierarchy of the global south countries.

Finally, after getting the visa, we returned to Kabul in early August to prepare for our trip to the UK. I had booked tickets for August 24, 2021. When the Taliban took over Herat (August 12th) and some other cities, I rushed to the ticket office to advance our flight date. With a lot of effort and considerable extra cost, I managed to reserve 5 tickets to London for August 18th, but the Taliban had already arrived on August 15th, just three days before our flight. All flights were cancelled, and we lost all the money we had paid for the tickets.

On August 16th, a day after Kabul fell, I went to Saqi's supermarket near our house to buy some groceries. Saqi had kept his shop open, continuing his business as if nothing had happened. From the window facing the street, it was clear that the comings and goings in Omid-e Sabz township had significantly decreased. A heavy silence and emptiness, borne of fear and doubt, enveloped the city. No one had seen a Talib in the township yet. Entering the supermarket, I noticed someone wearing a mask so that it almost covered his entire face, wearing sunglasses, and a hat in the middle of summer. He looked entirely out of place. When he started talking, I immediately recognized him; he was one of the employees at the office of the Second Vice President of the Republic. Suddenly, uncontrollably, I burst into laughter in the supermarket, and he seemed annoyed. I had often seen him there before, always in a suit and tie, clean-shaven, and without a mask, but today, here he was in traditional Afghan clothes, slightly bearded,

and with his face covered! Jokingly and laughing, I reassured him that he was hard to recognize.

We lived in a building with seven families, all of whom had a common background: we had grown up as migrants in Iran, were educated, and had returned to Afghanistan. Hiding documents that could potentially cause us trouble became a priority, as most of us had worked with foreign institutions. We knew how merciless the Taliban could be, especially since we were all Hazaras. The massacres in Mazar-i-Sharif and Bamyan by the Taliban in the 1990s were still fresh in the memory of the Hazara people, and we were all worried. A large crowd had gathered around the airport, fuelled by rumours that foreigners were taking Afghans abroad. For me, who had experienced the visa application process for two European countries, the belief in such a possibility was nearly zero.

To ease the bitterness of the days (from August 15th until our planned departure on August 18th), we would gather together and discuss different ways to leave Afghanistan. Everyone was aiming for countries in the Global North. The image of Afghans clinging to an American military aircraft at Kabul Airport soon spread across the world. After the plane took off, those who were clinging to the aircraft's body fell to the ground one by one. The step to the Global North seemed impossible. Migrating to Iran (where many of our extended families still lived) was more feasible but felt like a step back to a point we had escaped years ago, and none of us wanted to experience that again. However, for many, like my relative Bashir, Iran, despite all its discrimination and humiliations, would be the only feasible option for migration.

During those days, we were constantly in touch with our friends to stay updated on the latest developments. I called Sakhi, who was the head of a non-governmental organization, to see how things were going. He mentioned he was at Kabul Airport and, through a German partner organization, his name had been put on an evacuation list. This was when we realized that lists were being prepared and sent to various networks. Many organizations active in the refugee sector in the Global North were also following up on the situation. A Facebook group had been formed by my former classmates in Poland, who were regularly trying to stay informed about my situation. One of them shared news in the group that Poland had sent a special aircraft to evacuate Afghans who had

worked with Poles. In this group, one of our classmates, who was a journalist, mentioned he had interviewed a member of parliament a few days earlier and could ask for his help to get my name on the list. Having previously seen the complex and stringent bureaucracy involved in accessing UK and Polish visas, I responded with complete disbelief: "That would be nice." But, to my utter astonishment, the next morning (August 18th), I received a phone call from the Polish Embassy in India, asking me to head to Kabul Airport. The same embassy that kept me waiting a month for a visa in Delhi back in 2018.

During the Evacuation:

My evacuation experience

On August 18th, around 8 AM Afghan time, I received a call from the Polish Embassy in India informing me that my family and I were on the list for a flight to Poland and we needed to reach the airport by 1 PM. I asked if there was an email or phone number I could use at the airport. They said they couldn't provide any phone number. The only thing repeatedly mentioned was to reach Abbey Gate at Kabul Airport as soon as possible. It was the first time I had heard of this gate. The phone call was extremely brief, not even lasting a minute, with no guidance or information about the airport or the flight, and I had no documents in hand (I had our UK visas, but assumed these would not work for Poland). This situation was unexpected and I was unsure what to do.

I had no idea about conditions at the airport. I didn't know who was controlling the airport, and the fear of encountering the Taliban preoccupied me. What would happen if we ran into a Taliban checkpoint and they started asking questions? It was unclear what awaited us outside: the Taliban had announced a curfew at night, and even during the day, there was hardly any movement in Kabul's streets. We spent a few hours in total uncertainty. It was clear to all family members that Afghanistan was no longer safe for us, especially for Rukhana, my wife and Sara, our daughter. We had no choice but to take the risk. Eventually, we decided to head to the airport. The city's pulse was in the hands of taxi drivers. When I called the local taxi service, I asked about the city's situation. The man

on the phone said there was no particular news at the moment. The taxi arrived and we set off across the city to the airport with four large suitcases. The streets were unusually empty. On the way to Kabul Airport, which took about 1.5 hours, there were no Taliban checkpoints. The taxi driver and I occasionally conversed on the way to the airport but the tension was palpable.

As we neared the airport, it became more crowded, and we could hear sporadic gunfire. Most noticeable were groups of young men wandering around the airport, looking for a way in. The Taliban were clearly identifiable with their long beards, dishevelled clothes, weapons, and long whips, especially concentrated at the main entrance of Kabul Airport. They were firing into the air to disperse the crowd, and some Taliban members, whip in hand, were trying to scatter people. A few individuals attempted to climb the airport's high security wall but retreated under the Taliban's gunfire.

My young sons, 10 year old Ehsan and 3 year old Latif were scared: it was the first time they had heard continuous gunfire so close. We made our way to *Havashenaci* Alley, where I guessed Camp Baron was located. Camp Baron was a residence and workplace for some international institutions and since I knew it had access to Kabul Airport, it was the only place I could think of where Abbey Gate might be located. The street was crowded, and the taxi struggled to move forward. When it was no longer possible to proceed due to the crowd on the street leading to Camp Baron, I asked the taxi driver to wait while I checked the situation. I got out and walked ahead and asked my family to stay in the car while I checked to see if there was any way to the airport.

During the chaos and disorder, I passed by several armed Taliban amidst the crowd at the start of the street. I moved towards a dense group of people who were struggling to reach the British forces. The British soldiers had blocked the street with an ambulance and barbed wire, leaving only a very narrow passage on the left which was difficult to enter due to the crowds. I could see the British soldiers from a distance, sometimes shouting angrily to the crowd to 'move back,' occasionally firing shots, and throwing water to disperse the crowd and prevent entry. It was high summer and nearing noon and the weather had become extremely hot.

I had not expected such disorder; it was chaos in every sense. The situation was distressing, resembling doomsday, with Abbey Gate appearing like the gateway to a 'promised heaven'. An Afghan man was waving his British passport in the air to get the British soldier to open the way for him. It seemed the British passport was the only quick way to salvation. I didn't know how the system worked. Who, other than British passport holders, could enter the airport? Who should someone like me turn to? Someone who had come based only on a phone call, without a visa or email and completely devoid of any information! Seeing the situation at the airport, with the intense heat, recognising that it would be impossible to navigate through the dense crowd with children and large suitcases, and as there was no sign of the Polish team or soldiers, we decided to return home. Disappointed, and believing travel to Poland from the airport impossible, I began to think of other ways out of the country, like going to Pakistan.

Around 1 PM that day, Anis called and said he had found a group going to Poland and that if we could join them, we would have a better chance of getting into the airport. We decided to try again, realizing that I needed to seize every opportunity to leave Afghanistan, as it was unclear what awaited us under Taliban rule. One of my friends, who had been captured by the Taliban for eight months in 2020, had described how evident the hatred for Hazaras was in their speech.

Considering our first experience, this time each family member took a small backpack containing a set of clothes, a water bottle, academic documents, and passports. We headed back to the airport. At the start of the street leading to Abbey Gate, a new Taliban checkpoint had been added, trying to prevent people from moving towards the gate. The distance between Abbey Gate and the Taliban checkpoint, about 500 meters, was crowded. I tried to pass the Taliban checkpoint, but a blow from a whip by one of the Taliban made me retreat. We all turned back together.

We found the group that was heading to Poland. We were a relatively large group, probably about 20, which later increased to 30 people. The street was crowded with people trying to get past the checkpoint to Abbey Gate. The heat and excessive crowd in the surrounding streets caused exhaustion and frustration. We were anxious and uncertain what to do as the heat and the crowds were practically impossible for the

children and women to bear. The sound of gunfire terrified the children. Someone in our group had successfully negotiated with a nearby parking attendant for our temporary accommodation. We all moved towards the parking lot and sat on the ground. The parking lot was an open area of approximately 1000 square meters, with several cars parked and a small office in the corner where the parking attendant was sitting.

The intermittent gunfire continued, and eventually tear gas was used. It drifted towards the parking lot, forcing us to cover our faces with wet scarves. After further discussions with group members, I learned that a Polish female journalist was among us, a good sign indicating that contact might have been established with the Polish soldiers inside the airport. The afternoon passed and it turned to night, our numbers in the parking lot growing. At 10 PM, a new group of about 15 to 20 people arrived with blankets and some food. They were all friends of the man accompanying the Polish journalist. Already I could see that it was enough to know someone involved in the evacuation to get on the list.

Among our companions was a young journalist couple, Jamal (Hazara, educated, married) and Taherah (Hazara, educated, married), with their one-year-old child, whose face and head had suffered sunburn. It was their second night near the airport, and they had not yet managed to enter. There was nowhere to rest, use the toilet, or eat. Men were urinating easily and shamelessly around the parking lot and streets, but it was a significant problem for women. In an emergency, everything changes. After much searching, we found a toilet in the corner of the parking lot near the guard's cabin. It was in very poor condition and without a light, but the women in the group could use it. The children were hungry, and at 10 PM, I went out through the crowded streets to buy some bread and water.

Exhausted, my wife and youngest child decided to sleep there on the ground. We found some cardboard and laid down. Contrary to the daytime heat, Kabul's mountainous nights were freezing, and the children were shivering in the cold, open air of the parking lot. The situation was so mentally and physically exhausting that I considered returning home several times, but I worried that so late at night, we might be stopped at a Taliban checkpoint for breaking the curfew they had announced.

Sitting in the parking lot, I gradually got acquainted with my fellow travellers. One of a small group of men, we discussed various ways to make our way through the crowd and get past the Taliban checkpoint and, more importantly, to the British and Polish soldiers. We reviewed all the available routes to the Abbey Gate but couldn't find a viable way. The last message from the Polish soldiers inside the airport was 'It's your responsibility to reach Abbey Gate; we'll be there at 8 AM tomorrow. Write a P on your hands.'

At 2 AM, thinking the crowd might have lessened, we set off, but from the beginning of the street to the Abbey Gate entrance, no more than 500 meters, the crowd was so dense that movement was impossible. It was decided that Rukhshana and Tahera should take the lead; they were our best chance of getting through. We relied on Afghan respect for women, which meant that people would reluctantly make way for them, despite some muttering or insults. Following them were my eldest Sara and Ehsan, with me carrying three-year-old Latif on my shoulders, and a group of younger men behind me, carrying one of my backpacks. We shuffled forward at a snail's pace, stopping every hour to splash water on our faces. Ehsan was close to fainting several times due to the suffocating crowd towering over his small, slim body.

Eventually at about 7.30 we reached Abbey Gate. Coming close to a British soldier, I asked him to inform the Polish soldiers if he saw them that we were waiting here. While waiting, I saw a group on the other side of the soldiers, lined up, with soldiers checking their documents one by one. I didn't know what exactly they were checking, but a long line had formed, and occasionally the soldiers would pull some people out and send them back into the crowd, apparently due to insufficient documents. After half an hour, the Polish soldiers arrived, and I was the first to speak with them. They had brought a long list, but I couldn't find my name on it. However, the previous night in the parking lot near the airport, I had managed to get on a list sent to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and showed it to them. We crossed the barbed wire, and the Polish soldiers began a thorough physical search of all our belongings. It took 5 hours to reach the Polish forces' quarters at the airport. After a few hours of rest in the yard of the Polish base where soldiers were coordinating operations, boarding started. A small military aircraft, capable

of accommodating about 40 of us, took off that afternoon. The noise of the engines was loud and terrifying, causing pain in my ears. We arrived in Uzbekistan near dusk.

Upon disembarking, we walked a short distance to a Polish passenger plane and waited in line near the aircraft. We were tested for COVID-19. Some of us, exhausted, sat stunned and silent on the ground. I lay down after two days and one night of sleeplessness and fatigue. It was at that moment, a Polish photographer started taking pictures without asking us, which felt intrusive. We didn't want anyone to photograph us in that state. A woman holding a child tried to hide her face as the photographer started, clearly uncomfortable, but a woman with a child in such a situation made a compelling subject. The journalist, in an attempt to justify himself, said he had a child of the same age and wanted to take more pictures of her, and if our pictures were published, he would blur our faces. This was the most explanation we got from a journalist after our silent protests.

The experience of other evacuees

The initiation of all conversations and interviews in London with those who had been evacuated was invariably their evacuation/arrival story. Following greetings, the first questions posed to each other were: "When did you arrive? And how did you come?" These queries formed the inevitable introduction to all the dialogues I engaged in at bridging hotels. The continuation of the conversation was shaped based on the responses to these two questions. Some findings that emerged from the data were that there was no clear pattern to who was evacuated to the UK. Those who were prioritized for evacuation included British passport holders, members of the security forces, those who had worked directly for British organisations such as the British Council or organisations funded by the British government, but membership of any of those groups did not guarantee evacuation.

Hakim (Hotel B), a member of the Afghan security forces, found himself unexpectedly in London in less than a week.

I had never even dreamed of coming to England. I was part of the security forces, working alongside British troops. After the Taliban's arrival, the situation was not good. On August 15, as I was heading to work, I saw my colleagues destroying documents. I went home: the atmosphere was eerie, streets deserted, and I walked a long way home. After a few days, I learned through a WhatsApp group that we could go to England... My manager in the group told me that the English were serious about evacuating us because we were in danger. I discussed it with my wife, and within a week, our evacuation was arranged.

Hakim's evacuation journey was different to mine; he entered the airport on a bus coordinated with the Taliban.

We were gathered from various locations in the city, given the license plate number of a minibus, and kept updated in a WhatsApp group, watching friends leave daily. At 6 PM, they called us, and we headed to the airport in the coach, not allowed to open the windows. It was very hot inside. Near the airport, people tried to enter through the bus windows, which were locked from the inside. As we entered, people rushed the bus, and then British soldiers threw training bombs to disperse the crowd and keep them away from the gate. It took about an hour inside the bus to enter the airport and head to the Baron Hotel, where we spent two nights.

Many who were in danger but lacked such connections had little chance of evacuation, despite expecting to be listed due to their special circumstances. One such person is Karim, a military man who had worked with security forces in Afghanistan. His father, also a military man, had directly worked with British forces. During the evacuation, his parents and four-year-old grandchild managed to leave Afghanistan and now live in Hotel A, but Karim and his wife remain stuck in Afghanistan. Even after two years, they have not succeeded in coming to Britain. I sometimes acted as an interpreter for Karim's mother, Nilofar, in her meetings with the Home Office.

Other Afghans caught off guard were the Afghan British passport holders who had returned to Afghanistan to visit their families, not expecting the Taliban to take over so quickly. Some were able to turn the situation into an opportunity, Jamil, a resident of Hotel B, couldn't believe what was happening or that he would find himself stuck in Afghanistan.

However, he wasn't too worried. After learning about the evacuation plan, he brought his family to Kabul and then, thanks to his British passport, to Britain. Jamil had already lived in Britain for 15 years but had not been able to bring his large family (6 people) to Britain earlier because he hadn't been able to meet the strict economic criteria and complex administrative procedures for family reunification. He said, "When the Taliban took Kabul, I was in Afghanistan. When the evacuation started, I came to Kabul with my family and then to Britain. Under normal circumstances, it would have been very difficult for me economically to bring my family to Britain."

During the evacuation, while waiting among the crowd at Abbey Gate for the Polish soldiers, I heard one British officer shouting to a soldier behind the barbed wire, "The boss said those with passports are the priority." Jamil said that when the news about evacuation of Afghans by British forces spread, some British passport holders quickly travelled from Britain to Pakistan where they had family members and then returned with them to Afghanistan. They were able to use the opportunity created by the evacuation to achieve a goal that days before seemed unattainable.

Having a British passport enabled the holders to bring extended as well as immediate family. Tawsifullah is a 26-year-old young Pashtun man residing in Hotel B, fluent in English. I spoke with him while he was preparing for a job interview at a hotel. He had had a personal business in Kabul and enjoyed a good life there. His arrival in London was down to luck, being in the right place at the right time.

After the Taliban's arrival, my cousin, who holds a British passport, was in Kabul. He planned to go to the airport with his young children, and I accompanied them. After getting through the crowds, I entered the airport with my cousin quite easily. I was just following him, and he opened the way by showing his British passport. My coming to London happened by chance; it wasn't planned at all.

There were also those who had worked with the British embassy and various organizations funded by the British. They had written emails and received confirmations to go to the airport for evacuation from Afghanistan. However, many of them couldn't make it through the airport chaos to board the flights to Britain. Around 150,000 requests

for evacuation assistance were sent via email, but many did not receive a response (Marshall, 2021).

The situation was much harder generally for women who had embarked on this journey without a male companion. Zahra (30 years old), who resided in Hotel A with her two younger sisters, worked for the Afghan government and was the sole breadwinner of her family. She had lost her father when she was young, and her younger brother had managed to reach a European country when a minor, and then later, in 2017, through family reunification, had taken their mother out of Afghanistan. But the three sisters remained in Kabul. With the arrival of the Taliban, they were increasingly worried as they had no male guardian, making them very vulnerable. Fear overshadowed their lives. 'We spent the first few nights at a relative's house, scared because being three women alone in a war situation was a big risk. Eventually, we returned home because we couldn't stay as guests forever or expect them to protect us. We felt like we were bothering them.'

Her younger sister had occasionally worked part-time with a British journalist. Fortunately, during the days of the Taliban's takeover, this British journalist was also in Kabul. After a week of continuous efforts, the female journalist managed to get Zahra and her sisters onto the evacuation list. After receiving an email from the UK Foreign Office on August 24, they followed a route suggested by their friends, one without Taliban checkpoints but with a large sewage canal separating the people from the American and British soldiers, near Camp Baron. Zahra recalls:

We spent four hours inside the sewage canal waiting for the British soldiers to take and check our documents. After a preliminary check, they helped us out of the canal and took us to the Baron Hotel. After 24 hours of waiting and scrutiny, they said we didn't meet the criteria for evacuation to Britain and showed us the way back. But we insisted on the authenticity of our documents. The British soldier asked us to stand in a long queue for a detailed document check and interview. The queue was entirely male, with one man from each family standing in line. Representing my family, I frequently faced men's protests asking, 'Where's your father? Your brother? Why are young women like you here?' I had grown accustomed to responding, 'I am the head of my family.' This situation continued

even in hotels in London, where we faced objections about being there without a male guardian, constantly asked 'Where are your men?'.

Finally, on August 26, after further scrutiny, they boarded a military flight to Dubai.

Niloufar, whose son Karim is stuck in Afghanistan with his family, told me "Now the world's attention is on Ukraine". By the spring of 2022, we had the feeling that attention had shifted from Afghanistan and an already slow family reunification process became interminable. In other words, it became clear that some refugees were no longer prioritized by the British government, causing a sense of disparity and resentment.

Conclusion

There were a number of findings to emerge from the accounts of the evacuation, but perhaps the key finding was that we had been conditioned to expect that the evacuation would be organised and orderly and based on strict criteria and the capacity to provide documentary proof of meeting those criteria. Instead, there was chaos, a chaos that exacerbated the dangers we faced, that exposed all of us to humiliation and terror. In such chaos, it was often those who were quick-witted and prepared to take a chance who were able to take advantage of the opportunity the fall of the government presented. The lack of a clear and efficient system led to feelings of resentment and a sense of injustice among those who were unable to leave or to bring family with them, and these aggrieved feelings were often directed at those who were able to take advantage of the situation, rather than at those in power, whose failings had created the chaos in the first place.

The next chapter describes the findings relating to arrival in the UK, while chapter eight will analyse the sources of the expectations around evacuation and reception.

Chapter 7: Unmet Expectations 2 - Life in the UK

Introduction

Undoubtedly, when we arrived in the UK we were all traumatized by our experiences in Kabul in the days and weeks leading up to the evacuation and then by the evacuation itself. We landed in the UK with little or no baggage, but with lots of hopes and expectations. After an initial honeymoon period, however, disappointment set in. This chapter explores the unmet expectations of those of us who made it to the UK in 2021, which crystallised around housing, employment and education. After exploring first impressions on arrival, each of these areas will be examined in turn. For many of the people we encountered, including the NGO workers who tried to help and support us through the first months, those expectations were unrealistic, but as will be seen below, those evacuated had good reasons for their expectations. In chapter eight, the sources of those expectations, and the factors that shaped them will be analysed, but here the focus is on what the expectations were, in what ways they were disappointed and the impact of those disappointed and unmet expectations.

Arrival in *Kharij*

For many Afghans, especially those who had not travelled, *Kharij* (abroad) was akin to Paradise, a place of wonder and plenitude, where no one suffered hunger or unhappiness. The term 'kharij' literally translates to 'abroad', but in Afghanistan, it does not typically include neighbouring countries like Iran and Pakistan or other neighboring countries. Instead, *Kharij* refers to affluent Western countries like the US, UK, France, Germany, Sweden etc. The concept of *Kharij* in Afghanistan is closely associated with notions of wealth, power, progress, security, and individual freedoms. *Khariji* (foreigner) refers mostly to white individuals with citizenship from Western countries. On being evacuated, we expected to find in *Kharij* what we did not have at home - peace, security, our needs met, the rights foreigners talked about so much respected in full.

First impressions on arrival were positive:

By God, these people (the British) are more Muslim than us, they are the true Muslims. So humane they are. When we arrived in Manchester, they took us to a hotel. We were in quarantine for 15 days, and they provided everything for us—from toothpaste and baby diapers to biscuits, water, and food. We lacked nothing
(Hakim, 52-year-old, Tajik, ex Security forces, married, 5 children)

However, as time passed, new emotions such as guilt, worry, stress, anxiety, and depression replaced the initial gratitude, happiness and relief of the 'lucky' evacuees.

Mostly this was due to growing awareness of what we had lost, what and who we had left behind. Most evacuees were struggling to bring family members to the UK. The sense of despair and guilt deepened among those who were safe here, yet who could not ease the suffering of their loved ones left behind. Parvin (28-year-old, Pashtun, journalist, single), who had worked with British organizations, fled to Pakistan after the Taliban's takeover and had subsequently been evacuated to the UK. She was single but had left behind her mother, sister, and brothers.

Whenever I go to the park or walk through the streets, admiring the city's beauty, my heart becomes heavy. I find myself wishing that my mother, my sister, and my brother were here with me. I know they are enduring difficult times under the Taliban's regime. Sometimes, the simple act of feeling happy makes me feel guilty...What is the point of being in paradise if your family isn't there to share your happiest moments? We didn't grow up like this; we grew up in a community, alive with comings and goings. Here, we have no one; loneliness is deadly.

While our bodies had reached 'kharij', our souls and thoughts remained in Afghanistan. A significant part of our minds and psyches were still embroiled in the conflict—not just the trauma and terror of war that we had experienced ourselves and that haunted our sleep and waking life, but also fear for the loved ones who endured suffering in various forms daily in Afghanistan.

It's 2 AM in October 2022, and I can't sleep again. I couldn't work on my thesis. My thoughts are still with Hajar and Marzia, who were killed along with 80 other Hazara

students in a suicide bombing at an educational centre in West Kabul. They weren't far from my sister's house. She was woken up by the loud explosion in the morning in Kabul, but now I couldn't sleep here in London. I got up and went outside. Night walks have become a habit for me. I can't work on my thesis anymore, and I'm thinking of quitting my PhD. (my fieldnotes)

Parvin's loneliness echoed my own. Sometimes, I would spend days at the university surrounded by people who would pass by with no acknowledgement of my existence. It was strange to attend university and return home without even having exchanged greetings with anyone. An exception occurred when my frequent visits to the university piqued the curiosity of a Black woman who was one of the sociology professors. Seeing me standing by the elevator from her office, she approached me and after greeting, asked, "Who are you?" I jokingly replied, "I don't know, That's a big question." This opened up a lovely conversation, reminding me of the workplace environment in Afghanistan where it was unthinkable to pass someone without greetings. Here, it seemed to be the norm. Gradually, I had learned to sometimes pass by others without acknowledging them, as if neither of us existed, as if we were quarrelling and not speaking.

One idea had comforted those of us who managed to leave in August 2021, an expectation that Afghan migrants had carried with them throughout the decades, an expectation that sustained those left behind (Schuster et al 2021): that we would be able to bring our families out to join us, that one day we would be reunited. Although in the chaos of the evacuation, the rules governing which family members could accompany a visa holder seemed to have been suspended, once we were in the UK, they were applied strictly and those over 18 were unable to bring parents and siblings to the UK. The UK government's definition of family is particularly narrow and hostile. This approach was stringently applied to Afghans, whereas for Ukrainians, the definition of family was more generous, allowing them to bring all their extended family members to the UK. Meanwhile, Ukrainians had settled into homes, but most Afghans remained in hotels until at least August 2023. This disparity had deepened the Afghans' sense of discouragement, as they realized some were more welcome than others.

It was not just fear for loved ones in Afghanistan that damped the initial feelings of relief. Conditions in the UK were not what we expected. Gradually, as they tried to find work, and places in schools and universities, the Afghan evacuees faced challenges we had not anticipated, and which were far removed from their expectations of life abroad. Their new lives were filled with appointments and disappointment. For everything, an appointment was required, and sometimes these could take months to secure. The bureaucratic process had become a significant burden, especially for those who were illiterate. Ali (55 years old, Hazara, Painter, Married, 5 children 2 of them left in Afghanistan) with a hearing impairment, lived in a hotel with four family members. The relentless pursuit of a residency card, school registrations, doctor appointments, opening bank accounts, and buying SIM cards had overwhelmed him to the point where Zahra (30 years old, Hazara, government employee, single, lived with two sisters) who occasionally assisted him, would break down in tears.

I saw Wajiha, (55 years old, Qezelbash, housekeeper, married, 5 children) walking with a walker. She came and sat next to me. I asked her how she was feeling today, and she complained bitterly about severe knee and back pain.

"Getting a doctor's appointment has become a fiasco," she explained. "The staff (NGO staff who were helping them) here start at 9 am, but if you want to make an appointment, you have to call the GP at 08:00 in the morning. I don't speak English, so I'm just left bewildered. It's not like in Afghanistan where you could see a doctor whenever you wanted. It was better there; you could see a doctor the moment you needed to, get diagnosed, and receive medication. Here in 'Kharij', the doctor examines you over the phone and then often just says to drink water. Since I've arrived here, my condition has worsened. What kind of Kharij is this? We are truly bewildered."

Nothing was like Afghanistan: this was *Kharij*, and here people changed. They weren't the Afghans we knew back in Afghanistan. Those who had come here even a few years earlier had lost their culture. Mirvais (22 years old, Pashtun, self-employed, single), that good-natured young man working at the pizzeria, told me a story that illustrated this clearly:

A few years ago, when my cousin visited Afghanistan from London, I gave him a car to use and I accompanied him for 1 month to sort out administrative matters. He stayed in our home the whole time, and we always cooked the best meals for him. But when I came to London and visited my cousin's home, I was completely disappointed. He bluntly told me that he couldn't host me for a long period, which was incredible to me. It has reached a point where you even need to make appointments to chat with a friend. You can't just call someone directly. I don't understand how being in kharij can strip people of their shame and sense of duty."

Many aspects of life in *Kharij* were unexpected. From shopping to using public transportation to the perpetually cloudy and rainy weather that was so depressing. For some Afghans who didn't speak any English and were illiterate in Persian/Pashto, reading signs and finding one's way was even more challenging. Some women, unable to speak English and unfamiliar with how to use public transportation, found themselves confined to hotel rooms for several weeks while their husbands went out to work. Encountering amenities they had never previously seen was frightening for some of us. One day, an Afghan-British friend invited Hakim, whose initial impressions had been so positive) to his house. On their way, when entering a metro station, Hakim's wife, who was using an escalator for the first time, panicked and fell, tumbling down.

Several people struggled to catch her, and someone hit the emergency stop button. She was injured but, thankfully, not seriously. Yet, we were deeply embarrassed as everyone stared. "If something serious had happened to her, where would we carry this shame of falling off the escalator in Kharij?" I thought to myself, relieved that she only suffered a knee injury. Our host was also embarrassed, regretting that it could have led to a mishap at his invitation.

Fatima (45 years old, Hazara, educated, teacher, married, 3 children) spoke no English, so while shopping, tried to watch what others did and mimic them. When it was her turn, there was a problem with the machine, and the cashier repeated something several times that she didn't understand. Eventually, the cashier resolved the issue with visible frustration, but Fatima remained upset about the incident all night and always felt stressed while shopping.

The language barrier often leads individuals to censor themselves. Even for the most basic needs, you try to avoid raising an issue because you either cannot express it or don't have the appropriate words. This lack of familiarity with the English language has seriously affected their mental and emotional health, making them dependent on others for most tasks and unable to defend themselves or explain situations when needed. These encounters encapsulate many Afghans' experiences with everyday life in London – suddenly thrust from Afghanistan into the heart of London. The next section discusses the situation in the hotels, including the challenges faced by women.

Expectations and Accommodation

Perhaps the most devastating unmet expectation of the evacuees was in relation to accommodation. For many Afghans who were evacuated, their normal life came to a halt after August 15, 2021, and their journey wouldn't be considered over until they were settled in a place that could be called "home", somewhere they could feel safe, somewhere that had the potential to become familiar, where they could receive guests, an important part of Afghan culture. However, contrary to the expectations of the Afghan evacuees, who believed that that the accommodation in the bridging hotels would last a few weeks at most, the situation they experienced for 2 years following the evacuation was one of limbo: they had left their "home" in Afghanistan but had not yet entered a "home" in the UK, stuck in a purgatory-like state in bridging hotels. Living in this prolonged interim state had negative impacts on the physical and mental health of many of the residents in the bridging hotels. The Afghan evacuees saw the UK government as their host, and the evacuation as a recognition of the debt that they were owed by the government, a debt acknowledged by the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson two weeks after the Taliban arrived in Kabul:

For those who have left their homes with no more than a small bag of belongings, and in fear for their lives, coming to the UK will no doubt have been a daunting experience, but also one of hope for the future. I am determined that we welcome

them with open arms and that my government puts in place the support they need to rebuild their lives. We will never forget the brave sacrifice made by Afghans who chose to work with us, at great risk to themselves. We owe them, and their families, a huge debt. (Home Office, 2021b)

As time dragged on and the expectation of being moved quickly to a permanent home faded, disappointment and bitterness grew. Although most people had been moved to more permanent accommodation by the time my fieldwork had ended in 2023, the extended period of uncertainty, and the poor quality of the homes they were offered, meant the disillusionment with the UK government had already set in and the energy and enthusiasm people felt on arrival had dissipated.

The prolongation of hotel living was seen as a sign of the UK government's ingratitude and a failure to honour their debt. In Afghanistan, the relationship of host/guest embodies certain expectations - the host is responsible for ensuring the needs of the guests are met, and there is a duty to ensure the guests' well being. Statements from the UK government, such as those above, seemed to acknowledge that Afghan expectations were reasonable and realistic, including that homes would be provided.

Without a home, how could we begin to rebuild our lives? Especially since it seems everything in the UK, from education to employment to medical care seemed to depend on having a permanent address. Nasrin, who resided in Hotel B, was earnestly looking for a college for English language training so that she could enrol in an educational course. However, in two years, she had to change her hotel residence three times, which disrupted her continuous study, especially as these changes did not consider the academic terms' start and end. "With every relocation, I had to look for a new college and wait for the enrolment period to begin again." This issue also applied to children who needed to register at new schools, a process that takes at least three weeks to a month.

The arrival of Ukrainian refugees, and their accommodation in UK homes, created a sense of humiliation and discrimination among those in temporary accommodation. In the following, I will explain how the unmet expectation for housing impacted life in the hotel. Though not living in a hotel, my own experience in searching for a home shattered my expectations of life in the Global North.

Life in Limbo:

Most Afghans residing in the hotel initially thought their stay would not extend beyond a few months and that they would soon be moved to a more permanent place, a house or flat. This was my expectation as well, as we knew that a hotel was not a suitable place for long-term living. The UK government had stated clearly:

We do not want to see families remain in hotel accommodation for prolonged periods, and there is a huge effort underway to get families into permanent homes so they can settle and rebuild their lives (Home Office 2021b).

Our expectation was that the government would honour this promise.

By the time I arrived in the UK some had been in the hotels for a month. I had gotten in touch with them almost as soon as I arrived, visiting or calling them to stay informed about their situation. In our first meetings and calls, most of my contacts believed their hotel life would not last more than a few months and that they would soon be living in houses.

Living in a hotel was a new experience for many Afghans; those who I spoke to had never experienced such a long-term hotel living, and some were staying in a hotel for the first time. Life in bridging hotels was governed by hotel managers through rules that were communicated to the Afghans via WhatsApp groups and some announcements in public spaces. Afghans living in the hotel were not allowed to bring guests to their rooms, cooking was prohibited, and meal times and the type of food were determined by the hotel management. Everyone had to come down to eat in the restaurant area. Some people were sick and unable to come down for food, and in such cases, they needed a letter from the hotel manager allowing them to eat in their room. This permission was temporary and had to be renewed every two or three days. Silence had to be observed after 9pm, the volume of televisions had to be lowered, and children in the lobbies and corridors had to be accompanied by adults and were not allowed to make noise.

This experience, especially for many of the women, whether they came from cities or more remote villages, was alien and brought many new challenges. Some women

remained confined in the gloomy hotel rooms for weeks because the new environment was culturally and lifestyle-wise very different to what they had been used to, even for those who had lived in exile in Iran or Pakistan. There they had lived in camps or quickly found somewhere to rent, mostly with neighbours and other family members. In those countries, in spite of hostility and discrimination, they did not feel so alien because they had been among people who were not that different culturally. Here in London, those of us for whom this was our first time in the Global North, including my wife, were shocked by the dress of the women they saw in the streets, by the bare arms and legs (it was still warm at the end of summer). In the hotels, most women preferred to wear traditional Afghan attire and to observe hijab, especially passing through the hotel lobby. Some women also wore face veils. In only exceptional cases did some of the younger women not wear a hijab. Afghan homes are usually surrounded by a wall and there is a clear boundary between home and *biroon* (outside). Inside the walls, the women were free from scrutiny but in the hotels, the lobby was a public space - as soon as they left the bedroom, they felt obliged to cover themselves and could not be at ease.

Afghans' relationship with space, place, and light was significantly disturbed by being confined to hotels that were gloomy and dark. A room was allocated for the staff of Paiwand to store their work equipment, where they would pick up and return laptops, papers, and other office items at the start and end of the day, respectively. I occasionally had to pass through a corridor flanked by room doors to fetch or return work items. The corridors were narrow, dimly lit, and the walls were generally painted in dark colours. Entering such an environment made me feel suffocated, to the point where I wished to exit as quickly as possible. Even the mere thought of living in such a space induced a sense of suffocation in me, and personally, I was glad to be living in an apartment in a house with a garden. In Afghanistan, houses and even hotels were built with much more spacious areas. Due to energy scarcity, light was a crucial factor in house construction. Based on this light, houses were divided into those facing the shade and those facing the sun. Sun-facing houses directly benefited from sunlight in winter, which not only made them more spacious but also played a significant role in heating the houses. The absence of this light, the gloom of the hotels especially during the dark and damp British winter,

the feeling of living in limbo as people waited to hear about permanent accommodation, all weighed heavily on the spirits of the evacuees.

Cooking and eating meals together are an important part of our culture, but cooking was forbidden in the hotel. Shabnam (55 years old, Pashtun, housekeeper, married, mother of six) was saddened by her inability to cook and prepare meals for her children. She reminisced about the years in Afghanistan when she cooked during the Ramadan months and prepared iftar meals, but due to hotel conditions, she'd been unable to cook for a long time. Living in the hotel had altered people's perceptions of themselves and others. For Shabnam, cooking for her family was part of her duty as a caregiver, a role now lost with hotel living, disrupting the previous order of her life. Roya (40 years old, Pashtun, housekeeper, mother of four), brought by her British passport holder husband to the UK with their four children, and illiterate, was among those women who were living in a hotel for the first time. In Afghanistan, due to her husband's absence, she had had the primary responsibility of looking after the children and had travelled little, mostly hosting travellers rather than being a guest herself. The few trips she had taken were mainly to her ancestral village in Wardak, where she would stay with relatives and family members. By May 2022, they had been moved to a third hotel. When they were moved to the first hotel, "I told the kids not to fully unpack their suitcases and just take out the necessities because we might be given a house at any moment." She is still waiting (July, 2023).

For Roya, living with four children in rooms that were essentially bedrooms was challenging, as it was for all mothers in the hotel. A bed in the centre of the room took up most of the space, while back home, people would have slept on mats that folded away. In bridging hotels, there was no space for children to play or entertain themselves; Roya's mobile phone was the only form of entertainment for the children, who took turns playing with it.

At the beginning and end of the day, the hotel lobbies and corridors were filled with children playing and running after each other, creating a lot of noise and leading to complaints from some families. These complaints added more pressure on Roya, who tried to control her children and would not allow them to go to the lobby or the narrow hotel corridors. Part of the hotel guards' duties had also become supervising the children,

regularly asking them to be quiet and not make noise, but they were not very successful. Sometimes, children would go out into the street alone, which caused more uproar. On one occasion, a few children aged 7 to 8 had gone to a park near the hotel by themselves, and the police, noticing they were without parental supervision, returned them to the hotel.

Unlike the women, the men could gather in the hotel lobby to talk in small groups. I sometimes joined these gatherings to hear what they were discussing. Most conversations were about recent events in Afghanistan under Taliban rule or news related to residency, housing, and jobs. Sometimes they would talk about their experiences with British society. These gatherings were predominantly male, and women were rarely seen in the hotel lobby, making the public space of the hotel mostly occupied by men.

The relatively long stay in the hotel gradually led to the formation of small Afghan communities that took control of the public spaces of the hotel, emphasizing Afghan values. This community would sometimes react to behaviours perceived as against Afghan culture. Anyone who acted contrary to this prevailing atmosphere was reprimanded. For many Afghans (mostly Pashtuns), eating with the family in public was not pleasant. Therefore, the restaurant space was divided into male and female areas, so women could eat separately from strange men and non-Mahrams. However, there were families where men and women dined together, paying no mind to the segregated space.

One day, there was talk about "Nasib," a young man who appeared in the hotel restaurant in long shorts for dining. Some residents objected to such attire because "We live in this hotel with our families and are Afghans, and therefore we must observe Afghan and Islamic values." The communal spaces in the hotels had become more controlled and restricted, especially for women. Living in limbo in the hotel, accompanied by control and tension, was not something some of the residents had expected to experience in a city like London. Such an environment increasingly reminded them of the restrictions on behaviour prevalent in Afghanistan. Zahra a single woman living with her two sisters in Hotel A, complained:

The hotel is like a small Afghanistan! I don't feel like I'm in London! I really had no particular opinion on the hijab, but I detest the public atmosphere prevailing

in the hotel. Therefore, I tried to show them by removing my hijab that I am different from you and do not wish to be in the space where you live.

Sattar, Shabnam's husband (63 years old, Pashtun, military background, married, father of six), was a general from the Afghan army who lived in Hotel D with his family of eight for 18 months. He likened living in the hotel to being in prison. Living in the hotel meant living in a public space where everything is under a specific and public schedule, and "you don't play a significant role in it." Frustrated by the uncertainty of when they would move to a more permanent home, to the point where he regretted coming to Britain: "It would have been better if we had stayed in Afghanistan, we would either have died or had our own life." "Our own life" was precisely what the hotel residents felt they had lost. They were brought to Britain in hopes of a better life, but in the bridging hotels they also lost their normal life, something they never expected. Two years later (August 2023), most Afghans residing in the hotel viewed their prolonged stay as a sign of neglect and disdain by the British government. Zolmai, Sattar's 23-year-old son (Pashtun, student, single, lived with his parents and sibling), felt he has completely lost control his life:

I don't have private space. When I am in my room, besides the noise from children playing and moving around, the daily entry of a cleaner for room service takes away my sense of privacy. My sleep schedule is disrupted; I stay up late at night and can't sleep in the mornings due to the noise when children are getting ready for school...

Living in the hotel has led to a decrease in Zolmai's self-confidence; he feels "like we are not considered human beings," even though "we have not asked for more than what was promised to us, we have not asked for more than our right."

Waiting for a Housing Offer:

If the evacuees were disappointed by the length of time it took to move them to more permanent and suitable accommodation, they were also disappointed by that accommodation when it was offered. People expected that they would find a home that was at least as good as that which they had left behind - after all, wasn't *Kharij* so much

better than what we had left, wasn't that the reason why for decades so many Afghans had left Afghanistan and been celebrated as successes when they returned from Kharij. During the evacuation process, leaving Afghanistan and arriving at Kharij was perceived by many as an 'opportunity', an achievement and a great success, whereas being unable to leave was seen as a failure.

Some Afghans rejected the houses offered to them. Generally, there were two reasons for rejecting a housing offer. Some of the houses provided to migrants were old and small. Parnian, (50 years old, Tajik, housekeeper, married, mother of four, husband left behind) from Badakhshan living in the hotel with her four daughters, was moved to a house on the outskirts of London. She says, "This house has so many rats, we don't know what to do! I've never seen such big rats in my life. The house is damp, and the smell of dampness is always in the air." News of these conditions was conveyed to many Afghans residing in the hotel, making the process of accepting a housing offer filled with hesitation and reluctance. Secondly, most evacuated Afghans expected to be offered houses in London, whereas most offers were in other cities. Niloufar, Hakim's wife (48 years old, Tajik, housekeeper, married, mother of five) explained her own hesitation:

Two people from the hotel accepted their housing offers; they were sent outside London, but now they regret it. Their house is in a village where they have to travel two hours just to buy halal meat, there is no mosque, they also have language problems, there's no one around them, and they feel lonely.

Some individuals placed a lot of emphasis on being close to Muslim communities to ensure access to necessities like halal meat. It became clear that it was necessary to consider all aspects of accepting or rejecting the offer before making a decision. Niloufar, living in the hotel with her family of seven for about a year, received their first housing offer in a distant city (Gloucester) but had doubts about accepting it. She said, "Staying in the hotel is temporary, and we can endure it however it is, but since a house is more permanent, we need to be more careful in choosing the location because once you leave the hotel, no one will listen to you."

During their time in the bridging hotels in London, Afghans had sought temporary jobs, created networks, and most importantly, familiarized themselves with London. Kazim (45

years old, Hazara, construction worker, married, father of two), who had been living in Hotel C in London for a year, was offered a house located four hours away from London, an offer he declined:

There are two reasons my family and I cannot leave London to live somewhere else. Firstly, my son is studying here and has just made friends; and secondly, we have just gotten acquainted with this area and after all these migrations, we cannot change our place of residence again. We have gotten used to it here and our mental state is getting better here.

Kazim was highly critical of the Home Office's planning. He argued that if there were no houses available in London, they should have been sent to the intended area upon their arrival, not after a year when they are just getting to know their surroundings and have settled in, only to be moved again to a new place. When Kazim and his wife, Gulrokh (43 years old, Hazara, housekeeper, married, mother of two) arrived in England, both had lost their mothers to COVID in Iran shortly before, but they had no one with whom they could mourn or hold a ceremony. In Afghan terms, they had no "shared grief." Therefore, maintaining their network of friendships was crucial, which they would lose by moving out of London.

For those who had found jobs in London moving to another city meant losing their employment without knowing whether there would be job opportunities in the new area. Zolmai, who had not yet received any housing offer, wanted to stay in London because he and his brother had found work in a hotel there. Although their jobs were not permanent, they had just begun to establish a network of work-related and friendly relationships, which they would lose by leaving London. Hakim, concerned about these points, asked me to find relevant information for him online. Not speaking English made it nearly impossible for him to search and read content in English. In response to his request for my opinion about the house offer, I said that in spite of those issues that if it were up to me, I wouldn't live in London because it's really expensive, and I couldn't afford the costs.

On August 15, 2022, Afghans from two hotels where I was continuously conducting research were relocated to the outskirts of London. Many of them are still (August 2023)

temporarily scattered in different hotels in other cities. However, residents of Hotel D resisted being moved to another hotel. The hotel residents contacted some newspapers to share their story, including an article in the Guardian (07/02/2023). Moreover, they organized a protest in front of the British Parliament, demanding the government's attention to their housing problem. I participated in three meetings at Hotel D organized for consultation and feedback. In these sessions, it was clear everyone was exhausted by the current situation. After 18 months, they still had not been able to settle in a house. Everyone was disappointed that their expectations regarding housing had not been met, and none of them had anticipated such a situation.

The request for housing had become their primary concern, and the way they rationalized their appeal to the government was quite interesting. One of them argued that they had served the British when they were in Afghanistan and had tried to assist them; therefore, it was natural for them to expect the British to listen to them now. Furthermore, they pointed out that they didn't come to the UK on their own but were brought here by the British government, so the government should take their concerns into account.

Many of those I spoke to referred to the significant amount of money being spent on housing each Afghan in the hotel, as had been discussed in the newspapers. They pointed out that, with that money, it would have been possible to buy houses for all Afghans, and that this gross waste could easily have been prevented with proper management and planning.

The fear of becoming homeless was slowly creeping into the minds of some hotel residents. Rahmat (40 years old, Hazara, University lecturer and artist, currently student, married, no children) had taken a video of the main Oxford Street showing homeless individuals sleeping beside the city's upscale shops. The fear of becoming homeless in Britain was a very serious concern.

As life in the hotel prolonged, Afghans began to resist the rules that did not consider their circumstances. This resistance took various forms, such as cooking secretly in rooms, eating inside rooms, and striking for better food quality, which sometimes led to tensions between Afghans and hotel staff and managers. Occasionally, meetings were held after the Maghrib (evening) prayer to organize and coordinate on general issues in the hotel,

discussing matters such as food, childcare, maintaining order, and the peace of the hotel and home. Women were absent from these meetings.

My search for a Home:

Upon arriving in the UK, the Council for At Risk Academics (CARA) had temporarily rented a flat in a house for me and my family for one month. The two bedroomed flat was too small for the five of us, and I was in search of a larger one. Finding a more permanent residence was crucial for carrying out administrative tasks like banking and registering the children in school, for which we needed a stable address and proof of it. Being unfamiliar with the city, lacking a sufficient network, not having a stable employment situation, and of course, the situation of the housing and renting markets in London presented huge challenges. In the neighbourhood where we were temporarily residing, we would see homeless people sleeping on the streets after 10 PM. These sights in London were completely unexpected, this reality was shocking for me and other Afghans. Rahmat, a fellow student, was shocked to see the condition of the homeless in downtown London and immediately posted a live video on his Facebook page, revealing some of the life realities present in London.

I had contacted a friend of a friend to ask him to recommend areas in London where Afghans lived and that would be affordable for me on a scholarship from the University. From the very beginning of our arrival in London, we felt isolated and were looking for people with whom we could connect to alleviate some of the loneliness. While my friend introduced me to some areas in London, he advised me not to focus too much on Afghan-dominated neighbourhoods, as life in London is vastly different from Afghanistan. In England, and especially in London, there is very little social visiting like in Afghanistan, even among Afghans; most people are preoccupied with their own lives or not interested in visiting like Afghanistan. I had heard about the individualistic lifestyle in Western countries, but this was the first time my family had experienced such solitude. Loneliness

was the first thing many Afghans complained about, whether they had lived in London for a long time or had just arrived.

According to London real estate agencies' standards, with a family of five, I should have been looking for a house with three bedrooms. I found it interesting that when I went to view a house, they would ask about my income, as I had to have a certain income level to rent a three-bedroom house and also present documents proving such an income. Additionally, I needed to find another person as a guarantor, who also had a specific income ceiling and would commit to paying the rent if I was unable to do so. I was surprised by all these strict conditions for renting a house. In Afghanistan and Iran, I had never encountered such requirements: when renting a house, no one asks for information about income or guarantors. In addition to that, in London in some cases, you even had to provide a reference from a previous landlord, which truly seemed bizarre to me.

I was lucky to have friends willing to be guarantors for me, but the problem was that finding a house that met the standards was difficult because my income was not sufficient to rent a house. Eventually, I asked CARA if we could stay in the same small two-bedroom flat, which was ultimately agreed upon. A friend of mine, who also was a PhD student with a family of five, was also looking for a house in London. After 6 months, guided by a real estate agent, he concluded that he had to declare a smaller family size; otherwise, he could not find a house. He mentioned that many real estate agencies were not even willing to show houses to a family of five, saying that the landlords were not interested in such families, did not have three-bedroom houses, or they were too expensive. Finally, by stating they were a family of three, he managed to find a house, but this did not mean the end of his problems.

Compared to the situation of those in IDP camps, the situation of those evacuated to London and housed in hotels in the centre of London, provided with food and warmth, was almost luxurious. But we were not comparing ourselves to the displaced and dispossessed in Kabul - we were comparing our present lives with those we had been forced to abandon so suddenly. And our encounters with Khariji had created expectations of what we would find in the Global North, not least of which was that these economically powerful countries would understand that keeping people in relatively expensive hotels

for an indefinite period was incredibly wasteful, and not just in terms of money. Our knowledge, skills and experience were deteriorating so long as we could not access employment.

Employment Expectations:

In this section, I describe the Afghan evacuees' expectations with regard to employment and how these were transformed upon encountering the reality of the labour market in the UK. Their initial perceptions and expectations of a society based on equal opportunities and meritocracy were shattered by the harsh realities of the job market. Some of the reasons for disappointment were related to the structure of a labour market that required English language fluency, references, networks, and UK work experience but others were created by the migration regime that kept people in a transient state in bridging hotels and did not provide them with the documentation that proved their right to work.

Initial Observations:

In the early days, when everything was new to me, I paid more attention to my surroundings. The first thing that struck me was the presence of non-white workers, whom I encountered on a daily basis. The non-white employees of the Aldi supermarket chain, who generally spoke English with an accent, taxi drivers waiting at the train station speaking Arabic as I passed by, and young men, mostly Arab, Pakistani, and Indian, focused on their mobile phones while waiting for new food delivery orders with their electric bikes. There's the Taiwanese man who has owned the fish and chips shop in the neighbourhood for over 30 years. Further on, there are Turkish, Indian, Thai, and Arab restaurants. A supermarket run by Indians, clothing and shoe repairs and a dry cleaner worked by Pakistanis. Mobile phone shops and laptop repair businesses operated by

Pakistani youth. Turkish, Kurdish, and Southeast Asian barbers, and in the GP reception, most of the staff are Black, with a few non-white doctors as well.

Around our neighbourhood, one day, I saw Zemarai, (25 years old, Pashtun, government employee, single) a resident of Hotel C, glued to his mobile phone, standing with his bike, waiting to receive a food delivery order. A little further away, Mirvais (an evacuee) was working in a pizza shop. This scene, not far from our neighbourhood, is observable in most parts of London. Many new immigrants find themselves in such jobs. It led me to ponder why most immigrants and refugees gravitate towards these types of jobs? What has led to this division of labour in London?

The Need for Work and the challenges finding it:

A key finding that emerged from the data was that there was a significant gap between Afghan expectations and the reality of the UK labour market. These individuals, driven by the hope of securing a stable future in an orderly and advanced society, found that they were starting from scratch, where their past achievements, skills, and experiences were often undervalued or not recognized at all.

Those evacuated in 2021 needed and wanted to work. Work would enable them to earn money to become independent, to provide for family back in Afghanistan and also potentially to help family leave the country. But there were other reasons: work would help with language (even unskilled work would help improve English, necessary to find better work), work would be an antidote to days filled with boredom and anguished thoughts of home, and work would create networks without which no one can survive. But faced with the unknown, numerous questions occupied their minds: How does one go about finding a job? Which organizations could assist in the search for work? Would skills and work experience from Afghanistan be of any help in securing a job in the UK? What additional skills are needed to enter the British job market, and how can we acquire them?

Upon arrival in the UK, the basic needs of the evacuees in hotels were met, but after the initial relief of being safe and having shelter and food, many of the evacuees were frustrated by this enforced dependence. There was social and economic pressure and

stress on men to find work quickly, as in most families, providing for the family remained the primary responsibility of men, forming a part of their masculine identity. Zaki, (45 years old, Tajik, security force, married, father of four) an educated man who previously worked at the Security Directorate in Kabul, has been searching for work since arriving in the UK, as he feels profound loneliness and sorrow in London. For him, work would be a refuge, keeping him away from loneliness and depression and distracting him from his grief. Whenever he visits the job centre, he tells the staff that the nature of the work doesn't matter to him; he just wants a job he can do. His English proficiency is not high, and he struggles with conversations. Even 7 months after arrival, he has not found any employment and spends his time attending English classes and taking his children to school, feeling that his days are being wasted.

The guilt felt by many of us at having left family and friends behind was exacerbated by our inability to help them financially. Almost everyone had family back in Afghanistan requiring financial support. The Taliban's return had worsened the economic situation, leading to increased unemployment. Those with savings in banks were unable to withdraw their money, with some banks allowing withdrawals of only \$200 a week, leading to long queues outside banks. Moreover, many women were banned from working.

Parvin, an educated and single woman living in Afghanistan with her mother, sister, and brothers, played a significant role in her family's income. Relocated alone to the UK, her family depended on her financial support. Upon arrival, in addition to loneliness, Parvin faced numerous issues like depression and significant stress, causing physical pain to the extent that she was hospitalized for several days. She shared little about her loneliness and stress with her family in Afghanistan to avoid causing them further sorrow. Meanwhile, her family hoped that Parvin could soon bring them to the UK, but that would require money. She was particularly concerned for her brother, who had worked for an NGO in Afghanistan. He needed to leave the country but lacked a passport, and on the black market, the price for a passport could be \$4000. However, even with a passport, the chances of obtaining a visa were slim, leading those at risk to resort to smuggling themselves out of the country, facing exponentially higher costs.

In families with younger children, women were less likely to consider outside employment since childcare in the UK is vastly different from Afghanistan, where the responsibility of childcare was distributed among the extended family, making it less burdensome. Only childless women, or those with school age children could look for work, in theory the most effective way to learn English and develop networks.

Shirin, Rahmat's wife (38 years old, Hazara, artist, educated, married, no children), to escape her loneliness and depression, started working in a café three months after arriving in London, hoping also to improve her English. She lived with her husband in a small studio flat, and they don't have any children. Both artists, they fled to Pakistan with the help of a charity organization and entered the UK on a student visa in September 2021, applying for asylum after 4 months. Shirin could not see much opportunity to continue as an artist unless she could improve her English. Initially, working in the café was physically and mentally challenging because communicating in English required a lot of energy and was intensely stressful, which together with the physical demands exacerbated her sciatica. Standing for long periods was difficult, and she considered quitting several times. However, she persevered, and over time (8 months), she gained enough confidence to communicate with customers in English, significantly improving her confidence and her mental state.

The strategy of working to learn English hasn't been effective for everyone. Fatima (45 years old, Hazara, educated, teacher, married, 3 children), a mother of three, works part-time as a cleaner to learn English, but most of her colleagues are Portuguese and cannot speak English fluently despite living in England for over 20 years. Thus, working in that environment doesn't significantly aid her language learning. Kazim found work in a fast-food restaurant where everyone speaks Farsi and their English isn't strong. Most of the jobs accessible to the evacuees don't rely on the language and are mostly performed by other migrants with limited English, thus not substantially aiding in learning the language.

While many of the evacuees saw work as a way to learn English, the lack of English heavily constrained their capacity to find work, but it was not the only barrier. The delay in issuing Biometric Residence Permits (BRPs) became a significant hurdle. By June 2022, some Afghans had yet to receive their BRPs, rendering job hunting futile for them,

as they lacked any document to prove their eligibility to work. Many institutions/companies are reluctant to hire, especially newcomers to the UK, because of the bureaucracy involved (Zahra, Personal communication, June 2022): residency documents and work permits must be scrutinized closely to ensure their authenticity, which must be verified online through a Share Code. Some of those I interviewed, or who came to Paiwand looking for support, had found work in restaurants but were turned away when their passport stamps, serving as their only form of documentation, were deemed insufficient proof of work eligibility by employers who demanded to see a BRP instead.

Zahra, attending a job interview, was asked to present her residence card, which was clearly marked with "Indefinite Leave to Remain," although the expiry date of the card was 2025. The examining staff, still confused after several consultations, highlighted a hesitancy in hiring based on the type of residency status. Zahra attempted to demonstrate that her residency was permanent and that her residence card would be renewed after 2025, indicating an underlying bias in employment practices based on residency type.

Khaliq (30 years old, Tajik, NGO worker, single), who I met while he was on his way to a job centre meeting, was frustrated because the job centre was pressuring him to find work, even though finding employment without a BRP is challenging. Only unskilled and/or irregular jobs in restaurants and similar establishments are accessible without it. The higher the job position or the better the income, the stricter the scrutiny of residency documents, except for temporary jobs which might overlook such documentation.

As mentioned above, the temporary nature of residing in hotels has been the root of numerous challenges, notably in securing permanent employment. For newcomers, having a stable address in London is crucial for landing a stable job. Majid (35 years old, Pashtun, educated NGO worker, married, father of four), after 18 months of job searching, was close to securing a reasonably paid permanent position but ultimately faced rejection in the final negotiation stages due to his temporary living situation in a hotel. Employers are hesitant to hire someone whose presence in the city might be temporary, especially when the address provided is a hotel's, signalling to them the applicant's recent arrival and uncertain status. Majid described the change in attitude once it's revealed you're a recent Afghan immigrant living in a hotel. Until they move out of bridging hotels, finding

stable employment remains challenging. In a vicious cycle, the Home Office communicated to hotel residents that having a job (potentially permanent) in London is one of the acceptable reasons for staying in the city, yet finding such a job without a residence was close to impossible.

Mastery of English and a stable residence was still not enough for many. Sima (26 years old, Hazara, educated, NGO worker, single), who had completed her master's degree at one of England's prestigious universities on a scholarship, struggled to find a suitable job after her graduation. Over a year, Sima attended more than 20 job interviews, and despite her qualifications, the lack of UK-based work experience or the irrelevance of her Afghan experience was often cited as a weakness in her job applications. Sima ended up at a refugee camp at a former military base for new Afghan arrivals, where she worked full-time as a translator and lived as well. Although she was happy with her current job, she said, "I hope for more than this."

This geographical and, implicitly, nationality-based evaluation of work experience suggests a deeper issue within the global job market. Conversations with friends relocated to Germany, Canada, and Australia echo the emphasis on local experience — German, Canadian, or Australian — indicating a broader pattern where work experience from the Global North is deemed more valuable and critical than that from the Global South. However, this does not cut both ways: An American or European with work experience in Afghanistan might be viewed as having a valuable and enriching experience due to working in a conflict zone, whereas the same experience held by an Afghan in the Global North is not valued.

Zahra, with a bachelor's degree from a private university in Kabul, made a number of unsuccessful job applications without being invited to interview. After discussions with career counsellors and charity organizations, she was offered volunteer opportunities, which would improve her CV and compensate for her lack of UK work experience. However, she hesitated, wondering how she would manage living expenses such as rent, utilities, and food through unpaid work.

Moreover, accessing volunteer positions isn't straightforward for many due to the requirement for references familiar with the individual's work. In the chaos of the Taliban's

return, the abrupt withdrawal and or dissolution of organizations disrupted connections and made finding referees and former employers very difficult. For those who worked for Afghan NGOs, their employers and managers may be unable to furnish a reference in English, complicating communication for reference checks.

This scenario highlights the complex barriers faced by newcomers in establishing themselves professionally in a new country. The reliance on "UK experience" creates a Catch-22, where obtaining paid work without local experience is difficult, but volunteering to gain this experience poses financial challenges. Additionally, the logistical difficulties in providing suitable references add another layer of complexity to their job search, illustrating the multifaceted challenges that migrants and refugees encounter in navigating their new environments.

Among the residents of the bridging hotel, some are lost and unsure how to find work. Zahra, says:

I still don't know what job to look for. The job market here is very different from Afghanistan. I mostly worked with the government in Afghanistan and was an administrative employee, but I'm not familiar with the job market here, I don't know what skills are needed, or what I can do? Sometimes I want to continue my education in a field that has a good job market, but I don't know exactly where to start?

These days, she concentrates on improving her English to improve her chances of employment appropriate to her skills.

Other educated residents of the bridging hotel were determined to find jobs relevant to their expertise. Esa, (33 years old, Hazara, educated, married, father of two), for example, wants to find a job in the security field. He has a master's degree from Russia and years of experience in Afghanistan but is uncertain how to enter the job market in his new environment. He requested a job guidance meeting but found it unhelpful, as the advisors seemed inexperienced and unfamiliar with his situation, offering no practical guidance. The most common advice given, such as how to create a CV, was not considered useful. This highlights a gap in the support system for newcomers, where guidance and

assistance in job searching and career building do not meet the needs of those with specialized skills and experience.

Hussain (51 years old, Hazara), a former university professor, who had worked in universities in Pakistan and Afghanistan, spent 18 months with his family in a hotel, attempting several times to secure an academic position for teaching but without success. He feels that compared to British candidates with degrees from local universities, his chances of teaching at a university in the UK are slim. He considered returning to study in the UK to re-enter academia, but his age and financial situation pose serious barriers. He struggled to withstand the pressure from the job centre to find any job. For Hussain, the idea of working in a restaurant or as a security guard in a store is unacceptable to him, a waste of years of training and experience, viewing it as the end of his identity, his life. Occasionally, he considered returning to Afghanistan or Pakistan where his social capital would have some value, where his experience and knowledge would be recognised and respected, and where he would have a support network to notify him of work opportunities and vouch for him.

Afghan networks in the UK could only assist with temporary positions with lower pay, especially for those with limited English proficiency. Without even such networks, finding and understanding job opportunities and navigating the work environment becomes exceedingly challenging. Jumah, who has years of experience in building renovations, initially found work with other Afghans to gain the necessary experience and understanding of how to find work in the UK, and gradually became more independent.

Nasrin's experience with job interviews in the UK highlights the importance of networking, though her established connections haven't yet led to employment. Despite applying for a number of posts without receiving responses, she observes that finding work in the UK follows similar unwritten rules to those in Afghanistan, albeit with more sophisticated labels. In Afghanistan, the term "connection" (واسطه) is commonly used, while in the UK, it's termed "networking." Initially disheartened by her expectations (of meritocracy) versus reality, Nasrin now understands that, just like in Afghanistan, networking is essential for job success in the UK, emphasizing, "Without a network, you are nothing!"

The journey to establishing a solid professional foundation in a new country, as experienced by Jumah and Nasrin (helping with job application and providing reference), underscores the critical role of social networks and the unique challenges faced by immigrants in the UK job market. Jumah's transition from working with Afghan peers to gaining independence in the building renovation sector exemplifies the gradual process of gaining local experience and understanding how to navigate the UK job market. This experience points to the importance of building a local professional network, especially for newcomers lacking strong English language skills or familiarity with the local job market.

Nasrin's story further highlights the nuanced dynamics of networking in professional settings. Despite having relatively good English proficiency and actively seeking to expand her social and professional networks, she faced challenges in securing employment through interviews, where her network played a crucial role but did not guarantee a job. Her perspective on the similarity between the unspoken rules of job searching in Afghanistan and the UK—where connections, or "networks," play a significant role—reveals a universal truth about the job market's reliance on social capital. Her initial disillusionment shifts to a pragmatic understanding that, regardless of location, networking is key to professional advancement.

After 16 months of effort and with the aid of a charity organization focused on training and employment for refugees, Nasrin secured a one-year contract at NHS, illustrating the positive impact such organizations can have on individuals struggling to find their footing in a new country. Her story, now looking for new opportunities with a year's worth of UK work experience, reflects the potential for progress when support systems are in place to bridge the gap between talented immigrants and the local job market. These narratives highlight the necessity of recognizing and supporting the potential within immigrant communities, emphasizing the importance of structured support and networking opportunities in enabling newcomers to contribute fully to their new home's society and economy.

Afghans' expectations and perceptions about working in Britain are significantly shaped by our image of societies in the Global North as orderly and advanced. This expectation

became evident in discussions with individuals like Ata Khan, (35, Married, Pashtun, educated, good English, NGO worker in Afghanistan) who worked with foreign NGOs in Afghanistan. His experience there taught him to expect that a gap analysis to identify employment opportunities in specific sectors where Afghan evacuees could be trained and placed would be conducted by the British government, and an assessment of the skills possessed by those evacuated so that, with minimal training and adjustment, labour needs could be met and suitable employment found. For instance, at the time there was a significant demand for truck drivers in the UK; it would not have been difficult to assist Afghans in quickly obtaining UK licenses and securing these jobs. This is just one example among potentially hundreds of areas where Afghan refugees could have been supported to fill job vacancies. Ata Khan found it hard to understand why practices introduced by Khariji in Afghanistan were not applied in the UK.

That everything they had learnt in Afghanistan, including from working with Khariji, counted for nothing and that even the most skilled were expected to take on the most menial tasks was a bitter pill to swallow. The positions available did not align with the Afghans' aspirations and expectations, leading to disappointment and anger. Throughout the job-seeking journey, they faced unexpected challenges that they had not encountered before, describing the opportunities and job-seeking process as unfair and inequitable. They saw themselves in an unequal race, focused solely on survival, and thus their initial perceptions and expectations of a society filled with equal opportunities and meritocracy were shattered by the harsh realities of the job market.

The Job Centres, supposed to help people into work, were of little use, steering people only to low or completely unskilled work that was poorly paid and temporary, and that offered no route to progression. Instead, by exerting constant pressure on people to accept any kind of work, underlined that Afghans were a burden. This pressure, in addition to challenges such as a lack of English proficiency, lack of housing, and depression, worsened the psychological condition of some, adding to their struggles. Little consideration was given to the trauma that those who had been evacuated had experienced. People needed time to come to terms with the sudden and shocking changes in their life circumstances, time to adjust to the mental and emotional load they

now carried, before they could plunge into work in a completely new environment, with a new language, without support networks.

The tension between their past lives and their current circumstances underscores the need for more tailored assistance and opportunities that recognize their skills, experiences, and aspirations.

The disappointment reflects a broader desire for independence and self-reliance, especially for those who have always been self-sufficient and the primary earners for their families. No one wishes to rely on the state, particularly when the assistance provided is minimal and not sufficient for someone accustomed to working and supporting a family.

Education expectations

Those who arrived in the West through educational and research programs found better opportunities to integrate into the educational space and continue working based on their skills. Conversely, less educated individuals found basic English language learning to be crucial, albeit time-constrained and often unsatisfactory in quality. Access to English language courses was particularly challenging and expensive for those with student visas like me.

The situation for young Afghans who had just completed grades 10 or 11 in Afghanistan and were transitioning to crucial stages in the British education system, such as GCSE or A levels, was especially complex, presenting unique challenges.

My experience of UK education:

During the process of writing this thesis, there were multiple occasions on which I considered discontinuing my studies. When I commenced my doctoral studies, I

understood that I would have to spend some time in the UK but given the financial circumstances and the deteriorating situation of the war in Afghanistan, I realised it wouldn't be safe to leave my family behind. But bringing them to the UK, especially given the small size of the scholarship grant, I did not see how I could manage. It seemed giving up was the only option. For advice, I visited a friend in Dasht-e-Barchi, west of Kabul. After sharing my concerns and that I was contemplating dropping out, he reminded me of something significant:

You are among the first group of Hazaras who have the opportunity to experience higher education in the West. This is not just important for you, but for the Hazara people as well. Your education, emerging from a discriminated group, is not merely a personal affair but a collective one. Much suffering has been endured for you to reach this stage; keep that in mind when making your decision.

This perspective viewed education as a collective responsibility aimed at improving communal life. This conversation rekindled hope within me and motivated me to persevere with my studies despite the difficulties and adversities to be faced.

When I was applying for a UK visa for my family and myself, I had to travel to Pakistan, as due to the insecure situation there were no consular services in Afghanistan. At that time I applied for financial support to an institution that supported researchers and academics, but was informed they could only support single academics, as the UK government had increased the visa costs so much, it was not possible to bring family members. After the Taliban took over Kabul, everything changed, and this institution responded positively to my request after I had arrived in Poland, because I had already paid for all of our visas. With the support of this institution, and after coordinating with the Polish police, I managed to leave Poland and entered the UK with my family. After spending several months under stress and fatigue, I felt I had finally reached a place where I could start a new life. However, I was soon faced with a new situation. The supporting institution, after explaining the financial support conditions, asked me to sign two documents, one promising not to apply for asylum and the other stating that we were not terrorists.

The first of these documents stated that financial support was conditional on not seeking asylum. Throughout the writing of my thesis, I was plagued by this dilemma, and tortured by indecision around which course of action to take. This constant worry negatively impacted the quality of my work. This mental conflict was experienced by many of my friends who had come to the UK in collaboration with this organisation, seriously disturbing their peace of mind and making scientific work impossible under such mental strain. I was faced with new challenges at every stage. My daughter Sara was approaching 18, and any further education for her was contingent upon paying very expensive international student fees. I had expected that bringing my daughter to the UK would guarantee her the education denied in Afghanistan, but the conditions imposed by the UK government and upheld by CARA made this impossible for her.

Should I apply for asylum, my fellowship would be terminated, and moreover, I would have to repay the grant and fees covered by the organization. If I applied for asylum and was rejected, returning to Afghanistan would put us at risk, and more importantly, my daughter Sara, who was 16, would not have the opportunity to continue her education, and my wife, a teacher, would have to become a housewife. However, as an international student visa holder, my family and I had no access to any state assistance, and we were charged 'international rates' for any educational or training courses. For example, my wife was not eligible for free English courses, we had to pay privately and the fees were twice as much as they would have been for a permanent resident.

I began consulting with Afghan friends I knew, and all were shocked that such a condition had been imposed. However, based on their experience of living in Britain, they unanimously encouraged me to apply for asylum, knowing well that the circumstances meant return to Afghanistan would be impossible, and seeking asylum would ensure a more stable legal status. On the other hand, legally, the longer I delayed applying for asylum, the more I feared I would jeopardize my chances of staying in Britain.

Staying and studying in England was becoming harder every day, especially given the uncertainty of our legal status. Once I finished my studies, my student visa would expire. I would be able to apply for a graduate route visa and obtain a three-year residency. However, it was not guaranteed I would be able to find suitable work and qualify for the

visa. If I succeeded the visa would not lead to permanent settlement, but more importantly, the cost meant I could not afford to apply. The three-year visa fee for each person was £3,927; for a family of five this was beyond my reach. I had friends who had entered the UK on a student visa and who had a similar commitment not to apply for asylum. Some of these friends had declared from the beginning that they did not wish to continue their studies under such conditions, preferring to break their undertaking and try for a more stable future for themselves and their children. They applied for asylum, abandoned their studies and moved into bridging hotels with other asylum seekers.

The second document I was required to sign by my sponsor organisation was a declaration that indicated I was in no way connected with any institutions or bodies supporting terrorism. Signing such a document was extremely distressing for me. I was angered by the notion that I had to sign something like this. I felt as though I was being treated as a potential threat. The following text is quoted from the terms and conditions letter:

It is understood by the signing of this letter that neither you nor any accompanying dependent will undertake any act that would threaten the security of the host institution or host country, nor support or promote violence or terrorist activities or terrorist-related activities, nor bring X or the host institution into disrepute.

I found the above text to be highly offensive and initially refused to sign it. This was indeed one of those moments when I contemplated discontinuing my studies. What could I do? If I intended to continue my education, I had to accept these conditions and make the commitment. This was not the first time I had encountered such a demand. When applying for a student visa, during the lengthy process of filling out the online visa application form, I was also faced with the following questions:

In either peace or war time have you ever been involved in, or suspected of involvement in, war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide? Have you ever been involved in, supported or encouraged terrorist activities in any country?

Have you ever been a member of, or given support to, an organisation which has been concerned in terrorism?

Have you, by any means or medium, expressed views that justify or glorify terrorist violence or that may encourage others to commit terrorist or other serious criminal acts?

Have you ever been a member of, or given support to, an organisation which is or has been concerned with extremism?

Have you, by any means or medium, expressed any extremist views?

Have you, as a part of your employment or otherwise, undertaken paid or unpaid activity on behalf of a non-UK government which you know to be dangerous to the interests or national security of the UK or its allies?

All of these experiences painted a picture of the host society's perception of us, a picture that was not pleasant, and one we did not expect. I thought to myself that we were ourselves victims of terrorism and the war against terrorism. For 40 years, we had been the victims of proxy wars. A war that the United States, along with its allies including the UK, had started in Afghanistan under the pretext of combating terrorism, and even before that, had supported and armed groups to counter the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Equivalency Certificate Process:

For some of the younger evacuees, continuing higher education was important and seen as a pathway to better job opportunities and integration into the host society. In conversations I had with many of these young individuals, they asked me for information about the higher education system even though I was newly arrived like them and truly did not understand the registration and application process for universities. What I found interesting in these discussions was their focus on practical fields of study with better job markets. Saqib (25 years old, Tajik, bachelor's degree holder, single), who speaks good English, has decided to study dentistry and is looking for ways to gather information about registration, application, and financial issues. Nasrin studied International Relations at the undergraduate level in Afghanistan, which, after evaluating her degree, was deemed to be at level 5 (equivalent to the second year of a Bachelor's Degree programme), but now

she is looking for a way to learn a profession at a college that would allow her to quickly enter the job market, although currently, she cannot afford the college fees.

An interesting point regarding the equivalency process is that when Afghan students come to the UK as students on a student visa, their undergraduate academic credentials are usually recognized, and they can pursue higher education. However, those who came through the evacuation route found that their academic qualifications are not recognized at the equivalent level, or they may have to take additional classes or courses to benefit from their degree. Some students from the same university where Nasrin studied in Afghanistan came to the UK for their master's studies, but Nasrin's degree was not equated to BA level.

Life Without English:

Those who had a background in studying at American universities had a better and greater chance of continuing their education because they had studied in English. Among the evacuees, some had hired English online tutors from Iran and Afghanistan and were rigorously studying English. At the hotel Zahra's sister studied English online all day long, because the sporadic and limited classes available in London were not sufficient for her needs.

When I step out of the room, I am mute and deaf; I don't understand a single word. One night, as Zemarai and I were coming through the metro, there was a woman with a suitcase. She couldn't get it up the escalator. She tried a few times but couldn't manage, and I could have offered to help her but didn't know the language. I told Zemarai, 'You know a few words, go help her.' But I don't know enough to do anything myself. If I go and touch her suitcase without saying a word, what would she think?

Kazim studied up to the 8th grade in Iran and worked most of his life there. He complained about the lack of English language classes in London. Not knowing English significantly limited individuals' social networks and their interaction with their surroundings. Even

though daily tasks do not necessarily require language skills, the impact on employment opportunities and psychological well-being has been significant.

Conclusion

Many Afghans feel overwhelmed by the cumulative mental stress. Simultaneously, they need to interact with various institutions such as banks, the Home Office, schools, the NHS, and the driving licensing authority, which consumes a significant amount of their energy and time, further increasing their stress. Some express that even during the conflicts and hardships in Afghanistan, they did not experience this level of stress and anxiety. For many, London has become a city synonymous with anxiety and stress. These scenarios illustrate the challenging conditions under which many Afghans find themselves in the UK, navigating a complex landscape of legal, financial, and bureaucratic hurdles, all while trying to maintain dignity and strive for a better life amidst uncertain and often exploitative circumstances.

Chapter 8: Afghan Refugee Expectations and Realities

Introduction

As we found in the previous chapter, those of us who were evacuated in August 2021 had a number of expectations about the evacuation and about what would happen to us once we arrived in the UK, in particular in relation to housing, employment and education, three issues that were key to our ability to construct a new home and imagine a future for ourselves. These expectations were, in general, not realised, leading to stress and disappointment. My analysis of these findings raised a number of questions: where did these expectations come from, what were the factors that shaped them; did expectations vary among those evacuated, where some people better able to adapt their expectations as they encountered the realities of life in the UK?

The data revealed different sources of expectations that included information and impressions gathered from those who returned to Afghanistan from *Kharij*, from *Khariji* (foreigners) inside Afghanistan, and from promises made by the British government in 2021, but also, I argue, from a legacy of colonial encounters that certainly shaped how the British saw Afghans (Hanifi, 2018) and equally how Afghans saw ourselves in relation to the West or Global North. In what follows, I discuss these different factors, before considering different expectations among those evacuated.

Unmet Expectations: The Myth of *Kharij*

The concept of failed and unmet expectations offers a critical analytical framework for understanding the lived experiences of Afghan evacuees in the UK following the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan. Expectations are not neutral or individual aspirations; they

are socially produced and historically situated. For Afghan evacuees, expectations were shaped by several overlapping factors: prior experiences of exile in Iran and Pakistan; exposure to Western values through a long history of encounters with *Khariji* (foreigners) in Afghanistan; international aid; employment in international governmental and non-governmental organisations; affiliation with Western institutions; our own culture of hospitality; and, crucially, the UK's own rhetorical and moral framing of the evacuation as a duty to those who had "helped us."

Many Afghan evacuees believed that their service to British military, diplomatic, or civil society missions had created a moral debt—an expectation of reciprocal protection, recognition, and dignity. When these expectations were not fulfilled, the resulting disappointment was experienced not simply as a bureaucratic failure, but as a profound ethical violation. This sense of moral betrayal was especially acute among those who viewed their displacement as directly linked to Britain's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

The expectations of those evacuated can be summarised as follows:

- That the evacuation would be orderly and planned with logical, rational and consistent criteria;
- That the accommodation would be planned and suitable;
- That housing would be provided quickly;
- That there would be some form of gap analysis so that labour needs could be met, and so that Afghan experience, knowledge and skills could be put to best use for Afghans and their British hosts;
- That children would be quickly integrated into the educational system, that adults' qualifications would be recognised, and that training would be provided so that people could quickly become independent and net contributors to British society.

The concepts of *Kharij* (abroad) and *Khariji* (foreigner) are central to understanding Afghan forced migrants' expectations of life in the UK. These terms do not merely describe geography; they signify a symbolic geography of safety, opportunity, and progress, rooted in longstanding historical and ideological processes. For many Afghans, *Kharij* represents not just physical departure from insecurity, but a moral and civilizational destination—a place where dignity and a better future are attainable.

Hospitality in Afghan culture

Analysing the data revealed frequent references to the concepts of hospitality and guest, that those evacuated had been brought to Britain as guests, that the British government was our host. These words carry different meanings in Afghan and European culture. It seems that in the UK at least, the emphasis is on being a 'good guest', ie not expecting too much, not creating work for your host and importantly, not overstaying one's welcome. In contrast, in Afghanistan, the emphasis is on the host to ensure that the guest has everything they need, that they are comfortable and have the best food and the best accommodation. The British government's acknowledgement of a debt to Afghans and the fact that they chose to bring people to the UK after years of making it so difficult to get here was understood as an implicit and explicit promise to be a good host.

In Afghan culture, hospitality is more than a gesture of kindness; it is a deeply rooted moral and religious obligation. The host is expected to take full responsibility for the guest's well-being, offering comfort, respect, and often the best food and accommodation, even at personal expense. In return, the guest brings honour to the host. While the relationship is reciprocal, it is also unequal—the duty lies primarily with the host, especially in times of need or crisis. As explained in chapter 4, in Islam there is a duty on *Ansar* (refugee hosts) to take in those fleeing (religious) persecution. Many Afghan evacuees understood the UK's decision to bring them to safety, along with official statements acknowledging a moral and political debt, as an invitation into this moral framework. In their view, the British government was not simply offering refuge—it was taking on the role of a host.

This reflects what Shahram Khosravi (2010) describes as the paradox of modern hospitality in the context of migration and borders. Drawing on Derrida, Khosravi argues that hospitality in liberal democracies is always conditional. It comes with rules, surveillance, and the ever-present possibility of exclusion. Migrants are welcomed only under certain terms, and as soon as they begin to assert rights or express dissatisfaction, they may no longer be seen as guests but as problematic outsiders. Adjusting to this perception of ourselves was extremely difficult, as evidenced by the oft heard comment 'We did not just come - they brought us here'. For many Afghan evacuees in the UK, what initially looked like generosity was experienced as the imposition of control. Our reception was shaped by bureaucracy, uncertainty, and a sense of fragility.

Noor, a former Afghan military officer and evacuee, spent 18 months living in a UK bridging hotel. Noor said, "Bridging hotels feel like a prison to me—a golden cage. I sometimes wish I hadn't come. At least back home, I would either have been killed by the Taliban or truly lived. Here, I am not living." During this time, he was unable to uphold the cultural norms of hospitality so central to Afghan identity. Strict rules around visitors meant that guests could not stay overnight, were often not allowed into his room, and cooking for them—an essential gesture of honour—was not permitted. As a result, Noor felt that he could not properly receive or host those who came to visit him. Instead of pride, the experience left him with a deep sense of shame. The inability to offer hospitality in return, even in a modest way, highlighted how evacuees were stripped not only of autonomy but also of an important aspect of their cultural dignity.

Khosravi (2010) also points out that the figure of the migrant guest is caught in a difficult position—expected to be thankful, but often denied true dignity or equality. When Afghan evacuees raised concerns about food or housing or delays in their resettlement, they risked being seen as ungrateful, demanding or culturally incompatible because they were not obeying European social norms, overlaid with colonial expectations that these refugees would accept their subservient position.

Colonialism

Afghans' first encounters with the British date back to the early 19th century following invasions in 1839 and 1878 (Barfield, 2023: 5), when the deposed ruler Shah Shuja sought British protection from his rivals and was again placed on the throne following the invasion by the British, only to be killed when the British withdrew in 1842. It seems Afghanistan's ruling elite have relied on foreign support for a very long time, and this, in spite of British defeats in 1842 and 1879, contributed to a sense of Afghanistan's comparative weakness. Starting with Shah Shuja, a series of rulers including Yaqub Khan, Abdur Rahman Khan, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani have been installed as heads of state by foreign powers, and it was the British (and Russians) who drew the borders of that state in 1893.

It was with the approval and support of the British government, that Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901), set out to Pashtunise Afghanistan by massacring Hazaras, confiscating land from non-Pashtuns and settling Pashtuns across the country (Bleuer 2012) fostering ethnic divisions that continue to this day. This interference continued in the 20th century as the US sponsored the Afghan mujahideen, leading to the first Taliban regime, and the 21st century when the US led international invasion and withdrawal triggered the second Taliban regime. The point I am making here is that, in spite of the idea of Afghanistan as the 'Graveyard of Empires', we Afghans were accustomed to displays of foreign might, of large well equipped military forces entering the country and using their power and resources to bend Afghan rulers to their will. We internalised an idea of *khariji* (foreigners) as more powerful and with apparently infinite resources, and the 20 years from 2001 - 2021 further underscored this impression.

This vision of *Kharij* has been shaped by what Shah Mahmood Hanifi (2011, 2018) and Rahimi (2021) calls the colonial construction of Afghanistan, in which British imperial powers—through cartography, ethnography, and diplomacy—produced Afghanistan as a peripheral, tribal, and unstable space in need of external guidance. In this binary opposition, Afghanistan became the “other” of a rational, progressive West. Over time, these colonial narratives were **internalized and reproduced** by Afghan political and intellectual elites (Rahimi, 2022). As Hanifi argues, this led to the emergence of a *colonial*

episteme that continues to define how Afghanistan is governed and imagined—by Afghans and foreigners alike.

It created an internalized belief in the superiority of Western-style governance, rationality, and modernity. This is directly relevant to the myth of *Kharij*: many Afghans, especially those involved in state institutions, absorbed the idea that legitimacy, success, and even personal worth were contingent upon proximity to *Kharij*—whether through language (e.g., English), connections with foreigners, or eventual migration, understood in particular as the capacity to move back and forwards between *Kharij* and *watan*.

Encounters with internationals 2001-2021: *Khariji* (foreigners)

The presence of *Khariji* in Afghanistan created an image of *Kharij* as a place of limitless resources. Following 2001, many foreigners came to Afghanistan to participate in its development and reconstruction. These "foreigners" aimed to institutionalize democratic values and respect for human rights, portraying themselves as ideal embodiments of such values (Simpson, 2023). Emphasis was placed on women's rights, human rights, transparency, and the fight against corruption. Billions of dollars were spent on the Afghan security forces, schools and universities, medical centres, research - our dependence on the international community was evident, as was the fact that foreign governments had bottomless pockets. According to the World Bank, Afghanistan received \$77 billion dollars in development assistance, while in 2021 SIGAR calculated that 'Cumulative appropriations for reconstruction and related activities in Afghanistan since FY 2002 rose to \$144.40 billion' (SIGAR 2021): so much money that it was referred to as a firehose of aid. So much money was pouring into Afghanistan that it could not be spent (even if most never left the donor countries:

In the last fiscal year, which ended March 20, [2011] the Afghan government was able to disburse about \$937 million, or just 40 percent of its original development budget of about \$2.3 billion. The government got much of that money in previous

years and has simply been rolling it over, budget after budget. (Deseret News 2011)

The long-term presence of international organisations, foreign military personnel, and NGOs in Afghanistan has contributed to the perception of *Kharij* as a place of wealth, power, and progress. We could see many failures, for example the AliceGhan project referred to in chapter one, but in comparison to the poverty in which most Afghans lived, these seemed insignificant when weighed against this extraordinary wealth and power. It was as though these *khariji* didn't care if money was wasted, they could afford it. Hardly surprising then that Afghans arriving in the UK were astonished to see homeless people on the street, to find that it was necessary to wait weeks, sometimes months, to see a doctor or a dentist. We had not expected to encounter poverty in Britain, had not imagined that homes would be small, damp and dark, that families could not survive on one salary, and sometimes barely survive on two.

The presence of *khariji* in Afghanistan significantly influenced the public's perception of "foreigners". They were regarded with a mixture of fear and envy, seen as alien and mysterious. The mystery derived from the distance they kept from the local population. During their presence in Afghanistan, only a handful lived in the community, the overwhelming majority lived in special camps behind barbed wire topped security walls, with airlock gates. On the streets of Kabul and provincial roads, their presence was often marked by military convoys with large tanks maintaining a considerable distance from other vehicles. Non-military foreigners typically travelled in large black or white vehicles with burly guards, shopping in exclusive supermarkets beyond the reach of ordinary Afghans. These tanks and foreign vehicles were often sources of fear and insecurity. People tried to keep their distance from military and foreign convoys, as they were potential targets for Taliban attacks.

While foreigners excited considerable curiosity, and were an important source of well-paid employment, we recognised that proximity created risks. The Taliban, who were fiercely opposed to all Western symbols, viewed foreigners as infidels lacking in faith, and as occupiers of Afghanistan (Facebook 2022). Television, music, films, and photographs were regarded as symbols of Western moral corruption, and democracy was rejected as

a carrier of Western degeneracy. Those who worked for foreigners were considered traitors and those who left Afghanistan were considered deserters by the Taliban (Facebook 2022). However, while there were risks associated with connections with *Khariji* in Afghanistan, they exerted a magnetic pull, potentially providing good salaries and opportunities for advancement and perhaps even access to *Kharij*.

Kharij was associated with high quality, especially of goods. Clothes, shoes, electronic equipment, discarded by people in far off countries or by the *khariji* stationed in Afghanistan were resold in markets such as Lycée Mariam or Bush Bazaar and highly often sought after. While poor-quality second-hand clothes and shoes bought by the container load from Europe and the US were often sold from carts on the streets of Kabul, Lycée Maryam was an area of Kabul where shops were stocked with better quality used goods and it was common to see middle class Afghans search there for leather shoes, and better quality clothes. If *khariji* could afford to discard these barely used, high quality goods, then surely they must live in lands of plenty?

Bush Bazaar had existed in the 1980s during the Soviet Occupation, selling discarded or surplus army clothes and boots, and electrical goods. At that time, it was called Brezhnev Bazaar. As times changed it was renamed Bush Bazaar. It was like an Aladdin's cave where anything could be found from American posters and CDs to chocolates, ice cream, cakes, glasses, watches, shoes, trousers, locks, keys, beverages, energy supplements, protein, and electrical appliances, the American flag, weapons, ammunition and other items used by the US military. Hundreds of Afghan translators and workers who worked on military bases stocked Bush Bazaar with tonnes of surplus goods discarded by the *khariji* military, emphasizing the idea of *kharij* as a place of plenty, where there was always much more of everything than anyone could ever want.

If the image of *Kharij* as rich and plentiful was widespread, so too was the belief that *khariji* were all powerful. In conversations both at the displaced camp in Afghanistan and the bridging hotels in London, the discussions often centred on the role of foreigners as the primary decision-makers in Afghanistan's domestic and foreign policies. Those of us who worked with *khariji* were used to seeing them setting the agenda, chairing meetings, making decisions - and always in English, always expecting Afghans, no matter what

position they held, to speak at least English, if not French or German. While ministers who spoke no English were treated with disdain by *Khariji*, there was no embarrassment or shame attached to a *Khariji*'s inability to learn Farsi or Pashto. If a *khariji* spoke only a few words of either, they were praised extravagantly.

For me, the image of *Khariji* (foreigners) in Afghanistan was closely tied to the English language. Over the years, substantial funds were invested in building the capacity of Afghans, with a large portion of NGO and development budgets dedicated to training. These trainings were almost always conducted in English, which was my greatest weakness when I first worked for an NGO in Afghanistan. English was the working language—emails, reports, meetings, and project documents were all in English. Although I could often understand the content being taught, my limited English skills made it difficult to express myself clearly. I felt like a child in a classroom designed for adults, where my knowledge and experience seemed to count for little because I lacked the language to communicate them. I realised that, no matter how skilled or experienced you were, if you couldn't express yourself in English, you remained invisible in the professional world of *Khariji* in Afghanistan. In this way, *Khariji* became the source of knowledge, and we—the local staff—became its passive receivers.

Our image of *Kharij* came from this wholly unrepresentative sample and contributed to our distorted view of *Kharij* and our 'unrealistic' expectations of the evacuation and resettlement.

Afghans abroad/visiting home

However, fellow Afghans also shaped our concept of abroad. Reaching *Kharij* had been regarded as a significant achievement and indication of success for decades before the evacuation, shaping expectations about life in *Kharij*. Afghans who travelled abroad were warmly welcomed upon their return to Afghanistan, treated as heroes by their families and friends. Typically, several cars filled with relatives carrying bouquets would go to the airport to greet those returning from *Kharij*, receiving them with great respect and honour, draping garlands around their neck. They would come with suitcases of gifts, which would be proudly displayed to visitors. The recipients of the gifts were unaware of the extra shifts worked to afford the gifts, or the loans taken out. News of prospective return visits was accompanied for demands for laptops, mobile phones, French perfumes, made without a sense of what that would cost the giver. For someone to return without gifts (for example, following a deportation) was a serious embarrassment for him and for the family (Schuster and Majidi 2015).

When my family first returned to Afghanistan, we rented a house in Dasht-e Barchi, a neighbourhood in western Kabul. Each time either of Hajji, our landlord's, sons returned from abroad, there would be celebrations. On these occasions, Hajji's house would be bustling with guests arriving one after another to greet his sons. This was followed by a grand gathering hosted by Hajji, where he invited everyone. In turn, all their relatives would also host Hajji's sons, inviting others to join, creating a cycle of celebrations throughout their stay in Afghanistan. Such receptions had become a customary part of the homecoming ritual. Their successful migration, and return visits, were a source of enormous pride for Hajji and his family.

Those who were lucky enough to participate in educational programs or projects organized by various institutions who conducted capacity-building workshops abroad amplified the myth of *Kharij*. Upon returning, the mere experience of having travelled abroad was considered a significant achievement, regardless of what was learned. Memories of these trips to European countries were often a source of pride. Those who returned from abroad typically portrayed an idealized image of life in *Kharij*, having been

accommodated in expensive hotels and sometimes treated to tours of beautiful and or historic sites. Although a short-term educational trip (which often seemed more like tourism) did not provide a deep understanding of life in *Kharij*, it still left an impression based on its tourist attractions.

At gatherings, conversations would typically revolve around success stories and descriptions of life and opportunities in *Kharij*. Those returning from abroad generally refrained from sharing negative experiences, often choosing to conceal them. An in-depth analysis exploring the reasons for this self-censorship is beyond the scope of this discussion, but explanations include difficulties sharing experiences that contradicted a widely held perception of their migration and return home as a heroic achievement. Additionally, these young men had often hidden their negative experiences and hardships from the family to avoid causing anxiety to family members they had left behind (Schuster et al 2021). When Afghan migrants do try to share the realities of life in *Kharij*, including the hardships of the journey and the challenges of resettlement, they are often met with disbelief, or are accused of having lost their culture, their sense of responsibility to the family still in Afghanistan (Schuster & Majidi 2013). It is assumed that they do not wish to help because they do not wish to share their good fortune.

In 2023, while I was visiting Mehraban (arrived in London 1998) in his home in London, he received a phone call from his brother, who had migrated to Iran and was now considering sending his young son to the UK. As Mehraban tried to explain how difficult it was to arrive, obtain legal status, and make a living in the UK, his brother abruptly ended the call. Mehraban later told me, “Whenever I try to explain the truth, he doesn’t believe me. He thinks I’m jealous and don’t want them to come here.” This disconnect is not uncommon. Many Afghans back home perceive those living in *Kharij* as successful and wealthy, regardless of their actual circumstances. This perception is further complicated when it comes to remittances. Families in Afghanistan often expect financial support from relatives abroad, not realizing that many of them rely on social welfare. When migrants are unable to send money home and try to explain their financial struggles, their relatives frequently interpret this as a lack of willingness or care, rather than a reflection of real hardship

Those who failed to reach *Kharij* or were deported often saw their situation as a personal failure, carrying a social stigma (Schuster & Majidi, 2015). There were no celebrations for them; instead, deported individuals tended to avoid encounters with acquaintances to escape the need to explain their return. Some of those deported decided not to contact their families, trying to leave the country again as soon as possible.

Some even concealed the fact that they had ever left for *Kharij*. In 2025, I spoke with Wali, an Afghan neighbour living in the United States, who had worked as a civil engineer in Afghanistan. Despite having a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV), Wali told me that he did not inform anyone— not even his parents—during the early stages of the process. He feared that if his application was rejected, it would reflect poorly on him rather than on the system. It was only in the final days before his departure that he told his parents, and even then, he refrained from saying goodbye to any relatives. He explained that, given the widespread corruption and the difficulty of crossing multiple international borders with an Afghan passport, there was no guarantee of successfully arriving in the United States. If he had failed, the shame would not have been attributed to external systems or obstacles, but rather internalized as a personal and familial shortcoming. This illustrates how *Kharij* is not only imagined as a destination of opportunity, but also as a benchmark of success— where merely reaching it validates one's worth and perseverance. As Schuster and Majidi (2015) suggest, it seems that those who have not left prefer to hold on to the myth of *Kharij* and its possibilities, rather than accept the brutality of the reality as told by those who have experienced it.

Overlooked Skills and the Colonial Legacy of Labour Recognition

Many Afghan evacuees assumed that their professional experience and skills— particularly those gained under extremely difficult and insecure conditions, and often through working alongside *Khariji*, including British workers, would be recognised and valued in the UK. There was a widespread expectation that the British government would carry out some form of gap analysis to match their skills with labour shortages, enabling evacuees to rebuild their lives and contribute meaningfully to British society.

This expectation was partly shaped by their past involvement in international development work in Afghanistan, where *Khariji* had trained Afghan professionals to design and deliver projects based on needs-based assessments. Many assumed that similar approaches would be applied in the UK, this time for their benefit, not just for others. This belief was especially strong among those who had worked directly with British military missions or international NGOs, and who expected that their previous service would be acknowledged not only as a moral obligation, but in practical terms, through employment opportunities or formal recognition of their qualifications.

However, this assumption quickly collided with reality. In practice, many evacuees found that their work experience in Afghanistan was overlooked or dismissed, especially if it was not gained in English, or not documented within Western institutional frameworks. Roles held in conflict zones, often under great risk and responsibility, were seen as irrelevant by UK employers. Even highly skilled individuals such as engineers, project managers, doctors, and senior civil servants were routinely told they lacked “relevant UK experience.”

By contrast, the professional experience of *Khariji* who had worked in Afghanistan—often in advisory or leadership positions—was readily accepted and even considered an asset in UK institutions. This discrepancy reflects what Shah Mahmoud Hanifi (2011) describes as the epistemological legacy of colonialism: a system in which knowledge is only considered legitimate when produced, certified, or mediated by Western actors. In this colonial hierarchy, Afghans were historically positioned as recipients of aid and knowledge, while Westerners were cast as experts and problem-solvers—even when both groups operated in the same context.

It reveals a deeper colonial logic that continues to structure how competence, value, and authority are assigned. As Hanifi (2011) argues, Afghan identities were historically shaped by British colonial frameworks that cast them as tribal, ungovernable, and reliant on external guidance. These colonial narratives continue to influence how Afghan contributions are perceived today: Afghan skills are often undervalued, while Western credentials are validated without question.

The result for many evacuees was not only economic exclusion but a deep sense of personal and professional devaluation. Expectations of being welcomed as skilled contributors were replaced by a reality in which they were treated as passive beneficiaries of state support. This was especially painful for those who had been integral to international missions in Afghanistan and were praised as capable partners—only to arrive in the UK and find their expertise ignored.

While skilled roles remained out of reach, migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and other countries were widely absorbed into low-wage, unskilled sectors—working as Uber drivers, bus and taxi drivers, food delivery couriers, supermarket staff, or security guards. These roles, while often socially acceptable or even welcomed for migrants, reinforced a narrow view of where they ‘belong’ in the labour market. For many Afghan evacuees, taking these jobs felt like a sharp and painful demotion from their former professional status.

In this context, the resettlement experience was not just a bureaucratic challenge—it became a repetition of colonial hierarchies. For many, it reinforced the belief that Kharij was not simply a land of opportunity, but a space where their value would always be measured against an external and unequal standard.

The Role of NGOs and Government Policies

Many evacuees expected substantial support from NGOs and government agencies, based on their experiences with international organisations in Afghanistan. Official statements such as those cited in the previous chapter emphasized that the government had not forgotten their allies and collaborators in Afghanistan and were trying to facilitate their entry. The term "allies" or those who had assisted them in their mission implied that from the government's perspective, these allies were to be considered deserving refugees. Once installed in the hotels, NGOs began arriving and offering help. In Afghanistan, there is little distinction made between NGOs, INGOs, IGOs and UN agencies. All of them provide real and substantial assistance, including clinics and

schools, training, educational and capacity building programmes, and contribute to infrastructure projects. These organisations had budgets of millions of dollars and provided assistance to millions across Afghanistan.

Soon after the arrival of the evacuees, NGOs turned up at the bridging hotel, but people were disappointed to realise these NGOs, most often staffed by volunteers, had very few resources and usually provided only consultation and referrals rather than direct assistance. It seemed incredible that in Britain, NGOs seemed understaffed and under resourced. English language courses were few and far between, oversubscribed and unable to cater to the needs of the different 'students'. As people realised that the most the NGOs could do was provide signposting to services for which there were long waiting lists, or shabby secondhand clothes and toys, the disappointment and disillusionment grew among those evacuated. People began to reflect on what they had left behind - family, friends, homes, familiar customs and language, the assurance that comes with knowing a place and knowing one's place in the community - and to compare it with what they now faced: uncertainty, unfamiliarity and poverty, this time without a support network. Some managed to accept and adapt to these unexpected realities. Others struggled.

Different expectations among the evacuees?

Expectations of what would happen after the evacuation varied. For example, those who held higher-status jobs in Afghanistan often had greater expectations for their new life in the UK and were therefore more likely to experience disappointment. In particular, individuals who previously worked in senior government positions struggled to come to terms with the realities of resettlement. One former high-ranking government official (Sattar, personal communication, oct 2022) , for example, expressed deep frustration at being unable to find a position that matched her qualifications or offered a comparable level of respect and responsibility. In contrast, individuals with lower-ranking roles or more modest career backgrounds in Afghanistan generally found it easier to accept their new status and actively sought out any available job opportunities as a means of rebuilding their lives.

Expectations were also shaped by evacuees' earlier experiences of displacement, for example, among those who had previously lived as refugees in Iran or Pakistan. These experiences provided both a baseline of hardship and a contrast point that informed how evacuees interpreted their current situation in the UK. In Iran and Pakistan, Afghans were restricted to informal labour markets, and denied pathways to legal residency or citizenship. As a result, many evacuees arrived in the UK with heightened hopes for legal protection, access to services, and social inclusion—expecting Western states to offer what their neighbours had long denied them. Instead, they found it harder to enter the labour market, to access accommodation, health care and education. Not just geographically, but also culturally, Iran and Pakistan were closer to Afghanistan, and there were large Afghan communities in both countries, so there were established means of dealing with the bureaucratic hurdles and discrimination faced by Afghans.

As the months passed and hopes for quick resettlement faded, many evacuees began to adjust their expectations and started to develop strategies for coping, moving from passive waiting to more active forms of advocacy. As it became clear that people would not be quickly moved from bridging hotels, the need to deal with some immediate, everyday concerns grew. For example, in every bridging hotel I visited, evacuees held internal meetings to discuss how to improve their living conditions. One of the first collective actions was to push for changes to the food menu. The mass produced and unfamiliar meals were a source of deep unhappiness and children and adults were becoming unwell. Unable to persuade hotel management to permit the use of the kitchens or to provide more familiar dishes, the hotel residents approached the NGOs responsible for providing support services, who then relayed the complaints and suggestions to hotel management and the Home Office. Some evacuees reported that, after almost six months of persistent lobbying, they eventually succeeded in getting the food menu changed. As time went on, frustration grew, and some evacuees adopted a more organised approach. After about a year, some of the residents began writing collective letters to relevant authorities, drafting petitions, talking to the media and arranging meetings to plan public demonstrations in front of Parliament. This shift from silent frustration to public action was a way for them to reclaim a sense of agency and push back against the feeling of being forgotten.

Others took a more informal, network-based approach. Recognising the power of connections, they sought out personal contacts within the Home Office or other government bodies, hoping these relationships might help them secure housing more quickly. In this way, they combined formal political pressure with informal social tactics, blending public protest with private negotiation as a means to accelerate their resettlement.

In the early months, some Afghan evacuees also rejected housing offers outside London, fearing isolation in unfamiliar towns without established Afghan communities. For many, staying in London meant maintaining vital social networks, including family, friends, and ethnic support groups, which they believed would be critical for finding jobs, accessing services, and adapting to life in the UK. This preference for staying close to existing networks reflects the importance of social capital as a survival strategy, even if it meant enduring more months in crowded and uncertain hotel conditions.

Together, these strategies reflect a broader adaptive response to the gap between initial expectations and the reality they encountered. For many, it became clear that simply waiting for the system to respond was not enough. Instead, they began to actively shape their own futures, using both collective action and personal networks to navigate the complex and often opaque resettlement process.

A common coping strategy among many Afghan evacuees has been the idea that they are part of a “burnt generation” whose primary role is to sacrifice for the success of the next. Many parents expressed the belief that, although they are enduring hardship, uncertainty, and underemployment, it is ultimately worth it if their children can access education and achieve success in the West. This narrative allows them to find purpose in their struggles, reinforcing the idea that they are making a noble and necessary investment in the future. As one father explained, “We are here to carry the burden so our children don’t have to.” This mindset often leads to a willingness to take on difficult or low-status jobs, with a sense of dignity rooted in parental responsibility rather than social recognition.

Conclusion: Lessons learnt/not learnt

Unmet expectations are not just technical failures: they reflect a continuation of colonial patterns—cycles of intervention and withdrawal, alliance and abandonment. The post-evacuation experience, especially for those held in bridging hotels or trapped in bureaucratic limbo, became a site where the colonial past reasserted itself in the form of delayed justice and failed responsibility.

The expectations that accompanied Afghan evacuees to the UK were shaped by a complex mix of previous interactions with international actors and a deeper, often overlooked, legacy of colonial encounter. These expectations—focused on housing, employment, recognition, and respect—were not simply hopes for a better life. They were rooted in the roles many evacuees had played within Western-led missions in Afghanistan, and in the images they had formed through contact with *Khariji* (foreigners), especially between 2001 and 2021. For many, the hope of resettling in the UK was not just about safety, but about continuing their professional contributions and being recognised as partners, not just beneficiaries.

As this chapter has shown, these expectations quickly came into conflict with a bureaucratic reality that was often unprepared or unwilling to acknowledge the skills and sacrifices of those once described as "allies." The legacy of colonial thinking remains clear: while the experience of Western professionals in Afghanistan is often celebrated and validated, Afghan expertise—no matter how important or context-specific—is frequently ignored or dismissed. This devaluation was not just economic; it affected evacuees' sense of identity, dignity, and future possibilities.

Another key source of disappointment was a mismatch in how hospitality was understood. Many Afghan evacuees expected a moral and respectful relationship with their hosts, based on cultural values of reciprocity and honour. This conflicted with the more formal, bureaucratic, and conditional systems of refugee support in the UK. The result was often a deep sense of frustration and confusion—not only with policies, but with the failure to uphold what were seen as moral promises of partnership and care.

Yet unmet expectations did not always lead to passivity. Over time, evacuees developed strategies of adaptation and resistance. From lobbying for better food and housing to organizing petitions and public protests, many began to assert agency and reclaim their voices. It is also important to recognise that not all evacuees held the same expectations. Those with professional backgrounds or international experience tended to expect more—and were often more disappointed. In contrast, those with more modest backgrounds, or prior experiences of displacement, were sometimes more able to adapt. This highlights the need to view refugee experiences as varied and shaped by class, status, and past exposure to global systems.

Overall, the concept of failed and unmet expectations helps us to better understand the post-evacuation experiences of Afghan refugees. It reveals not only personal struggles, but also the deeper historical and structural forces that continue to shape who is valued, who is supported, and who is seen as deserving of a future.

Chapter 9: Conclusion and final reflections

This thesis has examined the lived experiences of Afghan forced migrants through the conceptual lens of unmet and failed expectations, with a particular focus on resettlement in London. By foregrounding expectations—not merely as personal hopes but as socially constructed, historically rooted, and politically shaped anticipations about the future—this study offers a critical reframing of how forced migrants, displacement and resettlement are understood.

Within much of the literature on forced migration in the Global North, expectations are often treated as individual aspirations or emotional responses to resettlement. They are rarely theorised as structurally or historically informed. Yet, this thesis argues that expectations must be re-centred as a valid analytical concept—not seen through the lens of Global research institutions, but instead through the lived perspectives of forced migrants themselves. When viewed from this standpoint, expectations are not passive hopes but deeply informed moral, social, and political claims shaped by long-standing engagement with the Global north.

A critical component in the formation of these expectations are the concepts of *Kharij* (abroad) and *Khariji* (foreigners), both of which played a central role in shaping how Afghans imagined the Global North and how Afghan have been imagined by Khariji in this interaction. For many, Kharij symbolised a space of opportunity, order, and fairness—contrasted with the uncertainty, conflict, and injustice experienced in Afghanistan. The presence of Khariji in Afghanistan—often as development workers, military personnel, NGO staff, or consultants—reinforced this imagination. These foreigners were seen as representatives of powerful and benevolent systems that promised empowerment, inclusion, and progress. Afghan professionals who worked alongside Khariji in international institutions often internalised the values and promises of these engagements.

Expectations do not emerge in isolation. They are formed through prior experiences of exile, engagement with international actors, and sustained exposure to development, humanitarian, and military institutions. For many Afghan evacuees, years of collaboration with Global north missions—as interpreters, civil servants, NGO staff, journalists, or security personnel—cultivated a belief in reciprocal recognition: that their loyalty, labour, and risk-taking would be met with protection, respect, and opportunity. These beliefs were further reinforced by the public narratives of host governments, which framed evacuees as “allies,” “partners,” and morally deserving of sanctuary.

Yet, the findings of this thesis show a stark disjuncture between such expectations and the reality of resettlement. For many evacuees, their skills and professional experience were dismissed or deemed irrelevant by Global North institutions. In contrast, similar work conducted by professionals from the Global North in Afghanistan was recognised and valued, exposing a persistent epistemological inequality in which knowledge and expertise are only deemed valid when produced or verified through Western systems.

This gap between expectation and reality produced a form of structural disillusionment that goes beyond economic or legal exclusion. It undermined evacuees' sense of identity, worth, and belonging—calling into question the moral and political commitments of the resettlement process itself. This disillusionment is not an individual failure to integrate but a symptom of deeper postcolonial contradictions, where the language of inclusion and partnership masks enduring inequalities, conditionality, and control.

The thesis also highlights the temporal dimension of displacement, demonstrating that unmet expectations are not only about what is offered but also about when and how. Many Afghan evacuees anticipated a rapid transition to stability and autonomy, yet instead found themselves in prolonged states of waiting—living in temporary accommodations, separated from family, and suspended in uncertainty.

In sum, this research contributes to refugee and migration studies by reframing the discourse around resettlement. The concept of unmet and failed expectations thus serves as a critical tool for interrogating not only how resettlement policies function, but also how they reproduce global hierarchies of value and recognition. By foregrounding the meanings of *Kharij* and *Khariji*, this thesis further shows how expectations are shaped

through unequal encounters with the West—encounters that continue to structure not only how Afghans imagine their place in the world, but how they are imagined, recognised, or dismissed by the systems that claim to protect them.

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